

Activity Report

2010

1. Introduction

The Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Portuguese Higher Education has completed in 2010 its second year of operation. Over this second year the Agency has focused its activity on the analysis of the preliminary accreditation processes, discussing its results with every institution. The Agency also prepared the implementation of the first formal evaluation/accreditation processes for those study cycles unable to demonstrate in the preliminary accreditation that they complied with the minimum quality standards.

Over this period the first cycle of prior accreditations of proposals of new study cycles presented by institutions for 2010/11 was completed. The electronic submission of proposals of new study cycles for 2011/12 was also completed.

The Agency has discussed a number of issues with the Advisory Council and the bodies representing higher education institutions. Those discussions included the implementation of internal quality assurance systems, performance indicators to be used in programme evaluation/accreditation and participation modes of students in evaluation/accreditation processes.

All the information collected over this period apparently confirms that the option for an electronic version of guidelines was fundamental for the success of the operation of the evaluation/accreditation system and no severe problem in the use of the Agency's electronic platform was reported. Indeed, without a totally computer based system it would have been impossible to manage the very high number of processes under analysis.

At last, over this period the Agency has moved to more functional facilities, which was only possible in 2010, as in 2009 absolute priority was given to starting the operations of the Agency, even in the absence of optimal physical conditions.

2. The prior accreditation of new study cycles

There were 327 proposals for new study cycles to be initiated in the academic year 2010/11. The results of their complete analysis are given in Table 1.

Table 1 – Results of the accreditation of new study cycles, 2011/12

Prior accreditation of NCE submitted in 2009		
Submitted processes:	327	
With Management Board decision:	327	100%
Favourable:	167	51%
Favourable with conditions:	36	11%
Unfavourable:	124	38%
Decisions opposed to EATs:	21	6%
Favourable for HEIs:	6	2%
Unfavourable for HEIs:	15	5%
Appeals:	13	10%
University education:	203	
With Management Board decision:	203	100.0%
Favourable:	110	54%
Favourable with conditions:		10%
Unfavourable:		36%
Decisions opposed to EATs:	16	8%
Favourable for HEIs:	5	2%
Unfavourable for HEIs:	11	5%
Polytechnic education:	124	
With Management Board decision:	124	100%
Favourable:	57	46%
Favourable with conditions:		13%
Unfavourable:		41%
Decisions opposed to EATs:	5	4%
Favourable for HEIs:	1	1%
Unfavourable for HEIs:	4	3%

The submission process for proposals of new study cycles for the academic year 2011/12 was completed in 15 December 2010 in answer to a demand of the bodies representing higher education institutions asking for postponement of the initially proposed deadline – end of November. However, the submission pace of the proposals did not at all legitimate this postponement (see Table 2).

Table 2 – Process submission pace

Date	Submitted processes
3 December	2 processes
6 December	1 process
7 December	1 process
10 December	17 processes
13 December	17 processes
14 December	65 processes
15 December	326 processes

At the end of the new deadline there were 431 proposals submitted, 228 of them from university education and 163 from polytechnic education. As for the nature of the new proposed cycles, 71 proposals were relative to first cycles, 281 to second cycles and 79 to third cycles. These results correspond to about 30% increase in relation to the previous year, which might be explained by the publication of legislation regulating the training of teachers for professional areas as well as by the strategic decisions of institutions in order to rationalise their education offer (an additional number of 335 study programmes were cancelled over this period). More detailed information about the submitted proposals is presented in table 3.

For the next cycle of submission of proposals for new study cycles the Agency will propose as deadline the 31st of October, which will allow for an anticipation of the date when the final accreditation decisions are made, which answers a desire expressed by institutions that the annual decisions of the numerus clausus of each study programme are made not later than by the end of May.

Table 3 – New study cycles submitted for prior accreditation

NCE submitted for prior accreditation - 431
University education - 268
Public university education - 166
Association of institutions - 8
Private university education - 99
Association of institutions - 6
Association between public and private institutions - 3
Polytechnic education - 163
Public polytechnic education - 106
Association of institutions - 7
Private polytechnic education - 49
Association of institutions - 4
Association between public universities and polytechnics - 6
Association between private universities and polytechnics - 2
Submissions relative to the degree of Licenciado - 71
Public university education - 12
Private university education - 21
Public polytechnic education - 23
Private polytechnic education - 15
Submissions relative to the degree of Master - 281
Public university education - 97
Private university education - 58
Public polytechnic education - 84
Private polytechnic education - 33
Association between private universities and polytechnics - 2
Association between public universities and polytechnics - 6
Association between public and private universities - 1
Submissions relative to the degree of Doctor - 79
Public university education - 57
Private university education - 20
Association between public and private universities - 2

3. Preliminary accreditation of study cycles in operation

As foreseen, the deadline for submission of proposals relative to the preliminary accreditation of study cycles in operation was this year, in April. The data from the Direcção Geral do Ensino Superior revealed there were more than 5.000 study cycles registered in the more recent count. Institutions were asked to submit, from among all those registered under the previous regime, only those they intended to keep in operation in the future. And they had to demonstrate that they possessed the necessary conditions and requirements to offer those programmes, namely in what

concerned the academic staff. After the deadline it was found that institutions had submitted 4.376 study programmes for preliminary accreditation (Table 4).

