

POLICIES OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT. QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS



Políticas de mejora continua. Garantía de la calidad en centros de educación superior
Políticas de melhoria contínua. garantia de qualidade nas instituições de ensino superior

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ABSTRACT

The Spanish legislative reform of recent years led to the development of new university policies of continuous improvement, as essential elements of university policy, establishing criteria and standards of quality assurance. The main one being: to demand quality in the performance of activities carried out in universities. In this sense, one of the most important policies developed in Galicia (Spain), as a strategy of continuous improvement of the autonomous government, was the constitution of the Agency for the Quality of the Galician University System (ACSUG). The Agency has been granted full independence to carry out its functions and fulfil the objectives set out in its creation, which favours the development of the pertinent actions that make it possible for Galician universities to have policies of continuous improvement, formally implemented and publicly available. All the continuous improvement actions carried out by ACSUG are centred on the actors participating in the processes, and different modes of interaction can be observed between these and the Agency, through which mutual relations and influences are developed.

Keywords: Curricula; evaluation of education; quality of education; education system; education administration.



RESUMEN

La reforma legislativa española de los últimos años provocó el desarrollo de nuevas políticas universitarias de mejora continua, como elementos esenciales de la política universitaria, estableciendo los criterios y normas de garantía de calidad. Entre ellas, la principal: exigir la calidad en el desempeño de las actividades que se realizan en las universidades. En este sentido, una de las políticas más importantes desarrolladas en Galicia (España), como estrategia de mejora continua del gobierno autonómico, fue la constitución de la Agencia para la Calidad del Sistema Universitario de Galicia (ACSUG). A la Agencia se le ha otorgado la independencia plena para desarrollar sus funciones y cumplir con los objetivos marcados en su creación, lo que favorece el desarrollo de las acciones pertinentes que posibilitan que las universidades gallegas cuenten con políticas de mejora continua, formalmente implantadas y públicamente disponibles. Todas las acciones de mejora continua desarrolladas por ACSUG están centradas en los actores que participan en los procesos, pudiendo observarse diferentes modos de interacción entre estos y la Agencia, por medio de los cuales se desarrollan relaciones e influencias mutuas.

Palabras clave: Planes de estudio; evaluación de la educación; calidad de la educación; sistema educativo; administración de la educación.



RESUMO

A reforma legislativa espanhola dos últimos anos levou ao desenvolvemento de novas políticas universitarias de melhoria continua, como elementos esenciais da política universitária, estabelecendo criterios e padrões de garantía de calidade. A principal delas é: exigir calidade no desempeño das actividades realizadas nas universidades. Neste sentido, uma das políticas mais importantes desenvolvidas na Galiza (Espanha), como estratégia de melhoria contínua do goberno autónomo, foi a constituição da Agência para a Qualidade do Sistema Universitario Galego (ACSUG). A Agência goza de total independencia para desenvolver as suas funções e cumprir os objectivos estabelecidos na sua criação, o que favorece o desenvolvemento de accións relevantes que permitam às universidades galegas ter políticas de melhoria continua, formalmente implementadas e publicamente disponíveis. Todas as accións de melhoria contínua realizadas pela ACSUG están focadas nos actores que participan dos procesos, e poden ser observados diferentes modos de interacción entre eles e a Agência, por medio dos quais se desenvolven relacións e influencias mútuas.

Palavras chave: currículos; avaliação da educação; qualidade da educação; sistema de ensino; administração da educação.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the concern in the Ibero-American context for the analysis of evaluation and accreditation processes in the university system has guided numerous researchers to study its repercussion on higher education institutions and on the quality improvement of university teaching (Elizondo, Ovando, Resendiz, Mena and Castillejeros, 2014; Espinoza and Gonzalez, 2012; Gonzalez and Santamaria, 2013; Marti, Cervera and Gonzalez, 2013).

In Spain, several authors (Egido and Haug, 2006; Michavila and Zamorano, 2008; Paulus, 2014; Rios de Deus, 2014) have analysed the role of accreditation within the construction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which services the main European quality assurance agencies, such as the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA), the National Union of Students in Europe (ESIB), among others.

The interest for the status of this matter in Spain is based on continuous legislative reforms concerning universities (Consejo de Universidades, 1996, 1999) that have taken place in the country - in each autonomous community - in recent years, which address the need to consolidate the university system within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), decrease the university dropout rates, strengthen the amount and level of researchers and set the principles of efficacy and efficiency as key priorities of university activity.

This reform has rendered the development of new continuous improvement policies in universities, defining quality assurance criteria and regulations as the core elements of university policy; one of the main ones being demanding quality in the performance of activities carried out in universities.

These policies are rolled-out as necessary and essential instruments for higher education

institutions and provide answers to their diverse demands: the new organization of teachings, organized, structured and systematic proposals on continuous improvement, teaching, services and faculty evaluation analysis of labor satisfaction and insertion, information for society, transparency, etc.

