Trans-national Accountability Initiatives: The Case of the EUA Audits

Alberto Amaral and Maria João Rosa

The European Commission has published a report on progress in quality assurance in higher education acknowledging the importance of the Bologna process, including quality assurance and welcoming the establishment of the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies. The report proposes a stronger European dimension in quality assurance, which would include further development of the ESG, criticises that the ESG still offers margin for interpretation in the context of different countries, disciplines and institutions and suggests more strict rules for ENQA and EQAR membership would be needed.

There are recent initiatives such as the development of quality enhancement systems, based on the institution’s fundamental responsibility for ensuring the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards. These initiatives are trying to rebuild trust in institutions. Unfortunately, developments in the US and EU point apparently to the victory of accreditation and accountability over trust in universities. Recent European developments promoting classifications and rankings of universities with the active complacency of European Ministers of Education, may well endanger the technical efficiency of different schemes to renew trust in institutions. At the same time, transnational organisations such as the European Commission and the OECD are developing initiatives that will grant them a position of power in the accountability market.

In this context, the traditional IEP was implemented as a service to EUA member universities, based on mutual trust and was very user-friendly. The IEP has been useful for institutional governance as it helped the central administration to analyse the major problems and offered recommendations to solve them, using experiences drawn from other European universities. However, their major impact was over the central administration (namely the rector and his team), in general being rather inefficient in penetrating to the lower levels of institutions, for example, departments or academics.

The main objectives were on quality improvement, helping institutions and their central administration to deal with external changing conditions and new European trends. Apparently the IEP has decided to adapt its grounding philosophy and its operational mechanisms to comply with the rules imposed by the ESG. Therefore, it is possible that the IEP will damage its most important characteristics and grounding philosophy ‘after its mutation imposed by the Bologna process, the ESG, the Register, and—horribile dictu, perhaps—the victory of accreditation and accountability?’