

## ACTIVITY REPORT

2009

### 1. Introduction

The Portuguese government has created the Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Portuguese Higher Education, from now on designated as Agency or A3ES, by Decree-Law no. 369/2007, of 5 November. However, the Agency only initiated its operation following the appointment of its Board of Trustees (Cabinet Resolution no. 19/2008 of 23 May 2008) and the appointment of the Administration Council by the Board of Trustees in 17 December 2008. The Council of Administration has responsibility for deciding how the Agency operates and for defining all the activities leading to the fulfilment of the Agency's objectives, except those that are committed to other statutory bodies by the Statutes. Therefore the Administration Council has extended capacity for management and representation of the Agency.

The legislation and the statutes commit to A3ES the responsibility for the assessment and accreditation of the higher education institutions and their study cycles, as well as to promote the integration of Portugal in the European system of quality assurance of higher education. Consequently, all the Portuguese higher education institutions, as such recognised by the Portuguese State, must comply with the norms and procedures for assessment and accreditation defined by the Agency. A3ES may also participate in other assessment exercises of scientific

nature, namely of those institutions integrating the national scientific system.

In the fulfilment of its mission of quality assurance of higher education, the A3ES is entitled to:

- Define and ensure the quality standards for higher education;
- Assess and accredit all higher education institutions and their study cycles;
- Promote the public disclosure of the results of assessment and accreditation;
- Promote the internationalization of the Portuguese higher education system;
- Participate in the organizations integrating the European quality assurance system (ENQA and EQAR);
- Coordinate the assessment and accreditation activities in Portugal with international institutions and mechanisms operating in the same area.

A3ES although being an institution created by an act of government is a foundation operating under private law, established for an undefined period of time, recognised as having an independent legal status and being of public utility. Under the law and its Statutes, the Agency is independent in the performance of its activities, without prejudice of the orientation norms that the State defines through its adequate authorities.

The general operational principles to adopt on higher education quality assurance procedures are those defined under the legal framework for the assessment of Portuguese higher education, laid down by law no. 38/2007, of 16 August. They are complemented by the relevant dispositions of Decree-Law no. 74/2006, of 24 March, later modified by Decree-Law no 107/2008, of 25 June, regulating the accreditation of study cycles; Law no. 62/2007, of 10 September, establishing the requirements for the organization and operation of higher education institutions; and Decree-Law no. 369/2007, of 5 November, that has created the Agency, enacted its statutes and defined some additional norms on the accreditation system.

## **2. Vision**

As referred in the 2009 Activity Plan, the Council of Administration defined a vision for the Agency aiming at creating a reputation as an institution fully capable to perform its mission at national level and at the same time being internationally recognised by a dynamic of permanent updating and improvement, capable of contributing to new knowledge creation in the area of quality.

The Agency does not want to be reduced to a mere bureaucratic body, looking instead to contribute for research and innovation in the area of quality. Its activity

must be supported by permanent research activity and improvement. Beyond an international assessment that is mandatory both by national law and by the rules of the European register, all its work will be reviewed by specialised researchers and, at the end of every year, the Agency will promote a meeting with foreign experts to evaluate the work done so far.

By taking into account its specific role in national higher education quality assurance, the Agency does not ignore that the first responsibility for quality assurance lies with the institutions themselves. This means that the mission of the Agency only makes sense when in permanent dialogue with the institutions and with their interested collaboration. Therefore, a substantial component of the Agency's activity will be dedicated to supporting the implementation of internal quality assurance systems in institutions while it upholds the principle that the institutions must play a fundamental role in the reorganization, improvement and rationalization of their offer of study programmes.