In that sense, one of the most significant policies developed in Galicia (as the autonomous government's continuous improvement strategy and policy) was the creation of the Agency for Quality Assurance in the Galician University System (ACSUG). The Agency has been granted full independence to carry out its functions and fulfil the objectives set out in its creation. This independence favours the development of the pertinent actions that make it possible for Galician universities to have continuous improvement policies that are formally implemented and publicly available.

ACSUG's principles are grounded on its ethical code: independence and transparency, as well as on its will to develop continuous improvement and quality assurance policies and systems that fit the needs of Galician universities. All of the actions implemented by the ACSUG focus on the actors involved in the processes, by which mutual relationships and influences are developed.

The Agency has developed diverse policies to promote quality in the higher education sphere at universities in the Galician University System (SUG), built based on legal regulations and with consensus among the actors. This negotiating interaction suggests a position of collaboration and competition, and removes conflict altogether, revealing the problems that arise in different areas of the university and developing an adequate treatment.

GALICIAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

Origin of Galician universities

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The Galician University System (SUG) began with the creation of Universidad de Santiago de Compostela (USC) in 1495, one of the oldest of Spain. Law 11/1989 of July 20th of the Organic Law of the Galician University System (SUG), created the universities of A Coruña (UDC) and Vigo (UVIGO). The segregation of material and human means of USC. The aforementioned universities are public and are formed by several campuses (Figure 1), which would be 3-4 YEARS to in the upcoming charts and tables: campus of A Coruña y Ferrol (UDC), campus of Santiago de Compostela y Lugo (USC) and campus of Vigo, Ourense y Pontevedra (UVIGO).



of the Spanish University System (SUG) has experienced expansion, increased university activity, roll-out of EHEA and new social and economic demands. This has resulted in the approval of different higher education regulations.

SUG's University Teachings

University teachings are grouped in five branches of knowledge: Arts and Humanities, Sciences, Health Sciences, Social and Legal Sciences, and Engineering and Architecture. These are structured in three cycles (Figure 2): Bachelor Degree, Master's Degree and Doctoral Degree.

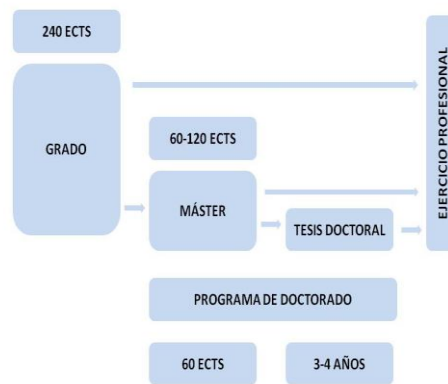


Figure 2: Structure of university teachings

In the 2013/2014 term, SUG granted 449 degrees (Figures 3, 4 and 5). Out of those, 130 were Bachelor Degrees, 202 Master's Degrees and 117 Doctoral Degrees (data taken from the universities of the Galician University System).

