QUALITY IN ACADEMIC SERVICES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ÉVORA – THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COMMON ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK TOOL

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Abstract

It's urgent to evaluate quality. But we wonder how to evaluate it? Why is it important? The degrees, the courses, the services that support all the University,…What? To evaluate the quality of degrees/courses taught on a Higher Superior Institution it was approved legislation to make compulsory its evaluation. What about the structures that support all the life of a Higher Superior Institution? Shouldn't their quality also be evaluated? What happens if, for instance, the Academic Services doesn't work properly or collapse?

For each institution to know the weak and strong points, the threats and opportunities of a service, a degree, a course, etc. is a matter of survival. But survival is not enough we must innovate and that is equal to quality.

This study presents the various aspects relating to issues of quality, the model Common Assessment Framework, the diagnosis and the main results obtained by the use of questionnaire surveys applied to some students, internal clients and managers of Academic Services of the University of Évora. The main objective of the study was to assess the grade of satisfaction with the quality of service, the performance of all stakeholders, and hence the sustainability of this service. Some strengths, weaknesses and suggestions for continuous improvement are also presented.

Key-words: Quality, *Common Assessment Framework* (CAF), Grade of Satisfaction, Quality Assessment

INTRODUCTION

The new concept of Quality integrates the new social paradigm of advanced societies. The evolution of this concept reveals the cultural evolution of a country and of a people,

although in practical terms beliefs, values and principles tend to juxtapose. Quality of life is now an important social issue.

Nowadays, consumers are well aware of the close relationship between quality, environment, hygiene and safety at work and social responsibility. They ask for an ethical and responsible management, the prices they have to pay for services or products being the least of their concern (Lopes and Capricho, 2007).

The concept of quality comprises several dimensions, such as the ones dealing with assistance and technical/functional features of a product or service, the aesthetic appearance, cost, safety and the environment concerns. Being some of these dimensions subjective, they are difficult to be measured accurately. Hence, quality must be objectified and quantified in such a way as to be measurable and therefore, controlled (Pires, 2004).

There are several definitions of quality, complementing each others and leading to the achievement of excellence. The definition of quality is dependent on the person who defines it and on his/her particular goals.

Given the subjectivity comprised in the definition of quality, it is now imperative to harmonize, identify and clarify the concepts underlying our research.

Quality is a term actualised in daily social or working interactions. Despite covering a wide range of meanings, the term is difficult to be defined due to its complexity and lack of consensus. According to António and Teixeira (2007) “the habitual definitions of quality emphasise one of the three perspectives of development of the product or service [..] - Process – Results – Consequences” (our translation).

The theme Quality has also called the attention of several authors, such as Juran (1964), Crosby (1979), Deming (1986), Moller (1992), Feigenbaum (1949), Ishikawa (1985) and Taguchi (1986).

To implement a process of change within an organization is not normally an easy task. Today, among the competitive advantages of any organization, the quality of the services it delivers is a major goal. To determine the quality of any service it’s important to assess/measure that advantage and public sector organizations should not

be an exception. The evaluation of public organizations is indeed, taking place all over Europe.

The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is a quality self assessment tool developed in the European Union for public institutions. In Portugal, this model is named "Estrutura Comum de Avaliação" and is understood as a starting point for continuous improvement.

The present proposition to apply the CAF model is based on methodological instruments that DGAEP presents. The documents available consider a group of practical orientations already perfected and improved, regarding to the experiences of public organizations of Portuguese services and institutions that have already used CAF and benchmarking from other European countries, with the cooperation of the European Union. The use of CAF will hopefully lead to a gradual improvement of the quality of the services and courses offered by the University of Évora, its administrative organization, institutions' image, the increase of collaborators and clients' satisfaction and the capacity of intervention of the Executive and Top Managers.

In this paper, we make, at first, a brief description of the conceptual framing and presentation of the CAF model, its evaluation criteria and its framing on national and European context. Secondly, we explain the methodology applied on this study. After, we present some final results obtained through the enquiries made to the undergraduate students, collaborators, executive and top managers. Finally, the conclusions obtained.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMING AND PRESENTATION OF THE MODEL CAF

