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Paper proposal form

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Proposal

Title: YES, THERE IS IMPACT. BUT IS IT POSITIVE, NEGATIVE OR "NONE OF THE ABOVE"?

The case of Faculty of Sciences and Faculty of Biosciences of the University Autonoma de Barcelona

Abstract (150 words max):

Within the system of external quality assurance of the education programmes in the Spanish Higher Education system, and in its phase of ex-ante accreditation (program approval), a provisional report released by the external assurance agency is included. This report contains requirements (compulsory) and recommendations. Thus, there is no doubt that the process generates impact. The question to consider is whether the impact adds value or not. This paper analyses each of the changes required and suggested in the provisional reports of 12 masters of the Autonomous University of Barcelona, which were evaluated by the Commission of Sciences of AQU Catalunya between 2012 and 2013. The results show that the education proposals of 2013 respond better to the assessment requirements of the program approval than those of 2012, but only in relation to the non-academic aspects. Regarding the evaluation added value, it is observed that the different stakeholders show agreements, but also divergences. Some of these divergences are unavoidable because stakeholders represent different perspectives of quality; others, however, point the way towards areas for improvement.

Verifica: an ex-ante process

The launching of the EHEA has led to a significant increase in universities' freedom to formulate new university degree programmes at the Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate levels. Royal Decree 1393/2007 of 29 October established the regulation of recognised university degree programmes. As from its publication, it is the universities themselves, in accordance with the prevailing regulations, that create and propose the degrees and awards that they teach and give. The counterbalance to this increase in the universities' autonomy lies in the fact that all proposals for new degree courses are subject to an ex-ante assessment process by a quality assurance agency registered with the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), which issues a binding assessment report for the Universities Council. Diagram 1 shows the functioning of this verification process.
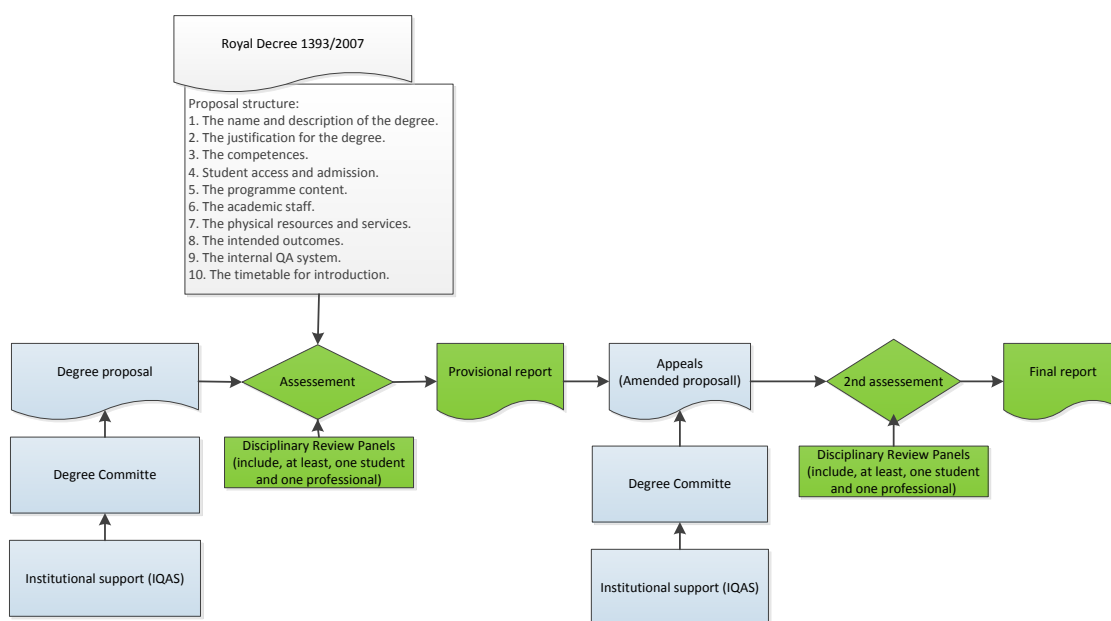

Diagram 1. Functioning of the verification process.

