

Accepted version of:

ROSA MJ, SARRICO CS AND AMARAL A (2012). Academics' Perceptions on the Purposes of Quality Assessment. *Quality in Higher Education* 18:3, 349–366.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2012.733550>

Academics' Perceptions on the Purposes of Quality Assessment

Maria J. Rosa¹, Cláudia S. Sarrico² and Alberto Amaral³

¹DEGEL, Universidade de Aveiro and CIPES

²ISEG, Universidade Técnica de Lisboa and CIPES

³A3ES – Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education and CIPES

CIPES – Centro de Investigação de Políticas do Ensino Superior

Rua 1º de Dezembro, 399

4450-227 Matosinhos - Portugal

Email: m.joao@ua.pt

Abstract

The accountability *versus* improvement debate is an old one. Although being traditionally considered dichotomous purposes of higher education quality assessment, some authors defend the need of balancing both in quality assessment systems. This paper goes a step further and contends that not only they should be balanced but also that other purposes can be devised for assessing quality in higher education. Five different purposes are proposed: communication, motivation, control, improvement and innovation, derived both from the higher education and the organisational performance literatures. Then the answers given to a set of questions related to these five intended purposes are analysed. The answers were collected through a questionnaire designed to investigate Portuguese academics' perceptions on higher education quality assessment. Overall the analysis performed reveals a certain degree of support for all the purposes, albeit higher in the case of the improvement and communication purposes and lower for control and motivation. Since an adequate implementation of quality assessment systems needs the support of academics, this paper can inform the design of systems integrating academics' views on the subject.

Keywords: quality assessment; purposes; academic staff

Introduction

Since the emergence of quality assessment in higher education, a discussion exists around its goals and purposes. Should quality assessment systems be designed with the ultimate goal of promoting higher education institutions' and systems' continuous improvement or should they promote the accountability of institutions and systems towards government and society (Vroeijenstijn, 1995)?

Thune (1996, p. 22) stated that this improvement *versus* accountability dichotomy arose from a United Kingdom (UK) bias, based on the existence in parallel of an accountability-focused system owned by government and a quality assurance-focused system owned by universities. According to Thune, improvement relates to self-learning-based procedures that aim to promote formative evaluation rather than judgements based on past performance or summative evaluation (Thune, 1996). Improvement related procedures are based on goals and criteria either internally defined by institutions or internalised by them. On the other hand, accountability has to do with procedures based on externally defined goals and criteria aiming at 'strengthening external insight and even control, opening the door for eventual external corrective action' (Thune, 1996, p. 22).

For Stensaker (2003) the debate improvement *versus* accountability has contributed to a simplified view on how change occurs in higher education, based on a simple cause-effect model that implies that internal processes are related to improvement, while external processes are associated with accountability (Kys, 2005). However, what can be seen when analysing different quality assessment systems is in fact a balance (or a dualism or synthesis) between the two purposes, although with an emphasis on one or the other (Thune, 1996; Smeby and Stensaker, 1999; Kys, 2005), suggesting that quality assessment systems 'are highly adjusted to each country's specific governing strategy for higher education' (Smeby and Stensaker, 1999, p. 3).

In line with the work of Thune (1996), Smeby and Stensaker (1999), Stensaker (2003) and Rosa and Amaral (2007), it is also defended that this dichotomy should be nuanced and that a balance is needed to have successful quality assessment systems. Thune (1996) argued that there are obvious advantages in having an external, systematic dimension for quality assurance (the accountability purpose) for it ensures impartiality, credibility, authority, comprehensiveness, consistency and transparency. He contended, though, that the 'basis for success is the extent to which a linkage can be made to aspects characteristic of internal institution-based quality improvement, that is, trust, commitment and understanding.' (Thune, 1996, p. 31).

Furthermore, and although evaluation activities have these two traditional goals, today, more than two decades after the implementation of the first European systems, there is a multiplicity of different objectives and an increasing diversity of rationales explaining why quality and the measurement of quality have assumed an important role. Changes in the context surrounding higher education, such as massification, globalisation, the presence of the market as a tool of public policy, the expansion of private higher education providers and the increasing competition in quasi-markets multiplied the uses of evaluation and of its results (Sarrico *et al.*, 2010).

Following this line of reasoning, this paper contends this discussion can indeed be nuanced, not only by assuming the possibility of a balance between accountability and improvement but also through the introduction of a more comprehensive typology of possible purposes for quality assessment in higher education (Sarrico & Rosa, 2010), derived from the organisational performance literature (Johnston & Clark, 2008). The rationale behind trying to find out if other purposes are relevant for implementing quality assessment systems rests on the fact that many universities do not seem to get enough out of their efforts for quality

assessment (Harvey & Newton, 2007; Harvey & Williams, 2010). Quality assessment costs money, time and goodwill, so it is imperative to understand what higher education gets out of it (Sarrico & Rosa, 2010). In fact, and according to Westerheijden *et al.* (2007), academics seem to have a negative perception of quality assessment, which only dissipates when they feel education is valued and rewarded. It is then argued that a better understanding of purposes and of the perceptions academics have on them, can contribute to design better quality assessment systems, meaning systems that will have more favourable and positive effects on the quality of higher education institutions and systems. Furthermore it can help on the design of quality assessment systems more supported by academics, which according to Laughton (2003) will contribute to its more effective implementation. Newton (2000) also contended that it is essential to take into account the expectations and values of the staff for successful quality arrangements, particularly if one assumes that lasting quality improvement is based on the energies and initiatives of staff.

