

CONCLUSIONS

Meta-evaluation of programme validation, monitoring and modification

6 March 2012 - Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona/UAB

Group 1: Availability and use of public information

The suitability of public information

The public information on programmes that has to be made available to the stakeholders, including programme delivery and information on the associated indicators, is considered to be sufficient and appropriate.

Particular mention was made of improvements in the availability of public information on recognised degrees made in recent years, which has partly been connected with the development of the Monitoring programme in all Catalan universities. The first call for this programme in 2011 showed that, in general, public information is more available for Bachelor degrees and that efforts must be made to address the shortcomings detected in the case of Masters degrees.

There is a need to raise awareness regarding the information available to the different stakeholder groups in order for them to make best use of it.

There are various evident risks associated with the use of public information, which may be the result of an insufficient analysis of the stakeholder groups and their needs, a lack of accessibility or also informational noise produced by an inflation of data or information disorganisation. The stakeholders need to be identified using different mechanisms and a structure for public information developed whereby the information can be easily accessed. This structure could include intranets, with different levels of restriction according to the specifics or complexity of the information.

Quantitative information

Firstly, it was noted that important efforts have been made to gather and publish programme-related indicators. It would appear that the management of this type of information is arguably more problematic, together with its interpretation by users. In this respect, the appearance of the WINDDAT teaching indicators webpage (<http://winddat.aqu.cat>) should facilitate the management of monitoring in the universities and standardise the presentation of information for stakeholders.

Improvements in the public information on recognised degree courses

There is the issue of making public certain information that has so far not been taken into consideration, such as for example the evidence used for evaluation (exams, final year project or dissertation for Bachelor or Master's degrees, etc.).

Further work is necessary in order for quantitative information to be offered that is comparable and available on a regular basis (indicators) regarding employment outcomes and the level of satisfaction of students and graduates at/from Catalan universities.

Tools for publishing information on university courses

Consideration was given to the implications of new public and private tools for publishing information on university courses, which complement the information provided by the institution on its courses.

The use of new formats and devices used particularly these days by students to obtain information is encouraged.

Group 2: Indicators and analytical assessment in programme monitoring

The usefulness of faculty IQAS implementation

With the universities and their faculties currently involved in implementing internal quality assurance systems (IQAS), it is important to take into account that almost all of the designs for these IQAS were positively evaluated within the framework of the AUDIT programme. This aspect is important in that it means that the IQAS has been designed in accordance with the quality assurance of programmes of study.

The level of IQAS implementation is highly uneven according to each university and faculty, and ranges from an almost total lack of knowledge regarding the existence of IQAS to active involvement in developing mechanisms whereby monitoring progress reports are useful for continuous programme improvement.

The usefulness of indicators established for programme monitoring

The monitoring process has resulted in faculty heads and programme managers and coordinators being much more in contact with QA units, which in many cases has led to much more appropriate IQAS.

A useful indicator is one which facilitates decision-making.

Care needs to be taken when interpreting indicators with regard to aspects such as: the circumstances in which the course has been delivered, special characteristics of the faculty, and the type of programme, course and module.

In addition to general indicators that are established for monitoring, indicators that fit the particular characteristics of the programme and as such are more useful for monitoring, evaluation and enhancement also need to be defined.

At the present time, the monitoring progress report looks at what are mostly quantitative indicators, and it would be very productive to also take into account qualitative indicators. AQU Catalunya reiterates that programme managers may provide other indicators that they consider to be appropriate for monitoring purposes.

The main concern is the way in which the acquisition of skills (competences) is measured and how to determine which indicators are the most appropriate. In relation to this aspect, it is important to check the factual data provided by indicators with the students' perceptions and include the analysis of this information in the monitoring report.

One last point is that indicators are considered to be an important element in programme monitoring, but not the only one.

The available resources for obtaining information that is considered necessary for making decisions

In general, support from QA units and better training in quality assurance for those in charge and coordinators of programmes are considered to be really important and necessary.

It is important to involve faculty staff in monitoring, and it is suggested that the role of teaching staff be enhanced in the internal evaluation of the IQAS.

The process for accessing indicator results clearly needs to be reviewed as it needs to be as streamlined and simple as possible for decision-making purposes and so that results can serve as an instrument for enhancement. Making access easier will help to prevent the gathering of data from being seen as a mere administrative requirement.

Although indicators are an important tool for gauging the process, other information should also be considered, bearing in mind that, in certain cases, obtaining indicators may imply a high cost at a time when resources are scarce. Consideration therefore needs to be given to data that can provide indirect information that is easily accessible and useful in decision-making.

Monitoring should be considered as a continuous process throughout the academic year, and the gathering and analysis of data therefore needs to be planned at appropriate times during the year.

Defining who the stakeholders are in indicator building and analysis

Although there is agreement on the fact that, in general, the people with responsibilities are identifiable, there is a wide diversity of stakeholders with different interests and visions that makes it difficult to achieve a joint definition of what the quality of the end product should be.

