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## **The long road – how evolving institutional governance mechanisms are changing the face of quality in Portuguese higher education**

**Abstract** While a lot has been written regarding the changing management and governance arrangements in higher education, less is known about how this progression relates to quality in higher education. The purpose of this article is to describe the context of governance in Portuguese higher education institutions and how institutional governance arrangements impact on quality and quality assurance mechanisms of higher education. The study is based on four institutional cases studies, comprising two universities and two polytechnic institutions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior managers, middle managers, academics and students from Arts and Engineering, and documentary analysis was undertaken. The main findings show that national and institutional features of governance and management may influence the implementation of quality policy and procedures, and indeed quality improvement. The different institutional actors seem to be aware of the dynamic nature of the equilibrium between positive and negative impacts and recognize the need for checks and balances in the governance and management structures of higher education institutions, especially between collegial and managerial facets.

**Keywords** Governance · Management · Quality · Higher education institutions · Portugal

### **1 Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to describe the context for governance in Portuguese higher education institutions and how institutional management and governance arrangements impact on quality and quality assurance mechanisms of higher education. The study is part of a wider research programme, where seven European countries participate, which aims to identify barriers and recommendations for the implementation of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for internal quality assurance (ENQA 2005) within higher education institutions across Europe (see [www.ibar-llp.eu](http://www.ibar-llp.eu)).

In Bergen, in 2005, an EU level ministerial meeting ushered in the Bologna process, progressively leading to the creation of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area disseminated by the European Association for Quality Assurance (ENQA) (ENQA, 2009). The linkage between governance and management structures and quality mentioned in the ESG is to be found pre-eminently in standard 1.1 which focuses on strategy, policy and procedures for quality assurance as well as the role of different stakeholders. To a lesser extent, standards 1.2 and 1.5 also emphasise management issues, as they regard procedures for the review of programmes, and management of resources. Thus, these European developments interacting with national policies can be considered an important steering mechanism for higher education institutions in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Magalhães et al. (2012a) even talk of “the creation of a

common grammar that provides models, concepts and resources, and influences national discourses and decisions on higher education issues”.

In the last two decades much has been written about the changing face of governance and management in higher education (Amaral et al. 2003; Braun and Merrien 1999; Rhoades 1992; Bleiklie and Kogan 2007; de Boer et al. 2008). Fewer studies have focused on the relationship between changing governance and management structures and processes and developments in quality in higher education (Salter and Tapper 2002; Hallinger 2010; Dill and Beerkens 2013). This state of affairs motivates the present study.

## **2 The changing face of governance in higher education**

The governance reform in European higher education is part of a larger reform of public administration and management in Western Europe (Pollit and Bouckaert 2004). This means that “European nation-states are increasingly seeking to steer their HE systems, along with other key public services” (Ferlie et al. 2009: 7). Governments are not retreating from responsibility for higher education systems, but they are in search of new forms of supervision and performance-based steering mechanisms for higher education institutions (CHEPS 2007). These new forms of supervision and performance-based steering are making the case for European meta-governance in higher education (Magalhães et al. 2012c; Stensaker et al. 2010). The different pace and content of governance reforms across Europe (CHEPS 2007; Paradeise et al. 2009) reflect the need to coordinate and develop a governance system by national governments and European level institutions (Magalhães et al. 2012c).

The relationship between governance and quality assurance can be seen as a reflection on the changing role of the state vis-à-vis higher education institutions and the rise of the ‘Evaluative State’ (Neave 1988, 1998; Power 1997). The enhanced institutional autonomy is the accomplishment of the ‘Evaluative State’ and the final step to its political change of statute, as in the words of Neave, from ‘Guardian’ to ‘Supervisor’ (Neave, 2007). Increasing autonomy is expected to enhance the efficiency of decision-making processes and the capacity of institutions to respond more actively and effectively to changes occurring in their organisational environment (Amaral and Magalhães 2001). However, “In an apparent paradox, the use of institutional autonomy by governments configures a definite step towards a stronger and potentially more intrusive relationship between state and HEIs” (Magalhães et al. 2012b). This intrusive facet underlines accountability “as well as more stringent and detailed procedures for quality assurance” (CHEPS 2007: 28), while impinging on the relationship between governance and quality assurance.