The curriculum proposal to be submitted for verification ("ex ante" accreditation) requires, among other things, that educational programmes follow a design logic that starts out from the training profile, and continues on to planning and resource allocation. Counterparts must be sought at home and abroad in order to establish a design culture based on benchmarking. Quality control mechanisms are also to be consolidated and the final verification report is made public in the interest of transparency.

This study divides the assessment of the impact of verification into two specific objectives:

- Determine whether there is an improvement in the quality of the proposals. For this objective, a comparison is made of the modifications and recommendations of the two years analysed.

- Assess how positive the change has been by triangulating[1] the opinion of the review panel (contained in the provisional report, in which changes that improve the proposal are expressed) with that of the academics responsible for drafting the proposal, the opinion of the Teaching Quality Office (TQO) and that of the deans of the two faculties.

Assessing the impact of the External Quality Assurance (EQA) process

The inherent assumption is that EQA enhances the quality of institutions and their services. Empirical research on this assumption is still scarce and scattered throughout European countries (Serrano-Velarde, 2008; Newton, 2012).

Perhaps one of the fields that has been researched the most is that of audit impact, with studies such as Dill (2000), comparing the audit in four countries, Wahlén (2004), on impact of national quality audit of Swedish higher education institutions between 1995 and 2002; Cheng (2011), analysing academics' perception of quality audit in England; Haapakorpi, on direct and indirect impacts in Finland, or Shah (2012), on the extent to which external audits in Australia have improved quality assurance in universities over the past 10 years. Newton (1999) and Bornmat et al (2006) are examples of research on the impact of institutional assessment (in the case of Newton two evaluation systems are compared: audit and institutional evaluation). A good example of ex-post accreditation is Volkwein et al (2007), which examines the influence of a change in accreditation standards on a representative national sample of 203 engineering programs at 40 institutions.

There is less research on ex-ante evaluation, related to the approval of the proposals. Programme approval and accreditation processes include both quality control and enhancement approaches (Dill et al., 1996). In this area it is important to cite the evaluation done by Gerbic and Krarenburg (2003), comparing two systems for approving programmes in New Zealand, and that of Suchanek et al (2012), on 1380 study programmes in the State of Lower Saxony. The former study, in its conclusions, shows that the record-keeping included in the process is likely to result in the preparation of a programme that is both cohesive, student-centred and ready for implementation; moreover, fear of not getting approval was also found to be motivational for the team and the need to work together to achieve success with the proposal can produce a cohesive approach and synergy. The study done by Suchanek et al, on the other hand, allows an analysis to be made of the typology of violations of accreditation standards, thus providing information on the problems hampering the reform process that the accreditation system set in motion.

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[1] Triangulation is one of the most important scientifically rigorous strategies used in qualitative research as a means of increasing its credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1990).

Challenges in impact assessment

An initial problem in assessing the impact of external quality assessment processes is the very polysemy of the construct of quality (Harvey & Green, 1993). According to Vroeijenstijn (1995) it is a waste of time to look for a definition: quality is a matter of negotiating between all parties concerned. Each of the different voices is valid, but none can be the only legitimate voice to be heard. The criteria of the different partners may actually be in conflict.

A second difficulty is that of establishing causality. A naïve positivistic causal link between the actions and requirements of the external quality agency and an effect within the institution cannot be assumed (Harvey, 2006). According to Stensaker (2008) this difficulty in identifying the causal links between national quality assurance systems and intended learning outcomes in teaching and learning is due to the fact that quality issues are not one-dimensional but multifaceted, and, as a consequence, there is also little agreement on the aims and objectives of policies and actions to address the problem. The assessment processes differ in their aims (Stensaker, 2003), and the aims vary between countries in the way they address different types of problems (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2002). To assess the programme's efficacy it is necessary, firstly, to define its aims, and then to assess what has been achieved (Heywood, 2000).

In the case of programme approval, the causality of the changes in the proposals is easy to establish. Programme design includes decisions on what society finds valuable for people to learn, and how this should be structured and organised. In this way it influences teaching and learning (Govers, 2011). In the case of online programmes, this is even more essential.