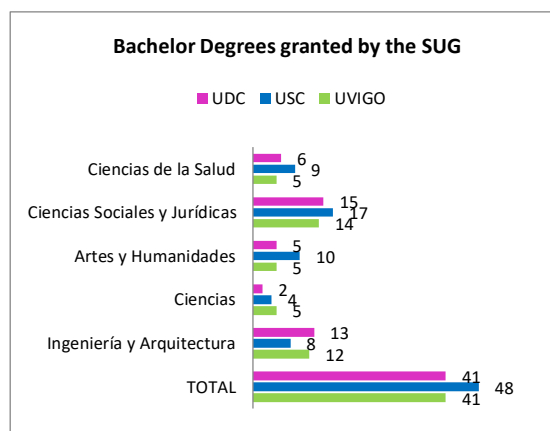


Figure 3: Degrees in the SUG, total and per branch of knowledge

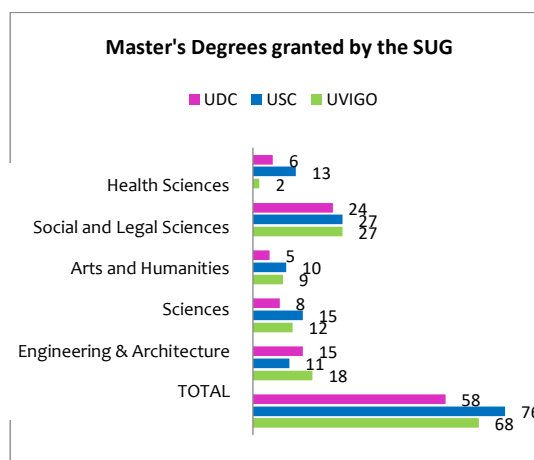


Figure 4: Master's Degrees in the SUG, total and per branch of knowledge

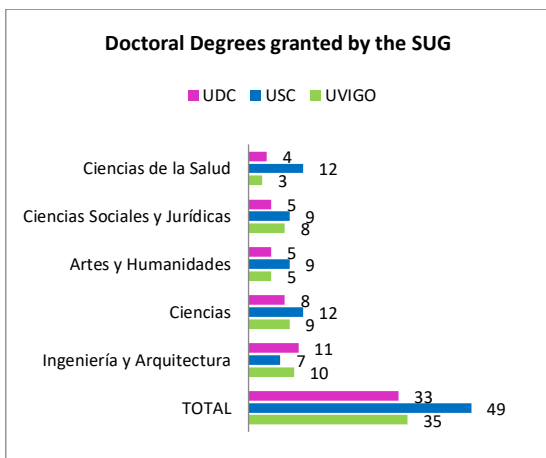


Figure 5: Doctoral Degrees in the SUG, total and per branch of knowledge

The figures show a gradual decrease of enrollment for Bachelor Degrees, in contrast with a rise of enrollment for Master's and Doctorate Degrees at the three Galician universities (Figures 6, 7 and 8).

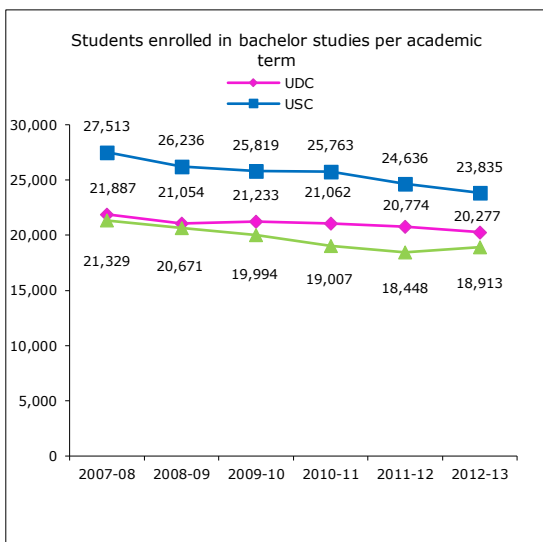


Figure 6: Students enrolled in bachelor studies in the SUG

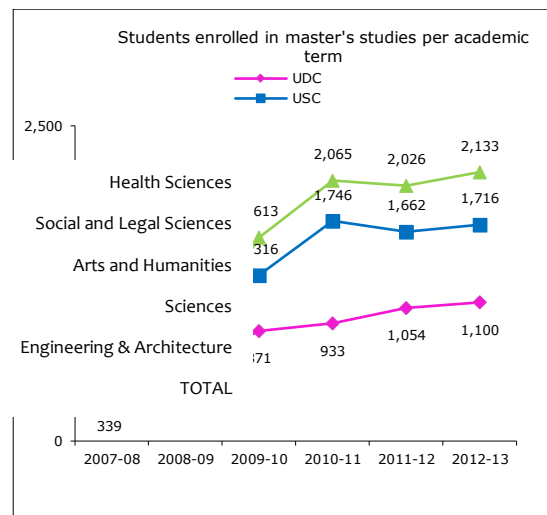


Figure 7: Students enrolled in master's studies in the SUG

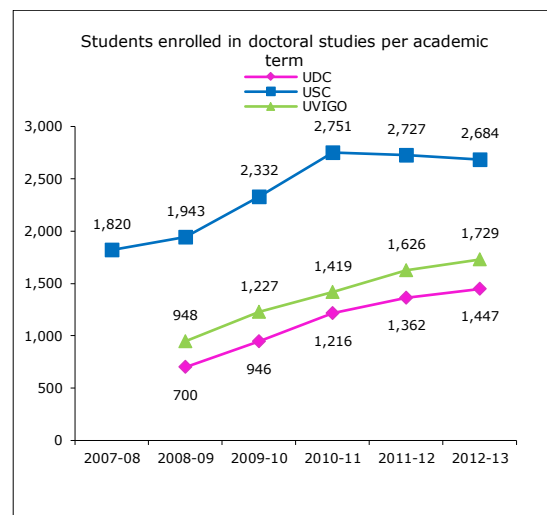


Figure 8: Students enrolled in doctoral studies in the SUG

The evolution of the Bachelor and Doctoral Degrees graduates has been practically constant in the last years, while Master's Degrees graduates have increased. This due to the EHEA's demands regarding studying degrees of new creation (Figures 9, 10 and 11).

