

The 2018 report from the Scientific Council to A3ES

1. Introduction

The 2018 annual meeting of the Scientific Council (SC) addressed the upcoming evaluation of the Agency by ENQA, and discussions centered on key issues addressed in the A3ES self-evaluation report, which is the point of departure for the upcoming evaluation. The long-term development of the Agency and the future strategic options of the Agency with respect to its mission and framework conditions were also our focal areas of discussion.

Although it is not the role of the SC to validate the self-evaluation report, we recognized critical issues that we had considered in the past, and valued the self-evaluation report as an important document summarizing well the historical development of external quality assurance in Portugal, as well as the functions and accomplishments of the Agency. As such, the meeting created an opportunity to address the role of the Agency in relation to more general developments in the Portuguese higher education sector.

As the self-evaluation report demonstrates, the Agency has played a very important role in safeguarding the quality of Portuguese higher education in an era of expansion and rapid development. However, as the higher education sector enters a phase of consolidation and as the first round of program evaluations is completed, the SC suggests this might represent a good opportunity for the Agency to stimulate further quality improvements of the sector. While this role indeed can be accomplished within the current regulatory framework, the SC suggests the timing might be right for the Agency to enter into constructive discussions with national legislators on future more expansive possibilities. Hence, our report is organized in two sections; the first addressing the possibilities of adjusting the national framework conditions for assuring and promoting quality in Portuguese higher education; the second addressing possible actions the Agency might consider within the frame offered by the current regulatory conditions.

2. The national context for quality assurance and quality improvement

The SC would like to underline the many existing strengths regarding the current regulatory framework for external quality assurance in Portugal. The way A3ES has been set up with specific regard to its autonomy and financial independence is unique in a European perspective. The manner in which the Agency has managed this autonomy, since its establishment, is impressive. The SC would also like to praise the relative stability in the regulatory framework, which offered the Agency the possibility for long-term planning and for a careful and sensible development of quality assurance formats and instruments. Hence, the different evaluation forms in operation by the Agency can be said to be appropriately adjusted to Portugal's diverse higher education sector.

At the same time, the SC would argue that the current legislative framework might limit the possibilities of the Agency to further refine the evaluative tools at their disposal. An example would be the possibilities of shifting the balance of its activities to include audits of internal quality assurance systems. As the policy statement by the Bologna Ministers as well as the policy of A3ES

stress, the institutions possess primary responsibility for educational quality, and a number of countries (such as Germany and the UK) have shifted their external Quality Assurance reviews to include an emphasis on institutional-enhancement. Currently the audits conducted are voluntary and while the SC recognizes the increasing interest of institutions to take part in this exercise, it can be argued if the higher education law made this type of evaluation mandatory, it could speed up development of internal quality assurance of educational provision in all higher education institutions. While the SC is aware that such an adjustment is fully in the hands of national authorities, we would encourage the Agency to invite relevant national authorities to begin discussions about the current regulatory design, and options for its further development.

The SC is of the opinion that the revision of the *European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) in 2015 adds weight to the argument for the Agency to invite national authorities into constructive discussions about the current regulatory design. That transformative change towards student-centered teaching and learning needs support through a broad set of instruments and actions is being recognized worldwide. For instance, in many European countries legislative changes are being made with respect to hiring and promotion of academic staff, giving more attention and priority to formal teaching qualifications and teaching excellence. Hence, the SC might encourage the Agency to identify current legislative options for realizing the revised ESG in Portugal – also in areas relating to education in universities and polytechnics beyond the formal quality assurance system.

Related to this, we suggest that the Agency, with its expertise and with its connections to stakeholders, might fruitfully play an active role in identifying potential partners – public and/or private – that could provide financial support to institutions that want to initiate innovative projects and actions to develop and diffuse student-centered teaching. Transforming existing teaching and learning trajectories within higher education institutions into a different mode is a difficult process – as exemplified in many different European countries – and the SC would argue that pushing an enhancement agenda requires a wide range of instruments, among which economic resources and funds should not be underestimated. In a number of European countries, but apparently not in Portugal, national funding is available to support and promote institutional enhancement initiatives for innovative teaching and learning.