Finally there is the risk that, as in the assessment of the impact of Total Quality Management Systems, the impact of external assessment processes is overestimated due to managers' and other stakeholders' interest in developing a successful image of their own efforts, Zbaracki (1998, cited by Stensaker, 2003).

Methodology

The study is based on the analysis of the provisional reports of 12 proposals for master's programmes at two UAB faculties. These proposals have been assessed by the Commission of Sciences[2] of AQU Catalunya. These faculties were chosen because their proposals required changes in syllabus design and the subsequent report was favourable, so the Commission considered that the changes significantly improved the proposal. Table 1 describes the composition of the master's degrees analysed.

Table 1. List of the master's programmes analysed.

	2012	2013	
Faculty of Science	Synchrotron Advanced Materials Chemistry	High Energy Physics Interdisciplinary Studies in Sustainability Palaeontology	**5**
Faculty of Biosciences	Bioinformatics	Biology Plant Biology Terrestrial Ecology Advanced Genetics Applied Microbiology Advanced Biotechnology	**7**
	3	**9**	**12**

Data comes from two sources: provisional reports, and questionnaires for academics, technical unit (TQO) and deans[3]. The questionnaires for academics responsible for drafting the proposal and technical unit included the list of requirements and recommendations in the provisional reports, and an opinion was sought on their relevance and suitability. Thus, for each requirement/recommendation the opinions of the Commission (provisional report), academics and TQO can be triangulated. The data were studied by applying qualitative content analysis.

Results and discussion

As seen in Table 2, in 2012 an average of 18 changes are required per report and in 2013 an average of 10, which is a 44% decrease. The same occurs, though to a lesser extent, with the recommendations (25% decrease). Therefore, it seems reasonable to assert that these initial data shows the institution "has learnt" from errors or omissions made.

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[2] A Commission formed by five academics, a professional, a student and the secretary of AQU Catalunya(http://www.aqu.cat/aqu/estructura/organs_avaluacio_acreditacio_certificacio/avaluacio_qualitat/ciencies_en.html)

[3] This combination of two complementary methodological approaches is common in the research analysed: see, for example, Haapakorpi (2011), Suchanek et al, (2012) or Shah, 2012.

Table 2. Number of reports, number of requirements and number of recommendations per year.

	Total number of requirements and recommendations		Average number of requirements and recommendations per report		
	2012	**2013**	**2012 /3**	**2013/9**	**Increase (2013-2012)/2012**
Total reports	3	9			
Number of modifications required	53	93	18	10	-44.44
Number of recommendations	23	52	8	6	-25.00

To analyse the provisional reports and the questionnaire results, the modifications and recommendations of the 12 provisional reports have been codified and classified into technical-administrative aspects (A) and academic aspects (B). The technical-administrative aspects are sub-divided into aspects related to regulations, credits, etc.(A1), access routes into the programmes and bridging courses (A2), justification of the proposal (A3) and requests for further information to be able to assess and pass judgments (A4), (for example, nature of work placement centres, or broadening of subject content). Design or more academic aspects include indications on the formulation of competences (B1), on the proposal's approach (B2), (change in the title due to poor fit with contents, change in compulsory contents, etc.), on the coherence of the academic planning in relation to the educational profile (B3) and teaching and assessment (B4).

As seen in Table 3, and following the same pattern as seen above, there is an overall decrease in modifications and recommendations of 31%. This decrease is of 55% for the technical-administrative comments, while, for academic comments, there is a slight increase of 12%.

Table 3. Type of modifications required and recommendations per year: number of quotes and increase.