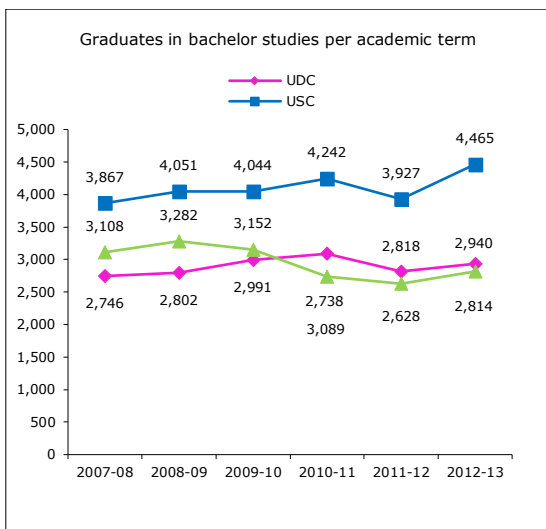


Figure 9: Graduates in bachelor studies in the *SUG*

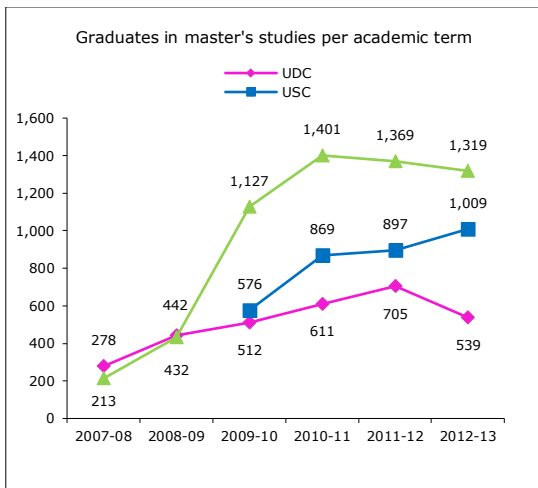


Figure 10: Graduates in master's studies in the *SUG*

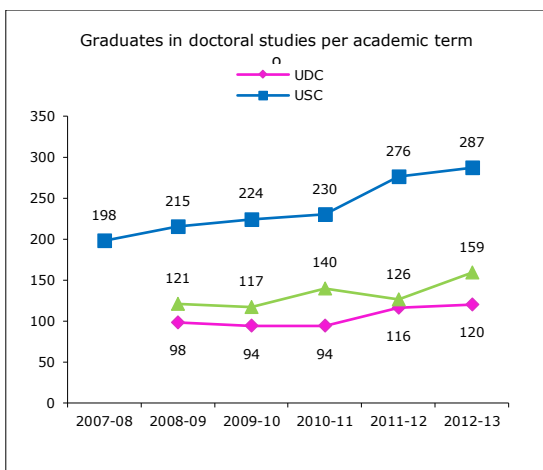


Figure 11: Graduates in doctoral studies in the *SUG*

The Spanish Universities Law assumes establishing continuous improvement policies as necessary and essential instruments for higher education institutions. These policies are understood as actions conducted by the government's initiative, both at state and autonomous level, or by quality agencies to meet the demands of higher education institutions: the new organization of teachings, organized, structured and systematic proposals on continuous improvement, teaching, services and faculty evaluation analysis of labor satisfaction and insertion, information for society, transparency, among others.

The ACSUG has been created as an improvement strategy and policy by the autonomous government and has been granted full independence to carry out its functions and fulfil its objectives. This benefits the deployment of pertinent actions to enable universities to have continuous improvement policies in place that are formally implemented and publicly available, aimed at and based on five basic principles, in accordance with the EHEA:

1. Teachers' methodologies must focus on students, for them to acquire competences with which to build their own professional project, with the constant support of teachers that will safeguard the successful and efficient completion of desired objectives and goals. This focus on students must begin prior to their enrollment by offering adequate public information and setting efficient recruitment policies.
2. The new study plans must guarantee students' training at academic and professional levels, allowing personal comprehensive training, and developing their skill to adapt to concrete and changing professional situations, as society in itself. This includes the possibility of complementing training in other Spanish, European or international centres to move forward in the

**CONTINUOUS
IMPROVEMENT POLICIES**

construction of EHEA and in the internationalisation of teachings.

3. Human and material resources must guarantee teaching's sustainable development in connection with the environment and social demands of the moment. Hence, it is necessary to have quality assurance mechanisms in place of the activities and permanent training.
4. Quality policies are oriented towards reaching results that agree with previously proposed objectives and expectations, including the assessment of results obtained.
5. The internationalisation process intends to comprehensively incorporate the international and intercultural dimensions into the mission and functions of the university's teaching, research and services, developing processes to manage and boost students and teachers' training mobility, support cooperation and participation projects of researchers in national and international networks, disseminating research lines and results obtained, etc.

Continuous improvement policies are not new at Galician universities; since the end of the last decade, universities have developed evaluation and certification processes of their teachings and collected the opinion of students and other groups. Some of these actions were developed by initiative of universities and others with the support of the Ministry of Education; and from 2001, with the guidance and aid of the ACSUG.

Experimental Evaluation Programs of the University's System Quality were developed in the 1993/1994 academic term.

In December 1995, the Ministry of Education and Science formulated the First National Plan of Quality Assessment in Universities (PNECU), through Royal Decree 1947/1995 of December 1st, with the objective of consolidating quality evaluation, producing homogeneous methodologies integrated in the EU's current practice and providing objective information to be used as the foundation for decision-making processes of different institutions within their scope. This plan evaluated 939 degrees, 30 departments and 46 university services in the Spanish state level, all of which participated voluntarily (Consejo de Universidades, 1996, 1999). The program included a self-assessment process and an external evaluation process that included a visit and was managed by quality agencies and conducted by external evaluation commissions. These processes evinced the universities' difficulty to deliver objective data for the analysis required by the Plan's own tools (Muñoz-Cantero, 2008); however, it did signify certain awareness towards quality and its evaluation, translated into the creation of university infrastructure, these were the drivers of quality units in all Spanish public and private universities (Muñoz-Cantero and Pozo, 2014).

