

Conference sub-theme: Professionalization of QA

Title: “Teaching Innovation in Andalusia: Professionalization through Reward Policies and Database Management”

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Requirements: Power-point presentation

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Abstract

Innovation in teaching is one dimension of the many that are shaping higher education nowadays and is part of the changes taking place in European universities at present. There is keen interest among Andalusian universities to promote teaching innovations, and they have requested from the Andalusian Agency for QA in HE and Research in Andalusia (AGAE) support for their educational innovation processes. AGAE believes that its functions should not be limited to assist in external evaluations, but should contribute to a better environment for innovation and change in universities in any way that is deemed possible.

In this spirit AGAE organized the First Andalusian Conference on Teaching Innovation. The first part of this paper discusses the competencies and skills AGAE’s staff acquired to ensure this extra effort was done effectively. It argues that the professionalization of QA and a positive public perception of AGAE’s achievements have forced the agency to keep internal management and development systems in place. The second part centers on AGAE’s contribution to the professional organization of QA. Two strategies are examined: granting of prizes and information management through database. We propose that a reward policy is useful to the professional apparatus of Quality credentialing and that databases may also serve as credentials.

1. Introduction

The changes taking place in European universities are impacting different dimensions of curriculum reform, structure of university degrees, procedures for university access, monitoring, evaluation and accreditation of new programs. But there is a fundamental

dimension in any process of educational reform without which reform cannot be successfully undertaken: teaching and student learning in the classroom.

Reforms in education must combine external pressure (up-down) with the promotion of teaching innovation within the institutions (bottom-up). It is important, therefore, to support the educational processes of innovation that the teaching staff at the universities starts and develops. In the understanding that the functions of an accrediting agency should not be limited to external evaluations, but should provide a better environment for innovation and change in universities, AGAE, on the request from Andalusian universities, convened the First Andalusian Conference on Teaching Innovation, held in Cordoba on December 2-3, 2009.

Thirty educational projects, selected by the 10 Universities in Andalusia (each University chose the best 3 teaching innovation projects planned in the institution), were presented. The conference was structured around the themes of multilingual teaching, evaluation of competencies, ICT-based teaching methodologies, procedures for welcoming and orienting students, strategies to spur students' participation and structure and style of master's theses. It included workshops, roundtables, presentations, lectures and symposia. The latter were defined as proposals from teams of 5 people maximum from different universities on a common theme so that different perspectives were brought to the fore. Their duration could not exceed 90 minutes. In addition, prizes were awarded (I Premios a la Innovación Docente en Andalucía) to the three best projects on innovation by a Committee formed by knowledge-authorities in QA. After the event AGAE set up a database of Educational Innovation Evaluators for stakeholder information.

Attendants (the number of attendants was approx. 750) were enthusiastic. Some called the event "timely" and mentioned that it was "exciting that we are speaking of innovation." The frequency with which this type of comment was heard was testament to the importance of teaching innovation in Andalusia. The second conference will be held on September 19-20, 2011.

2. On How QA Professionalization and Social Recognition Bring Professional Value to AGAE

AGAE's staff organized and conducted the whole enterprise. This labor required two types of competencies: of diagnosis and networking. The competence of diagnosis (knowledge of facts

and theories) was acquired through regular contact (formal and informal) with AUPA, the Association of Public Universities in Andalusia in charge of implementing the region's plan of innovation and modernization. Training in seminars, courses, meetings and conferences on the processes of innovation and change (credited by degrees and diplomas) also provided the staff with the knowledge to appraise the areas that needed to be addressed in the course of the conference and helped structure the event accordingly.

The competence of networking (the instrumental ability of planning, coordinating, using technologies and communicating in formal contexts) was acquired through the previous organization of Conferences and Seminars at an international level and, of course, through the staff's daily activities in the fields of evaluation and accreditation which certainly require organization skills. Basically what is at stake here is the professionalization of QA and how it has helped the agency's staff to manage their talents and become better professionals.