This paper presents Portuguese academics' perceptions on different purposes for a quality assessment system. The Portuguese quality assessment system has recently experienced major transformations following a review and recommendations by ENQA (2006). The existent system was dismantled, under accusations of not being truly independent and not producing results and a new one was initiated in 2009 under the influence of European developments (namely, the Bologna Declaration and the compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ENQA, 2005)). The new arrangement is characterised by the establishment of a system for assessment and accreditation of study programmes and institutions under the responsibility of a new and independent body for its coordination, the Higher Education Assessment and Accreditation Agency (A3ES). The agency is also responsible for the pre-accreditation of proposals of new study programmes before they start operating. Within this new system, accreditation assumes a preponderant role as a way to assure that study programmes and institutions abide by minimum standards leading to their official recognition. The new legal framework for quality evaluation and accreditation also determines that institutions should develop a quality assurance policy for their programmes, a culture of quality and quality assurance of their activities and a strategy for their continuous improvement. It is then relevant to look at Portuguese academics' perceptions on quality assessment systems generically, to see to what extent the new Portuguese system will find acceptance. Additionally, and since Portuguese higher education institutions are now in the process of implementing internal quality assurance systems, this study can also shed some light on the purposes they should try to accomplish, given the academics' views.

Furthermore, the study will also contribute to develop a research area, which, according to the opinion of several authors (Lomas, 2007; Nasser & Fresko, 2002; Newton, 2000; Westerheijden *et al.*, 2007), is still relatively underdeveloped, that is, knowledge of academics' opinions and attitudes on quality assessment and assurance.

Purposes of quality assessment

As mentioned in the introduction, purposes to assess quality tend to be seen as dichotomous: accountability *versus* improvement (Vroeijerstijn, 1995; Westerheijden, Stensaker & Rosa, 2007) but these can be further elaborated upon. Not only can these two purposes be balanced in the same quality assessment system, it is also possible to discern other purposes for assessing quality in higher education. Harvey and Newton (2007), on the one hand, refer to the illusory tension between 'improvement' and 'accountability' (because there are other purposes of quality processes) and, on the other hand, to the fact that 'improvement and accountability are not two related dimensions of quality, rather they are distinct' and separate dimensions (Harvey and Newton, 2007, p. 232).

In fact, the literature on higher education quality assurance includes papers that discuss the goals and purposes for implementing quality assurance systems and mechanisms in higher education systems and institutions (Langfeldt *et al.*, 2010; Liu & Rosa, 2008; Westerheijden *et al.*, 2007; Laughton, 2003; Newton, 2000) that are not all about improvement or accountability. Other intentions were in fact described as being possible reasons behind the establishment of those systems, such as control, compliance, information, enhancement or transformation (Harvey & Newton, 2007). In trying to systematise all these different intentions and see the degree of support they would get from Portuguese academics, the organisational performance literature was called upon. This literature has, for a long time now, studied the purposes organisations may have for assessing quality, namely communication, motivation, control and improvement (Johnston & Clark, 2008). In this paper it is argued that to these four purposes innovation should be added, translating the ideas behind the quality enhancement movement with an emphasis on student support and staff development (Sarrico, 2010; Sarrico & Rosa, 2010). Each purpose can be understood as follows (Sarrico & Rosa, 2010):

Communication. At institutional level, assessment informs academics or a department about what the university requires of them or may be responsible for. It is therefore an important means of strategy communication and implementation. At supra-institutional level this purpose is linked to transparency and trust. It is important to communicate to the public and all stakeholders of higher education that the institution offers quality and value-for-money. At the same time by publicising the results of external evaluation the state and its agencies are conveying to universities what aspects of governmental policy are important.

Motivation. The criteria for quality assessment influence the behaviour of academics. It is important, therefore, to have a framework for quality assessment that encompasses a balanced mix of criteria, which support the strategic intentions of the university. As strategic intentions are often derived from national and supra-national public policies, the arguments for a balanced design remain at these levels, if one is to avert perverse effects from quality assessment.

Control. One of the aims of quality assessment is to provide feedback, so that measures can be taken. This requires a control loop, complete with measures, targets, means of verification, feedback mechanisms and ways to take appropriate action. This can be used to ensure consistent quality, not only within a department but also across a university or a higher education system. What often fails in control mechanisms is the action part. Having measures, targets and information systems in place is no guarantee of action. Thus, the importance of the two previous purposes (communication and motivation) for action to follow measurement.

Improvement. Quality assessment can be a powerful drive for improvement. Often, it is enough to assess, that improvements will follow. Linking assessment results with rewards may motivate academics to improve quality, assuming that individuals have control over what is being assessed. This is a big premise, which is not often present. People can be motivated but if they do not have the means to act, improvement will not follow. Information on what drives successful implementation can help to better manage the processes involved, thus the importance of the communication purpose. University managers should not confuse assessment forced by government or an external agency with what they need to assess to communicate, motivate, monitor and improve the operation of the university, in order to fulfil its mission.