The Agency does not ignore the danger that assessment/accreditation activities may become mainly bureaucratic exercises, where the indicators of the quality of education are mere proxies without direct link to quality. In general, indicators for the quality of education are removed from the concept they intend to measure, most of them being linked either to concepts of efficiency – such as student/staff ratios, costs per student, costs per graduate, etc. – or to concepts of effectiveness, such as the number of graduates, employment data, etc. It is also important to recognise that some apparently appropriate indicators such as the qualification of the teaching staff or the level of research activities, although being related to conditions necessary for good teaching do not ensure, by themselves, the good quality of education. Therefore, the Agency is following international developments to be aware of the best practices addressing procedures for measuring outcomes.

At last, the Agency will permanently regulate its activities and procedures using the norms set by the “European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Area of Higher Education”, in order to ensure its recognition by the relevant European agencies ENQA and EQAR.

### **3. Priorities of the Agency**

The 2009 Activity Plan listed a number of priorities, including:

- 1) Implementing measures to ensure the beginning of the Agency's operation, including tenting facilities, buying the necessary equipment, installing the governing bodies and recruiting personnel.
- 2) Definition of the electronic platform for all the assessment and accreditation activities promoted by the Agency, which implied the definition of a

computerizing strategy and the selection of a company with adequate capacity for implementing the electronic platform.

- 3) The organization of diverse training activities, both for the Agency's own personnel and for personnel of higher education institutions that will participate in self-evaluation and accreditation activities of study cycles.
- 4) Promotion, as determined by legislation, of the internationalization of the Agency, either by using periodic evaluations of the activity developed by the Agency by international experts, or by the integration of the Agency in the relevant international organizations such as ENQA and the European Registrar EQAR.
- 5) The preparation of an activity plan allowing for the commencement of the Agency's activities as determined in article 54 of Decree-Law no. 107/2008, of 25 June, that establishes that a higher education institution must get a pre-accreditation of any new study cycles it wants to offer.
- 6) The preparation of an activity plan allowing the fulfilment of article 83 of Decree-Law no. 107/2008, of 25 June, that establishes that every study cycle already in operation when the Agency commenced its activity must be accredited before the completion of academic year 2010/11.

Independently of any ideas the Agency could formulate for the best fulfilment of its mission, the legal framework inevitably conditioned its initial operation. Under article 83 of Decree-Law no. 107/2008, of 25 June, the study cycles already in operation when the Agency started its activity, had to go through an accreditation process, which must be completed until the end of scholar year 2010/11. And, under article 54, of the same Decree-Law, the initial operation, in a higher education institution, of a new study cycle leading to any degree needs to be pre-accredited. Therefore, the priorities of the Agency for the two first years of its mandate included preparing the pre-accreditation of the proposals of new cycles of study to be initiated in the academic year 2010/2011, and preparing and organising the accreditation procedures of all the more than 5,200 study cycles already in operation, as the most recent available data indicated.

It became evident, both due to the legal imposition and to the material impossibility of accrediting more than 5,000 cycles of study in the available short period of time, that the accreditation could not follow a formal assessment/accreditation procedure of every programme. Therefore, the Agency has decided to implement a less detailed system for checking which cycles of study did comply with the required minimum operation standards and separate them from those cycles of study where it was not evident that they complied with the minimum legal standards.

This first accreditation exercise of the study cycles already in operation was designated as preliminary accreditation. On the one hand, it is not an accreditation resulting from a regular assessment exercise of the quality of institutional

performance and, on the other hand, the resulting accreditation will not have a definite period as it depends on the calendar for its re-evaluation within the assessment of the performance of the institution.

The tight schedule of the operations for initiating the accreditation of the study cycles, even preceding the definition of the assessment model of the quality of institutional performance, has resulted in some improvisation that however has not damaged essential aspects of the Project the Agency aims to develop.

#### **4. Initial installation phase**

The urgency in initiating the Agency's work has conditioned the initial implementation strategy and the Council of Administration made the option of the immediate use of provisional facilities that were available, leaving for 2010 the search for better conditions.