The Portuguese context for governance and quality arrangements in higher education has been shaped by a review of its higher education system by the OECD (2007), and a review of the quality assessment system by ENQA (2006). These reviews set the theme for new legislation regarding governance and management arrangements, with a new *Juridical Regime for Higher Education Institutions* (Law 62/2007), known colloquially as RJIES, as well a new quality assessment and assurance system enshrined in the *Juridical Regime for the Assessment*

*of Higher Education* (Law 38/2007), which led to the creation of the Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education - A3ES (Decree-Law 369/2007).

RJIES presented a 'reform' of higher education, and frames every higher education institution's context for governance, management and quality issues, having required a change in the statutes of all Portuguese higher education institutions. These changes include the possibility of adopting foundation status, where institutions operate under private law, and introduced new governance bodies with increased participation of external stakeholders, including in the general council which elects the rector or president of the institution.

The same legislation clarified the roles played by the State and by higher education institutions in the sphere of quality. The State is responsible for quality assessment (article 26), and only degrees that are accredited can run (article 61). However, quality assurance is a responsibility of the rector, in the case of a university, or the president in the case of other higher education institutions (article 92). A position is reached where 'quality improvement' rests with the institutions, within their autonomous sphere, and the 'accountability' side of quality assessment is assured by the State, via A3ES, which evaluates and accredits degrees.

The new legal framework led to a different balance between improvement and accountability in relation to quality and between bottom-up and top-down approaches to decision making (Rosa and Amaral 2012). External quality assessment and internal quality assurance are the two sides of the same coin: with the State being responsible for setting up external reviews and institutions responsible for assuring their quality. Institutions are now supposed to develop a quality assurance policy, a quality culture, and a strategy for continuous improvement (Rosa and Sarrico 2012).

At the same time changes between the State and institutions have occurred. New governance models enhance management structures to the detriment of collegial bodies, encourage the centralization of decision-making, and significantly increase the participation of external stakeholders (Amaral et al. 2011; Magalhães et al. 2012b). At the same time, institutions that wish to be more 'agile' can benefit from the possibility of adopting foundation status, whereby they operate according to private, as opposed to public, law.

Thus, given this context, it is of interest to investigate the relationship between governance and quality in Portuguese higher education institutions, allowing an understanding of how institutional governance and management arrangements impact on quality and quality assurance mechanisms of higher education institutions.

### **3 Methods**

For the research approach, a case study methodology was chosen, and four case studies were undertaken. In the sample there are two universities and two polytechnic institutes, all different in terms of size and location; this choice ensured a diversified sample, able to empirically base the research. To further diversify the study, the contrasting study areas of Arts and Engineering were investigated in the different institutions. In each institution, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both members of the central administration and

the faculty or department, depending on the structure of each institution. The first group comprised the Rector (or his/her representative), and the representative of the quality assurance structure of the institution (or its equivalent in the institution concerned). The faculty group for each area of study (Arts and Engineering) included the Dean, the head of the pedagogical council and the representative of the quality assurance structure (or equivalents), and two panels: one of academics from the unit, the other of students (around 6 participants in each panel). In total 20 interviews and 16 panels took place for the entire project during June 2011. The research method was based on content analysis of the legal documents, institutional documents and the interview transcripts.

The collection of data followed a script consisting of two broad groups of research questions: (1) the institutional context of governance; (2) the relationship between institutional governance and quality assurance. The first set included the themes of change covering governance structures and processes, including decision-making cultures. The second set included the themes of governance's role in quality assurance, and quality cultures. The content analysis departed from these broad themes but it allowed for emergent dimensions of analysis.

## **4 Findings**

The findings relating to the institutional context for governance, point to recent changes in institutional governance, management and quality arrangements, namely the new legislative framework, the role of A3ES and how these have acted as triggers for internal change agendas. The impact on quality and on the decision making culture are two dimensions that also emerge. Here the tension between bottom-up and top-down approaches is clear and the necessary balance between the two discussed.

In terms of the relationship between institutional governance and quality, two dimensions are discussed: the governance structures' role in institutional quality assurance, and institutional quality cultures.

### **4.1 The institutional context of governance**

#### **4.1.1 *Main changes in institutional governance***

National legislation gives the background for the institutional context for governance in Portuguese higher education institutions. Virtually all institutions mention RJIES and the consequent change in institutional statutes as a major turning point in the way institutions are governed and managed. The role of A3ES is also a ubiquitous theme in the interviewees' comments in relation to the development of quality arrangements at their institution. The emergence of the new legislation is also frequently the trigger for new internal arrangements and 'reform'.