Innovation. Improving the university is to take what exists and develop it further. Innovation looks beyond what is there, that is, it searches for something new. Innovation, therefore, often requires an element of risk, namely financial and, often, personal, as those responsible for change put their reputation at stake. A crucial role for university leaders is to be alert and look for new ideas but also have the will to evaluate them carefully, support some and follow them up as appropriate. The question is whether the mechanisms for quality assessment promote or hinder innovation. The quality enhancement movement, with its emphasis on student support and staff development, seem to give form to the emergent developmental character of performance management in universities (Sarrico, 2010).

From a theoretical point of view one can devise inter-linkages between the different purposes. Communication is needed to motivate. Without motivation, even if it is extrinsic, there is no action and thus no control. Without both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, improvement is probably impossible. And without systematic improvement practices, innovation will remain a rhetoric device (Sarrico & Rosa, 2010).

In higher education literature one can find evidence of these five purposes. According to Langfeldt *et al.* (2010: 391), quality assurance activities may be undertaken for a variety of purposes: '(1) ensuring that higher education institutions, their procedures or their specific study programmes fulfil required standards, (2) as basis for assigning institutional or programme accreditations, (3) for closing down substandard programmes, and (4) for informing potential students and other stakeholders about the quality of institutions and education'. One would argue that the first three purposes suggested by the authors could be included in the more general category of control, while the fourth could be placed under the communication one. Additionally, Langfeldt *et al.* (2010: 392) contended that the initiation of quality assurance is usually embedded in formal requirements, the overall aim being most likely 'some kind of improvement; to enhance the quality of the education and of the national higher education system as such', which goes in line with the improvement purpose suggested in this paper. Finally, the authors put forward the idea that institutional diversity and excellence within a higher education system may be affected by the characteristics of the existent quality assurance system, which may be understood under the innovation purpose.

In their analysis of the quality assessment of undergraduate education policy, issued in China in 2002, Liu & Rosa (2008) stated that this policy was designed with four main objectives: improvement to bridge a quality gap, compliance to ensure that institutions will behave as the government wants them to behave, information to promote the transparency and comparability of higher education institutions and accountability for public funding and the standards achieved. From the point of view of this paper, the four objectives of this particular policy can be placed under the more general five purposes for assessing quality: the improvement objective fits obviously with the improvement purpose, while the compliance and accountability ones can be placed under the control purpose; finally the information objective is related to the communication purpose of quality assessment.

According to Westerheijden *et al.* (2007), before quality assurance had become a new popular policy instrument in higher education, evaluation had been in use at the level of individual lecturers as a voluntary instrument for the improvement of their own teaching. It was only when external authorities began to demand quality assurance schemes that 'educational evaluation was integrated into the new schemes, which, however, served multiple, and other goals rather than the improvement of individual courses' (Westerheijden *et al.*, 2007, p. 296). The authors also claim that the rise of accreditation, much more connected to the control purpose, has led to a diminished attention to quality improvement at all levels of the higher education system.

Sarrico & Rosa (2010), in a literature review, also found evidence of the five proposed purposes in higher education quality assessment systems, despite the fact that the communication and related motivation purposes seemed to be less developed and peripheral to current quality assessment mechanisms. The authors concluded that this fact was probably not alien to the persistent complaint in the literature on how little effective quality assessment mechanisms have been in actually promoting improvement. On the other hand, the literature review revealed that control mechanisms seemed to have been exacerbated to the point of bureaucratisation, homogenisation, or even cheating and destroying, rather than nurturing, the conditions for innovation.

Finally, in studies of academics' perceptions on quality assurance, which, as previously mentioned, are not that abundant, one can also find references (both positive and negative) to the five proposed purposes: i) according to Laughton (2003) and Newton (2000) academics tend to see quality assurance as accountability led (often encapsulating both the control and communication purposes), rather than improvement led (improvement purpose); ii) Lomas (2007) and Watty (2006) claimed that academics see quality as mainly linked to the ideas of fitness for purpose and conformity with external standards (control purpose), rather than with enhancement and transformation (innovation purpose); iii) Papadimitriou *et al.* (2008) also noticed that for academics quality assurance is about consistency and compliance with external given standards (control purpose) and much less about enabling institutions and academics to go beyond those standards (innovation purpose); iv) for Laughton (2003), academics see quality assessment procedures as incapable of grasping the essence of the educational process (motivation purpose); v) for Harvey (2009), academics are sceptical about quality assessment, because, essentially, it does not engage with the 'heart of the academic endeavour' (motivation); vi) and finally, in a recent study conducted in The Netherlands, to assess academics' perceptions on internal quality management, Kleijnen *et al.* (2011, p. 149) stated that 'faculty were positive about the effects of quality management in terms of improvement and negative about its effects in terms of control'. It seems, then, that the literature on higher education points to a situation where academics tend to support more purposes linked to improvement and innovation rather than with control and that they would like to see the motivation purpose reinforcing the core functions of higher education, namely teaching and academic staff issues.

