



Reflections from the workshop at the University of Alicante

Azerbaijan Tourism and Management University

The study tour to the University of Alicante benefitted the staff of Azerbaijan Tourism and Management University in several ways. The knowledge gained during this tour complemented the experience accumulated during the previous work visit to the Middlesex University London campus.

The staff had the opportunity to acquaint themselves with Spain's experience in accrediting study programs. The speaker provided important pieces of information about how the accreditation process has evolved in Spain and how the model of accreditation actually works. A holistic view of the Spanish experience allowed the participants from ATMU to appreciate common challenges faced by Spain and Azerbaijan (albeit over different time horizons), as they gradually adopted European-wide quality assurance mechanisms in their higher education.

One of the crucial points raised by the speaker was that ANECA, the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain, conducts the accreditation process independently from the country's Ministry of Education. It ensures accountability and transparency in the conduct of regular evaluations for the purpose of study programs' validation. Moreover, ANECA treats its process of evaluation as a tool for subject universities' continuous improvement. This is evidenced by ANECA's use of three-phased approach to the accreditation process: (a) verification (or ex-ante accreditation), monitoring (follow-up procedure) and accreditation (ex-post accreditation).

The speaker continuously emphasized the fact that the system works as an integral part of the European Higher Education Area. Spanish universities' journey of growth towards maturity concluded successfully thanks to their strong ties to the European network of quality assurance bodies and compliance with the common regulatory framework. In other words, the change was as much externally induced as it was internally driven. However, another recurrent point was that the sustainability of quality assurance depended on how strongly quality mechanisms are embedded in universities' internal quality control systems.

One of the speakers stressed the importance of having a proper action plan in place for any kind of strategy and in particular, for the quality assurance policy. Underlining the question about staff members' readiness to actually adopt quality policy in their practical, day-to-day work, the speaker summed up the ultimate success of quality by one apt expression: "You are as strong as your friends". Put differently, the university's claim of success in applying its quality policies boils down to the question of how the weak links in its "chain of personnel" are ready to implement it.

All of the speakers communicated a clear message that the efforts to establish a quality assurance system within universities should not merely rely on a top-down approach. As one of the speakers put it, "first, get your Quality Assurance department ready, then pick up enough energy in the bottom to bring about the change". Speakers tried to get across the message that quality policy should not be thought of as lofty, abstract goals out of touch with the reality and hard to accomplish. The key yardstick to measure the quality

of policies at a university is to simply ask “Does this particular step or measure make student experience better?”.

One of the most interesting sessions dealt with the tech-driven Education 4.0. The speaker elaborated on how the advent of the big data, artificial intelligence and internet of things was changing the higher education landscape. This session drove the point home that the quality of education was not measured by how well an institution complies with a set of rules and procedures. New technologies significantly expanded the boundaries of what a higher education institution can do to enhance student and staff experience.

The workshop was marked by an effective mixture of conceptual and practical knowledge. Trainers demonstrated passion and good will in their interaction with the participants. Activities used to encourage greater participant engagement was successful, judging by the end products they delivered. Participants reviewed their initial SWOT analysis of their respective universities and developed action plans to address the core vulnerabilities in terms of quality control.

One of the highlights of the workshop was participants’ introduction to Tableau Software, data analytics software and its benefits in terms of building data-driven, sustainable quality assurance processes. The participants had an opportunity to work on Tableau and examine its key strength as a tool for data analysis.

Last, but not least, presentations also expanded on the role of KPI (key performance indicators) in tracking universities’ progress in terms of their institutional objectives. The speaker demonstrated how the KPIs are used to measure progress and help higher education institutions understand how particular organizational units are performing vis-à-vis the institutional strategy. The emphasis was made on the importance of selecting appropriate KPIs to gauge the institution’s performance.

All speakers highlighted the importance of university autonomy in properly adapting to standards of quality assurance in European Higher Education Area. This recurrent theme of greater need for universities’ flexibility in designing their own programs and maintaining their quality was one of the key takeaways from the workshop.