Parallel to the institutional evaluation programs, universities developed processes aimed at analysing the quality of services applying models recognized at international level, such as the EFQM excellence model and the UNE-EN ISO 9001 standards.

INTERRELATION OF UNIVERSITIES WITH THE ACSUG

Continuous Development Policies Developed by the ACSUG

ACSUG's principles are grounded on its ethical code: independence and transparency, as well as on its will to develop continuous improvement and quality assurance policies

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Starting in 1981, information regarding university students' satisfaction in terms of the teaching imparted has been collected through different surveys, other stakeholders were incorporated afterwards (2006-2008): teachers, alumni, administrative staff and employers. However, only in the 90's did concepts and visions become relevant in university education. Indicators systems, evaluation of programs/degrees, quality assurance, accreditation, etc. The

and systems that fit the needs of Galician universities.

All of the continuous improvement actions focus on the actors that take part in the processes, different interaction modes are observed between these and the Agency, which lead to the development of mutual relationships and influences. Scharpf's (1997) actor-centred institutionalism anticipated that each policy constitutes a model of specific interactions; which is why the institutional framework of each policy renders it more or less feasible. Thus, the institution of reference is fundamental to configure and explain these relationships.

The perspective of Sharp's (1997) actor-centred institutionalism - ACI (Navarro, 2002) facilitates the development of models that allow comparing public policy processes, depending on the context and on the interacting institutions. This way, a new trend oriented towards public policy development and another centred in problem-solving (as with the case of quality assurance policies) arise. Following this trend, the ACSUG has formulated diverse policies to promote quality in the higher education sphere at universities. The ACSUG has formulated diverse policies to promote quality in the higher education sphere at universities on legal regulations and with consensus among the actors. This negotiating interaction suggests a position of collaboration and competition, and removes conflict altogether, revealing the problems that arise in different areas of the university and developing an adequate treatment to address them.

Verification of Official Degrees

Before rolling-out a new official degree, Galician universities must subject the proposed study plan for its evaluation by the ACSUG. If the evaluation is favourable, the degree will be verified by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports (MECD), subsequently, the autonomous community of Galicia must authorise it, as per the established programming criteria and funding availability. Authorised degrees are registered in the

Universities, Centres and Degrees Registry (RUCT) in order to be imparted.

The objective of the verification is guaranteeing the new teachings to be formulated in accordance with the EHEA's requirements, the qualifications framework and with existing consistency between denomination, competences and content, following the proposals of different disciplines.

To date, 424 degrees have been evaluated: 115 Bachelor Degrees, 226 Master's Degrees and 83 Doctoral Degrees (ACSUG) (Figure 12).

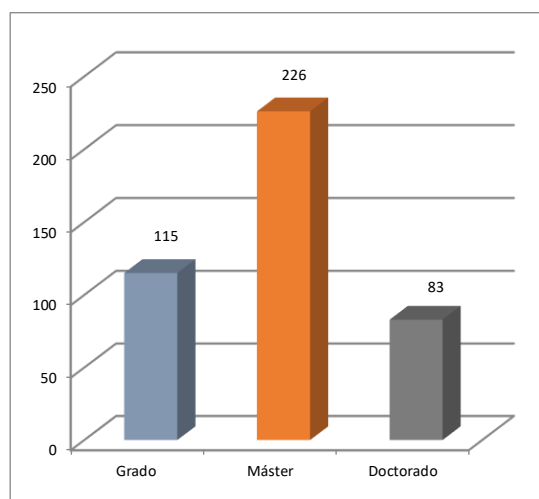


Figure 12: Degrees evaluated in the ACSUG

Follow-up on Official Degrees' Roll-out

According to the dispositions of the current legal framework, once the roll-out of the official degrees registered in the RUCT begins, the Agency will follow-up on the compliance of the project contained in the verified study plan. This follow-up comprises the period from the degree's roll-out to the moment in which the degree must be subject to evaluation for its accreditation renewal, after which a new cycle ensues. This process analyses public information presented by each university regarding the degrees, the project's compliance level and its results are assessed. Also, good practices, deviations, decision-making processes, actions resulting from recommendations by the final verification and

modifications report (if any) and subsequent follow-up reports are identified.

To date, 371 degrees have been followed-up on: 194 Bachelor Degrees and 177 Master's Degrees (ACSUG) (Figure 13). Some degrees have been subject to follow-up in more than one occasion.