Data and methods

Being aware that academics' support of quality assessment processes (namely their core values, assumptions, purposes, goals and methods) is relevant for their implementation and legitimacy (Laughton, 2003; Newton, 2000; Kys, 2005), a research project was designed to understand the general positions assumed by the academia towards the new Portuguese quality assessment and accreditation system and the potential effects of its implementation on institutions and study cycles. Part of the empirical data supporting the project derives from an on-line questionnaire sent to all Portuguese academics, with the goal of collecting these actors' perceptions on higher education quality assessment, generically and on the Portuguese higher education quality assessment system, in particular.

The available data shows that Portugal, in 2009, had a population of 36,215 academics (GPEAR/MCTES, 2010). Overall 41% belong to public universities, 28% to public polytechnics, 19% to private universities and 12% to private polytechnics. Furthermore, 56% of Portuguese academics are male. The highest percentage is found in the age group 40–49 years old (34%), followed by the groups 30–39 (29%) and 50–59 (23%).

A census was opted for as the strategy to collect data. All Portuguese higher education institutions (more precisely their rectors and presidents) were approached and asked to distribute information on the research project, including a link to the online questionnaire,

among their academics, asking them to answer it. 1,782 academics have answered the questionnaire (which corresponds to a response rate of around 5%). The analysis of the characterisation data (excluding missing data) reveals that the respondents' sample comprises academics from the university and polytechnic sectors, both public and private, although with an overrepresentation of the public system (90%), especially public polytechnics (45%), in relation to the academics' population in Portugal. Since the sample obtained was not representative of the Portuguese academics' population one has decided to resort only to the answers of academics belonging to the public sector, conducting also a random post-stratification weighting in order to have a sample with proportions of polytechnic/university, male/female and age groups equivalent to the ones existent in the public sector Portuguese academics' population.

The sample used for the analysis presented in this paper consists then on the answers of 653 academics from public higher education institutions, which corresponds to 2.6% of all the public sector academics. Although this percentage is low, posing some limitations regarding the generalisations of results to the overall public sector academics population, the size of the sample and the detail of the data gathered provide a rich source to explore the way Portuguese academics from the public sector perceive higher education quality assessment.

Summarising, the sample comprises 385 academics from the public university subsystem (59%) and 268 from the public polytechnic subsystem (41%). Additionally, it includes both female (40%) and male (60%) academics, with different age groups (the most significant being the 40–49 (35%), followed by the 30–39 (29%) and the 50–59 (26%)), reflecting the Portuguese public sector academic population characteristics. Furthermore the academics included in the sample have different academic degrees (with the ones holding a doctorate (47%) and a master's (28%) degree being the most represented), belong to different scientific areas (although mostly from engineering and technology (30%) and social sciences (25%). In addition, 25% of respondents have been involved in quality management activities in their institutions.

One of the goals behind the questionnaire design was to investigate academics' perceptions on the intended purposes a quality assessment system may have, understood as the intentions that may lie behind the development of a quality assessment system. In the questionnaire, a set of sentences tentatively tried to operationalise such purposes, based on the results of a literature review (Veiga *et al.*, 2012; Papadimitriou *et al.*, 2008; Langfeldt *et al.*, 2010). Academics were asked to signal their degree of agreement towards each one of the sentences in a Likert-type scale (from 1 'Totally disagree' to 5 'Totally agree'). They could also choose the option 'I do not know'. Descriptive statistics have been used to investigate academics' support for the different purposes that quality assessment may have (Table 1).

Portuguese academics' perceptions of the purposes of quality assessment

As already stated, the five different purposes this paper contends higher education quality assessment may have were tentatively operationalised through a set of sentences (see the second column on Table 1 for this 'classification'). Overall academics tend to agree or totally agree with all purposes; although the level of agreement is higher when they are linked to higher education institutions' and academics' improvement (Table 1). In fact, the higher mean scores (and the higher percentages of (4) 'agree' and (5) 'totally agree') were obtained for purposes related to improvement and communication, while the lowest mean scores reflect purposes linked to control and motivation.

The analysis of Table 1 allows for immediately concluding that a significant percentage of academics tend to agree or totally agree with all the sentences (a percentage always higher than 74%) reflecting the *improvement purpose*. It seems that Portuguese academics tend to favour higher education quality assessment systems that ultimately lead to quality

improvement (translated in the improvement of teaching and learning processes, the development of their own skills and competences, or in a better link between teaching and research).

The *communication purpose* seems to be the second most supported. All aspects considered under this purpose deserve a high degree of support (all mean scores are around 4.0), which can be seen as academics agreeing with the need to develop mechanisms to make transparent both to society and institutions the quality level of the higher education system, of its institutions and study cycles.

[Table 1 approximately here]

Less supported are sentences reflecting the *control purpose*, although it has to be mentioned that those still collect some degree of agreement, since all their mean scores are higher than 3.0 (out of 5.0). ‘Provide the State with instruments to control the higher education network’ is the sentence that collects the lowest level of agreement (mean score of 3.1 with 29% of the academics totally disagreeing or disagreeing with it). Furthermore, fewer academics support the idea of quality assessment as having effects on the ‘higher education institution’s criteria for student selection or staff recruitment and promotion (both academic and non-academic)’.