The data provided by institutions when filling the guidelines was used to build a data basis with information about each institution and each study programme. Aiming to develop this process the Agency has commissioned a report entitled “Performance Indicators for Supporting Evaluation and Accreditation Processes of Study Cycles”, which was used to promote a debate with institutions concerning the performance indicators and their standards to be used in the present phase of evaluation/accreditation of study cycles. The indicators for each study programme were then automatically calculated being used to perform the proposed screening operation.

The results of this screening exercise were individually discussed with each institution and this was used to call the attention of institutions to some study programmes, which probably would not comply with the minimum accreditation standards. As consequence of these discussions, institutions voluntarily decided to eliminate an additional number of 335 study programmes in operation (Table 4).

Table 4 – Programmes in operation submitted to preliminary accreditation by A3ES

		<i>1st cycle</i>	<i>Integrated Masters</i>	<i>2nd cycle</i>	<i>3rd cycle</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Initial programmes</i>	Total	1 669	138	2 004	568	4 379
<i>Discontinued programmes</i>	Uni.	76	1	146	36	259
	Poly.	38	-	38	-	76
	Total	114	1	184	36	335
<i>Programmes for accreditation</i>	Uni.	125	8	90	59	282
	Poly.	85	-	54	-	139
	Total	210	8	144	59	421
<i>Programmes with preliminary accreditation</i>	Total	1 345	129	1 676	473	3 623

As consequence of this process the study programmes became divided into two sets. The first one comprises the study programmes receiving preliminary accreditation valid until the steady state operation of evaluation/accreditation system, which will be

implemented at the start of academic year 2011/2012. The term of the preliminary accreditation is variable, being defined by the sequence of the evaluation/accreditation of study cycles in operation established for the 5-year cycle beginning in October 2011.

The second set includes those study cycles that in the preliminary accreditation process were unable to produce enough evidence allowing for a positive decision on their compliance with the minimum quality standards. They will be the object of a detailed evaluation/accreditation between October 2010 and October 2011. Under the Agency's regulations, the accreditation procedures will be reopened for those study cycles, which will go through a formal evaluation/accreditation process by an External Assessment Team, including foreign experts. The EAT will visit the institution in order to draft a report that will support the decisions, positive or negative of the Management Board. The results of this exercise will be "accreditation for a 5 year period", "conditional accreditation for a period up to 3 years" or "no accreditation".

Therefore, in this phase of the accreditation process, 421 study cycles will go through this exercise, 210 being first cycles, 8 integrated masters', 144 second cycles and 59 third cycles (see Table 4). The process for submitting the self-evaluation reports will end by 15 February 2011.

4. Internal quality assurance systems

As referred in the 2009 and 2010 action plans of A3ES, the Agency adheres to the principle that responsibility for quality assurance lies first of all with each higher education institution, which should implement adequate internal structures and procedures in order to promote and guarantee the quality of its operations. The Agency will be responsible for promoting audits aiming at certifying the institution's internal quality assurance processes.

With this objective in mind the Agency has commissioned a report entitled "Comparative Analysis of European Processes for Evaluating and Certifying Internal Quality Assurance Systems" which was presented to CRUP, CCISP and APESP. The report was widely publicised during the first trimester of 2010, for collecting the opinion of higher education institutions on the audit model to be adopted in Portugal. Over the hearing period that lasted until September, more than 30 conferences were made in answer to institutional demands. After this period the report was completed taking into account the comments received, being published as a book in early 2011, both as hard copy and in electronic version.¹

¹ This is the first publication in the series *A3ES Readings*, aiming at publishing thematic or transversal studies on quality assurance in higher education.

Supported in this report the Agency has adopted a set of reference points for internal quality assurance systems, formulated as non-prescriptive propositions detailing the main characteristics of a well-developed and consolidated quality assurance system. Those reference points were not meant to be considered absolute standards. They are mainly intended to provide orientations that might help institutions to design and develop their internal quality assurance systems, preferably starting from those mechanism and procedures already in place and complying with the specific profile and needs of each institution, aiming at internalising a quality culture inside the institution.

Following this work the Agency has started to develop an Institutional Audit Model, based on a number of assumptions proposed in the report and favourably accepted by institutions. It is foreseen that the audit process may start in the academic year 2011/12, using again an experimental exercise and a voluntary participation of institutions.

The Agency is also well aware of the significance of its own internal quality assurance system. Therefore the Agency has taken the initiative of promoting the critical monitoring of its activities by a number of well-reputed foreign experts (the Scientific Council, referred under §7 of this report).