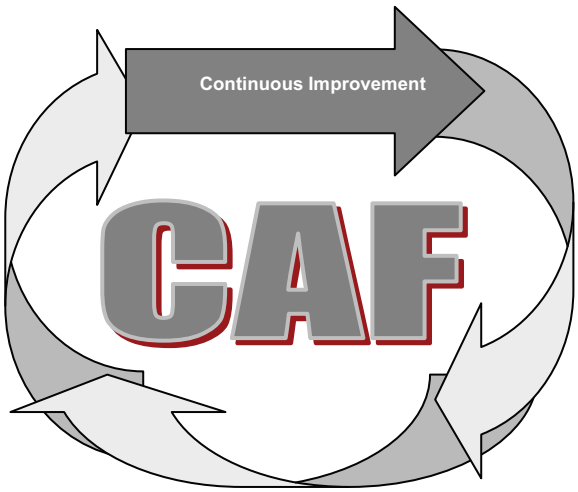
A first version of CAF was elaborated in 1998 by the Innovative Public Services Group (IPSG), inspired by the Excellence Model of the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) and the model of the German University of Administrative Sciences Speyer and the European Institute of Public Administration (EIPA), under the influence of the orientation guidelines defined during the German presidency, on the first semester of 1999. Another CAF version was produced and tested during the Finish presidency on the second semester of 1999 and during the Portuguese presidency on the first semester of 2000. The CAF model was a result of co-operation among the EU Ministers responsible for Public Administration.

This model has been continuously perfected. On the 2nd Conference of Quality of Public Administrations from European Union, in Copenhagen (Denmark), on October 2002, was presented the last version – CAF 2002. This version was a result of improvements introduced, based on information obtain through enquiries applied on 2001 concerning the use of this tool around Europe. The main objectives of these enquiries were to avoid redundancies, overlapping, to make easier the use of this tool and to do a glossary of terms.

The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) was inspired by the Excellence Model of the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) but adopted on a more simplified form for Public Services. It's a way of public organisations know better their organisational performance and use the techniques of Quality Management.

This model is settled on a methodology based on objective criteria's, used for public organisations that presents a self-assessment process and emphasize the leadership, the continuous improvement, satisfaction of clients and all interested parts. **Figure 1** presents on a schematic form the advantages and disadvantages when it is implemented on an organisation.

Figure 1 – Advantages e disadvantages when the CAF is implemented on an organisation



ADVANTAGES

- Improvement of the Management System
- Improvement of the real knowledge of the institution, strong points and areas to improve
- Information share
- Creation of bookmarks for quality control
- Definition of strategic orientations on an institutional level
- To systematize the tasks and understanding of its importance on the organization context
- Increase of sensitization for quality questions

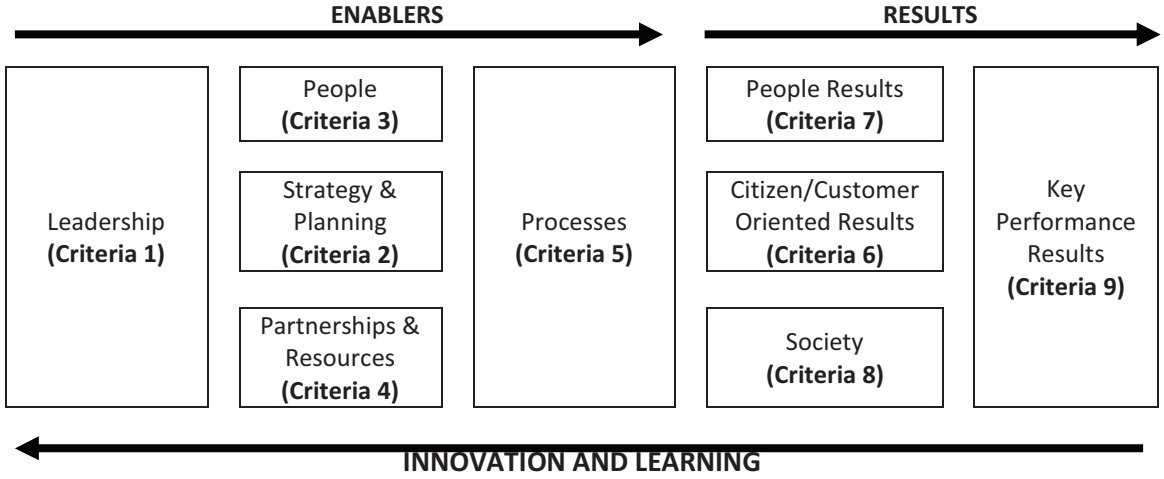
DISADVANTAGES

- Time to implement the model
- Resistence to change
- Information and formation of the intervenient