In one institution the change in the statutes led to the creation of autonomous schools which represent an additional layer of management with increased responsibility for the attainment

of goals. The schools implement the university strategy, which emerges from a negotiation process between the rectorship and the schools (neither totally top-down, nor absolute autonomy for the schools). A similar development occurred in another institution. Accordingly, it seems that due to the complexity of the environment, intermediate coordination bodies between the rectorship and the departments, such as schools or faculties, have been deemed necessary. However, they are very much tools of the rectorship: their activities are meant to implement the institutional strategy, the rector or president now has more leeway in choosing their heads, and they will be accountable for the performance of their units to the centre. On the other hand, the process is not totally top-down, and people often talk about negotiation between the centre and the faculties or schools. In one other institution, which always had faculties, and where the faculties have significantly more autonomy, especially to choose their deans, it is clear to some interviewees that this setup represents a problem for the rectorship in terms of implementing central policy.

Another consequence of the change in legislation was that students lost representative weight in a number of institutional governance and management bodies. However, it seems that students gauge their power to influence decisions less by their formal representation but more by the characteristics of those involved, be it their fellow student representatives, or those in charge, who will listen to them (or not).

In addition, the deterioration of the financial situation of the country, and consequently of institutions as well, promotes the need for earned income streams, a new contextual feature which impacts on the way the institution is managed. For some interviewees this development can have positive effects, namely encouraging a united, concerted, strategic direction for the whole institution, but also negative effects, specifically when managerial values conflict with academic ones. In the words of one interviewee: 'Everything now relates to the market' (Engineering polytechnic student).

The ability to acquire foundation status, operating under private law, has amplified the need, for those that went down that path, to become self-determined, to take care of themselves, and become truly autonomous, but that can only be achieved by increasing earned income. That is a determining factor in the context for governance and management of the institution. The institution becomes more responsible for its own finances and destiny. The possibility of operating as a foundation is only available to those institutions able to earn at least fifty per cent of their income, and is related to times of austerity and a general lack of public funding to continue support for a mass system. However, some see some positive effects: lack of money and the need for earned income can have the added benefit of sharpening ingenuity and creativity and unite people into defining new directions and strategy.

Less availability of state funding may hinder quality, in the sense that there are limitations in terms of hiring and promoting staff, and buying materials (especially important in Engineering and Arts). On the other hand, less dependence on state funding and increased autonomy demand more strategic thinking and coordination of efforts, which can have a positive effect on quality. Irrespective of becoming a foundation or not, it seems the new arrangements have fostered more accountability, from programme directors, from heads of units, and from heads of institutions. There is the perception among interviewees that institutions are now more

unified organisations with unique strategies, rather than a collection of often decoupled faculties or schools, and departments within them.

‘The university gained a sort of consistency as an institution, losing somewhat the idea that each faculty held a certain degree of autonomy.’ (Arts university lecturer)

Thus the drivers for change in terms of governance and quality seem to derive not only from the changed external national framework but also from internal institutional contexts.

Often the national framework gives impetus to and justifies the need for change that had already been diagnosed internally. Alternatively, the change opportunity given by the need for changing governance and organisational structures as a result of RJIES are seen as an opportunity for an internal change agenda.

It is interesting to note that the interviewees saw the institutional information system as a tool central to change, an integrative mechanism and a structure to bind together traditionally loose-coupled departments, schools or faculties.

‘This change was very important because it allowed for the connection of multiple bodies to resources and students (...). Now there is an alignment in the monitoring of all programmes and that is very positive.’ (Arts polytechnic programme director)

It is as if the system is a central piece in holding the institution together and enforcing the implementation of central policy. It is often identified as a determinant for change, although it is not clear if the system is the cause of integration or its consequence, and indeed a feedback loop might be at work. This type of system seems to be seen in a favourable light both by the centre and the periphery, albeit often for different reasons. The central bodies see it as according control, while the periphery often see it doubly as a time saving device in the bureaucratic quest of having to constantly report on quality and performance to the centre, and as a further means of control of devolved units in relation to programme directors and members of staff.