As preliminary work for preparing to ensure compliance with the European standards (*European Standards and Guidelines – ESG*), the Agency has commissioned a report on the theme “*Internal Quality Assurance Systems of Evaluation and Accreditation Agencies*” which covers three major topics:

- an in depth analysis of the ESG requirements for agencies, with a special focus on standard 3.8, relative to the agencies own internal quality assurance;
- European trends on the way agencies view their internal quality mechanisms, including 32 case studies comprising all agencies registered in EQAR as well as other reference agencies in Europe;
- an appraisal on the A3ES degree of conformity with Part2 and Part 3 of the ESG, including a specially detailed analysis of the Agency’s internal quality mechanisms, including some improvement suggestions in those cases where there is not yet total conformity with the standards.

The report concludes that although A3ES has been established quite recently, it already compares rather well with other European agencies presenting a degree of conformity with ESG that is at least equivalent to several agencies already registered in EQAR (see Table 5 for a summary).

Table 5 – Position of A3ES in relation to ESG.

Standard	Degree of conformity	Areas for further development
2.1	Substantial	Institutional audit process
2.2	Substantial/Total	Elaborating studies on assessment impact.
2.3	Total	
2.4	Substantial	Formal <i>follow-up</i> procedures.
2.5	Total	<i>Feedback</i> on the usefulness of reports.
2.6	Parcial	Formal <i>follow-up</i> procedures.
2.7	Total	
2.8	Substantial	Elaboration of cross-cut synthetic reports.
3.1	Substantial	Those identified in standards 2.1 to 2.8.
3.2	Total	
3.3	Total	
3.4	Substantial	Financing of the costs of infrastructure. Formal policy for continuing staff training.
3.5	Substantial	Integrated mission declaration.
3.6	Total	
3.7	Substantial	Formal <i>follow-up</i> procedures. Formal policy for continuing staff training.
3.8	Partial/Substantial	Formalisation details. There is substantial conformity in terms of substance.

5. The participation of students and professional associations in accreditation

The Agency is well aware of the relevance of student participation although it may be a controversial issue. Therefore, the Agency has promoted a debate of a report entitled “Student participation in the Assessment of Portuguese Higher Education Institutions: contributes for its definition”. This report was also discussed in the Advisory Council. Following the debates it was agreed that the Agency should promote an experimental exercise of the participation of students in External Assessment Teams, using the voluntary support of institutions. The results of this experimental exercise will support a decision on the modes of student participation when the evaluation/accreditation system reaches steady state.

The participation of Professional Associations is foreseen in number 1 of article 13 of Law no. 38/2007, of 16 August, in paragraph a) of number 6 and in number 7 of article 7 of Decree-Law no. 369/2007, of 5 November. Therefore, the Agency has decided to ask Professional Associations to issue an opinion about the accreditation of new study cycles in areas that are relevant for the scope of their activities of Professional regulation. The decisions of the Management Board on the accreditation of each study programme will take into consideration not only the recommendation of

the External Assessment Team but also the opinion of the relevant Professional Association.

6. Completion of the composition of the governing bodies of the Agency

In 2010 the Board of Trustees has completed the composition process of the Appeals Council, the only body of the Agency that had not initiated operation in 2009. The members of the Appeals Council are the following:

Judge Councilor Manuel Fernando dos Santos Serra (President)

Professor João Alcindo Pereira Martins e Silva

Professor Dionísio Afonso Gonçalves

Dr. Andrée Sursock

Dr. Pádraig Walsh

Judge Councilor Manuel Serra is former President of the Supreme Administrative Court. Professor Martins e Silva was for a number of years the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Lisbon. Professor Dionísio Gonçalves was President of the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança. Dr. Andrée Sursock holds a PhD from University of Berkeley and is Senior Adviser of the European University Association. Dr. Pádraig Walsh is the President of the Irish Quality Agency.

As there will be a foreseeable substantial increase of the volume of work due to the implementation of the first accreditation processes and of the internal quality assurance systems it was decided to increase the membership of the Management Board. Consequently, the Board of Trustees has appointed Professor Sérgio Machado dos Santos as executive member of the Board.

7. Scientific Council report

The Agency has a specialised body, the Scientific Council, composed of international experts in Higher Education Policies. This Council produces an annual report on the work developed by the Agency and containing recommendations for developing and improving the system. As the Agency organised a meeting, in February 2011, for discussing the publication of a book with Palgrave, meeting attended by a number of members of the Council, the 2010 annual meeting was postponed to February 2011. The report of the Scientific Council is presented as Annex 1 to this report and will be taken in consideration when the Agency prepares its work plan for 2011.