Source: Self made

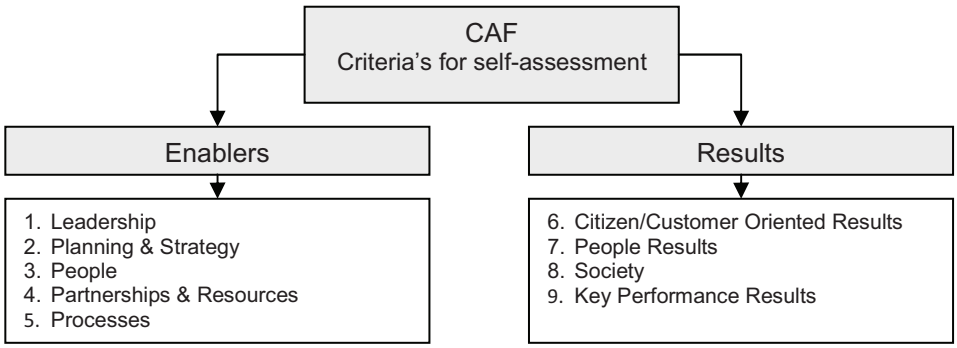
CAF have been designed for use in all parts of the public sector, applicable to public organisations at the international, national, regional and local level. It can be used as a way to offer to public organisations a simple and an easy use tool of self-assessment, with an efficient return. The implementation of CAF model involves a group (with a multidisciplinary constitution) of individuals of an organisation that will do a critical evaluation of their organisation, department and/or section oriented for two types of criteria's: Enabler and Results. **Figure 2** presents the schematic form of CAF and **Figure 3** the criteria for self-assessment.

Figure 2 – The structure of CAF Model



Source: DGAP (2003: 4)

Figure 3 – Criteria for self-assessment



Source: Self made

CAF is settled in a 9 structure criteria corresponding to the main aspects of an organisation considered in any organisational analysis. Those 9 criteria of self-assessment are divided in 5 enablers' criteria and 4 results criteria. The enablers' criteria determine what the organisation does and how it approaches its tasks to achieve the desired results. The Results criteria refer the results that are being achieved by the organisation, i.e., action's final product which show how well we are doing to reach the targets we may have set for the organisation.

The conjugation of these nine criteria refer that the results are caused by enablers and enablers are improved using the outcomes of results. The results obtained by the organisation are a consequence of the action developed on several areas such as people, clients, processes, etc. That means that excellent results concerning Performance, Clients, People and Society are achieved through a strong Leadership in Planning and Strategy, transferred by People, Partnerships and Resources and Processes (Carapeto e Fonseca, 2006).

Per each criterion there is a list of sub-criteria which identify the main questions to be considered on the organisation assessment. Related to them there are feasible indicators that are capable to show a privileged action for quality management. This means that the organisation must act in a determined way or present determined results to its management be considered positive (Rocha, 2006).

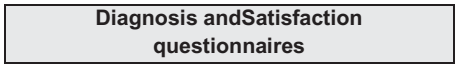
The application of CAF in Portuguese public institutions is framed in the self-assessment principle, with the final aim to improve the organizational performance. Underlying the use of the CAF model is the will to promote, on a voluntary basis, the continuous improvement of organizations (Carapeto e Fonseca, 2006). This performance improvement must be a voluntary, spontaneous and simultaneous act from the services, made with the engagement of all interested parts and never "imposed by decree".

To undertake an accurate self-assessment with the application of CAF, it's important to take into consideration some stages and phases of its planning as **Table 1** shows.

Table 1 – Phases and Stages for self-assessment

Stages / Phases	I **Planning of self-assessment**	II **CAF presentation to the organisation**	III **Filling up of self-assessment table**	IV **Diffusion of results**
1st	Initiative of the process: Definition of ambit and mission of self-assessment	Presentation of the CAF to middle managers	Definition of initiatives and indicators	Analysis of the results obtained
2nd	Presentation of the proposal to Top Management	Presentation of the CAF to collaborators	Collecting data	Elaboration of the final report
3rd	Constitution of self-assessment group		Documental research	Elaboration of the Improvement Plan
4th	Meeting with top and middle managers		Enquiries	Presentation of the results to the organisation
5th	Planning of meetings and working plans		Self-assessment tables	Challenge to do the change
6th	Definition and diffusion of tasks		Attribution of punctuations	

Source: Self made based on DGAP (2005)



Bearing in mind that quality management aims to provide the organization with the opportunity to learn more about itself and that quality conceptual framework can be applied both in industrial organizations and in all parts of the public sector (António e Teixeira, 2007), any public institution, when applying the CAF model, learns how to use a model of organizational analysis, how to practise self-assessment in a continuous and systematic way, how to develop a culture of public service aiming at leadership and to foster the strategic management based on the qualification and responsibility of people.

