

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 co-operation 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”.

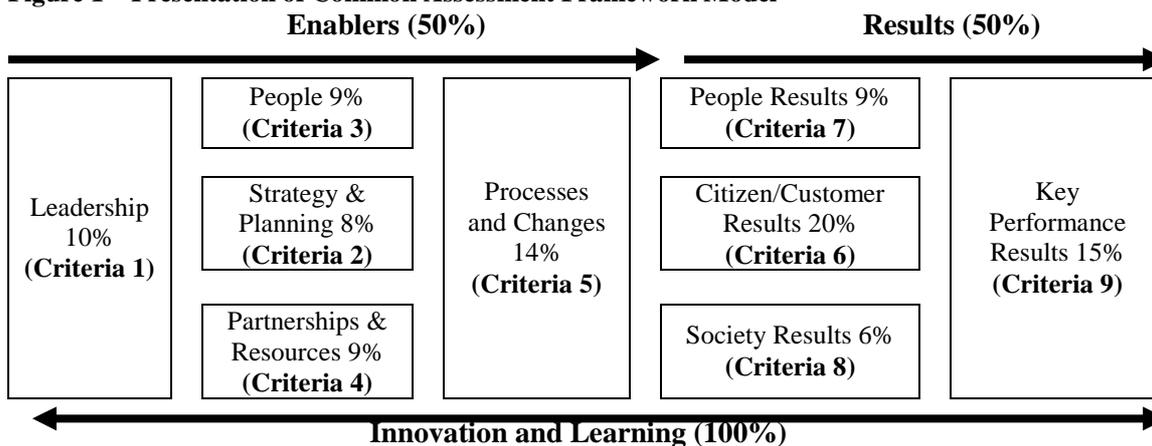
The General-Direction of Public Administration (DGAP), a service responsible for the promotion of Quality and Innovation in Public Administration, in syntony with the European Quality movement, developed a kit of tools for services and public organizations that aims at improving their performance based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

Figure 1 – Presentation of Common Assessment Framework Model



Source: Adapted from DGAP (2003), 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.

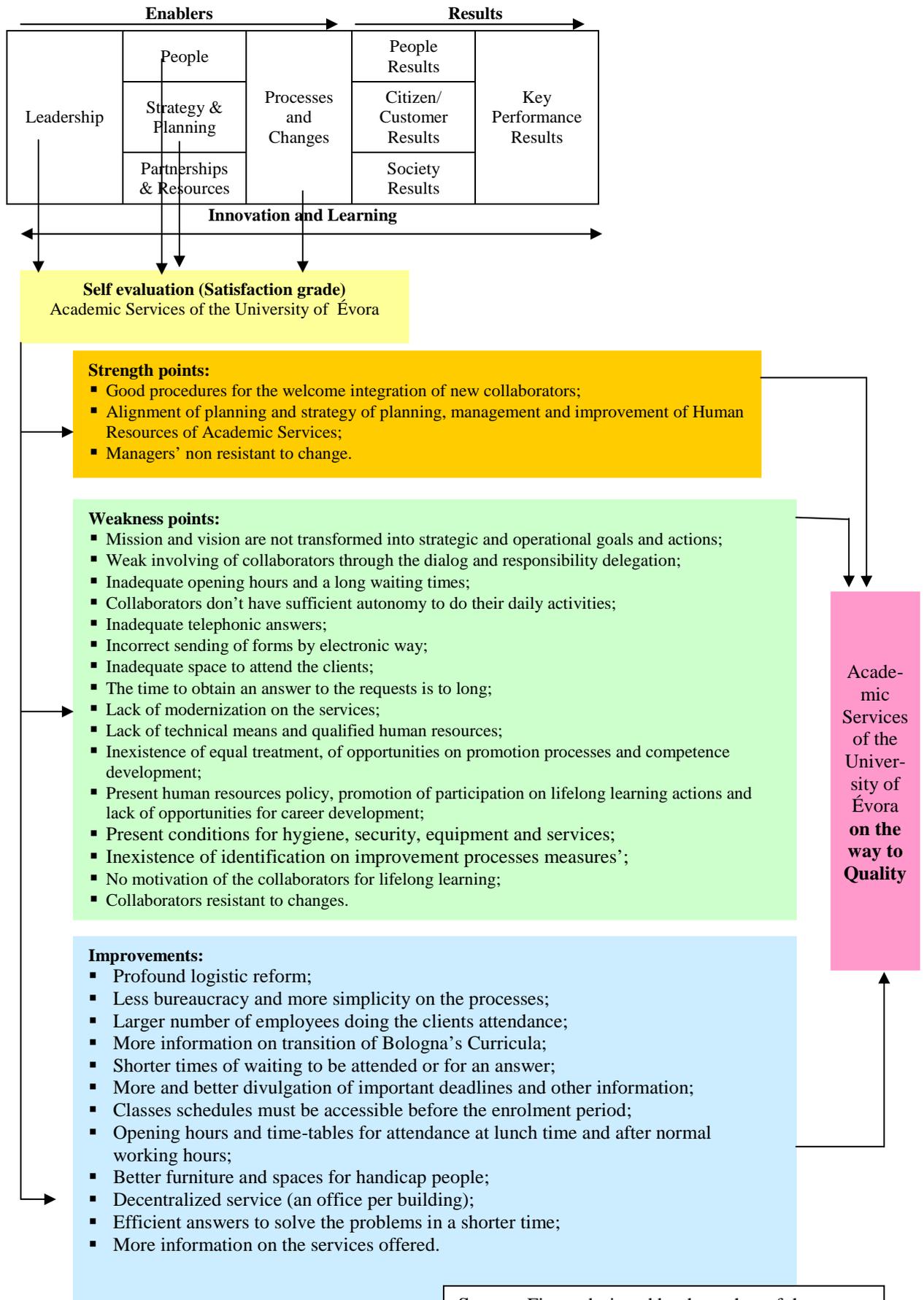
Table 1 – Phases and Stages for self-assessment

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	Initial process: Definition of scope and mission of self-assessment	Presentation of the CAF to executive and top 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 executive 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: Table designed by the author of the paper

Diagnosis and Satisfaction questionnaires

The CAF and the Evaluation of Academic Services: results obtained
Figure 2 - Results Obtained



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:

$$n_0 = \frac{(t)^2 * (p)(q)}{(d)^2}$$

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.

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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

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