##### **4.1. Facilities**

The Agency assumed from the very beginning of its activity that it had to initiate its operation in 2009, shortly after the appointment of the Administration Council in 17 December 2008. The Agency occupied a rented space at street D. Estefânia, 195 - 5.º Esq. made available by ADISPOR. The Agency's Council of Administration must acknowledge and show its gratitude for this contribution that was made possible by the cooperation of the Coordinating Council for Polytechnic Institutes (CCISP) that has also offered some equipment. Later the Agency has also rented a second floor to install the technical personnel to be hired. The installation did not have significant costs and a transfer to better facilities is foreseen over the present year. A small unit was also created in Porto, using free of charge some space made available by CIPES, where for the time being will be located the "Gabinete de Estudos e Análise" and the local secretariat of the President of the Council of Administration.

##### **4.2. Installation of the Agency's governing bodies**

The Agency was able to initiate operations within a rather short period of time due to the helpful collaboration of the Board of Trustees combined with a very positive answer from the organizations that under article 15 of the Statutes of the Agency to appoint representatives to the Advisory Council. The first meeting of the Advisory Council was held in 7 May 2009. In this meeting the Council formulated an opinion about the main guidelines for the Agency's activities and issued an opinion about the

2009 Activity Plan.

The Agency asked the Ministry for Science, Technology and Higher Education to obtain the appointment of the Supervisory Board of the Agency by the Minister of State and Finances, as laid down in the statutes. The appointment of the Board was made in 8 of October with effect from 1 of August (ministerial order no. 22714/2009, of 8 October, by the Minister of State and Finances published in the Official Journal, 2nd series, no. 200, of 15 October). The members of the Supervisory Board are Victor Manuel Batista de Almeida (representing Sociedade de Revisores Oficiais de Contas Victor Almeida & Associados), Ernesto Mendes Batista Ribeiro and Mafalda Eugénia de Araújo Costa Ferreira. The Agency also asked the Board of Trustees to appoint the members of the Revision Council, as they may have to intervene following the first accreditation decisions of the Council of Administration.

#### **4.3. Recruiting the Agency staff**

The Agency has taken the necessary steps for recruiting the administrative staff using, whenever necessary, the mobility mechanisms foreseen in article 10 of Decree-Law no. 369/2007 of 5 November. Therefore, the Agency filled the place of the Secretary General and hired three additional officials, one of them being placed in Porto. A computer technician was also hired.

The technical staff of the Agency necessary for providing support to the assessment/ accreditation processes was recruited following a public tender. The staff was chosen among individuals holding a higher education degree, good knowledge of English and the capacity to use computers, a post-graduation being considered as a positive factor. All recruited personnel had at least a Master and attended a training programme at the level of post-graduation (five months from April to September 2009). All technicians were hired after having successfully completed the training programme and having presented and debated a written essay.

The staff for the Development and Analysis Office was recruited either by using the mobility mechanisms foreseen in article 10 of Decree-Law no. 369/2007 of 5 November or because they held a PhD in Higher Education policies or because they already held a Master in Higher Education Policies and were working for a PhD and doing research in one area relevant for the Agency. Therefore, the strategy used combined hiring people already holding a PhD with recruiting PhD students in relevant areas.

The Agency also hired juridical support for drafting its regulations and decided to outsource the accountancy by making a contract with a company. This decision will be reviewed in 2010, as the work volume of accountancy will most certainly increase

as the Agency develops its work.

## **5. The electronic platform of the Agency**

The Agency decided that every assessment and accreditation procedures should be run on an electronic platform. Therefore, all administrative acts and formalities are registered in the electronic platform accessible in the INTERNET site of A3ES, as was already the case of most operations run by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia for research programmes. Consequently, all proposals for new cycles of study, the self-evaluation reports and the external evaluation reports, all accreditation documents, the guidelines and the documents defining the accreditation standards are available on the very same electronic platform.

