Transnational accountability initiatives. The case of the EUA-audits

Alberto Amaral and Maria João Rosa

The European Commission has published a 2009 report on progress in quality assurance in higher education acknowledging the importance of the Bologna process and proposing a stronger European dimension in quality assurance, which would include a “multi-dimensional customized university ranking”. The report criticizes the fact that the ESG still offers a certain margin for interpretation and suggests that more strict rules for ENQA and EQAR membership would be needed to see generate the necessary level of mutual trust and to create transparency and credibility within the EHEA as a whole.

There are recent initiatives such as those linked to the development of “quality enhancement systems” which are based on the institution’s fundamental responsibility for ensuring the quality of its programs and the academic standards of its awards. In quality enhancement systems external scrutiny assumes the characteristics of an audit. At the same time, transnational organizations such as the European Commission and the OECD are developing initiatives that will grant them a position of power in the accountability market.

The traditional IEP program was implemented as a service to EUA member universities, based on mutual trust and very user friendly. There was a price to pay for this: the participation of universities was totally voluntary and IEP/EUA did not have any means to force follow-up activities or even the public disclosure of the final evaluation reports. The IEP was useful in terms of institutional governance and its 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, e.g. departments or academics. The main emphasis of IEP was not accountability to public authorities or society. Its 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. It is quite 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?” (Kholer)