Modifications and recommendations	2012	2013	Nº by report (x/3) 2012	Nº by report (x/9) 2013	Increase: [(2013-2012)/2012]*100
A4 Further information	12	21	4	2	-41.67
A3 Grounds of justification	3	6	1	1	-33.33
A2 Access routes	9	14	3	2	-48.15
A1 Administrative	19	17	6	2	-70.18
Total codes Type A	**43**	**58**	**14**	**6**	**-55.04**
B4 Methodologies and assessment	1	6	0	1	100.00
B3 Curriculum consistency	9	31	3	3	14.81
B2 Profile Approach	8	23	3	3	-4.17
B1 Formulation of skills	6	21	2	2	16.67
Total Type B codes.	**24**	**81**	**8**	**9**	**12.50**
Total codes A + B.	**67**	**139**	**22**	**15**	**-30.85**
Total reports	**3**	**9**			

The fall in modifications and recommendations of the technical-administrative type (type A) is due to the fact that this type of indications is handled by the technical unit that gives support to the drafting of all the proposals. Generally, the indications of this type can be extrapolated to more than one course and therefore, once resolved favourably, they are taken as a model for subsequent courses. Moreover, most of these modifications and recommendations are related to general university regulation issues that sometimes only require more information to be supplied. This leads coordinators to accept these changes or suggestions from the technical unit.

On the other hand, modifications and recommendations of a more academic nature (type B) denote a major controversy especially in questions of profile definition and consistency of the curriculum, as will be seen below. Moreover, they show a greater degree of specificity as they are related to academic content. Learning in the resolution of these indications from one year to another is more complex given the diversity of criteria and responses possible. However, in some aspects like methodologies and assessment or the formulation of competences, the technical unit has been able to intervene and establish processes of response and resolution that the course coordinators generally regard as correct.

Of the 12 master's coordinators who received the questionnaire to assess how "good" were the changes required or recommended in the provisional report, replies were received from 10.

As seen in Table 4, in general, the recommendations made are appreciated more than the modifications required.

Table 4. Summary of overall assessments of the proposal by coordinators

Required modifications	Applicable cases	Improves proposal	Does not improve it
Design aspects	10	7	3
Access to the master's degree	9	4	5
Resources	10	3	7
Other aspects	7	6	1
Recommendations			
Design aspects	10	9	1
Access to the master's degree	6	3	3
Resources	2	0	2
Other aspects	5	4	1

If we look at the required modifications, 7 of the 10 coordinators conclude that the modifications on the teaching design improve the proposal. However, as illustrated by the two references below, the range of opinions is wide, going from "completely good" to "completely useless":

> My assessment is positive. This report leads to the conclusion that the commission analysed the proposal in detail and "detected" both specific technical-type deficiencies and more important defects whose correction substantially improved the final proposal.
> The questions/suggestions/requests made are very well-expressed and therefore have proved to be useful. (Respondent 1)

> It is an opaque, very bureaucratic process. The emphasis was always on formal aspects with no practical importance, instead of aspects that (at least in my opinion) have a real effect on teaching quality. (Respondent 2)

In four cases the Sciences Commission asked for the title or the curriculum to be changed as they did not fit properly. Two academics see the changes as positive because "the degree will reflect the

content properly". On the other hand, another academic disagrees with the change of title and a fourth one says that this makes the master's less attractive as "the title that was adopted finally is more general and so the degree stands out less from other international master's.". The latter case illustrates how discrepancies can be irreconcilable because they stem from different interests. To understand this situation, it must be realised that in Catalonia in 2013 there are a total of 485 master's degrees underway and that they must have at least 20 students enrolled per year.

Regarding the modifications to **access**, 5 of the 9 coordinators believe it has not improved for several reasons: For example, coordinator 2 says that "is not realistic" the design of bridging courses given the possible diversity of entrance qualifications. Coordinator 3, however, does not criticise the criterion of the importance of levelling the students before starting the master's degree but does criticise the fact that they are set beforehand: in his master's degree there is a double access path and he considers that it would make sense to have a levelling module within the master's programme.

Thus, it is seen that, in some cases, the opinion of the different *stakeholders* does not coincide (need to guarantee the entrance level versus need to guarantee the viability of the degree) and that, in any case, we will have to "agree to disagree". For example, in a proposal in which the academic accepts the recommendation that it should be an external committee and not the proposal's coordinator who decides the bridging courses, she claims that "creating a committee would only bring a lot more red tape". On the other hand, the Technical Quality Office (TQO) considers that the fact that it is a collegiate body that is analysing the student's previous studies can facilitate the analysis of the degree and give more guarantees to students. This reflects what Barnett quoted as a "power struggle" between the different groups of actors in Higher Education, (1994, quoted in Tam, 2011).