METHODOLOGY

The Academic Services of the University of Évora, a front-office service, serve a vast community of customers composed namely by students, teaching and non-teaching staff, managers and administrators, fact that determined being the first services in the university to be assessed.

When undertaking a process of self-evaluation it is of fundamental importance that the parties involved should be heard. In this study and in the process of gathering information, structured questionnaires, in the form of opinion inquiries were thought to be very useful.

In order to obtain a diagnosis of the Academic Services, to assess the processes developed in these services, as well as to assess the students' and collaborators' level of

satisfaction with the quality of the services delivered, three types of questionnaires were done: one to be answered by the first-cycle students enrolled in the academic year 2006/2007, in greater number when compared with all others, one questionnaire of diagnosis and satisfaction to be answered by the internal collaborators and another diagnosis questionnaire to be answered by the managers of those services.

In 2006/2007 there were 5276 first-cycle students enrolled, and they constituted the basis for the representative sample. As for the collaborators and managers, the questionnaires were applied to the totality of their population. **Table 2** illustrates the populations, the location of application and the period of the study.

Table 2 – Target populations, location of application and period of study

Target Population	Population	Location of application	Period of study
First-cycle students of the University of Évora enrolled in 2006/2007	5276	Buildings of the 'Campus' of the University of Évora	May and June, 2007
Managers of the Academic Services of the University of Évora	5	Saint Augustine Building University of Évora	October and November, 2007
Non-teaching collaborators of the Academic Services	17	Saint Augustine Building University of Évora	October and November, 2007

Source: Self made

The questionnaires were elaborated based on the models provided by the General Department of Public Administration and Employment (DGAP, 2005).

There were 896 student valid respondents out of the 1000 questionnaires sent out, which means an 89,6% response rate. These questionnaires were applied in classrooms, and targeted the curricular units with the greatest number of students enrolled, not less than 20, in each course offered at the university. 17 questionnaires were applied to internal collaborators of the services under analysis, corresponding to the totality of them. Out of these, there were 15 valid respondents, which represents an 88,24% response rate. All the managers were given a diagnosis questionnaire, and the response rate was 80%.

Collaborators and managers responded in their working locations what may have conditioned their answers to certain questions. The three questionnaires contained closed, mixed and /or overt questions and 4 criteria of enablers of the CAF model were applied, namely leadership, planning and strategy, people management and management of processes and change management, as illustrated in **Figure 4**.

The Leadership criterion assists people in making a diagnosis and in assessing the way leaders develop actions and behaviours when implementing the management system of the organisation. The criterion of planning and strategy is useful to know how the organisation implements its mission, vision and values, thus allowing a diagnosis of whether the strategy is based on adequate policies, plans, objectives and processes. The criterion of people management is the support and the competitive advantage of the organisations, hence it is crucial to know how the organization manages, develops and transfers knowledge and the people potential, and assess their degree of satisfaction. With the criterion of management of processes and change one seeks to make a diagnosis and an evaluation of the processes, how the organisation conceives, manages and improves its processes. The analysis of these four criteria of the CAF model was made with the purpose of obtaining strong and weak points and improvement actions. This way the Academic Services will learn more about themselves and will improve quality.

RESULTS

The results obtained indicated that the majority of first-cycle students of the University of Évora are young female adults, single and regular students. The majority of them are satisfied with both the performance and the global image of the Academic Services. Location, products and services delivered were in general also appreciated in a positive way. However, the students didn't have any opinion on some services delivered either because they didn't know about them or because they had never been in need of them.

As for the Academic Services staff, the results show that the majority of them is composed by married females, and the average age is 36 years old. This population is qualified and has been working in the Academic Services for several years, the majority of them since their admission and integration into the services.

The majority of the managers used to work in other services of the university and have academic qualifications to perform the tasks assigned to them.

Results obtained from the collaborators

The collaborators of the Academic Services state that their director is a good leader, in spite of the fact that he does not promote them, does not support training actions necessary for the improvement of organisational performance and does not discuss their

individual performance with them. Some state that there is not leadership by example. These collaborators are not involved in the elaboration of the plan of activities nor in the strategic objectives adopted or to be adopted by the University or the services. There is not effective negotiation regarding the objectives and priorities of their sector. Regardless of this they give their opinion because they consider it important.