8. Internationalisation

The Agency has continued to develop activities that will promote its internationalization, namely by participating in activities organised by the ENQA. Therefore, for 2010 these activities included:

- 1) Visit the Irish quality evaluation agency, the Irish Universities Quality Board.
- 2) Participation in the ENQA workshop “Quality Assurance and Learning Outcomes”, July, Vienna.
- 3) Participation in the ENQA seminar, “Internal Quality Assurance – Enhancing Quality Culture, June, London
- 4) Participation in the European Quality Assurance Forum, Building bridges – making sense of QA in European, national and institutional contexts, November, Lyon.
- 5) Participation in the annual conference of the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers, University of Oslo, 10-12 June.
- 6) Participation in the annual Conference of EAIR (European Association for International Education), Valência, 1-4 September.
- 7) Participation in the IMHE (OCDE) General Conference, Paris, 13-15 September.
- 8) Invited participation in the Conference of the Council for European Studies, Montreal, 15-17 April.
- 9) Invited participation in the European Science Foundation Conference “ERA and the Bologna Process: implementation problems and the human resource factor”.

The Agency also participates in the IBAR research Project, financed by the European Commission, on the analysis of barriers to the implementation of the European Standards and Guidelines, and participation in the ENQA led project on practices for drafting evaluation reports, including examples of good practice and the definition of standards for different types of report.

9. Publications

1. Amaral, A. and Rosa, M.J. (2010), "Recent Trends in Quality Assurance", *Quality in Higher Education*, 16.1, 59-61.
2. Cardoso, S.; Santiago, R. e Sarrico, C. (2010). Atitudes estudantis face à avaliação das instituições de ensino superior, *Avaliação: Revista da Avaliação do Ensino Superior* (Brasil), 15.3, 29-58
3. Carvalho, T.; Machado, M. L. (2010). Gender and shifts in higher education managerial regimes: examples from Portugal. *Australian Universities' Review*, 52.

- 2, 33-42.
4. Machado, M.L. e Sá, M.J. (2009-2010). "Em busca da excelência no ensino superior: inquérito à satisfação dos estudantes em Portugal", *Revista da Faculdade de Educação/Universidade do Estado de Mato Grosso*, Ano VII, nº 11 (Jan./Jun.), 97-114.
 5. Melo, A., Sarrico, C.S. and Radnor, Z. (2010). The influence of performance management systems on key actors in universities: the case of an English university. *Public Management Review* 12: 2, 233-254.
 6. Monteiro, J.M. e Sarrico, C.S. (2010). A caminho de uma escola com mais qualidade: auto-avaliação de uma escola básica aplicando a CAF. *TMQ Qualidade*. 1, 214-230.
 7. Sarrico, C.S. (2010). On performance in higher education: towards performance governance? *Tertiary Education and Management* 16: 2, 145-158.
 8. Sarrico, C.S., Rosa, M.J., Teixeira, P.N. and Cardoso, M.F. (2010), "Assessing Quality and Evaluating Performance in Higher Education: Worlds apart or complementary views?", *Minerva*, Vol. 48, 35-54.
 9. Tavares, D., Rosa, M.J. and Amaral, A. (2010), "Does the EUA institutional evaluation programme contribute to quality improvement?" *Quality Assurance in Education*, 18.3, 178-190.
 10. Amaral, A. (2010). "Tendências recentes dos sistemas de avaliação do ensino superior na Europa". *Sísifo*, 12, 51-62.
 11. Fonseca, M. (2010), "2010: Acreditação Ano Zero. Os Sistemas Internos de Garantia de Qualidade das Instituições de Ensino Superior em Portugal", (Publicação electrónica) http://www.a3es.pt/sites/default/files/SIGQ_IES_PT.pdf

Chapters in books

1. Amaral, A. and Rosa, M.J. (2010), "Trans-National Accountability Initiatives. The Case of the EUA audits". In Stensaker, B. and Harvey, L. (eds), *Accountability in Higher Education. Global Perspectives on Trust and Power*, New York, Routledge, pp. 203-220.
2. Machado, M. L.; Meira Soares, V.; Gouveia, O. (2010) The Study of Academic Job Satisfaction and Motivation: an Ongoing Study in Portuguese Higher Education. In *Global Business & Economics Anthology*, B&ESI Volume II, Issue 2, pp 242-246. (GBEA), ISSN: 1553-1392
3. Taylor, J.S. & Machado, M.L. (2010). "Leading Strategic Change in Higher Education: The Need for a Paradigm Shift toward Visionary Leadership," in Claes, T and Preston, S. (eds.), *Frontiers in Higher Education*. Amsterdam, Netherlands. At the Interface Series, 167-194.

4. Teixeira, P. (2010) Higher Education between the masses and the market: An outsider's reflections about trends in quality assurance, in Blättler et al (eds) *Creativity and diversity: Challenges for quality assurance beyond 2010*; European University Association
5. Teixeira, P. and Amaral, A. (2010); Portuguese Higher Education: More Competition with less Market Regulation? in Roger Brown (ed.) *Higher Education and the Market*; Routledge.
6. Vucasovic, M. and Sarrico, C.S. (2010). Inequality in Higher Education: Definitions, Measurements, Inferences. In: GOASTELLE G (Eds), *Understanding Inequalities in, through and by Higher Education*. Sense Publishers: Rotterdam, pp 1-16.
7. Amaral, A., (2010), "Impacto del aseguramiento de la calidad en la eficacia formativa." In *Calidad de los egresados, responsabilidad institucional ineludible*, Seminario Internacional, Santiago de Chile, pp. 37-48.

