The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and the Evaluation of Quality in a Public Service: Case Study of Academic Services of the University of Évora, Portugal

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Abstract

Society is more and more demanding on professional terms. Therefore, in order to achieve Excellence we need to go through processes of continuous improvement and we need to measure and to evaluate Quality which is increasingly seen as a competitive and distinguishing factor between institutions. And institutions from Public Sector like Universities are no exception. It’s urgent to evaluate their quality. But a question remains: how do we evaluate them? Why is it important? Should we evaluate the graduate and post-graduate degrees, the services that support all the University,…What?

In Portugal it is compulsory to evaluate the quality of the degrees taught on a Higher Education Institution. For that purpose a set of legislation has been approved: Law n.º38/94 of 21st November, Decree-law n.º205/98 of 11th July and Law n.º1/2003 of 6th January.

But if this is a compulsory procedure, shouldn’t the structures that support all the life of a Higher Education Institution also be evaluated? What happens if, for instance, the Academic Services don’t work properly or collapse? This service is considered as essential and fundamental on Higher Education Institutions.

Key words: Common Assessment Framework (CAF); Quality, Quality Evaluation, Higher Education.

Introduction

Evaluation has been part of managing since the creation of the world (Kardec, Arcuri e Cabral, 2002) and has led to the continuous search for Excellence. According to Vught e Westerheijden (1995), the motives for the necessity of evaluating the Higher Education Systems are the increase of public expenses, the expansion of higher education systems, more transparency of processes, the increase in the number of students, teachers’ and researchers’ mobility. But to evaluate is not enough, we need to control the evaluated quality.

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 organisation, 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 CAF, its evaluation criteria and its framing on national and European context. Secondly, we explain the CAF application process and the support tools for self-assessment. Finally, we present some final results obtained through the enquiries made to the undergraduate students, collaborators, executive and top managers.

**Conceptual Framing**

The CAF was a result of the cooperation of the EU Ministers responsible for Public Administration. It was jointly developed in 1998 under the aegis of the Innovative Public Services Group (IPSG), a working group of national experts set up by the General-Directors (DG) in order to promote exchanges and cooperation where innovative ways of modernizing government and public service delivery in EU Member States were concerned.

A first version of CAF was elaborated in 1998 by the IPSG, inspired by the Excellence Model of the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM), the model of the German University of Administrative Sciences Speyer and the European Institute of Public Administration (EIPA), under the influence of the great orientation guidelines defined during the German presidency, in the first semester of 1999. Another CAF version was produced and tested during the Finnish presidency in the second semester of 1999 and during the Portuguese presidency in the first semester of 2000.

This model has been continuously perfected; the last version – CAF 2002 - was presented in the 2nd Conference of Quality of Public Administrations from European Union, in Copenhagen (Denmark), in October 2002. This version was a result of improvements introduced, based on information obtained through enquiries applied in 2001 concerning the use of this tool around Europe. The main objectives of these enquiries were to avoid redundancies and overlapping, to make the use of this tool easier and to do a glossary of terms (DGAP, 2003).

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. 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”.

The General-DIRECTION of Public Administration (DGAP), a service responsible for the promotion of Quality and Innovation in Public Administration, in syntony with the European Quality movement, developed a kit of tools for services and public organizations that aims at improving their performance based on CAF model.

The CAF has 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, costless and easy to use tool of self-assessment, with an efficient return. The implementation of the CAF involves a group of individuals of an organisation (with a multidisciplinary constitution) that will do a critical evaluation of their organisation, department and section, oriented for two types of criteria: Enabler features and Results.

**Presentation of CAF model**

CAF is settled on 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 into 5 enablers’ criteria and 4 results criteria. The enablers’ criteria determine what the organisation does and how the tasks are developed to achieve the desired results (DGAP, 2003; Carapeto e Fonseca, 2006; Rocha, 2006; António e Teixeira, 2007).
The Results criteria refer to the results that are being achieved by the organisation, i.e., action’s final product which show how well we are doing against the targets we may have settled for the organisation.

The conjugation of these nine criteria refer that the results are caused by enablers who, in turn, are improved using the outcomes of results. The results obtained by the organisation are a consequence of the action developed in 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 (Lopes e Capricho, 2007).

Per each criterion there is a list of sub-criteria which identify the main questions to be considered in 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 certain way or present certain results, so that its management can be considered positive. (Pires, 2004).