Planning and strategy implementation in the Academic services is considered defective, as it does not involve all the staff. The practice of hosting and integrating the collaborators seems to be positive, although it needs improvements. There is a lot to do in the area of management and career development as well as in the area of professional training. It seems that collaborators do not wish to answer these questions by lack of interest, motivation or any other factor which when spoken out would be considered as a mere conjecture.

The involvement of people by developing open dialogue and empowerment may be considered a weak point in the Academic Services, as the autonomy granted seems to be insufficient; responsibilities are not delegated to collaborators and the involvement of people is observed only in the internal communication and consensus between collaborators and managers on the objectives to achieve by the department.

The collaborators think that the global image of the Academic Services is good, irrespective of two weak points which they consider must be urgently improved: telecommunications and the electronic sending of forms. They demand a more efficient modernisation, more technical means and more qualified human resources. Although globally not satisfied, they recognise that the social role played by the services needs to be improved. Management and the management system need to be improved urgently in the areas of rewards, implementation and application of the assessment system, including the definition of individual and shared objectives.

They are globally satisfied with their working conditions. The only weak point stated is the inequality of opportunities regarding promotions. The level of satisfaction in this domain is not very high, which means that the Academic Services must focus their attention on developing the human resources management policies and on creating the opportunities for the development of new competences.

They are not motivated for lifelong learning, nor do they like change. They prefer teamwork. Motivation strategies must be implemented in order to engage them in lifelong learning, a practice of crucial importance in any organization.

Equipment is satisfactory but should be improved. Hygiene and safety conditions should also be intervened. The leadership styles of both principal and intermediate managers are different, the collaborators revealing a higher level of satisfaction with the last ones. This may be due to a closer relationship between collaborators and intermediate managers.

Results obtained from the managers

The assessment made by the managers reveals that the management system has to undergo a thorough analysis, evaluation and implementation, as there is a lack of important measurable mechanisms and systems of assessment and of total quality management. The leadership style of each manager motivates the collaborators. The managers do not take part in the process of change of their respective sectors. Each one of them is responsible for the implementation of initiatives considered relevant for the motivation of the collaborators and for the incentives that promote creativity and people's performance.

The Academic Services make use of adequate mechanisms to develop, revise and upgrade planning and strategy. To implement planning and strategy, the managers take simultaneous measures in their respective sectors. Common to all of them is the definition of responsibilities. The Academic Services need more collaborators. There are mechanisms to recognise exceptional performances. Planning, management and human resources improvement go hand in hand with the planning and the strategy defined for each sector. The Academic Services has not a very clear and explicit way to identify, develop and make use of the people's competences in articulation with the organisational individual or collective objectives and goals.

Results show a certain involvement of people in the definition of plans and strategies for their sectors, assuming responsibility for them. Improvement measures for processes are not identified. A culture of resistance to change is nonexistent and it can be used to implement changes in practices. Benchmarking is yet to be exploited. Modernization will not occur unless the sectors are provided with essential means involving all parties

in the process. The assessment of the modernisation process must be transparent, purposeful and measurable.

Collaborators' opinions *versus* managers' opinions

When data provided by the collaborators and the managers are crossed, it's possible to see that there is still a long way to go in the way the organization leaders develop and proceed on with the necessary mission, vision and values that will sustain the success of the academic Services in the long run.

From the data collected in the abovementioned questionnaires the generic model underlying this study can be completed, as shown in **Figure 4**.

CONCLUSIONS

Quality exists and can be defined according to the interest shown by those who refer to it or by those who are willing to make use of it. There are in fact, tools to measure quality and the CAF model used in this research work is a living proof. Quality, being a factor of competitiveness, must be assessed continuously as this is the only way to establish the difference between organisations that promote quality and excellence and those that do not do so.