#### *4.1.2 Impact on quality arrangements*

Changes in the steering of the Portuguese higher education system do appear to have had a significant impact on quality in higher education institutions. It seems consensual, among those interviewed, that A3ES has had a positive impact on quality. The achievement of certain standards has become compulsory, with procedures carried out in a formal and systematic way. As a result, A3ES has for instance refused to accredit degrees in prestigious institutions. The importance of the work of A3ES is recognized by the institutions. Internally, taking such impartial actions was hitherto difficult as it meant going against fellow academics. Furthermore, A3ES emboldens the internal authority of those in charge to take certain decisions. Decisions are made citing the impartial authority of A3ES; allowing difficult but necessary resolutions to be made which internally would be a political stumbling block.

Formalisation of exam dates, student satisfaction questionnaires, employability questionnaires, service quality questionnaires, information on the course syllabus and degree curriculum, and staff evaluation forms are all becoming common features of institutional

quality assurance mechanisms. In this respect, information systems prove to have a dominant role in supporting the internal quality system. However, current systems are centred very much on administrative and management procedures, namely for those institutions that have adopted ISO certification of their quality systems. It is taking longer to develop a system for managing the quality of teaching and learning. In working towards this goal, A3ES is seen by some as capable of providing the necessary incentive. It is acknowledged that CNAVES (National Council for Higher Education Evaluation), a representative body of institutions that preceded A3ES, had started the process. However, the two-year lag between the extinguishing of CNAVES and the founding of A3ES caused the process to stall; now A3ES is resuming the work with some degree of focus and determination.

The new institutional governance bodies required by RJIES, such as the general council – the strategic steering body of the institution where all stakeholders are represented, including academics, non-academic staff, and students – now have more external stakeholders, who, according to some interviewees put more emphasis on accountability and demand explicit measured results. These people often come from the business world, alien to things academic, and bring with them into the institution more managerial values. They want measures, quantification, and information for making decisions and making judgements about the performance of the university. This is increasing pressure for data, for formal and systematic procedures and for the professionalization of some quality management activities. The responsibility for quality systems still rests with academics, but increasingly academic managers mention the need for recruiting qualified technical staff or even the need for consulting services, be it for the implementation of ISO accreditation standards, or simply for designing, administering and analysing student satisfaction questionnaires, and the like. There is a feeling that many quality related procedures have been implemented without proper technical knowledge, in an ad-hoc manner, and that this should change; otherwise the validity and impact of some procedures becomes void, namely the now ubiquitous student satisfaction questionnaires.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to differentiate between the formal governance structure and what really happens. Students, it seems, are formally represented in a number of institutional, faculty, department, and degree-level bodies, but often students that do not sit in those bodies do not know about their representation and its associated impact on quality improvement.

Paradoxically, it seems the new arrangements and the added pressure for accountability and reporting may, at times, hinder the quality of teaching and learning, if people are not careful in balancing the traditional activities of the lecturer with the new burdens of administration and management increasingly pressed on them. Lecturers would spend their time on academic duties, with a few taking on managerial responsibilities. It appears that now everybody, even front-line academic staff, are called upon to make their contribution to administrative and managerial processes, namely quality management ones, robbing precious time from research and teaching activities. This is a trade-off mentioned by quite a few interviewees, whose precarious balance needs to be addressed.

‘(...) the role of the lecturer a few years ago, and it was not that long ago, was effectively limited to the role of lecturer. Therefore only a few had other roles besides being a lecturer. (...) over the years the lecturer no longer just prepares lessons, and carries out research activities, but now also has developed a very active administrative role.’ (Arts university lecturer)

Another hindrance resulting from emerging quality mechanisms is standardisation, which for a lot of people does not make sense at all when the same arrangements apply to big faculties and small ones, or to different areas of study, as with the attempt to use traditional scientific standards in the arts and humanities.

The truth is that most academics, academic managers and students believe that nothing much has actually changed in the classroom, and that quality management activities have yet to produce substantial improvements in the teaching and learning processes. However, a lot seem optimistic that their institutions are on the right track towards this, and that these processes take time to bear fruit. People admit that they are not keen on the formal systematic procedures involved in quality management (such as filling in questionnaires, course sheets, summaries of lectures, etc.), but generally they consider them to be necessary evils. What comes next is clearly perceived as the very much needed follow-up, which institutions are struggling with. There exists a general awareness that more could be done with the information being collected to actually improve the student learning experience, but that is hard and not a straightforward process.