Conferences

1. Seventeenth International Conference of the Council for European Studies, Montreal, Canada, 15-17 de Abril, 2010. Apresentação: "The European Higher Education Area: Various Perspectives on the Complexities of a Multi-Level Governance system", Alberto Amaral e Amélia Veiga.
2. ESF Explanatory Workshop on: Human resources for research: perspectives and tendencies for researchers, career expectations and job satisfaction in the European Research Area. Institute for Research on Population and Social Policies. Rome on 26-27 April 2010. Key-note: "ERA and the Bologna process: implementation problems and the human resource factor". Alberto Amaral.
3. Doing More with Less, IMHE Conference, Paris, 13 a 16 de Setembro. Apresentação: Democratization of Access and Success in Higher Education: A reflection on the realities of Portugal and Brazil. Diana Tavares, Claisy Araújo-Marinho, Leandro Almeida e Alberto Amaral.
4. European Quality Assurance Forum, Building bridges - making sense of QA in European, national and institutional contexts, November, Lyon. Apresentação: Students' Participation in the Assessment of Portuguese Higher Education Institutions: a contribution to its definition. Sónia Cardoso, Sérgio Machado dos Santos e Alberto Amaral.
5. Annual Conference of the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers, University of Oslo, 10-12 June. Presentation: The impact of quality assessment in Portuguese universities: students' perceptions. Sónia Cardoso, Rui Santiago and Cláudia Sarrico.

6. Annual Conference of the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers, University of Oslo, 10-12 June. Presentation: Higher education quality assessment: an account of intended purposes and observed effects. Cláudia Sarrico and Maria João Rosa.
7. Annual Conference of the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers, University of Oslo, 10-12 June. Presentation: An examination of Academic Job Satisfaction and Motivation in Portuguese Higher Education. Machado Taylor et al.
8. Annual Conference EAIR (European Association for International Education), Valência, 1-4 September. Presentation: The EUA Institutional Evaluation Programme: an account of institutional best practices. Maria João Rosa, Diana Tavares, Alberto Amaral and Sónia Cardoso.
9. Universidade de Freiburg (Alemanha) – Summer Conference of the Work Group on Higher Education, May 2010, DeGEval (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Evaluation) on performance evaluation methods in Social Sciences, alternative to bibliometric methods, using the Swiss experience. (Madalena Fonseca)
10. Doctoral Programme in Geography, University of Lisbon, 2 June 2010. Invited conference: “A Geografia do Ensino Superior em Portugal – breve retrato - O Ensino Superior em Mapas e em Números”. Madalena Fonseca.
11. Seminar on “Quality Management Systems in Higher Education”, Instituto Português de Qualidade (IPQ) - Comissão para a Educação e Formação (CS11). Caparica, 20 October 2010. Presentation: “ 2010: Acreditação Ano Zero. Os Sistemas Internos de Garantia de Qualidade das Instituições de Ensino Superior em Portugal”. Madalena Fonseca.

PhD Thesis

Orlanda Tavares – As Escolhas dos Estudantes no Acesso ao Ensino Superior Português. Processos e Racionalidades.

Amélia Veiga – Bologna and the Institutionalisation of the European Higher Education Area.

10. Facilities and staff

The change of the Agency's premises was implemented, as planned, for an office building located in Praça de Alvalade, in Lisbon. The Agency has thus available an area of 610 m² with very good access.

A new staff member, Dr Amelia Veiga, was hired (on mobility from the University of Porto) to replace Dr. Claudia Sarrico, who moved to the Institute of Economics and Management Of UTL.

11. Final comments

The Agency has always developed its role in close cooperation with the higher education institutions, either directly either through their representative organisations, namely the CRUP, the CCISP and the APESP, as well as with the students, professional organisations and employers represented in the Advisory Council. This has allowed the Agency to adapt its activity by taking into account the informations received and the opinions of the different partners, which sometimes results in the adaptation and adequacy of the different processes presented in successive activity plans.

Among the changes that were made, we draw particular attention to the changes to the procedure for preliminary accreditation. Initially it was anticipated that the analysis of the study cycles in operation would result in three possible situations: the first corresponding to a preliminary accreditation decision; a second corresponding to studies cycles that should immediately go through a process of assessment/ accreditation; and a third situation, of studies cycles that should be immediately discontinued. Along the process it was found that institutions chose to voluntarily discontinue a significant number of study cycles (335), so the process was adjusted by dropping the third possibility that was no longer justified as a consequence of the highly responsible attitude assumed by most institutions.

