

# Seventh Report of the Scientific Council to A3ES

Based on the Council's meeting on 12 June 2017

## I Introduction and Aim of the Report

The Scientific Council of A3ES was created in 2009 in response to the wish of the Portuguese Legislature to emphasise the Agency's internationalisation and to spur A3ES's continual improvement of its procedures. The Council visits the Agency annually to debate A3ES's progress; the conclusions and suggestions of which discussion constitute the Council's annual report. Due to several reasons within A3ES, the 2016 meeting of the Scientific Council was postponed until June 2017. For instance, the memberships of the Board of Trustees as well as of the Executive Board of A3ES were changed in 2016.

The Agency's *Activity Report 2016* provided the main input to our Council's meeting, together with a paper on a 2003 pilot medical accreditation project as well as the outline for the A3ES institutional assessment process currently being implemented. Discussions with the Agency's president, prof. Alberto Amaral, and executive member of the management board, prof. João Duarte Silva completed the Council's picture.

## 2 Achievements and Acknowledgements

A3ES has almost completed its first round of programme evaluations for accreditation; this constitutes an extraordinary amount of work, which has led to a sizeable reduction of the offer of study programmes in the country. A3ES staff appear to believe the overall process has been successful in part because many institutions voluntarily closed programmes rather than submit them for accreditation review. Also, the yearly number of requests for new program accreditations has diminished since the initiation of the process, which suggests development of more rigorous norms for program development and review at the institutional level, and also suggests the number of necessary future program accreditations and reaccreditations for A3ES may diminish somewhat from previous years. The Council finds the transition towards institutional-level accreditation promising as a signal of increasing trust in the maturity of institutional quality assurance.

The A3ES 2016 Report stressed the value of its efforts, in association with Cipes, to conduct studies and provide conferences for its constituents on academic quality assurance policies and related issues. As noted in previous reports of the Scientific Council, A3ES' strengths in research and analysis are distinctive among EU and other national quality assurance agencies and provide a comparative advantage for Portugal's system of higher education.

The internal quality assurance of A3ES was noted positively in the Council meeting.

## 2.1 Follow-up of previous Scientific Council reports

In its 2015 report, the Scientific Council made several recommendations, of which we highlight two here. First, some suggestions were given for increasing the public functioning of A3ES's reports (as had been stressed in the external review of A3ES). Our Council notes with pleasure that since then, A3ES published more than 25 short, factual brochures setting out sectoral analyses of major area of knowledge, e.g. *Sociology and other studies, Management and administration*, or different types of engineering. The aim and target group of this series of thematic studies are, however, not very clear. The brochures do not seem oriented towards informing prospective students about the diverse programmes' strengths and weaknesses, nor about programmes' pros and cons in the eyes of current students.

Second, in the 2105 report our Council turned its attention to accreditation of the emerging academic programmes in non-conventional Medicine. The A3ES 2016 Activity Report includes the results of this process among all other prior accreditations of new study programmes. A3ES apparently succeeded in including these programmes in its normal course of evaluation, although having so many completely new programmes with little previous foundation in the higher education system may account for the growth of negative accreditation decisions of A3ES in 2016.

## 3 Current Challenges

### 3.1 Institution-level accreditation

Since several years, A3ES is preparing to define its next round of accreditation. As the higher education law prescribed, in the second round the focus should be on institutional accreditation, including an assessment of institutional internal quality assurance, which up to this point had been reviewed only on a voluntary basis.

Within A3ES there seems to be some ambivalence over the effectiveness of the institutional-level assessment and mandatory program accreditations are sometimes perceived as more forceful to achieve real quality enhancement. Research on required external subject-level assessments and accreditations in the Nordic countries and Germany indeed suggests they have encouraged greater faculty attention to improving program instruction in academic programs (Dill and Beerkens 2010). But over time programme reviews have proven expensive, wearying to program faculty, and appear to result in diminishing returns and decreasing faculty support (Dill and Beerkens 2010; Ganseur and Pistor, in press; Westerheijden 1990). Furthermore, recent comparative research on the academic profession indicates an emphasis on external efforts at quality assessment is often associated at the institutional level with an increase in hierarchical management and the diminishment of collegial efforts and actions traditionally employed to ensure academic standards (Teichler, Arimoto, and Cummings, 2013). In the Changing Academic Profession global survey, for

example, Portugal is among the three countries whose academics reported they were less influential (Dias, et al, 2013). With regard to academic quality only 28% of Portugal's university faculty responding to the CAP survey agreed their institution had a supportive attitude towards teaching and 44% considered the teaching support staff at their institution as poor or very poor.