The different aspects covered by the *motivation purpose* are also among the less supported by academics, with mean scores lower than those obtained for the improvement and communication purposes and more similar to the control purpose. These results raise the question of the possible limitations of a quality assurance system for influencing the behaviour of academics, unless it promotes what academics consider as higher education core functions, namely teaching and learning. In fact, the results show that academics are more in favour of motivation propositions that are compatible with traditional academic norms and values. This is the case of the sentence ‘increase academics’ involvement in teaching and learning issues’ (agreement of 74%).

The percentage of academics agreeing that quality assessment should ‘allow institutions’ management and governance bodies to define sanctioning policies for inadequate practices’ (42%) is substantially lower than the percentage of academics that agree with quality assessment allowing ‘the institutions’ management and governance bodies to define rewarding policies for good practices’ (59%). It seems that, as might be expected, the ‘carrot’ may be a good way to motivate academics but less so the ‘stick’.

Regarding the *innovation purpose* there is a significant level of agreement by academics on issues that operationalise it (mean scores are all around 4.0 and the percentage of academics that agree or totally agree are always higher than 66%). It seems that academics believe quality assurance systems should contribute to innovation, meaning going beyond what is there, searching for something new, such as ‘new academic practices, new methodologies for teaching and learning’ or new ways to ‘link teaching, research and management processes’ in higher education institutions.

Finally, the higher percentages of ‘I do not know’ answers, as well as the lower number of valid answers, appear when academics are asked about quality assessment purposes referring to other higher education actors, namely non-academic staff and students.

Implications for the design of quality assessment systems

Overall the analysis performed reveals a strong agreement with the improvement purpose in higher education. Academics strongly favour the idea of improving the quality of teaching and learning processes, supported on appropriate strategies; strategies for the development of their own skills, student support, the implementation of internal quality assurance systems and

the collective identification of institutional strengths and weaknesses. The Humboldtian ideal of linking teaching and research is also clearly valued.

Portuguese academics are also in favour of a communication purpose for quality assessment, agreeing with the adoption of policies to promote the flux of information regarding quality issues, not only within higher education institutions, in order to improve decision making but also as a way to communicate and be accountable to the external world, namely to students and the general public, so that informed decisions can be taken.

The innovation purpose of quality assessment is also well regarded by Portuguese academics. They agree that quality assessment mechanisms should promote new practice, both in teaching and research, or even contributing to the better alignment of teaching, research and management, as well as contributing to reward innovative practices within academia.

In general, the motivation purpose, of changing the behaviour of academics, as a consequence of quality assessment is supported by academics, even if not always as enthusiastically as with the improvement and communication purposes. As mentioned, the type of positive motivation purpose of rewarding good practice is better regarded by academics than, not surprisingly, the more negative reinforcement mechanism of punishing bad practice.

As for the more contentious control purpose, it is worth noting that despite the fact that it gathers some of the lowest scores, all assertions relating to control are still on the positive side of the neutral value. The somewhat lower scores associated with the control purpose are probably associated with the perception of losing some of the traditional academic autonomy to regulatory agencies, outside academia. Portuguese academics seem, as expected, to be less inclined to agree with control mechanisms relating to individuals' performance and more accepting when it comes to institutional and degree programme performance. The exception seems to be in relation to the definition of the higher education network, presumably because of recent discussions on the eventual necessity of closing or merging institutions.

There seems to be some implications of the study findings for the design of quality assessment systems. Academics seem to favour the improvement purpose of quality assessment, are sympathetic to the communication and innovation purposes, favour positive rather than negative motivation mechanisms and admit to some level of control. All five proposed purposes for quality assessment seem to be positively regarded by academics, albeit to different extents, suggesting that a quality assessment system should incorporate all of them, in a balanced way. This corroborates the literature that defends the need for a balance between different goals and purposes in the design and organisation of quality assessment systems (Thune, 1996; Smeby and Stensaker, 1999; Kis, 2005).

In fact, as argued in the beginning of this article, all purposes seem to be interrelated and have the potential to reinforce each other. However, in the design of a successful quality assessment system, one that will induce quality assurance and management at institutional level, the only level at which improvement and indeed innovation can happen, the misgivings of academics should be acknowledged. Control is acceptable but the damage to autonomy should be negotiated and the possibility of hindering innovation minimised. Positive reinforcement mechanisms seem to be preferable to negative ones and be left to institutional policy, rather than imposed from the outside.

Finally, the scores associated with assertions relating to the involvement of students and non-academic staff on academic matters does not seem to be particularly highly regarded by academics. Given the fact, that the involvement of all stakeholders seems to be a cornerstone of quality management theory, some work in this regard might need to be done in Portuguese higher education institutions. Quality assessment systems can be designed in order to induce changes at institutional level as well in this matter.

Conclusions

A number of authors (Harvey and Newton, 2007; D'Andrea, 2007; Dill, 2007) argued 'there is much evidence of a mismatch between intended effects and implemented measures at the institutional level' (Stensaker *et al.*, 2007, p. 252), which justifies the 'interest to further investigate what individual teachers experience as implemented quality assurance mechanisms, and how they perceive the changes experienced' (see also Newton, 1999; Westerheijden *et al.* 2005; Stensaker *et al.*, 2007, p. 255).

