THE PORTUGUESE CASE: CAN INSTITUTIONS MOVE TO QUALITY ENHANCEMENT?

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Abstract

Recent literature shows a decline of trust in public institutions, including higher education institutions, as well as in professionals (Amaral et al., 2009). The emergence of ‘New Public Management’ (NPM) and the attacks on the efficiency of public services have contributed to this loss of trust in institutions (Trow, 1996) and demands for more accountability. Governments are increasingly using market-like mechanisms as instruments of public regulation (Dill et al., 2004). A comparison of state approval versus accreditation schemes in the years 1998 and 2003 reveals an overwhelming movement from state approval towards accreditation (Schwarz and Westerheijden, 2004). At European level, the communiqué from the Leuven Ministerial Conference (2009) suggests that both the ministers and the Commission are inclined to develop rankings and classification tools that will be even further removed from the academic core activities of research and teaching, and reveal lack of trust in institutions. These developments reflect increasing lack of trust in higher education institutions’ capacity to ensure adequate standards of quality. Simultaneously, some authors argue that quality no longer bears a relation to the core activities of universities, namely knowledge creation and student learning (Harvey and Newton, 2006). Against this background, the quality enhancement (QE) approach being developed in several countries (Filippakou and Tapper, 2008) may be seen as an attempt by universities to regain trust by restating that quality is their major responsibility. In this chapter, recent developments of the Portuguese quality assessment system are analysed to understand how they relate to the quality enhancement movement.