The reliability of qualitative analysis

There are two aspects where work needs to be done, achieving correct data, i.e. data cleansing of the various databases, and checking that these data are a true reflection of the situation that is to be evaluated, indicators are measured at appropriate times and that the data to calculate these indicators have been processed with regard to all possible circumstances and whether it is a Bachelor or Master's programme.

Group 3. Development of enhancement actions: internal enhancement, modifications and revalidation

(not available)

Group 4. Programme accreditation

The accreditation process

There is concern regarding the accreditation process, which is seen as the culmination of all the quality assurance processes implemented up until now (validation and monitoring), i.e. it is a continuous review process. Likewise, the situation needs to be avoided where the universities focus their efforts on passing accreditation as if it were just another exam and lose sight of the overall series of quality assurance processes.

It is noted that the accreditation process needs to be simple and focus on all of the programme monitoring reports, with a process involving a site visit that has to be defined.

With regard to the aspects to be evaluated in the review process, the conclusion is that the programme needs to demonstrate that set learning outcomes are being achieved. In this regard, it is impossible to take a one-size-fits-all approach to all programmes, although there does need to be detailed consideration of the final year Bachelor's project, the final year Master's project, exams, work placement, amongst other things. Another relevant matter in the accreditation process is the degree to which the study programme IQAS is implemented, together with its role in the continuous enhancement of the programme.

The degree accreditation guidebook needs to be simple and flexible.

The review panels

It is laid down that review panels must consist of experienced experts (for example, members of a university's board of trustees). They should also include an international expert with an understanding of the European Higher Education Area, professionals and graduates (recently graduated).

The site visit

Difficulties are pointed out regarding the design and programming of the site visit to faculties. There are considerable complexities in the case of some programmes (for example, inter-university and interdepartmental degrees), while in other cases the timing associated with the introduction of programmes has an influence on the number of monitoring reports that are produced.

Mention is also made of the fact that the site visit needs to be designed in conjunction with the universities and AQU Catalunya. The possibility is also suggested of the universities recommending experts to participate in the review panels.

Groups that need to be interviewed during the site visit are faculty staff, students, graduates, employers and those who are in charge of the IQAS.

The accreditation report

The accreditation report needs to refer to the students' achievements, namely, the learning outcomes. In addition, the report should also deal (analyse) the degree to which the IQAS has been implemented, together with its role in the continuous enhancement of the programme of study. It should also include recommendations made in the monitoring report, enhancements that have been made and their development in the medium and short terms (impact, implication, usefulness, etc.).

Group 5: Indicators on satisfaction with programmes of study

Dimensions to be considered when diagnosing satisfaction

There is a certain lack of awareness of the good practices and models used among universities and even among the faculties in the same university.

The most common practice is associated with the course/teacher satisfaction survey. Even so, there are difficulties if the results of the survey focus exclusively on the evaluation of the teacher.

More extensive experience has been acquired and gathering data on satisfaction has become easier in terms of organisation and management (e.g. the curriculum being followed, resources and services, etc)

There is a difficulty in defining “how” to obtain the students' satisfaction regarding the learning outcomes, i.e. how to obtain data on their satisfaction regarding the level of achievement of specific competences (desired learning outcomes) and core competences associated with the development of personal, emotional and social skills.

There appears to be a degree of mistrust regarding the students' ability to formulate their satisfaction with the quality of the study programme.

The timing of gathering information on satisfaction

It is noted that, in general, information on student satisfaction is gathered on completion of their studies, as to every academic year. There has been more times (more experience) when information has been gathered for Master's degree level than for Bachelor's degrees.

There is a clear need for satisfaction data to be gathered every academic year in order for study programmes to improve in the short term.

The methodology and instruments for gathering satisfaction data

The online survey is the method most generally used between institutions, especially for gathering data on course/teacher satisfaction. The main criticism of this method is the low level of student participation. In-person surveys (by telephone, written questionnaire) imply a higher cost. It is noted that institutions have gained experience in encouraging students to participate in surveys, such as carrying out surveys at the time when students are awarded their degrees and when submitting their final year project or dissertation, amongst others.

Positive assessment is made of the use of other mechanisms used to gather satisfaction data, such as the tutorial plan, student participation in governing and representational bodies, the complaints and suggestions box and social networks, amongst others.

Institutional management of the gathering of satisfaction data

There is a clear need to harmonise the different dimensions and define common indicators for the higher education system as a whole in Catalonia, which should provide benchmarks for self-evaluation and the monitoring of programme quality.

The survey model for gathering information should include indicators associated with the particular characteristics of each institution, and it should also gather qualitative information.

The impact of the results

The gathering of satisfaction data does not always systematically result in programme enhancement actions, partly because of the low level of IQAS use.

Possible enhancement actions introduced as a consequence of satisfaction surveys should be included in programme monitoring reports and serve as evidence for programme accreditation.