Recent studies (Paradeise and Thoenig, 2013, 2014) of leading universities in the EU and the US have clarified the internal processes by which contemporary universities attain and assure standards of academic excellence. Academic quality was primarily sustained through the social interactions that occur within and between academic subunits and among academic staff at the host university. These collegial processes play a major role in building shared identities, developing valuable common knowledge in research and instruction among academic staff members, as well as generating and communicating essential academic norms and values through socialization and internal regulation. In sum, the evaluation and influence of respected faculty peers appears to be a more powerful incentive for real academic improvements in academic quality than are government edicts, market forces, or administrative policies. All of which suggests that external efforts to improve teaching and student learning in higher education need to be more focused on enhancing and strengthening institutionally-based efforts at academic quality assurance. This reality is increasingly reflected in current international and European policies (Hopbach, 2014). Consistent with the traditional values of academic research, the most effective means for assuring and continually improving instruction and student learning is systematic, evidence-based analysis and continual review by academic peers.

Among external quality evaluations, the Scottish Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR)<sup>1</sup> might provide a good practice example to focus on effectiveness for improving academic quality. It addresses the issue of imbalances in the way in which institutions experience quality assurance by emphasising ways of enabling improvements in practice as well as checking that systems are in place.

The *Auditing Internal Quality Assurance Systems – Guidelines For Self-Assessment* which were submitted to us appear to address relevant internal quality assurance issues, primarily at the university level. However, the key issue for evaluating institutional internal academic quality assurance processes is whether there is evidence of these processes' ability to motivate and support collective action by the faculty responsible for each academic program in assuring and improving academic standards in instruction, student learning, grading and marking, as well as in the assessment of student learning outcomes. It is noteworthy that, just like the UK's institutional quality audit does, the German process of 'system

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/enhancement-led-institutional-review>.

accreditation' focuses primarily on the institutional methods for assuring the quality of each academic program. Next to some earlier studies (e.g., Grendel & Rosenbusch, 2010), the thorough case study (Ganseur and Pistor, in press) describing the University of Duisburg-Essen's development of its internal quality assurance system in preparation for this accreditation review provides valuable insights into the types of issues and evidence that will be needed to successfully accredit such internal processes. In addition, the external academic audits implemented in Hong Kong and the US (Massy, Graham, and Short, 2007; Massy, 2010) provide useful guidelines for the design of such an evaluation process. Both examples suggest such reviews need to attend not only to institutional policies, but by direct investigation of a sample of academic programs, also need to seek evidence of the impacts and influence the institutional quality assurance processes have had on faculty behaviour with regard assuring and improving program level instruction, student learning, academic marking/grading, and student assessment. To be successful such external evaluations will also require reviewers who possess relevant academic knowledge, experience, and appropriate training to permit them to effectively assess the validity and reliability of the processes and measures they are examining.

Many institutions in Europe have adopted or been required to adopt student satisfaction surveys as a primary means of evaluating academic instruction. Recent research, e.g. in the US and France, on standardized student surveys (Stark and Freishtat, 2014; Boring, Ottoboni and Stark, 2016) suggests that the results of these surveys are biased by discriminatory evaluations of women and minorities, positively associated with the award of inflated student grades, and not related to direct evidence of student learning. Student comments on their learning experiences in a course in which they are enrolled can be of genuine value in improving university instruction. But student observations will be more useful if collected by course instructors with relevant qualitative methods and tools (see for example the problems experienced with mandated student satisfaction surveys at the University of Duisburg-Essen, and the new types of student evaluations developed by that University in Ganseur and Pistor, in press). To better monitor and improve university instruction, direct assessments of teaching behaviour appear to be more effective, such as classroom observations by academic peers as well as systematic university appraisals of instructor teaching materials (Stark and Freishtat, 2014). However, these types of evaluations are much less commonly employed globally than student satisfaction surveys (Cummings, 2009). This example also lends support for the assertion above regarding the need for external reviewers of internal quality assurance processes to possess the scientific knowledge and experience enabling them to evaluate the validity and reliability of institutional quality assurance systems and practices. In sum, when designed well, student satisfaction surveys can be helpful for drawing attention to problems with courses, for inspiring critical reflection, and offering basic feedback to the instructor, but they are not a very valid measurement of quality of teaching and if used as such, may have perverse effects.