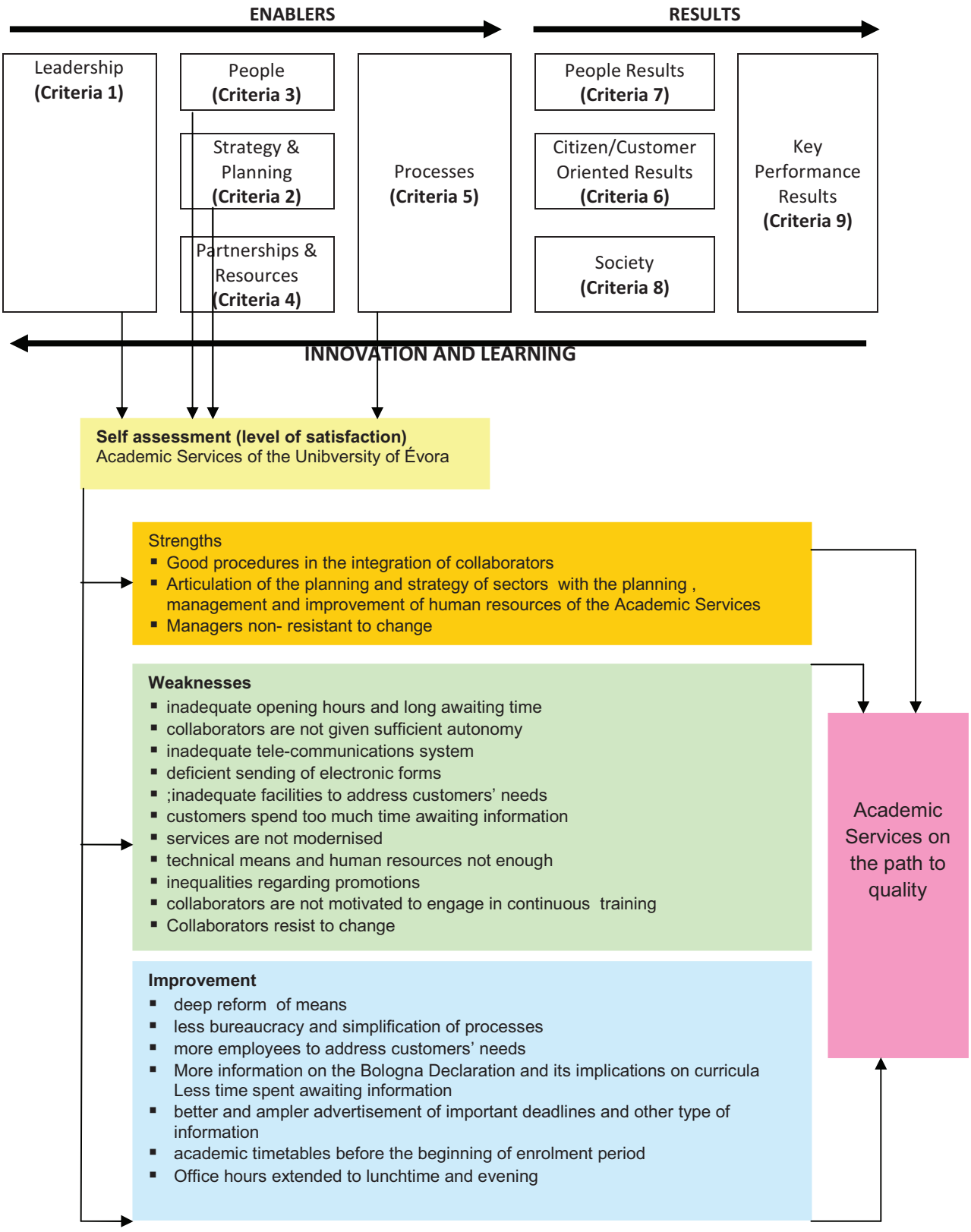
In general terms, the study undertaken reveals that the mission and vision of the University of Évora are acknowledged by all respondents; that the managers are receptive to change unlike the collaborators who tend to be a barrier to change. Moreover, it shows that there is a good leadership, regardless of the lack of a collective involvement in the negotiation of objectives, of the participation of collaborators in the planning or in the definition of the strategy of the services. Leaders do not delegate responsibilities and the participation of managers in the processes does not seem to be a priority. People are not motivated to take training actions.

Consequently, The Academic Services now have some indicators on how to improve their image, accessibilities and performance. This is the right way to proceed on, knowing exactly where to go and what they want to achieve: excellence in the services delivered.

Due to some constraints, namely the ones related to the lack of time and shortage of Human Resources, only some questionnaires were applied, contrary to the

recommendations of the General Department of Public Administration and Employment (DGAEP). Thus, it is our intention to further this study based on a more representative sample of respondents in the University of Évora and do it on other Institutions of Higher Education. The comparison to be established will certainly highlight the use of good practices.

Figure 4 – Self-Assessment model of the Academic Services of the University of Évora



Source: Self made

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