Development of a methodology to assess innovative methodologies in teaching and learning in the Basque University System

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ABSTRACT

In the framework of the INNOMETH project, funded by INQAAHE, Unibasq has developed a methodology for the assessment of innovative/active methodologies in teaching and learning in the Basque University System. The new regulation regarding study programmes in the Basque Country establishes that study programmes should be classified in different levels under the category of "Innovative methodologies in teaching and learning". Likewise, innovation in teaching and learning is a hot topic highlighted in the last European Higher Education Area Ministerial conferences, linking innovation in teaching and learning with the implementation of student-centred learning and the development of soft skills like innovative and critical thinking, emotional intelligence, leadership, teamwork and problem solving abilities. The different phases of the project (desk-based review, focus-groups with academic staff and students, and workshop) have provided information on the use of active learning methodologies helping to develop the assessment methodology.

Key words: innovation, active teaching and learning, student-centred learning.

Introduction

Interest in active teaching and learning and student-centred learning (SCL) has been long-standing among educators in higher education and as a result, research, policy and practice claiming to take a SCL has continued to grow (Lea et al., 2003). As many similar others concepts heterogeneously disseminated worldwide –such as innovative methodologies and active teaching or learning–, SLC offers an umbrella term with many variations that have at times led to confusion (Trinidad, 2020). Many different actors may contribute towards a substantive shift were SCL should be a real key issue both in policy and practice and the Quality Assurance Agencies must be at this stake in this critical issue.

Unibasq –the Agency for Quality of the Basque University System– is actively committed to this issue and has developed a specific assessment methodology related to its activity of program-assessment. More specifically, the agency has developed a framework –namely, the "Assessment of innovative methodologies in teaching and learning in the Basque University System (INNOMETH) – as a result of a Project coordinated by Unibasq and funded by INQAAHE within the initiative "Capacity Building Projects 2019".

Innovation in teaching and learning is a hot topic in the global higher education landscape as has been highlighted in the last European Higher Education Area Ministerial conferences (Paris Communiquè (2018) and Rome Communiquè (2020)). Linking innovation in teaching and learning with the implementation SCL "*in order to respond to growing needs for innovative and critical thinking, emotional intelligence, leadership, teamwork and problem solving*

abilities, as well as enterprising attitudes" and "*with due consideration for the skills needed to address current and future challenges of society*".

According to the European Students' Union (ESU & EI, 2010) "*Student Centred Learning represents both a mind-set and a culture within a given higher education institution and is a learning approach which is broadly related to, and supported by, constructivist theories of learning. It is characterised by innovative methods of teaching which aim to promote learning in communication with teachers and other learners and which take students seriously as active participants in their own learning, fostering transferable skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking and*

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reflective thinking." Furthermore, SCL is in the core of part 1 of the revised version of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015).

The regulation regarding study programmes in the Basque Country (Decree 274/2017 of 19 December (BOPV, 2017) and Order of the Basque Minister of Education of 27 July 2018 (BOPV, 2018)) establishes that study programmes should be classified in different levels under three categories, including one regarding "Innovative methodologies in teaching and learning". The Order provides some aspects and indicators to consider as methodologies such as project-based and problem-based learning; academic staff with a positive evaluation of their teaching performance; student satisfaction; and a strategy to manage the implementation and monitoring of active learning methodologies.

Methodology

The project specific objectives and main actions can be seen in the following table:

Table 1. Specific objectives and actions of the INNOMETH project

Objectives	Actions
Setting the general context of the use of innovative methodologies in teaching and learning – Identification of these innovative methodologies	Creation of the steering group Desk-based research
Analysis of the use of innovative methodologies within the Basque HEIs	Focus-groups with representatives of the three Basque universities (academic staff and students/alumni)
Guidelines drafting	Elaboration of the draft methodology (guidelines: procedure, standards and criteria)
Capacity building - good practices sharing	Workshop with the lessons learnt from the previous activities and good practice sharing. Keynote speakers to introduce the topic presenting success cases of the use of these innovative methodologies
Final version of the guidelines	Elaboration of the specific methodology (guidelines: procedure, standards and criteria) considering the lessons learnt through the project

The assessment methodology is based on the outcomes of the project:

- Information collected on the use of active learning methodologies and student-centred learning, including the educational model and the teaching innovation initiatives developed in recent years by the three Basque universities.