The new legislation gave increased autonomy to institutions to further develop their own management processes, including quality management, of which staff appraisal is a very recent development. The centralisation of management processes, such as staff appraisal, seems to have a rationale of pulling the standards up, the idea being to aspire to the best practices of different units, in terms of research, teaching, and third mission, by encouraging common criteria for assessment, and thus the possibility of comparability and consequent benchmarking. This phenomenon has been termed ‘a way to increase internal competition for status and resources, in order to lift quality’ by a representative of the quality assurance structure of a university. This reasoning has been put forward with other aspects of quality management, such as student satisfaction questionnaires, performance indicators’ reports, activity plans, activity reports, etc.; although it is not clear if quality has indeed improved as a result.

The problem with this type of centralisation, especially with reporting, is that often the information flux is primarily bottom-up, the institutions having great difficulty in turning the masses of centrally uniformly held data into information that is actually useful, and indeed used, by the periphery, especially for quality improvement. This is acknowledged by all, from top, to middle, and front-line academic managers. Information is widely available, but people do not use it.

‘It does not seem to be used in a way that would lead to continuous improvement.’  
(Centrally based university representative for the quality assurance structure)

One of the institutions studied, as a consequence, is trying to promote public presentations of results followed by reflection and discussion sessions in order to stimulate the incorporation and indeed utilization of quality information compiled by the centre into decision making processes at the devolved units, and even at programme level. Also, the creation of schools in two of the institutions studied, as an intermediate layer of management between the centre and the departments had two positive effects: pooling of resources and better interdisciplinarity, which appears to have had a positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning.

Still, it seems that it is generally accepted that the recent changes in governance and management structures have produced little in terms of improved quality of teaching and learning outcomes. However, the idea is also quite widespread that if these changes are not enough to produce improvement they seem to be a necessary condition on the road to improvement.

‘So I do not have a very strong conviction that these legal frameworks alone can have a direct consequence for the quality of teaching and learning. However, I also have no doubts that they are fundamental, they have to exist, because even if with their existence we do not always get the desired results, without them it would certainly be worse.’ (University representative of the quality assurance structure at unit level)

It will be a balancing act between the necessary evil of added bureaucracy to implement a quality management system and the capability to turn that bureaucratic architecture into a tool for actual teaching and learning improvement. The fear is that the whole organisational energy will be spent on the process itself rather than using the process as a supporting device for improvement.

#### *4.1.3 Impact on decision making culture*

It is of interest to discuss how the changes have impacted upon the decision making culture, specifically the balance between bottom-up and top-down approaches.

Informal elements of bottom-up decision-making remain throughout, despite increased formal elements of top-down arrangements, especially due to the new legislation. However, it is still generally the case that heads of departments and schools try not to take decisions that explicitly go against the will of their colleagues. Members of staff are heard but it is acknowledged that someone has to decide. The necessary process of discussion often takes place in both informal settings and formal meetings, where the latter includes heads of department, or relevant lecturers of a degree programme or scientific area. Ultimately the decision rests with the head of unit or rector/president.

The hybrid style of decision making, with both top-down and bottom-up elements, reveals itself in the quality of teaching and learning. Everybody can be heard, everybody can participate, but the centre and the top decide. The majority of the problems emerging from centralisation are in respect of standardisation, treating all areas of study the same way, despite the fact that front line staff believe there are differences between areas that are not

accounted for. However, it is also acknowledged, by both the centre and the periphery that at times it is impossible to please everybody when you make decisions.

While the decision making culture is in general clearly hybrid, it also depends on the particular domain within which decision-making takes place. It seems there is a tendency for centralisation of everything non-academic (academic services, administrative services, technical services), leaving academic matters, scientific and pedagogical, to more traditional collegial bodies, such as scientific and pedagogical councils, and degree programme committees, where students often participate. The fact that quality offices are often positioned at the centre, physically as well as in everybody's minds, raises the question as to how they are viewed: mostly bureaucratic, administrative bodies and less academic ones? It is as if quality matters are often removed from the academic endeavour, relegated to being an element of external accountability imposed on institutions by the regulatory framework. Quality is something that is done at the front line to appease the centre, rather than an intrinsic academic activity.