Before proceeding a review of the literature on professions in general might be useful. The early study of professions was based on a functional-structural approach, which identified set criteria. In considering the concept of professionalization, it is useful to think of a continuum with the very well established professions at one end and emerging professions at the other. A profession has both social/structural and individual/attitudinal elements. The former refers to the occupation or structure, while the latter refers to ideologies or attitudes. The structural attributes of professions identified in the literature include:

1. Creation of a full time and paid occupation.
2. Establishment of a training school.
3. Formation of a professional association.
4. Support of law (i.e., legal recognition of title and/or work activities).
5. Formation of a code of ethics (Wilensky 1964).

Attitudinal elements can be thought of as the invisible characteristics of professionalization, less visible than a title or letters after a name or an association. The elements identified in the literature include (Hall 1968):

1. The use of the professional organization as a major referent.
2. Belief in service to the public.
3. Belief in self-regulation.
4. Sense of calling to the field.

5. Autonomy.

Schack and Hepler (1979) added another factor to Hall's original five: Belief in continuing competence.

From a structural point of view, then, QA can be defined as a well-established profession in the sense that its associations have authorized qualifications and standards, require a set of competencies and abide by a code of ethics to be adhered to. In addition they provide its members with the attitudes that support professional attributes and comprise the essence of “acting like a professional” (Hall 1968, 93).

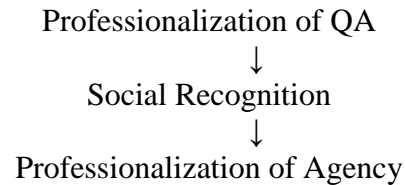
Yet, it is only recently that QA has been recognized as a profession (in both structural and attitudinal terms) within Spanish society. There have been changes in the perception of QA in recent years due to the international consideration of programs and activities to foster professional growth and advancement and the revision of educational structures within the European Higher Educational System. Before the Bologna Process all those who spent time in a classroom with students were deemed to have the adequate level of knowledge, skill and competence to guarantee quality. Now the power to evaluate quality, regulate its practice, implement and enforce its policies is granted by professional organizations.

As it is, the choice of AGAE as referent of the event was a clear indication of the trust given by Andalusian Universities to the achievements of AGAE and its credibility as an autonomous professional agent. This means that there is a link between recognition and professionalization. The decision that an accrediting agency should do something more than send out teams to evaluate institutions and programs against standards contributes to the professionalization of its staff in the sense that it serves as recognition that the service so far rendered is high quality and acknowledges that other services can be offered at the same quality level. It must be noted that although at times the drive to professionalize a field may increase the distance between stakeholders and workers this has not been the case. The fact that AGAE was tasked with this commission is a clear indication that no evaluation policing stigma sticks to the agency or that evaluation as a policing exercise has been de-stigmatized.

The whole experience gave us proof that (a) the professionalization of QA shapes the professional nature of AGAE and (b) the identification of QA as a profession within society (it should be added that support of the law is not enough and that social support also

conditions the definition of a profession) strengthened the agency's belief in its capacity of service to the public, self-regulation, continuing competence and sense of calling to the field.

We thus arrive at the following diagram:



So far the focus has been on how the occupation of QA and social trust spur the professionalization of AGAE's staff. But how has AGAE contributed to the professional organization of QA? Two strategies are examined: granting of prizes and information management through database.

3. On AGAE's Contribution to the Professional Organization of QA

3.1. Reward Policy

As seen, prizes were awarded to the three best projects by a Committee formed by representatives from the 10 Universities operating in Andalusia and 3 representatives of AGAE (the agency administered the prizes). Each institution nominated a member on the basis of his/her expertise in the field of Innovation. The selection process was carefully and soberly conducted, particularly when it came to selecting those who would do the selecting. The 13 members were required to judge all the projects and discuss their ranked lists.

The institution of prizes dispelled two of the myths surrounding Educational Innovation. One: the assessment of innovation is difficult because of its unique character. Two: consensus in the field of innovation can hinder innovation. A prize competition rewarding the best contribution on the topic served to disseminate the idea that innovation can be stimulated by measuring it and that a professional approach to innovation was possible. It also conferred value on QA.