- Focus groups held with teachers and students, gathering their perspectives including what they understand as innovative methodologies, the benefit of their use, challenges and good practices.

- Workshop to share the preliminary results and to reflect on them (January 2020).

Outcomes

The discussions held with representatives of the three universities regarding the concept of innovative teaching and learning methodologies and its relationship with teaching innovation, led us to the conclusion that, although there were common points, each university interpreted this concept within its own educational model. The Danish Accreditation Institution (AI) found a similar situation when analysing how Danish institutions understand and apply the concept of student-centred approach. They concluded that there are diverse interpretations, that the external evaluation must consider and see how it is included in their quality system (Warming & Frydensberg, 2018). A similar situation, although in the general framework of institutional

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evaluation, can be found in NVAO's 'Appreciative Approach' in its evaluations in Flanders. The "Overview report on the institutional reviews. The quality of the educational policies at the Flemish universities and university colleges" (Caris & Aerden, 2017), summarises the results of the pilots carried out between 2015-2017, concluding "*In this approach, the context of the institution and the educational policy model chosen by the institution were the starting point. It was therefore not judged whether the chosen policy model was "good", but whether it worked.*"

Throughout the different phases of the project it has become evident that:

- The three Basque universities have their own educational models, implemented to a greater or lesser extent depending on the centres and the study programmes they teach.

- Evaluation of the development of active teaching and learning methodologies should address the specificities of each model.

- The quality assurance system of each institution should be the starting point for the assessment of active teaching and learning methodologies.

Procedure

It should be, as concluded in the previous section, a holistic external evaluation approach in the overall context of the study programme within a centre and university, encompassing wider educational developments including the design and implementation of study programmes and considering the expected learning outcomes. As this is not an isolated process, it should be integrated within other usual evaluation procedures.

In any case, the external assessment process must be aligned with the ESG 2.3 and consist of the following phases:

- Self-assessment;

- An external assessment including, where appropriate, a visit;

- A report resulting from the external assessment;

- Systematic monitoring.

Constitution on the assessment panel

Given the nature of active learning methodologies, it is crucial to incorporate specific expertise in the area - teaching innovation, active learning, SCL, project-based or problem-based learning, among others - within the assessment panels. Following ESG 2.4, a transparent and adequate selection process of experts should be ensured by ensuring that all panels include at least one person with proven experience in teaching innovation/active learning, among others, in addition to complying with the usual composition of the panels, which would include at least one student preferably with experience in this type of methodologies. Similarly, specific training will be ensured for the evaluation panels in relation to the specificities of this type of methodology and information on the educational model of each university.

The general composition of each panel will be established in the guide to the evaluation procedure (renewal of institutional or degree accreditation) in which this evaluation is integrated.

Stakeholders involved

It should be borne in mind that the assessment of this type of methodology requires the involvement of many stakeholders (institutional heads, school and study programme heads, academic and support staff, students, graduates and representatives of collaborating entities, among others) during the different phases of the

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process (self-assessment, visit, etc.). It should include units of educational innovation/advice, quality units, those responsible for managing the educational model and even vice-rectors involved.

Assessment criteria

The assessment criteria follow the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015) as can be seen in the following table:

Table 2. Assessment criteria and their correspondence with ESG Part 1 (2015).

Assessment of active teaching and learning methodologies	ESG 2015
Educational model	1.1 Policy for Quality Assurance 1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment 1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes
Development of the teaching-learning processes	1.2 Design and approval of programmes 1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment
Students	1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment 1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification
Teaching staff	1.5 Teaching staff
Resources	1.6 Learning resources and student support
Outcomes - Information Management	1.7 Information management
Public information	1.8 Public information

Criterion 1. Educational model

Standard: The institution applies the University's educational model in a systematic way in the official study programmes it offers.