The Administration Council,

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2nd Report of the Scientific Council to A3ES

Meeting of 2nd of February 2011

The Scientific Council hereby submits its second report to A3ES. Once again, we are grateful for the hospitality and engagement that met us at A3ES, and for the detailed discussions on the activities and challenges facing the agency. We see the repeated invitation to join in the discussions as a sincere attempt to bring about change and improvement in higher education in Portugal, and are honoured to take part in this process.

Our report follows the outline of last year's report. First, we would like to acknowledge the activities of A3ES that we think are very promising and relevant for higher education in Portugal. Second, we allow ourselves to bring to the table a number of issues and suggestions which we hope can provide inspiration and reflection within A3ES. We make these recommendations in the knowledge that we as foreigners may have an insufficient understanding of the many factors that may hinder or stimulate the improvement of the sector, and that quality improvement – in essence – is a responsibility of those closest to the action.

Commendations

Although the agency is very young, we already notice a spirit of engagement and entrepreneurship within it. One sign of such engagement is the swift and efficient way in which the agency has dealt with a great deal of work - measured in the number of accreditations undertaken. (More than 4,000 study programmes in all three cycles have been accredited in two years' time.) There is good reason to think that a key factor here is the technology-based accreditation platform, an innovation we commended in our last report, which seems to be continuing to provide added-value to the whole system. However, while technology certainly might play a central role, the influence of what seems to be a very thoughtfully selected cadre of staff, combining academic and administrative competence with a wealth of experience of the sector itself, should not be underestimated. That such competence is complemented by further training – often in close collaboration with staff from higher education institutions – is highly commendable. In sum, what has been created is an agency with capability, competence and, along with these qualities, sensitivity and adaptability, grounded in understanding of the higher education system.

Moving to a closely related theme, we admire and would like to give further encouragement to the reflective and research-driven approach of the agency, with respect to gaining knowledge of how the new system of quality assurance in higher education in Portugal is received within the sector. This curiosity-driven approach is not the most typical characteristic of quality assurance agencies in Europe, and

demonstrates A3ES's readiness to take advantage of the opportunities for learning from experience both within and beyond its borders.

Building support for and involvement in the decisions facing the agency is one of the central conditions for developing a successful agency, and the systematic surveillance by the staff of trends in QA in Europe provides a good knowledge base for any decisions taken. An example of this is the current study undertaken by Machado dos Santos on audit procedures in Europe. The Scientific Council believes that surveillance of this kind can also be considered as a vital part of a well-functioning internal quality assurance system; systematic interest in what happens in the rest of Europe is perhaps one of the key drivers for more reflective practices, and for constantly questioning existing procedures and processes.

We have seen further evidence of the agency's commitment to building trust and support in the sector in the number of conferences, seminars and also meetings with individual institutions they have held throughout Portugal.

The dual approach to the establishment of trust through systematic analysis and research and close engagement with the sector, (already commented upon in the Scientific Council's first report) has been sustained and seems already to be bearing fruit and to have been of value to A3ES in meeting the challenge presented by the preliminary accreditation process. We have learned how it successfully, and deftly, managed to accommodate the existing standards and rules in a way that allowed for the closure of a significant number of programmes with little or no chance of meeting the requisite quality standards, without recourse to formal accreditation procedures that might have been both costly and painful.

A3ES now is considering adopting an audit procedure as an alternative/complementary method to accreditation. This has much to recommend it, not least in the light of European lessons of diminishing returns when evaluation methods become too standardised and routinised. Since the higher education system in Portugal is highly diversified and includes some institutions that have already established systems for internal quality assurance, installing a more flexible and user-oriented system that takes this into account, is commendable. We also think a more experimental approach to audit is a good idea, although such a step does require some thoughts on the contextual factors influencing the success of such an approach. Hence, in the next section we give some recommendations and reflections as to how this might be implemented.

Recommendations

This section lays out some more detailed reflections, and some recommendations as to how A3ES may develop further activities in relation to the planned audit piloting project. Some other minor issues are also addressed in the end of the section.

The challenging relationship between quality audits and quality culture

The Scientific Council noticed that much mention was made in our discussions and in the A3ES documents of developing a "quality culture" in Portuguese higher education institutions. The ambition of encouraging a commitment to quality in all activities of

higher education institutions through external audits is admirable. However, we wonder whether the initial scope of the new audit approach is perhaps unrealistically broad. New national policies in Portugal on research evaluation/funding and on the use of performance-based contracts are likely to create powerful incentives for improving a number of institutional processes of interest, including research management. Yet, given the increasing adoption among EU countries of higher education policies emphasising research productivity, university rankings, bibliometric measures, economic development etc., most countries are discovering that the greatest challenge is how to create effective incentives for the assurance and improvement of academic standards in degree programmes. A key question is therefore how to develop a robust culture of quality in teaching and student learning at all three degree levels within higher education institutions.