Westerheijden (2007, p. 73) raised the question of very limited penetration of policy concepts into 'the still highly autonomous 'inner life' of academe with regard to teaching and research'. Several authors (Amaral and Rosa, 2007; D'Andrea, 2007; Harvey and Newton, 2007) agreed there is an impact of quality assurance on the 'inner life' although there is still much room for improvement.

Recent trends in quality assurance seem to evolve in two opposite directions: on the one hand, there is an increasing number of national systems based on accreditation and other more intrusive forms of quality assurance (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004) and a move to ranking systems (Kaiser & Jongbloed, 2010; Van Vught, 2009); and on the other hand, there is a movement in some countries towards quality enhancement as a way to reinstate trust in institutions. While traditional quality assessment reviews use summative judgements and sanctioning mechanisms to achieve quality improvement (Stensaker *et al.* 2007), quality enhancement reviews use formative judgements, focusing on improving teaching and learning and avoiding summative judgements leading to sanctions, to achieve improvement (D'Andrea and Gosling, 2005).

Quality enhancement repatriates the responsibility for the quality of learning processes to the inner institution, with external vigilance relying on institutional audits rather than on more intrusive forms of quality assessment, such as programme level accreditation (Higher Education Academy, 2008; Filippakou and Tapper, 2011). Quality enhancement can only be successfully implemented 'in the context of a flexible, negotiated evaluative model' (Filippakou and Tapper, 2011, p. 92), that should be voluntary and 'shaped by the actual participants in the teaching and learning process' (Filippakou and Tapper, 2011, p. 94).

In this paper, five possible purposes of quality assurance systems have been discussed. The results presented in this paper show that Portuguese academics strongly agree with the improvement purpose, the communication purpose and the innovation purpose of quality assessment, which are also compatible with quality enhancement. However, they show less support for the motivation purpose and the control purpose. Linking the results of quality assessment to penalties or rewards is a contentious issue. Although some practices from the private sector are making their way into the public sector, it is a fact that, in general, public legislation and the use of national pay scales do not facilitate individual reward systems, as is the case for the private sector. Also, traditional academic values might mean more emphasis on academic recognition rather than mere financial rewards. Furthermore, the control purpose is seen as endangering academic autonomy and potentially hindering innovation.

The available literature shows the preference of academics for the characteristics of quality enhancement, which is corroborated by the results in this paper. Laughton (2003) argued that academics see positive attributes in quality assessment especially when this is directed at institutions as a whole; the opposite happens when those systems are directed at individual academics' performance. Furthermore the studies about academics' perceptions on quality assessment that have been revised clearly show their support towards systems capable of inducing improvement, especially in teaching and learning, and of grasping the essence of the core values of academic culture, such as self and collegial accountability and improvement.

Since academics do not tend to support quality assessment systems with a focus on the control purpose, and because their support is essential for their adequate implementation (Laughton, 2003; Newton, 2000), it is paramount that governments and agencies responsible for the design and implementation of quality assurance systems be careful in the way they conduct their work so they get the collaboration of academics, who are not the sole stakeholders of higher education but are a very important and perennial one. This raises an interesting question: as, although there are cases where quality enhancement seems to be making some progress, European ministers and many European countries seem to be moving in the opposite direction.

The results presented in this article are based on a quantitative survey of academics, which presents some limitations. The very assignment of assertions to different purposes for quality assessment is not totally clear-cut as, by this paper's own admission, all purposes are interrelated. Also, the reasons behind the attitudes displayed by academics are not clear from this type of analysis. Thus, this article will be followed by an analysis of a qualitative survey of academics regarding these matters, conducted within the remit of the same research project.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by a grant from the *Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia* under the framework of the project Perceptions of Higher Education Institutions and Academics to Assessment and Accreditation (PTDC/ESC/68884/2006).

The authors would like to thank Cristina Sousa Santos for her help with data.

References

- D'Andrea, V.M. & Gosling, D., 2005, *Improving Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: A Whole Institution Approach*. (Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, Buckingham).
- D'Andrea, V., 2007, 'Improving teaching and learning in higher education: Can learning theory add value to quality reviews?', in Westerheijden, D.F., Stensaker, B. & Rosa, M.J. (Eds.), *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Trends in Regulation, Translation and Transformation* (Dordrecht, Springer).
- Dill, D., 2007, 'Will market competition assure academic quality? An analysis of the UK and US experience', in Westerheijden, D.F., Stensaker, B. & Rosa, M.J. (Eds.), *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Trends in Regulation, Translation and Transformation* (Dordrecht, Springer).
- European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2005, *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (Helsinki, ENQA).
- European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2006, *Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Portugal: An Assessment of the Existing System and Recommendations for a Future System*, (Helsinki, ENQA).
- Filippakou, O. & Tapper, T., 2011, 'Quality assurance and quality enhancement in higher education: contested territories?' *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62(1/2), pp. 84–100.
- Higher Education Academy (HEA), 2008, *Quality enhancement and assurance: – a changing picture?* (Higher Education Academy, York).
- GPEARI/MCTES, 2010, *Inquérito ao Registo Biográfico de Docentes do Ensino Superior (REBIDES)*, Retrieved January 4, 2011, from www.pordata.pt.