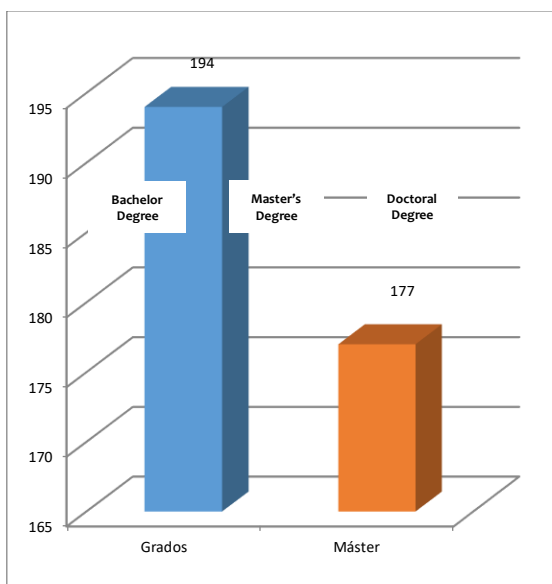


Figure 13: Follow-up on SUG'S degrees

Modification of Official Degrees

Universities may modify their degrees as consequence of the follow-up process. If these modifications entail alterations regarding structure, competences and nature and objectives of the degree, they must undergo a new verification process. For other modifications, the ACSUG evaluates the university's proposal and issues a report in favourable or unfavourable terms.

To date, modifications to 168 degrees have been evaluated: 105 to Bachelor Degrees, 60 to Master's Degrees and three to Doctoral Degrees (ACSUG) (Figure 14).

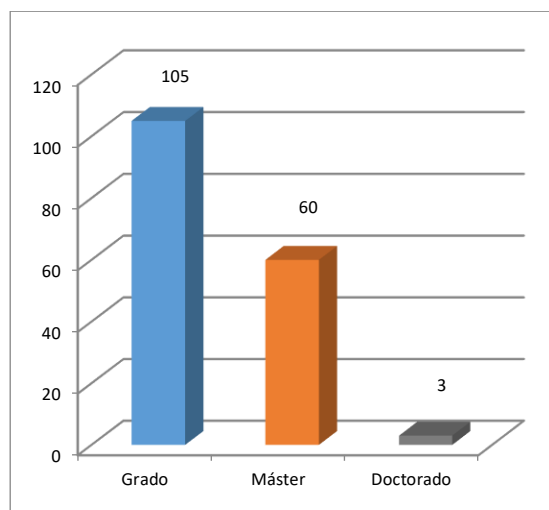


Figure 14: Modifications to SUG's degrees

Accreditation Renewal of Official Degrees

Rolled-out degrees must be subject to an evaluation in order to renew accreditation. This will verify if the study plan has been conducted or the project, an external evaluation visit place. The evaluation is conducted every four years for Master's Degrees and every six for Bachelor and Doctoral Degrees.

In 2013 a state-level two-year moratorium was approved to initiate accreditation renewal proceedings. To date, evaluations to renew accreditation have been carried out for 17 degrees: 12 to Bachelor Degrees and five to Master's Degrees (ACSUG) (Figure 15).

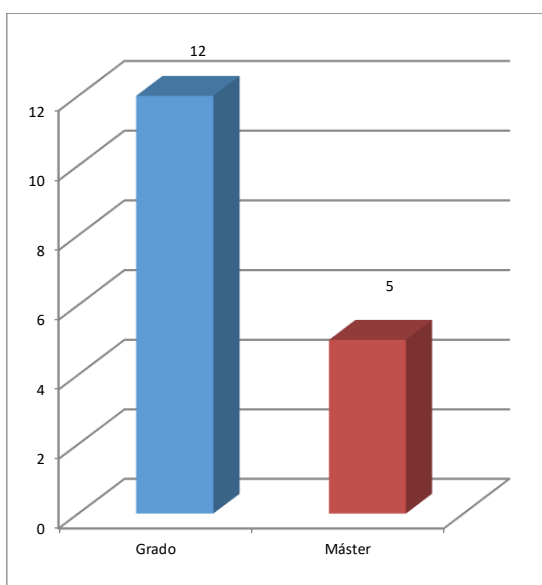


Figure 15: Accreditation renewal of *SUG's* degrees

QMS

Universities' concern for institutional quality and changes in Spanish legislation have been considered the starting point for the design and roll-out of the centres' QMS, through the AUDIT Program. This program supports the universities' required need to have procedures associated to quality assurance and motivates the centres to reflect on the changes that are necessary to systematically integrate continuous improvement processes. The roll-out of a QMS favours the processes of verification, follow-up and accreditation renewal of official degrees. It aims to steer Spanish universities' centres in the effective definition, design and implementation of the QMS. The program is a reference framework in which all universities are welcome to voluntarily participate. These develop their QMS freely around their mission, vision and strategic plan, traditions and internal structure, among other factors.

AUDIT is developed under the guidelines of the ENQA. Each guideline breaks down into a series of elements, some of which are regulated at national level in the educational program design framework (Chart 1).