A strong case may be argued for teaching and student learning to be the primary focus within an audit process geared towards developing a quality culture. Such a focus would also be more consistent with the shift from a systematic review of all degree programmes to a “lighter touch” audit regime, since to do so responsibly will require evidence that higher education institutions have in place effective processes for assuring the academic standards of their academic programmes.

Going beyond institutional QA-systems based on “student satisfaction surveys”

Strengthening institutional processes for evaluating and improving the quality of teaching is a critical priority in most EU countries. As in other countries, so in Portugal the most commonly reported QA procedure is “student satisfaction surveys.”² However, while the adoption and use of student surveys of instruction can contribute to improving instruction, they have their limitations. Research suggests that student ratings of teachers may be affected by students’ conventional views of what constitutes good teaching, by class size and by grading/marking leniency (thus encouraging grade inflation/compression and the decline of academic standards).³ From a conceptual perspective, moreover, student satisfaction surveys measure short term satisfaction with teaching rather than long term satisfaction with learning. Over time the ritualistic employment of such surveys may paradoxically lead to less attention being paid to improving teaching and student learning. In our view, A3ES has much to gain from experimenting with external reviews that do not highlight a single mechanism for evaluating teaching, but rather encourage higher education institutions, as in the process of research itself, continually to seek more valid, reliable and effective means of assessing and improving education, by including mechanisms such as peer evaluations of teaching, external reviews of course syllabi, validation of student assessments plus student and alumni interviews etc..

Assessing Learning Outcomes and Improving Student Learning

Improving instruction is important, of that we are convinced. Yet, the ultimate social benefits of higher education are what students actually learn from their academic programmes. Learning outcomes increasingly figure in Europe-wide developments in

² Fonseca, M. (2011) Higher Education Accreditation in Portugal: Year Zero 2010. Paper presented at the Third International RESUP Conference: Reforming Higher Education and Research, Sciences Po – Paris, 29 January.

³ McKeachie, W. J. (1997) Student ratings: The validity of use. *American Psychologist*, 52(11):1218-1225.

higher education. For this reason, some subject assessments and accreditations as well as academic audit procedures have been criticised for focusing insufficiently on the improvement of student learning and/or failing to provide incentives for higher education institutions and programmes to develop effective measures of learning outcomes. When improving its subject accreditation reviews and developing the academic audit process it envisages, A3ES may wish to study the methods particularly of those subject accreditation agencies that have achieved a firm track record for focusing their criteria and reviews successfully on student learning and on the assessment of learning outcomes. Among them, it may care to note the accreditation process of the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) in the USA, the accreditation and quality processes of the General Medical Council in the UK, and the ABET international accreditation process in applied science, computing, engineering, and technology.⁴ These external reviews all appear strongly to emphasise a culture of evidence-based decision-making within institutions directly applied to the improvement of teaching, student learning and academic programmes. Accordingly they place much weight on assessing the validity and reliability of institutional measures and mechanisms to ensure the quality of teaching and student learning. Given the research strength A3ES marshals, one project that might be envisaged in the year ahead is to investigate in depth how higher education institutions interpret – and what they understand by – “learning outcomes”, and, further, how such representations relate to broader objectives that concern both qualification frameworks and internal quality assurance systems.

Design options within an audit approach

The Scientific Council applauds the initiative to develop an audit approach in the higher education system in Portugal. The recent A3ES exercise of benchmarking internal quality assurance processes is for this reason a valuable contribution.⁵ However, while a number of studies suggest that subject-oriented external quality assurance is able to provide incentives for improving academic quality⁶, the evidence supporting the benefits of a comprehensive academic audit process as it is outlined on pages 98-102 of the Machado dos Santos report (2011) is perhaps less clear.

Given that an audit approach ought to be designed to take full account of the needs of higher education and the diverse institutional landscape in Portugal, we would suggest that A3ES consider the “frame of reference for internal quality assurance

⁴ E. El-Khawas, The Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) in the USA (pp., 37-54) and L. Harvey, The Accreditation and Quality Processes of the General Medical Council in the UK (pp. 249-274). In Dill, D. D. and Beerkens, M., *Public Policy for Academic Quality: Analyses of Innovative Policy Instruments*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2010.

[Prados, J. W.](#), [Peterson, G. D.](#), [Lattuca, L. R.](#) (2005) Quality Assurance of Engineering Education through Accreditation: The Impact of Engineering Criteria 2000 and Its Global Influence, *Journal of Engineering Education*, 94(1): 165-184.

Volkwein, J., Lattuca, L. R., Harper, B. J., and Domingo, R. J. (2007) Professional Accreditation On Student Experiences And Learning Outcomes, *Research in Higher Education*, 48(2): 251-282.

⁵ Machado dos Santos, S. (2011) *Comparative analysis of European processes for assessment and certification of internal quality assurance systems*, A3ES.