Guidelines:

- The institution has a governance structure that allows it to coordinate the implementation of the educational model.

- The institution has a strategy that includes a clear description of responsibilities, roles and procedures for the implementation of the educational model.

- The institution has set goals in relation to the impact of the educational model on the teaching and learning processes, on the labour insertion of graduates, on society and on other areas of interest. These goals are consistent with the strategic objectives of the University.

- The deployment of the educational model in the institution is done through active learning methodologies, with the necessary flexibility to meet the characteristics of each study programme, the diversity of students and their lifelong learning. The model allows students to complete their studies part-time and to choose the components of their own curriculum.

- The institution promotes the development of teaching innovation plans or projects aimed at introducing, reviewing or improving teaching and learning.

- The institution has a contingency plan to ensure the application of active learning methodologies in situations that may arise.

- The institution monitors, reviews and reports to the University on the application of the educational model and active learning methodologies for their improvement.

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- The institution recognizes good teaching practices focused on the development of active learning methodologies and the educational model.

Criterion 2. Development of the teaching and learning processes

Standard: The development of the teaching and learning processes, in all the study programmes taught in the institution, is consistent with the educational model and the application of active learning methodologies.

Guidelines:

- The coordination strategies and procedures developed in the subjects and courses favour the application of the educational model in all the study programmes taught in the institution.

- Teaching activities are supported by active learning methodologies that are aligned with the foundations and principles of the educational model. These activities take into consideration the diversity of the students and are in line with their training needs.

- The students' learning strategies are inscribed in the active learning methodologies developed in the subjects and courses.

- The participation of collaborating entities in the teaching processes is carried out in accordance with the bases and principles of the educational model and with a concept of lifelong learning.

- The institution uses an assessment for learning approach. The application of this approach provides information that enables the teaching staff to help students improve their learning. Assessment procedures are varied and consider the diversity of the student body and their learning needs.

- The evaluation of the teaching activity of teachers is aligned with the educational model.

Criterion 3. Students

Standard: Students know and internalize the implications of the educational model, act according to its foundations and principles and have the necessary guidance and support in the personal, academic and administrative areas.

Guidelines:

- The institution has provided the necessary information and training so that the students really know the implications that the educational model has for them in the personal, academic and administrative areas.

- Students or their representatives participate in the bodies that make decisions on the implementation, revision and improvement of the educational model.

- Students have the knowledge and competence necessary to carry out the activities and tasks derived from the application of active learning methodologies developed in the institution.

- The activities carried out by the students in the academic, professional or social fields in the institution are in accordance with the foundations and principles of the educational model and are part of the active learning methodologies developed.

- The guidance, tutoring and learning facilitation activities promoted by the institution help to improve students' learning outcomes and their lifelong learning.

- The educational support offered to students takes into consideration their diversity and the different needs that arise from it.

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- The institution has the tools and procedures that allow it to address the actions of students that are contrary to the foundations and principles of the educational model or the use of active learning methodologies.

Criterion 4. Teaching staff

Standard: The teaching staff has internalized the educational model and its implications and acts daily according to its foundations and principles, having the necessary training and support in the personal, academic and administrative fields.

Guidelines:

- The institution has provided the necessary information and training so that teachers are aware of the implications that the educational model has on the personal, academic and administrative spheres.

- Teachers or their representatives participate in the bodies that make decisions on the implementation, review and improvement of the educational model.

- The teaching staff is competent in the use of active learning methodologies promoted by the institution.

- Teachers have internalized the educational model so that the teaching activities they carry out daily are supported using active learning methodologies that are in line with the foundations and principles of the educational model indicated.

- The teaching innovations introduced by the teachers support the use of active methodologies that have the educational model and student-centred learning as their reference, so that they deepen the foundations of this model, subject it to revision or improve it.

- The teaching staff carries out and publishes research on their teaching. The results of such research are transferred to the improvement of teaching and learning processes.

- The professional development of teachers is consistent with the results of the evaluation of their teaching activity.

- The training offered to teachers takes into consideration their training needs related to the development of active learning methodologies and their career development.