ESG	AUDIT
1.1 Quality assurance policy and procedures	Directive 1. How the centre defines its quality policy and objectives
1.2. Regular approval, control and review of degrees and programs	Directive 2. How the centre assures the quality of its training programs
1.3. Student evaluation	Directive 3. How the centre orients its teachings to students
1.4. Quality assurance of the faculty	Directive 4. How the centre assures and improves the quality of its teachers
1.5. Learning resources and student support	Directive 5. How the centre manages and improves its material resources and services
1.6. Information systems	Directive 6. How the centre analyses and takes results into account
1.7. Public information	Directive 7. How the centre publishes information regarding the degrees

Chart 1: Relation between the ESG¹ criteria and the AUDIT program's guidelines

AUDIT includes two action sequences for universities and agencies. Universities design their own QMS to implement afterwards and agencies evaluate these designs, finally an audit is used to certify the roll-out of the designs. The design evaluation stage is of great importance because it guarantees the quality of the QMS proposed by the centre and it is the step prior to the roll-out and certification stages.

The ACSUG conducted four annual calls in the 2008-2012 period for centres of the universities of the *SUG* to submit their QMS for evaluation. In this period, the design submitted by the entirety of centres in Galician universities was evaluated: 81 centres (ACSUG) (Figure 16).

¹ European Standards and Guidelines, produced by the ENQA.

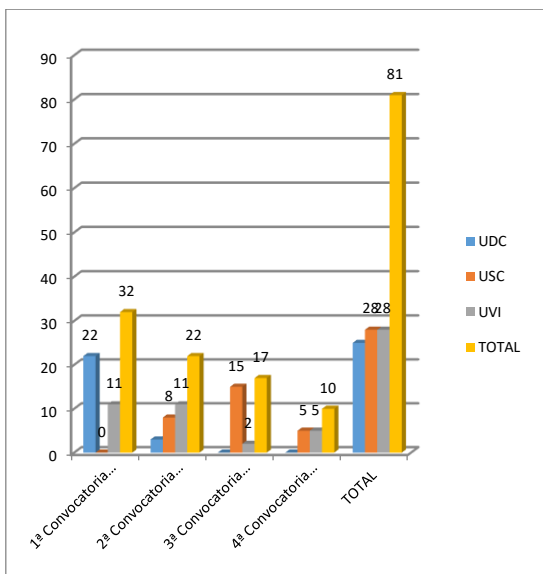


Figure 16: Evaluation of the QMS design

The roll-out of the QMS in the centre requires systematisation and structuring of the existing quality assurance processes. During the certification process and as a general objective, external auditors determine if the rolled-out system complies with the directives set in AUDIT. It must be explained that the rolled-out system enables an efficient and operational continuous improvement cycle, and that its adequate sustainability in time will be confirmed.

Since 2012, the ACSUG opened two annual calls (2012/2013 and 2013/2014) for universities to submit the request to participate in the certification process for the QMS roll-out. This process takes place with an external audit. To date, 17 QMS roll-out implementations have been evaluated (ACSUG) (Figure 17) and 11 favourable reports have been issued.

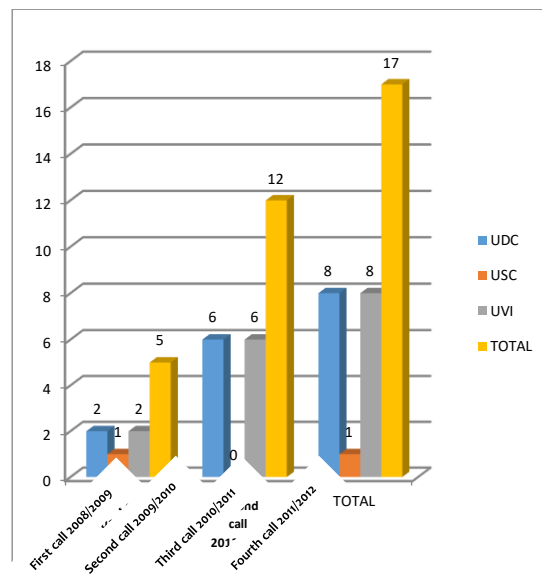


Figure 17: Certification of the roll-out of the SGC

Quality Assurance of the Faculty

One of the criteria to consider when assessing university quality is the quality of the teachers.

At universities in the SUG, it is necessary to receive a positive evaluation by the ACSUG to be offered positions as: hired doctor teacher, assistant doctor teacher, private university teacher and previously, as collaborating teacher.

Evaluations are conducted by a panel of expert evaluators, professors at the university who are selected based on their experience in certain scientific field. They assess the applicants' CV following the guidelines set by score scales (public and known). These scales have been developed by the ACSUG considering five core dimensions of a university teacher's professional career: teaching experience, research experience, academic training, professional experience and management experience.

As a general rule, an ordinary annual call is opened to submit accreditation requests. To date, 2,395 requests have been evaluated (ACSUG) (Chart 2; Figure 18).

Call/year	Evaluations conducted
2009	609
2010	554

2011	411
2012	405
2013	416
TOTAL	2395

Chart 2: Faculty evaluation

For teachers who have reached a stable working condition, diverse incentives to the teaching, research and managing activity are presented (paid retributions). To acknowledge said retributions, it is necessary for the ACSUG to evaluate their CVs.