⁶ See for example: Dill, D. D. and Beerkens, M., *Public Policy for Academic Quality: Analyses of Innovative Policy Instruments*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2010.

systems” (Machado dos Santos, 2011: 8.1.1) as working hypotheses for the development of an academic audit process. A3ES may wish to think about some pilot testing with a sample of Portuguese institutions as a way to experiment with a preliminary model of academic audit. This would provide an opportunity to evaluate the results of these “pilot” tests and make the necessary adjustments to the audit model before fully implementing the audit procedure. An organically developed model of academic audit which is appropriate to the specific needs of Portuguese higher education and *informed* rather than *determined* by the experience of other systems, is, we believe, most likely to lead on to an audit procedure that is successful and useful.

Considerable weight should, we suggest, be placed on the focus of the audit process. The proposed frame of reference, as we have had cause to note, is highly comprehensive. To put in place mechanisms for each of the 10 references runs, however, the risk of distracting institutions from the basic task of developing and strengthening the core QA processes which are necessary if the academic standards of their study programmes are to be assured. Whilst we take the view that the 10 References are indeed valid indicators and highly relevant in a longer term perspective, A3ES may even so wish to consider setting priorities within these 10 References and introducing them stepwise and incrementally into the audit process rather than including them all from the outset. Thus, for instance, the first wave of audits might focus on References 2&3, which are most closely associated with assuring the quality of study programmes. Later audits might then successively add further References as planned.

Such a way of implementing the audit approach is, we believe, consistent with A3ES’ commitment to the principle that the higher education institutions are themselves responsible for assuring the quality of their own academic programmes, a stance we support strongly. This implies, however, that institutions have certain processes to assure academic quality already in place. Hence, the major task is one of quality enhancement, to support institutions in strengthening and making existing processes for assuring the academic quality of study programmes more rigorous and more effective. The Scientific Council notes that over 48% of Portuguese institutions report having no internal quality assurance system. However, over 70% say they have mechanisms for assessing teaching and learning, monitoring teaching, assessing study programmes, assessing teachers, and student surveys (Fonseca, 2011). This suggests some disagreement or at least a degree of uncertainty in Portugal as to what the term “internal quality assurance system” means. To avoid creating an overweening “quality bureaucracy” and a no less undesirable “culture of compliance,” we would suggest A3ES consider concentrating on a review of processes already common to, and well understood by, all or almost all of its institutions, when designing its academic audit procedure.

A useful example of an audit process focused on assuring academic standards in study programmes is the system of quality audit developed by the Quality Assurance Council (QAC) of Hong Kong.⁷ Since the main objective of the Hong Kong audits is to ensure the quality of student learning, they focus on several processes higher

⁷ See *Audit Manual*, Hong Kong Quality Assurance Council:
<http://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/doc/qac/publication/auditmanual.pdf>

education establishments already have in place. Amongst them: processes of programme development and approval; programme monitoring and review; curriculum design; programme delivery, including resources, teaching mode, and student learning; assessment; teaching quality and staff development. Auditors evaluate these processes at the institutional level. They then confirm the degree of effectiveness by assessing influence and impact on the quality of teaching and student learning in a sample of study programmes within each institution.

Some minor points bearing on the administration of, and activities within, A3ES

In the course of our discussions, the Scientific Council learned that some institutions misunderstood how the appeals process worked. While we are well aware of the close attention A3ES is paying to this issue, we would strongly recommend that the legal framework of the appeals process be clarified or revised, if only to rule out the possibility that higher education institutions perceive it as an opportunity to secure rapid re-accreditation.

Follow-up of evaluations already carried out has been a challenge to many quality assurance agencies in Europe. Since A3ES is currently considering the introduction of an audit approach a major question follows. It is this: how is the agency to follow up such audits? So long as the audits have not been activated, this issue is not of pressing immediacy. Even so, we think it wise to begin weighing up ways and means by which the impacts an audit may have on higher education may be optimised.

Despite its currently limited capacity for disseminating, diffusing and bringing its activities to the attention of the public, A3ES ought not to underestimate the degree of interest the public might have in its work. Both the research the agency carries out, and the results its activities achieve are key to its public standing. They are also of great promise in raising public awareness and interest in the nation's system of higher education to a higher level.

The Scientific Council was informed that A3ES will start to monitor how higher education institutions are fulfilling their performance contracts. This activity has the welcome potential of providing the Agency with a more stable financial base. It is commendable on that account. However, the Council is concerned lest monitoring activity such as this give rise to tensions as to the exact role the Agency plays in the Portuguese higher education system. The Council is of the view that extreme care to maintain the Agency's independence—vis-à-vis both the Ministry and higher education institutions—is a matter requiring constant vigilance as the prime condition of its role as “honest broker”.

These are our collective views and conclusions. We submit them to you for your earnest consideration. In doing so, we wish once again to express our heartiest appreciation for the spirit of openness, commitment and firm resolution for the future in which the Secretary General of A3ES and his colleagues engaged in discussion with us.

We remain

Yours truly

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