**Methodology to apply the CAF model**

Taking into consideration the methodology proposed by DGAP, the CAF Model present version (CAF 2002) suggests a group of application guidelines, with the purpose to guarantee a certain level of standardization in the assessment process. Therefore, the supporting guide from DGAP helps organizations to prepare the files for self-assessment, to do the evaluation of both criteria (enablers and results) and to analyse and to divulge the results obtained.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Planning of self-assessment</th>
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<th>Diffusion of results</th>
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<td>Presentation of the CAF to executive and top managers</td>
<td>Definition of initiatives and indicators</td>
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<td>Planning of meetings and working plans</td>
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<td>Definition and diffusion of tasks</td>
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**Source:** Table designed by the author of the paper
The CAF and the Evaluation of Academic Services: results obtained

Figure 2 - Results Obtained

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<th>Enablers</th>
<th>Results</th>
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<td>Strategy &amp; Planning</td>
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Strength points:
- Good procedures for the welcome integration of new collaborators;
- Alignment of planning and strategy of planning, management and improvement of Human Resources of Academic Services;
- Managers’ non resistant to change.

Weakness points:
- Mission and vision are not transformed into strategic and operational goals and actions;
- Weak involving of collaborators through the dialog and responsibility delegation;
- Inadequate opening hours and a long waiting times;
- Collaborators don’t have sufficient autonomy to do their daily activities;
- Inadequate telephonic answers;
- Incorrect sending of forms by electronic way;
- Inadequate space to attend the clients;
- The time to obtain an answer to the requests is to long;
- Lack of modernization on the services;
- Lack of technical means and qualified human resources;
- Inexistence of equal treatment, of opportunities on promotion processes and competence development;
- Present human resources policy, promotion of participation on lifelong learning actions and lack of opportunities for career development;
- Present conditions for hygiene, security, equipment and services;
- Inexistence of identification on improvement processes measures’;
- No motivation of the collaborators for lifelong learning;
- Collaborators resistant to changes.

Improvements:
- Profound logistic reform;
- Less bureaucracy and more simplicity on the processes;
- Larger number of employees doing the clients attendance;
- More information on transition of Bologna’s Curricula;
- Shorter times of waiting to be attended or for an answer;
- More and better divulgation of important deadlines and other information;
- Classes schedules must be accessible before the enrolment period;
- Opening hours and time-tables for attendance at lunch time and after normal working hours;
- Better furniture and spaces for handicap people;
- Decentralized service (an office per building);
- Efficient answers to solve the problems in a shorter time;
- More information on the services offered.

Source: Figure designed by the author of the paper
The results on figure 2 were obtained by the analysis of three different questionnaires using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences commonly called SPSS, version 15. For the students were applied 1000 questionnaires and a total of 896 answered questionnaires were received. For collaborators were applied 19 and answered 17 and for executive and top managers were applied 5 and answered 4.

For the students the estimation of the sample was based on the following Cochran’s (1977) equation:
\[ n = \frac{t^2 \cdot p \cdot (1-p) \cdot d^2}{(d^2)} \]

on which (t) is the estimated value for the 0.025 confidence interval; (p)(q) is the estimated variance of 0.25; and, (d) is the error margin for the estimated proportion. Therefore, for the target-population of 5276 undergraduate students enrolled, the dimension of the sample was of 358 individuals.

Conclusions
In our days there are tools capable of helping us to evaluate Higher Education Institutions, namely the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) model and European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) model. The true evaluation of quality must take into serious consideration the evaluation of services and teaching of various sciences.

CAF is an inevitable instrument to be applied to any quality policy in any public institution and even to any context, with the necessary adaptations, obviously. It’s easy to use and its costs are extremely low. However, there are some disadvantages, as there are some limits to its use as an instrument of a critical and detailed self-assessment.

In general, the use of this model will gradually lead to the quality of the teaching and services rendered, of the administrative organisation, of the institutional image, of the increase of clients’ satisfaction and of the intervention capacity of top and executive managers.

The results obtained in this study allow us to say that a long way is still yet to be run by the Academic Services of the University of Évora in order to achieve Excellence. The evaluation made by the undergraduate students (main clients of this service) enrolled in the 2006/2007 academic year is only satisfactory. The evaluated items were, as we saw, institutional image, accessibilities and services rendered. The list of suggestions to achieve the “Very Good” level is long. Suggestions are very useful, giving to us the impression of concern by these clients. They want to be served in an accurate and adequate way. The staff of Academic Services gave us the strength and weakness points of this service. These are very important indicators that will help the Academic Services to head towards Excellence.

Bibliography