3. Possible quality enhancement initiatives within the current regulatory framework

In previous reports to A3ES, the SC has commended the Agency for its careful design of the evaluations undertaken, which amongst other things, have resulted in a very cost-effective quality control function, not least due to the fact that some institutions have decided to shut down low-quality offerings prior to submitting them to the Agency's evaluation. To the extent that the first round of program accreditation has achieved its aim to protect Portuguese students against low-quality provision, the SC heartily supports the current transition into a more light-touch audit system for those institutions demonstrating responsibility through a good track record in upholding quality. The transition toward a light-touch audit approach is also aligned to and signals a stronger role for the institutions and for supporting enhancement initiatives taken by the institutions in the years to come. To stimulate the development in this direction further, the SC offers some suggestions for the Agency to consider in the next years.

Stimulating institutions to strive for the highest quality

Many current external evaluation schemes – be they accreditations or audits – struggle to encourage institutions to raise their ambition above the threshold level. The main attraction of the light-touch approach consists in the reduced organizational burden it implies for the institutions compared with accreditation of each study program. Nevertheless, the light-touch approach may not encourage institutions to go beyond maintenance of current quality levels with respect to their educational provision. However, now that Portuguese higher education sector may have entered a period of consolidation, the opportunity arises to enable institutions to compete as much on quality accomplishments as on more traditional aspects (recruitment and research). The voluntary certification approach that is in use now may provide an effective basis for developing a pioneering quality mark for institutions that truly excel in their approach to quality. The SC would like to challenge the Agency to identify ways in which the audit exercise could provide institutions with incentives to pursue innovative and ground-breaking quality initiatives, giving them public recognition for their achievements but also for actions in this area. For institutions, such recognition could have added value in situations where there is increasing competition for students, and where institutions' distinctive brands may acquire additional significance. If pursuing this option, care should be taken allowing for different enhancement paths where institutional identities and system diversity is strengthened.

Promoting positive quality culture through ethical standards and practices

The SC noted with interest the code of ethics adopted by A3ES as a way to regulate and govern the conduct and actions of its staff and review panel members. Emphasizing the ethical dimensions could be a constructive way forward also for institutions to promote a positive quality culture in their operations. Since a quality culture consists of shared values, norms and practices besides the structures and processes of internal quality management, a code of ethics might provide institutions with means to translate such values and norms into such sustainable practices for all teaching staff. As the idea behind developing a quality culture is to support a collegial approach to educational improvement, the Agency might stimulate institutions in this area by looking into possibilities for how codes of ethical conduct might be integrated into the audit approach¹. Throughout Europe the foundations of a strong collegial approach to education are under pressure, and cooperation between institutions and the Agency might provide a strong support to maintain collective, ethical behavior in education.

¹ One example of a university-based approach to a statement of professional responsibilities for all instructional faculty is the *Principles of Teaching and Learning* developed by the Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence and Educational Innovation (2017) at Carnegie-Mellon University (CMU) in the US. These principles are particularly noteworthy, because they were derived from the respected research on effective university course design by the CMU Open Learning Institute.

Stimulating student-centered approaches to education

As noted earlier, the 2015 version of the ESG strengthened the emphasis on student-centered education for institutions to enhance quality of students' learning. In the current guidelines underlying the accreditations and audits by the Agency, A3ES mirrored this emphasis. Yet the SC is of the opinion that more must and can be done in the years to come to anchor student-centered education in institutional quality assurance. Of course, the effort to stimulate student-centered education should not lead to imposing certain practices and approaches on institutions, thus unduly limiting institutional autonomy and more situated developments regarding how to develop strategies and initiatives in this area. A relevant area concerning student-centeredness in internal quality assurance is renewal and innovation with respect to how student evaluations of teaching are conducted. In many institutions throughout Europe, a standardized satisfaction survey approach has been adopted, which often only covers input dimensions (teaching delivery) leading to low diagnostic capacity, while important process dimensions (student engagement) and output dimensions (student learning) are neglected.² Other examples include how institutions work to adapt student examination and tests to reflect intended learning outcomes, or how institutions work to increase formative feedback to students.