Among the different economic incentives that may be obtained is the recognition to teaching and research curricular excellence. This procedure entails a comprehensive curricular evaluation of the merits of active official teachers and hired doctors, selected based on their experience in certain scientific field, with the aim to guarantee and encourage an activity of excellence, rewarding permanent updating, innovation and quality in the teaching and research performance. First, any acknowledged five-year teaching and six-year research tenure-tracks of the applicant are assessed; then an evaluation continues based on a scale of 12 relevant merits (six in teaching and six in research), which are short-listed by the applicant. The score is weighed depending on the applicant's overall CV. This evaluation has a five-year validity and expires, that way, the university faculty is able to submit merits or evidence to highlight updating and improvement of their teaching, research and managing activity

To date, 2,045 requests have been assessed (ACSUG) (Chart 3).

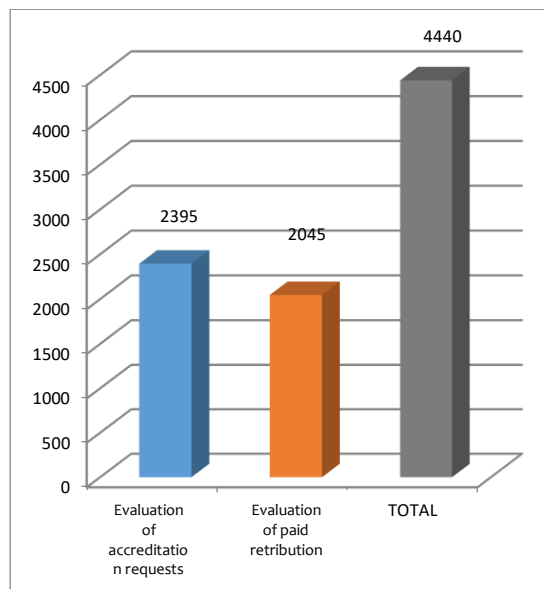


Figure 18: Quality assurance of the faculty

The DOCENTIA program was jointly developed by all of the quality agencies in Spain with the purpose of satisfying universities' demands and faced with the need to have procedures in place to guarantee the quality of the faculty's teaching activity, and to consequently acknowledge it. The three Galician universities voluntarily participate in this program, having obtained a favourable assessment of their procedures by ACSUG in 2007. In the 2008/2009 academic term, the stage of the evaluation models' roll-out began with a minimum length of 2 years, agencies follow-up on the roll-up process as a step prior to the stage of design certification.

Labor Incorporation

In 2001, the ACSUG developed a general study regarding the incorporation of the SUG graduates in the labor market. Given the importance of the results obtained, the Project has become one of the Agency's annual activities.

The main objective of the studies is to provide the results of the SUG graduate's labor incorporation and training satisfaction to universities in order to aid in the design of strategies to review and improve the quality of the offer, minimizing the distances between learning objectives and professional and employability requirements; also, they have

Call/year	Evaluations conducted
2009	456
2010	403
2011	914
2012	272
2013	-
TOTAL	2045

Chart 3: Evaluation of paid retributions

become an important information source for future and current students, employers, administration and society in general.

The population that is the object of the study comprises university graduates in certificates, bachelors', technical engineering and engineering, expanding to alumni in the latter versions of the studies, as a consequence of the adaptation process to EHEA. The results are obtained at SUG level and for each university, branch of knowledge and degree.

The indicators applied are: the labor incorporation rate, most frequently used job search means, average time in finding the first job in connection with the degree, most valued factors to get a job, competences acquired with the degree, among others.

In 2013 the scope of the labor incorporation studies was extended to include the official university graduates of the 2007/2008, 2008/2009 and 2009/2010 academic terms. The information obtained complements the existing data on labor incorporation of the entirety of SUG graduates.

CONCLUSIONS

After identifying the need to create an agency, the government of Galicia incorporated an entity to address quality in higher education, via a quick agreement with Galician universities. This arose from the need for an urgent political reaction to the central government's initiatives concerning university quality, due to the fact that Galicia (with its full competence on education) had to develop continuous improvement policies in universities.

The figure of the Agency as a consortium benefits tight coordination and collaboration between universities and the ACSUG, facilitating the development of continuous improvement policies such as quality assessment programs supervised by the Agency, which is perceived by different actors as an external organism of collaboration, trust, dynamics and as the core actor, the one that

imposes an educational and evaluative dynamic to Galician universities. This brings efficiency advantages because cooperation capacities are strengthened and activity continuity is sustained, also acquisitions are reinforced by sharing benefits, information and experiences amongst the members.

The aforementioned improvement policies have been gradually developed and rolled-out, as the regulating standard was enforced. But the technical drive determined the Agency's evolution and power to develop them, and even foster most of them. This technical and legal evolution meant the consolidation of continuous improvement policies in Galicia, revolving around the ACSUG, as well as recognition at European level.

Finally, the ACSUG becoming a member of ENQA guarantees that the organizational and operational policies and procedures conducted by the Agency will comply with principles of quality and transparency.

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