External evaluation of a QA agency
Lessons from experience

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Maria Jose Lemaitre
What we expected to gain?

- Feedback: Self assessment and external review provided a good opportunity to focus on the impact of the work, the view of HEIs, an international perspective.

- Accountability: Assessment made it possible to offer the Government, HEIs and the public with an external report on the way the work had been carried out.

- Improvement: Need to learn in a systematic way about strengths and weaknesses, and how to do things better.
Who should evaluate us?

- Need for an international perspective
- Legitimacy
- Clear guidelines

→ The decision was made to ask INQAAHE
→ A report about alignment with the Guidelines of Good Practice
→ The report would be accepted by the INQAAHE Board
Framework for the evaluation

- INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice
- The agency’s own purposes and objectives:
  - Program accreditation
  - Institutional accreditation
  - Capacity building
Role of the GGP

- GGP provided the outline for the assessment and for the self evaluation report
- They cover most of the main issues, making it easier to organize the assessment process
- The examples of sources of evidence not only help with information gathering, they also clarify the meaning of the guidelines
Self evaluation process

Participation:

- Board members
- Technical staff
- Representatives from programs and HEIs
- Reviewers for program and institutional accreditation (national and international)
Evidence:

- Questionnaires answered by representatives from HEIs and reviewers
- Statistics on performance (time taken to complete different tasks, number of accreditation decisions, response from HEIs)
- Review of documents, handbooks, guidelines, forms
Self evaluation process (3)

Writing the report:

- Self evaluation proved to be as difficult as the institutions have always said it is:
  - Difficult to get adequate involvement and participation from stakeholders
  - Difficult to recognize strengths
  - Difficult to identify weaknesses without explaining them away

- It also proved as useful as they have reported
Preparation for the external review

- Availability of supporting materials (decision on translation)
- Organization of meetings and interviews
  - Identification of people to be interviewed and institutions to be visited
  - Invitations
  - Agenda (on the basis of requests from review team)
- Logistic organization (contracts, hotel, travel, food, translations, interpretation)
Reading the external review report

- A wide range of important and significant information
- A different look at familiar chores
- Important insights into the work of the agency
- The feeling that things were not completely understood
- Significant suggestions and recommendations
- Partial agreement with recommendations

➢ Overall, great contribution to improvement
Lessons learned

- Essential to assess against standards and the agency’s own purposes
- Self evaluation is a powerful tool for learning, for reflection, for ‘making urgent what we know is important’
- External review is essential to put self evaluation in perspective
- External review makes it possible to learn about the way in which the agency is seen, not only by reviewers but also by other stakeholders
Lessons learned

- The external review provides important feedback on the improvement plan and makes it easier to plan for the future
- A balanced review team provides wide ranging and significant feedback to the agency
- The self assessment report and the external report become essential tools for future development
Lessons learned

- The need to complete and improve the GGP
  - They do not cover the whole range of issues to be addressed (e.g., no guidelines on procedures)
  - Some issues are covered in more than one guideline
  - They could be more explicit in terms of what is expected
- Based on this experience, RIACES prepared a handbook and a form with basic information
Lessons learned: some difficulties

- The issue of language:
  - Spanish vs English (translation of materials, interpretation during the visit, readability of reports and materials)
  - Different ways of understanding common concepts – the issue of a common QA language
Lessons learned: comments from the perspective of an external reviewer

The guidelines:

- Minimum standards or guidelines for improvement
- Open or prescriptive
- Level of compliance
- Conceptual issues
Lessons learned: comments from the perspective of an external reviewer

The review process:

- Clear terms of reference
- Division of labour between panel and agency
- Understanding of context and language
- Process guidelines

Taking part in a review is a significant learning experience, both for reviewers and reviewed