In its self-evaluation report, the Agency notes that the adoption of the consideration of 'learning outcomes' as a tool for quality improvement is not yet fully integrated in the higher education culture in Portugal. The SC realizes that investing effort into such developments would be made easier for teaching staff if institutions and national frameworks gave more priority to educational development and teaching performance next to research performance in appointment, salary, and promotion decisions—this too is an area for long-term development to keep Portuguese higher education in touch with developments elsewhere in Europe. The SC is convinced that the Agency, and the many qualified experts which are brought into the work conducted, could play a prominent role in advocating student-centered approaches to learning in Portuguese higher education. Given the research and analytical capacity of A3ES, one could imagine that the Agency also may initiate research and development projects in this area.

Fostering student engagement in internal and external quality assurance

While quality assurance intends to safeguard the quality of education for the benefit of students, significant room remains for improvement of the engagement of students and of the willingness of students to take part in quality assurance processes both internally in the institutions and externally as part of the work conducted by A3ES. In the self-evaluation report, the Agency shows its awareness of the problem, and it has taken some measures to assure sufficient student involvement in external evaluations. Prolonging the period during which students may serve in the different evaluation types is a relevant and efficient initiative in this respect. Nevertheless, the SC sees opportunities for the Agency – perhaps in partnership with the institutions, and possibly with national authorities – to

² See: Boring, Ottoboni, and Stark (2016).

consider further initiatives to foster student engagement in quality assurance. In some countries, such as Scotland (*Student partnerships in quality Scotland*, SPARQS) and Denmark (*Student Accreditation Council*, STAR), initiatives have been taken to establish student networks and semi-autonomous organizations for stimulating and supporting student engagement in quality assurance. To be effective, such efforts need to be present and visible both at institutional and national levels, and they should include a range of initiatives and approaches to promote student engagement. Illustrations of activities that could be interesting to test include social and academic activities combined with training exercises, next to invitations to students to provide input into both institutional³ and Agency procedures and practices in quality assurance. The SC is aware that the Agency wants to strengthen its outreach activities – not least regionally – and an initiative to stimulate more systematic student engagement in quality assurance could be a part of this initiative.

4. Closing reflections

In closing it should be underlined that the development work suggested in this report should not distract the Agency from maintaining its focus on its core tasks. The SC acknowledges that some of the suggestions made concerning national context may be overambitious in the short term, and highly dependent on actors and processes outside the Agency's control. The suggestions are nevertheless put forward, because the SC appreciates and commends the Agency for its ability to integrate strategic and long-term perspectives in its daily work. While the current legal framework enables the independence of the Agency, the SC expects substantial benefits from a dialogue between national authorities and A3ES about the many interdependencies that exist when further developing the quality of higher education in Portugal.

References:

- Boring, A., Ottoboni, K., and Stark, P. B. (2016) Teaching evaluations (mostly) do not measure teaching effectiveness, *Science Open* DOI: [10.14293/s2199-1006.1.sor-edu.aetbzc.v1](https://doi.org/10.14293/s2199-1006.1.sor-edu.aetbzc.v1), accessed 21 December 2018.
- Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence and Educational Innovation (2017) *Principles of Teaching and Learning*, <https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/principles/>, accessed 21 December 2018.
- Ganseuer, C. and Pistor, P. (2016) *From Tools to a System: The Effects of Internal Quality Assurance at the University of Duisburg-Essen*, UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning, <http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/internal-quality-assurance-eight-universities-share-their-experiences-4002>, accessed 21 December 2018.

³ See for example the means of student engagement for improving instruction developed at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany (Ganseuer and Pistor, 2016).