- Harvey, L., 2009, *A critical analysis of quality culture*, Retrieved September 2010, from http://www.inqaahe.org/admin/files/assets/subsites/1/documenten/1241773373_16-harvey-a-critical-analysis-of-quality-culture.pdf.
- Harvey, L. & Newton, J., 2007, 'Transforming quality evaluation: moving on', in Westerheijden, D.F., Stensaker, B. & Rosa, M.J. (Eds.), *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Trends in Regulation, Translation and Transformation* (Dordrecht, Springer).
- Harvey, L. & Williams, J., 2010, 'Fifteen years of quality in higher education', *Quality in Higher Education*, 16(1), pp. 3–36.
- Johnston, R. & Clark, G., 2008, *Service Operations Management*, 3rd edn. (FT Prentice Hall, Harlow).
- Kaiser, F. & Jongbloed, B., 2010, 'New transparency instruments for European higher education: the U-Map and the U-Multirank projects', paper presented to the *2010 ENID Conference*, 8-11 September 2010.
- Kis, V., 2005, 'Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education: Current Practices in OECD Countries and a Literature Review on Potential Effects', Report prepared for the *OECD Thematic Review of Tertiary Education* (www.oecd.org/edu/tertiary/review).
- Kleijnen, J., Dolmans, D. Willems, J. & van Hout, H., 2011, 'Does internal quality management contribute to more control or to improvement of higher education? A survey on faculty's perceptions', *Quality Assurance in Education*, 19(2), pp. 141–55.
- Langfeldt, L., Stensaker, B., Harvey, L., Huisman, J. & Westerheijden, D., 2010, 'The role of peer review in Norwegian quality assurance: potential consequences for excellence and diversity', *Higher Education*, 59(4), pp. 391-405.
- Laughton, D., 2003, 'Why was the QAA approach to teaching quality assessment rejected by academics in UK HE?', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 28(3), pp. 309–21.
- Liu, S. & Rosa, M.J., 2008, 'Quality assessment of undergraduate education in China: a policy analysis', *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 20(3), pp. 79-96.
- Lomas, L., 2007, 'Zen, motorcycle maintenance and quality in higher education', *Quality Assurance in Education*, 15(4), pp. 402–12.
- Nasser, F. & Fresko, B., 2002, 'Faculty views of student evaluation of college teaching', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 27(2), pp. 188–98.
- Newton, J., 1999, 'An evaluation of the impact of external quality monitoring on a higher education college (1993–98)', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 24(2), pp. 215–235.
- Newton, J., 2000, 'Feeding the beast or improving quality? Academics' perceptions of quality assurance and quality monitoring', *Quality in Higher Education*, 6(2), pp. 153–62.
- Papadimitriou, A., Ursin, J., Westerheijden, D. & Valimaa, J., 2008, 'Views on excellence in Finnish and Greek universities', paper presented to the *21st CHER Conference*, Pavia, Italy, 11-13 September.
- Rosa, M.J. & Amaral, A., 2007, 'A self-assessment of higher education institutions from the perspective of the EFQM Excellence Model', in Westerheijden, D.F., Stensaker, B. & Rosa, M.J. (Eds.), *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Trends in Regulation, Translation and Transformation* (Dordrecht, Springer).
- Sarrico, C.S., 2010, 'On performance in higher education: towards performance governance', *Tertiary Education and Management*, 16(2), pp. 145–58.
- Sarrico, C.S., Rosa, M.J., Teixeira, P.N. & Cardoso, M.F., 2010, 'Assessing quality and evaluating performance in higher education: Worlds apart or complementary views?', *Minerva*, 48, pp. 35–54.

- Sarrico, C.S. & Rosa, M.J., 2010, 'Higher education quality assessment: an account of intended purposes and observed effects', paper presented to the *23rd Annual CHER Conference, Effects of Higher Education Reforms*, Oslo, Norway, 10-12 June.
- Schwarz, S. & Westerheijden, D., 2004, *Accreditation and Evaluation in the European Higher Education Area* (Kluwer Academic Press, Dordrecht).
- Smeby, J-C & Stensaker, B., 1999, 'National quality assessment systems in the Nordic countries: developing a balance between external and internal needs?', *Higher Education Policy*, 12, pp. 3-14.
- Stensaker, B., 2003, 'Trance, transparency and transformation: the impact of external quality monitoring on higher education', *Quality in Higher Education*, 9(2), pp. 151-59.
- Stensaker, B., Rosa, M.J. & Westerheijden, D., 2007, 'Conclusions', in Westerheijden, D.F., Stensaker, B. & Rosa, M.J. (Eds.), *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Trends in Regulation, Translation and Transformation* (Dordrecht, Springer).
- Thune, C., 1996, 'The alliance of accountability and improvement: the Danish experience', *Quality in Higher Education*, 2(1), pp. 21-32.
- Van Vught, F., (2009), *Mapping the Higher Education Landscape*, Dordrecht: Springer.
- Watty, K., 2006, 'Want to know about quality in higher education? Ask an academic', *Quality in Higher Education*, 12(3), pp. 291-301.
- Westerheijden, D.F., Stensaker, B. & Rosa, M.J., 2007, *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Trends in Regulation, Translation and Transformation*. (Dordrecht, Springer).
- Westerheijden, D.F., Hulpiaw, V. & Waeytens, K., 2007, 'From design and implementation to impact of quality assurance: an overview of some studies into what impacts improvement', *Tertiary Education and Management*, 13(4), pp. 295-312.
- Westerheijden, D., 2007, 'States and Europe and quality of higher education, in Westerheijden, D.F., Stensaker, B. & Rosa, M.J. (Eds.), *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Trends in Regulation, Translation and Transformation* (Dordrecht, Springer).
- Veiga, A., Rosa, M.J., Dias, D. & Amaral, A., 2012, 'Why is it difficult to grasp the impacts of the Portuguese quality assurance system?', *European Journal of Education*, accepted for publication.
- Vroeijenstijn, A.I., 1995, *Improvement and accountability: navigating between Scylla and Charybdis: guide for external quality assessment in higher education*. (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London).