In addition to this point about student satisfaction surveys and the evaluation of instruction, similar concerns can be raised about the need to improve institutional policies and practices regarding grading and marking, assessment of learning outcomes, institutional support for learning and instruction, and academically related institutional resource allocation policies, (see for example the experiences of the University of Duisberg-Essen, Ganseuer and Pistor, in press). There is a significant debate in the USA among national quality assurance and accrediting agencies as to whether and to what extent they should be engaged in institutional and faculty development (cf. National Academy of Sciences, 2017). But as European and Portuguese policies continue to emphasize deregulation and corporatization in higher education, academic institutions will necessarily need to develop new evidence-based strategic processes for managing their own academic affairs as well as for assuring and continually improving academic instruction, student learning, and research. As these changes evolve, A3ES could play a vital role by offering publications, including best institutional practice identified in their accreditation reviews, as well as conferences focused on institutional academic needs and concerns.

### 3.2 Accreditation of medical education

The other main issue confronting A3ES presently is accreditation of medical studies. Our Council endorses the Agency's intention to take not only the academic side of medical teaching into account, but also the clinical teaching in the so-called teaching hospitals.

We were provided with a report from a pilot study undertaken in Portugal for the accreditation of clinical teaching facilities in medical education from 2003–2004. Given contemporary demands for increased medical education in many countries, European regulation in the area, the high risks associated with errors in the medical profession, as well as the high costs associated with such programmes, the need to assure effective accreditation in this field is understandable. A3ES may therefore find useful the recent report by the US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2016) on Accreditation in the Health Professions, which attempted to address global issues in this field. Given the complexities involved with accrediting medical education, we would support A3ES's involvement if not direct responsibility for such an effort. The outlined pilot project appeared to provide a well-designed process for this type of accreditation as well as a potentially useful model for the ongoing accreditation of medical education by A3ES.

## 4 Recommendations

The published *Guidelines for an Institutional Accreditation Self-Report* shared with our Council appear generally sound. There was some discussion of utilizing data and relevant assessments from the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT) as part of this institutional accrediting process. There have been criticisms of, and some reported negative impacts from, the heavy reliance in EU countries on publications and research citations to

assess and financially support academic research (see, for example, Feller, 2009). Among the most respected, valid, and reliable information on the scientific impact of research by subject field for universities are the independent rankings produced by the Centre for Science and Technology Studies at Leiden University (<http://www.leidenranking.com/>). This type of information might also be considered by A3ES as a supplemental indicator of research quality for Portuguese university accreditations.

To reduce the burden of accreditation once the turn to institution-level approaches will have been made, A3ES aims to apply a ‘lighter touch’ procedure, evaluating only a sample instead of programme accreditations for all study programmes in a higher education institution wherever possible. The indications to decide in which higher education institutions this sampling possibility exists, include the institution’s previous accreditation record and a scrutiny of input factors such as staff numbers and qualifications, as well as research productivity. Our Council suggests that the maturity of the institution’s internal quality assurance arrangements (‘capability maturity’ scales, e.g. Massy, 2010) might be given a more prominent role in this decision.

From the A3ES 2016 Activity Report, our Council learned that evaluators, including student-members of external evaluation panels, are given one-day trainings (sections 7 and 8). While agreeing that the legal framework, the conduct and procedures to be adopted, and the functioning of the electronic platform are important preconditions for external evaluators, we would like to see in those trainings more emphasis on the practical, professional conduct of evaluators during the process, especially during site visits (e.g. interview techniques).

As noted in our 2015 Council Report, and as reflected in the activities and publications listed in the A3ES Activity Plan for 2016, many of the studies, publications, and conferences focus on national and international policy issues, which address different concerns and issues of quality assurance from those being addressed by Portugal’s higher education institutions. As far as our Council can see, and as we already hinted above (page 5), future studies and conferences by A3ES might fruitfully support higher education institutions in addressing their challenges, such as turning institutional accreditation reports and recommendations into educational quality enhancement.

Further to the remarks we made about the thematic study brochures (page 2) our Council would draw A3ES’s attention to extending the Agency’s communication strategy both in print and on its website to stimulate public engagement rather than one-way information provision.

## 5 Scientific Council Developments

In the past year, the composition of the Scientific Council has changed. Prof. Dr. Guy Neave stepped down after having chaired the meetings since the inception of the Scientific Council.

The year before, Dr. Mary Henkel, another Council member since its beginning, also had retired. The Council owes much to their insights and contributions.

At the 2017 meeting, the Council welcomed two new members, Dr. Maarja Beerkens (assistant professor at the Institute of Public Administration at Leiden University, the Netherlands) and Professor Murray Saunders (co-director of the Centre for Higher Education Research and Evaluation and Professor of Evaluation in Education and Work, Lancaster University, United Kingdom).

### The Scientific Council

Dr. Maarja Beerkens

Prof.Dr. Murray Saunders

Prof.em. Dr. David Dill

Dr. Bjørn Stensaker (by correspondence)

Prof. Dr. Roberto Moscati

Dr. Don F. Westerheijden

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