- The institution has the tools and procedures that allow it to address the actions of teachers that are contrary to the foundations and principles of the educational model or the use of active learning methodologies.

Criterion 5. Resources

Standard: The institution has adequate infrastructure and resources for training based on active learning methodologies within the framework of its educational model.

Guidelines:

- The institution provides the academic staff, the administration and support staff and the students with the necessary resources and technical support for the adequate implementation of active learning methodologies within the framework of the educational model.

- The resources and didactic means used in the subjects and courses favour the application of the educational model and the development of active learning methodologies.

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- The technological support received by students helps them to develop learning strategies consistent with the proposed active learning methodologies.

- The personal support and services provided to students to encourage the development of learning strategies consistent with the proposed active learning methodologies.

- The institution regularly reviews and updates the resources available to faculty and students for the application of active learning methodologies.

- The institution provides financial, material, human or other resources to facilitate the development of teaching innovations or research on teaching.

- The institution promotes the acquisition and use of innovative resources - even in the period of trial or experimentation - to facilitate the introduction of new ways of teaching and learning.

Criterion 6. Outcomes - Information management

Standard: The institution has a system to collect, manage and analyse information in an agile, systematic and relevant way about the application of active learning methodologies and achieved learning outcomes, within the framework of its educational model.

Guidelines:

- The institution periodically collects information on the application of active learning methodologies from the opinions of teachers, students, graduates, collaborating entities and other interest groups, and from performance and satisfaction indicators.

- The institution analyses the information collected to improve and increase the application of active learning methodologies, in aspects such as student involvement in tasks, assessment for learning, student and academic staff knowledge of these methodologies or learning outcomes.

- The institution carries out a systematic review of the achieved learning outcomes to establish their consistency with the educational model and active learning methodologies used.

- The institution uses the most relevant outcomes extracted from the analyses to promote improvements in students' learning experiences.

- The institution uses the most relevant outcomes extracted from the analyses to promote improvements in the application of active learning methodologies in classrooms, seminars, workshops, etc.

Criterion 7. Public information

Standard: The institution reports in a segmented, truthful, complete and updated way to the main stakeholders (students, teachers, management and collaborating entities) about the active learning methods and the educational model of reference, according to their different profiles.

Guidelines:

- The institution informs the students before they enrol in a study programme about the educational model of reference, the active learning methodologies that are planned to be applied, and the evaluation procedures to be used (criteria, regulations and instruments), the didactic resources and the technical support available.

- The institution informs the teaching staff before the start of the academic year about the outcomes obtained with the application of active learning methodologies, the learning outcomes of the

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students and, if applicable, the changes introduced in their application, as well as their implications in the educational model.

- The institution informs the management before the beginning of the academic year about the outcomes of the application of active learning methodologies, the learning outcomes of the students, the impact generated by these methodologies, as well as the decisions taken in the different areas of responsibility.

- The institution informs the collaborating entities and other stakeholders about the evolution of the application of active learning methodologies, the main changes made and the learning outcomes obtained.

- The information provided to the management is used, according to the different levels of decision, to review the planning of teaching, to evaluate the teaching activity of the teaching staff or to design training activities.

- The institution regularly and systematically publishes information on good practice focusing on the development of active learning methodologies.

Conclusions

Assessment criteria, standards and guidelines have been developed to help institutions organize how they will describe the context in which active learning methodologies have been implemented and their impact.

The assessment criteria should not be understood as a closed set of criteria that could limit the institution in providing information on the impact of active learning methodologies. It is the institution that presents the context in which the active learning methodologies are developed and that chooses how to demonstrate the impact that these methodologies have on student learning, on the professional development of the teaching staff, as well as on the relations with the collaborating entities and their impact on society.

The institutions may also provide such evidence, as they deem appropriate. The proposed assessment approach also focuses on the collection of evidence relating to the strengths of the institutions, stories of achievement of objectives and good practice, as well as the success stories of their students, graduates and faculty. In this sense, the institutions can incorporate personal testimonies and involve the collaborating entities to support the arguments made that try to demonstrate the fulfilment of goals and expectations.

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