Table 1 – Academics’ perceptions on different higher education quality assessment purposes (purposes are presented in descendent order of agreement by academics, higher to lower)

Higher education quality assessment should:	TP	N	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	I do not know	Mean
Allow the academic community to know and reflect on the institution’s quality so strategies to improve it can be defined	I	646	1%	3%	12%	31%	51%	1%	4.3
Allow HEI governance bodies to promote continuous quality improvement processes for teaching and learning	I	650	2%	4%	13%	32%	49%	1%	4.2
Contribute to the collective and shared identification of the institution’s strengths and weaknesses	I	651	2%	3%	12%	38%	43%	2%	4.2
Promote the creation of quality assurance internal systems	I	642	2%	3%	15%	37%	42%	2%	4.2
Improve the links between teaching and research	I	651	4%	5%	14%	33%	42%	2%	4.1
Increase academics’ involvement in teaching and learning	M	650	3%	6%	16%	32%	42%	1%	4.1
Favour the development of academics’ individual skills	I	649	2%	4%	14%	38%	41%	1%	4.1
Provide students with information on the quality of teaching and learning so they can make choices	Com	645	4%	4%	15%	36%	40%	1%	4.1
Allow the governance bodies to have information on the HEI’s quality so they can take decisions	Com	646	2%	3%	19%	35%	39%	1%	4.1
Promote the improvement of student support systems	I	649	3%	5%	15%	38%	38%	2%	4.1
Publicly assure the accountability of a higher education system	Com	647	4%	5%	18%	37%	35%	1%	4.0
Allow governance bodies to promote policies for the development of new teaching and learning practices	In	644	3%	5%	20%	36%	35%	1%	4.0
Contribute to the definition of new routines and procedures	In	647	3%	5%	23%	38%	30%	2%	3.9
Facilitate the adoption of new methodologies for teaching and learning	In	649	5%	5%	19%	36%	34%	2%	3.9
Encourage institutions to be concerned with their reputation or social image	M	649	5%	5%	20%	33%	37%	1%	3.9
Contribute to the convergence of teaching, research and management processes and practices	In	647	5%	7%	18%	36%	33%	2%	3.9
Reward academics’ innovative practices	In	647	5%	5%	18%	33%	34%	4%	3.9
Allow for the closure of study programmes that have no quality, based on its non-accreditation	C	650	5%	11%	20%	23%	38%	4%	3.8
Provide information about the institution to an external entity, for accreditation purposes	C	649	4%	7%	23%	36%	27%	4%	3.8
Allow the governance bodies to define rewarding policies for good practice	M	646	6%	7%	25%	35%	24%	2%	3.7
Increase students’ involvement in teaching and learning issues	M	643	7%	10%	23%	29%	29%	3%	3.7
Allow the governance bodies to allocate resources, based on quality assessment results	M	646	7%	11%	25%	33%	22%	2%	3.5
Promote the existence of control mechanisms of the performance of academics	C	648	9%	11%	27%	32%	21%	1%	3.5

Have effects on the HEI's criteria for academic recruitment and promotion	C	644	8%	9%	26%	33%	19%	5%	3.5
Allow the Government to allocate resources to institutions based on the assessment results	M	648	10%	12%	29%	30%	18%	2%	3.3
Allow governance bodies to define sanctioning policies for inadequate practice	M	647	10%	17%	29%	25%	17%	3%	3.3
Have effects on the HEI's criteria for student selection	C	645	10%	12%	29%	26%	15%	8%	3.3
Promote cooperation between academic and non-academic staff	M	647	11%	17%	28%	24%	16%	5%	3.2
Have effects on the HEI's criteria for non-academic staff recruitment and promotion	C	645	11%	14%	27%	28%	14%	7%	3.2
Provide the State with instruments to control the higher education network	C	648	14%	15%	30%	26%	14%	2%	3.1

Note: TP – Type of purpose (C – Control; Com – Communication; I – Improvement; In – Innovation; M – Motivation); N – Number of answers. Answers collected in a five point scale: (1) – totally disagree; (5) – totally agree; (3) – neutral).