Before launching the process several entities were consulted, namely for collecting information and for receiving support, including the Agência para a Sociedade do Conhecimento IP (UMIC), the Fundação para a Computação Científica Nacional (FCCN), where the Agency's electronic platform will be located and the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT). At last it was agreed with the Direcção Geral do Ensino Superior (DGESup) that all the processes for authorisation of the operation of new cycles of study that were received by this directorate to initiate operation in the academic year 2009/2010 – and not yet under the new format that the Agency will define – will be dispatched until the end of June 2009, not being therefore transferred to the Agency.

The Agency wants to publicly acknowledge the help and support received from Professor Luís Magalhães, president of UMIC and from Professor Pedro Veiga, President of the Executive Board of FCCN and his team. The Agency is also grateful for all the excellent advice it received and which allowed for the successful implementation of the Agency's electronic platform. The FCCN agreed to be responsible for lodging the platform and for ensuring its efficient performance even in periods when the great number of simultaneous users and the large volume of information being transferred might originate a lower efficiency.

For the implementation of the electronic information system the Agency hired a company, selected by means of a public tender that was technically designed by the technician recruited by A3ES. The Agency acknowledges the good quality of the work developed by the company to fulfil the contract, the work developed being permanently followed by the Agency's technician. So far the performance of the system has been perfect and no problems were detected.

## **6. Training activities**

The Agency organised a full-time training study programme with duration of 5 months, for training the new technicians hired by the Agency. The Agency is determined to promote the improvement of the human resources available for activities in the areas of assessment/accreditation by training technicians and researchers in the different domains of quality.

The Agency also organised a number of training activities for personnel from the higher education institutions that declared their interest in them. These activities were apparently well succeeded, helping most institutions to make a good use of the procedures for the pre-accreditation of new cycles of study and for the preliminary accreditation of cycles of study already in operation.

## **7. Internationalization**

In order to correspond to the emphasis given by the legislator to internationalisation, the Agency decided to create a Scientific Council, integrated by experts with well recognised international experience that will promote at the end of each year a debate on the annual progress of the Agency and will present a report with criticisms and suggestions to improve the Agency's procedures. The members of the Council are:

- David Dill, Professor of Public Policy, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- Don Westerheijden, Senior Researcher, CHEPS, The Netherlands
- Bjorn Stensaker, Research Professor, University Oslo, NIFU-STEP
- Mary Henkel, Professor Brunel University, UK
- Guy Neave, Researcher at CIPES, consultant WB, OECD, EU, Swedish Academy
- José Ginés-Mora, University of València and Institute of Education (University of London)

The Scientific Council held its first meeting in December 2009 and produced a report with recommendations (Annex 1). The Administration Council has carefully considered those recommendations and proposed a set of actions that are listed in Annex 2.

Over this period the members of A3ES have participated in a number of seminars and international conferences, including the ENQA's General Assembly, in Barcelona.

In fulfilment of article 28 of the Statutes of A3ES, the Agency made an application to become an associated member of ENQA, which was accepted with effect for the year 2009. Application to become a full member is only possible after three years of activity and an evaluation of the Agency.

At last, it was decided that due to the internationalization of the composition of the assessment teams and of the Revision Council, all the assessment/accreditation procedures, which are always submitted in the electronic platform of the Agency, would have a Portuguese and an English version.

## **8. The assessment/accreditation system**

### **8.1. Implementing the system**

In the first phase of the implementation of the system, and following the strategy defined by the Council of Administration, a number of activities were developed, including:

- 1) Preparation of the Regulations of the Agência de Avaliação e Acreditação do Ensino Superior, published in the official journal (Diário da República), 2nd series, of 18 December, which define the Procedures for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions and their Cycles of Study.
- 2) Preparation and public announcement of the guidelines for the Pre-Accreditation of New Cycles of Study.
- 3) Preparation and public announcement of the guidelines for the Preliminary Accreditation of Cycles of Study already in operation.
- 4) Preparation and public announcement of the guidelines for the Assessment of Cycles of Study already in operation.
- 5) Determination of the periods for presentation of proposals for the pre-accreditation of new cycles of study and for the preliminary accreditation of cycles of study already in operation. Determination of the taxes to be charged for the different procedures.
- 6) Preparation of the norms for the external assessment commissions.
- 7) Preparation of an electronic platform for supporting all procedures.

