Understanding the impacts of quality assessment: an exploratory use of cultural theory

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ABSTRACT

Cultural theory is tentatively used to understand how far quality assessment affects institutions by influencing the group and grid dimensions. This paper argues that the self-assessment phase of the Portuguese system, in use until recently, promoted the egalitarian (logic of mistrusting power and expertise) and the individualist (logic of freedom and autonomy) ways of life as its structure was based on academic cooperation and closed to society. However, the external assessment phase emphasised the individualist and hierarchical ways of life, the latter promoting the logic of authority and expertise. This analysis presents the dynamics of quality assessment as a step-by-step process rather than a broad-spectrum development. This attempt to apply the grid/group cultural theory to the opinions expressed on the establishment of quality assessment systems of Portuguese universities is promising. Moreover, if it is accepted that pressures from outside will enforce the grid dimension, to avoid the fatalist way of life the group dimension should be reinforced, by adopting policies and strategies to increase the group membership. These policies might be linked either to social capital or to collegiality.

Keywords: quality assessment; cultural theory; higher education; Portuguese universities; grid-group; sociality; social incorporation