In varying degree prizes are bound up with the professional end of Quality, with its funding. The word "prize" is traced to the Latin *premium*: "price," "money." Conceiving of innovation in terms of money brings up the concept of capital which should not be merely understood in its narrow economic sense but also as designating anything that registers as a cultural asset and can be put profitably to work. James F. English in *The Economy of Prestige*

highlights the equivalence between prizes and cultural values when he says that medals and trophies are legitimate measures of cultural worth and serve “as the most bankable, fungible assets in the cultural economy” (22). It is not difficult to see that by bringing value to innovation, prizes inevitably also bring value to Quality.

In addition, prizes confer publicity and recognition to qualifications. Although a prize cannot produce perfect agreement as to the value of this or that project and may become the occasion for disputes over how accurately qualifications have been gauged, it is still an instrument well suited to establishing qualifications and ensuring conformity to them. It may be countered that prizes assist in the bureaucratization of quality but this is not necessarily so if qualifications are flexible enough.

During the whole process the Prize Committee drew on the EFQM Innovation Framework. Developed in the middle of the last decade as a structured approach to assessing the innovation potential of organizations, the framework is organized around creativity (the ability to find and develop new ideas) and assumed risk (the capacity to put into practice new ideas). These two factors are flexible and permit variation. Flexibility was further enhanced by rewarding different perspectives in different knowledge areas. The recipients of the prizes were the following universities (titles of projects are included to illustrate plasticity of criteria):

University of Almeria: “Design and Development of Remote Laboratories for the Teaching of Engineering Studies”

University of Malaga: “Informatics through Computer Games”

University of Cadiz: “Clinical Assessment of Skills and Abilities”

It is not surprising that English assimilates the logic behind the foundation of prizes to the narrative of professionalization (54). Material awards, he says, are “designed to raise the cultural profile and broaden the cultural authority” of a profession (55) by promoting the strategy of qualification. There is then evidence to suggest that through a reward policy an agency may contribute to the professional activity of QA by (a) ascribing capital (both material and cultural) to it and (b) disseminating standards and qualifications.

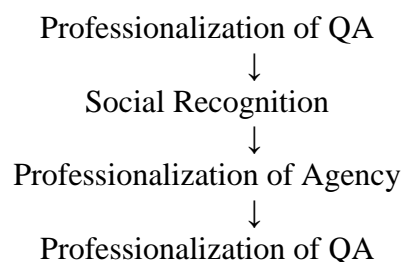
3.2. Database Management

Each of the 10 Andalusian universities participating in the Conference compiled a list of experts on Innovation. The criteria used for selection were established by AUPA. There were: training in Teaching Innovation courses and directing successful Innovation Projects (successful meaning achieving the results targeted). The lists were submitted to AGAE. Its staff created a database of 300 evaluators of Educational Innovation. As designed, the software package offers free access to all Andalusian Universities who can select experts according to the field of knowledge they need assistance in.

Immediately two questions suggest themselves: How does the database shape the professional nature of the agency? And, how does the professional nature of the agency legitimates the expertise of the list members? The first question brings us directly to the issue of trust and the stakeholders' recognition of an agency's role. There is no need to insist on the fact that recognition creates credibility and credibility equals professionalization and increased influence for evaluation organizations.

The second question invites reflection on the specific reasons that led to the decision of establishing a professional body of educational innovation evaluators through AGAE's database. Leaving aside the logic of efficiency (AGAE has produced good results in short times) the main motivation resides in the autonomous framework of the agency, independent from government and stakeholders. Independence is a guarantor for the high quality and the objectivity of the services offered and certifies that the database is impartial and scientific.

The diagram above can be completed as follows:



4. Conclusions

The objective of this study was to further discussion on the issue of professionalization of QA by exploring the organization of a Conference on Teaching Innovation. The experience provided the following conclusions:

1. The professionalization of QA spurs social recognition of an agency's services.

2. The increasing professionalization of QA strengthens an agency's belief in the attitudinal components that support professional attributes.
3. An agency may contribute to the professional organization of QA by promoting the strategy of qualification through a reward policy.
4. Founding a prize may be one way to attach cultural value to the function of QA and disseminate qualifications.
5. Information management (database) may help shape the professional nature of an agency by the logic of trust and credibility.
6. The autonomous framework of an agency guarantees the autonomy and objectivity of the information managed.

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