The implementation process was permanently discussed by the Council of Administration of the Agency with the bodies representing the higher education institutions (Conselho de Reitores das Universidades Portuguesas (Public universities), Conselho Coordenador dos Institutos Superiores Politécnicos (Public polytechnics) and Associação Portuguesa do Ensino Superior Privado (Private institutions)).

### **8.2. Pre-accreditation of new cycles of study**

It was agreed with the General Directorate for Higher Education that the procedures for the authorization of new cycles of study, when the proposals were submitted before the Agency started its normal operation, would be dealt with by the MCTES. The Agency became responsible for the pre-accreditation of new study programmes to be initiated in the academic year 2010/2011. The period for the submission of new proposals was from 1st October to 31st December, and the number of proposals received in the Agency is detailed in the next table.

Table 1 – proposals of new study programmes for 2010/2011

<b>ACCREDITATION OF NEW STUDY CYCLES (NCE) 2010/2011</b>
Preliminary proposals – 459
Completed proposals – 330
<b>Proposals for university education – 203</b>
Public university education – 120
Associations of institutions – 8
Private university education – 81
Associations of institutions – 6
Association of public and private institutions – 2
<b>Proposals for polytechnic education – 127</b>
Public polytechnic education – 88
Private polytechnic education – 36
Associations of public universities and public polytechnics – 2
Associations of private universities and private polytechnics – 1
<b>Proposals for 1st cycles – 45</b>
Public university education – 6
Private university education – 15
Public polytechnic education – 14
Private polytechnic education – 10
<b>Proposals for 2nd cycles – 229</b>
Public university education – 69
Private university education – 55
Public polytechnic education – 74
Private polytechnic education – 27
Associations of public universities and public polytechnics – 2
Association of public and private universities – 2
<b>Proposals for 3rd cycles – 56</b>
Public university education – 45
Private university education – 11

When these data are compared against the number of proposals for new cycles of study made in previous years, it is observed that the number of proposals for 2010/2011 has decreased significantly. At the same time it was confirmed that there were no relevant problems in the use of the electronic platform. The only registered problems were a small number of cases where some institutions tried to present their proposals too late, those proposals being turned down by the platform for having exceeded the fixed deadline for submission. All proposals are being analysed by external assessment teams and the process will be completed around May 2010.

### 9.3. Preliminary accreditation of cycles of study already in operation

Under article 83 of Decree-Law no. 107/2008, of 25 June, the cycles of study already in operation when the Agency initiated its activity, will be subject to an accreditation process, which must be completed until the end of the academic year 2010/11.

As there are at present some 5,200 cycles of study in operation (Table 2), the dimension of the problem makes impossible to launch a regular system of assessment/accreditation that meets the legal deadlines defined. Therefore, a viable solution will be the introduction over the next two years of some form of preliminary accreditation, after which the assessment/accreditation system will be launched in a more regular form.

**Table 2 – Cycles of study registered by Direcção Geral do Ensino Superior**

	<i>1st cycle</i>	<i>Integrated masters</i>	<i>2nd cycle</i>	<i>3rd cycle</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Public Univ.</b>	515	115	1 370	612	2 612
<b>Private Univ.</b>	459	15	544	85	1 103
<b>Total Univ.</b>	974	130	1 914	697	3 715
<b>Public Polytec.</b>	700		435		1 135
<b>Private Polytec.</b>	271		141		412
<b>Total Polytec.</b>	971		576		1 547
<b>Total</b>	1 945	130	2 490	697	5 262

In order that the preliminary accreditation fulfils satisfactorily its objectives it should be stressed that it is an accreditation based on minimal quality standards (as it is to be expected from a traditional accreditation system), following a trial exercise that

allows the Agency to concentrate its efforts of more detailed analysis on the cycles of study and scientific areas that do not show clear evidence that minimal standards are universally fulfilled. Therefore, the objective was to ensure that the Agency's processes were totally transparent, in order to quash any doubts about the criteria that determined this preliminary accreditation.