Both coordinators and TQO clearly disagree on the improvement brought by the requirements and modifications concerning **academic resources**. Both groups agree that the information on the dedication of teaching staff to the master's degree is not helpful. For the TQO "it does not improve the proposal because it only adds more information", while the academics argue that it is unrealistic and very difficult to know which lecturers will be teaching the various modules each year, since it is the different departments, at the coordinator's request, that designate the lecturers who will be teaching on the master's programmes. This point, of doubtful necessity in large centres with a long tradition, where teaching staff are appointed through externally-regulated mechanisms, is, however, necessary in other institutions. Institutions' problems therefore vary, but the verification process is the same for all proposals.

The academics are more favourable towards **other types of modifications** or recommendations regarding the proposals, for example, those related to administrative aspects (credit transfer and recognition, clarifications of rules on credits to be taken, error corrections, etc.). This opinion contrasts with that of the TQO, which points out that, while being relevant, these modifications do not improve the proposal because they are secondary issues that depend on internal UAB rules or indications on administrative aspects of the Ministry's computer application.

In general, all the coordinators coincide in highlighting the TQO's support role in the process and its importance to the correct framing of the degree proposals.

If we consider **the process globally**, only one of the ten academics thinks that the verification does not help to make more appropriate proposals. To draw up the proposals, a team of academics participated on all degrees but only four out of ten say they did any *benchmarking* with similar programmes at home or abroad.

The questionnaires show up external assessment elements that could be improved:

> (a process) Necessary but also intimidating as most of the commentaries cannot be nuanced or do
> not allow an explanation of the ideas that lead to a decision being taken. So I think in future it

would be very useful for the coordinator to interview a member of the committee to be able to give detailed comments on the points made in the memoir. (Respondent 4)

The process is also regarded as very bureaucratic by one of the deans and three of the academics:

(It is) an extraordinarily tedious and bureaucratic process (a memoir of over 100 pages!) (Respondent 2)

This seems to "plague" practically any process of external assessment (Newton, 2002; Haapakorpi, 2011). But, despite the length of the memoirs the information may not be enough for the Commission to make suitable judgments:

The commentaries on overlap with other master's in the UAB Faculty of Biosciences were not appropriate, revealing a lack of knowledge about the faculty's idiosyncrasy and that of the master's programmes it offers. (Respondent 4)

Conclusions

- Unlike other external assessment processes, it is simple to establish the causality of the changes in a programme approval process. Programme approval has impact over the design of the degrees and, insofar as the curriculum shapes teaching methodologies and assessment methods, it affects teaching and learning. Programme approval and accreditation processes include both quality control and enhancement approaches (Dill et al., 1996).

- Modifications and recommendations on formal or technical-administrative aspects of the memoir are considerable and the latter have been seen to diminish from one year to another. The procedure followed by the TQO in these is therefore a good practice that is also backed by the academics and deans.
- Judgments on how "good" the changes are, taken one by one, are not unanimous among the different stakeholders, who have different viewpoints on the aims of the process and quality.

- The study highlights the good and bad aspects of the assessment process that allow us to pick out areas for improvement, such as encouraging more interactions with those responsible for the proposals or making a greater effort regarding the aim behind the memoir, which is basically all about aspects of quality, transparency and homogeneity.
- Although, according to the different participants in the proposals, there has been success in bringing degrees close to the EHEA, which is the main objective of the education reform launched by Royal Decree 1393/2007, other objectives of the reform have not yet been achieved, such as the *benchmarking* of syllabuses when proposals are being drawn up. It would seem reasonable, as in a research project, for the development of an educational project to be based on an analysis of the context where the degree will be applied and of other experiences in Europe and worldwide.

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Questions for discussion:

- Impact and typologies of external assessments (audit, institutional assessment, programme approval): which are the ones that have more impact, which are the most useful, and why.

- Educative reforms and the role of external assessment: it is enough with "external controls" or should other mechanism be in place to steer change?

- When the change is mandatory: risks, benefits and precautions

- Different views between different stakeholders: which should prevail?