To implement the accreditation process the Agency defined guidelines based on a set of performance indicators and a set of minimum standards that will allow for a clear separation of those cases that need a more detailed analysis from those that apparently fulfil minimum standards without reasonable doubt. Basically, institutions were asked to reorganise their offer of study cycles, declaring which of those cycles in operation (registered at Direcção Geral do Ensino Superior) they would like to maintain in the future, while demonstrating that they possessed the human and material resources to fulfil the required minimum legal standards. Therefore, taking into consideration its autonomy, each institution was asked to assume the main responsibility for adjusting the offer of study cycles to its available resources and to its development strategy. This exercise will take place until mid April 2010.

The Agency will take into account assessment/accreditation processes previously used by institutions and that offer guarantee that minimum standards are safeguarded and that comply with conditions laid down in article 14 of Law no. 38/2007.

The cycles of study with acceptable performance indicators will be exempted from detailed assessment/accreditation in this phase off the process, being considered pre-accredited until the stable operation of the system, in the academic year 2011/2012. The cycles of study showing less favourable performance indicators will be submitted to a detailed assessment/accreditation process and, if the assessment is positive, they will be accredited for a period of five years.

This procedure will allow experimenting the assessment/accreditation procedures using a limited number of cases (selected as already described). This procedure can be completed until the end of the academic year 2010/2011, allowing for the testing and improvement of the future quality system, while at the same time giving a clear sign for institutions and society that the new Agency can act in an efficient and effective way by contributing to close down the study cycles with more evident lack of quality. It will also allow for the definition of a consensus between the Agency and its partners about a common quality concept. Other visible effect will be the elimination of cycles of study and of institutions without viability or in a terminal phase that will be discontinued following a decision by its own managers.

#### **8.4. Other activities**

In the initial phase of the implementation process the Agency decided to commission several work documents and reports aiming at discussing with the higher education institutions a number of themes that are central for the development of the assessment/accreditation procedures. Therefore, the Agency decided:

- 1) To commission a report on a “Comparative Analysis of European Procedures for the Assessment and Certification of Internal Systems of Quality Assurance” in order to discuss the implementation of these internal systems with higher education institutions. Discussion will take place in 2010.
- 2) To commission a report on “Performance Indicators for Supporting the Procedures for Assessment and Accreditation of Cycles of Study”, that will be the basis for a discussion with higher education institutions of the performance indicators and standards to be used by the Agency on the assessment/accreditation procedures. The discussion is scheduled for 2010.
- 3) To commission a report on “Student participation in the Assessment of Portuguese Higher Education Institutions: contributes for its definition”. This report will be used for a debate on the role played by students in the assessment/accreditation procedures.

#### **9. Chronology of the activities**

The degree of fulfilment of the chronology of activities established in the 2009 plan deserves some comments. It is considered that the plan established for 2009 was fully carried out, the only exceptions being some minor adaptations that the development of the process made advisable.

It was decided that the Scientific Council would convene regularly once a year. The initial idea of meetings every semester did not make sense as this corresponded to an excessively short period for formulating a global critical vision of the progress of the work developed by the Agency.

The selection and training of the external evaluators was also postponed to 2010, as it was difficult to organise their selection without having a more precise idea of the cycles of study that would be submitted to pre-accreditation. At last the visits to other reference accreditation agencies was also postponed to 2010, as priority was given to establishing a dialogue with ENQA and participating in its General Assembly and in the European Quality Assurance Forum held in Copenhagen.

## **10. Envoi**

To conclude, the Council of Administration of the Agency considers it is fair to acknowledge the great efforts developed by all higher education institutions to answer to the demands of the new assessment and accreditation system of cycles of study that the Agency has implemented.