## 4.2 Institutional governance and quality assurance

### 4.2.1 *Governance structures' role in institutional quality assurance*

Lecturers are deemed to be individualistic and to find it hard to work in teams. However, it is tough to make decisions against the body of academics. In this regard, and as discussed above, it is useful to have A3ES to help justify your actions, even if you knew all along yourself that they needed to be taken. Again, as mentioned previously, the general decision making culture is a hybrid of top-down and bottom-up features, and this is clearly also the case for quality matters. It seems that there are top-down processes in place in terms of formalisation and systematisation, and bottom-up in terms of talking to alumni, employers, and students. Bottom-up is also more commonplace for pedagogical matters, changes in teaching methods, changes in degree curricula, changes in course syllabi, and even the creation of new degrees. Top-down is pre-eminent for organisational structures, setting up quality systems and information systems, procedures for staff appraisal, degree evaluation, student satisfaction questionnaires and the like.

For instance, the procedure and specification for student satisfaction questionnaires are often imposed by the centre, with the results similarly compiled and treated centrally. However, the use that the results are put to is still very much a matter devolved to the lecturers and eventually directors of degrees. Their discussion with the students, if it happens at all, depends very much on the departmental units and less on the central management. Students, despite being represented in a number of bodies – namely the pedagogic council, or in some cases in staff-student liaison committees at programme level – are often not aware of the end use of the results of student satisfaction questionnaires. The general perception is that nothing much is done with them and that the results do not have consequences.

'We have to respond to questionnaires but nobody cares much about it.' (Polytechnic Arts student)

'I think there is a feeling, particularly within the student body, that student satisfaction questionnaires are useless.' (University Engineering lecturer)

However, there is an increasing number of procedures, especially to do with reporting, i.e. accountability, that are imposed from the centre. These may include standardised course forms, such as syllabi, assessment rules, bibliography, lesson summaries, questionnaires, and other information, subsequently filed in a centralised information system.

Again, representatives of employers and other external stakeholders often sit in governance bodies, but it seems that third mission initiatives and indeed liaison with the world of work is very much an ad-hoc activity undertaken by some willing lecturers rather than a formal procedure or part of a wider quality management system. However, these practices, albeit rather informal, seem to actually be quite widespread in the institutions analysed.

#### 4.2.2 *Institutional quality cultures*

Institutional quality cultures seem to be characterised by informality. For instance, the results of the student satisfaction questionnaires are seldom discussed formally in the pedagogic council (although it does happen in some instances), but more often it is up to the degree director to 'informally' talk to the lecturers with less satisfactory results. While the procedures for measuring quality are becoming more formalised, those for dealing with the measurement results are still quite informal, despite the governance and management arrangements in place (such as quality offices, pedagogic council, head of degree, head of department, head of school/ faculty).

There is clearly more of a culture of transparency than in the past. More information is now online, in the information system, with an increasing amount made public not just on the intranet, but also on the internet. This is often connoted with market values. In the words of an Engineering university student: 'I do not know about the quality policy, I only know marketing policies'. The implication is that to be seen to be doing is rather more important than the actual doing.

This particular importance attached to increased transparency and availability of information points to a culture of accountability as opposed to a culture of improvement; and the culture of accountability has increased markedly with the new governance arrangements, namely participation of external stakeholders, centralisation of decision-making, appointment of academic middle management by top management and leaner decision-making bodies with fewer members, so that decision making becomes more agile.

Interestingly, the students often admit *mea culpa* in terms of a lack of improvement culture on their part. There is a certain passivity in using the bodies that exist to represent them. Often they are invited to be involved but choose not to. On the other hand, some students also complain that they are formally heard, in often quite amicable terms, but then nothing happens; their input does not bring consequences, and they are not informed about follow-up to their opinions, suggestions or even complaints. This state of affairs demotivates their participation.

It also supports the idea that there is not yet a quality culture in terms of an intrinsic motivation of the institutions; quality being something that is imposed from the outside, by legislation, the market, and in a more pressing form now, by the existence of A3ES and its evaluation and accreditation processes.

Nonetheless, there is evidence that there is awareness that these external impositions are necessary and may even be positive, despite some perverse effects (bureaucratisation, managerial values displacing academic ones, loss of academic freedom, etc.), and are little by little promoting a culture of reflection and improvement. Quality is now mostly seen as producing measures and reports, and people are conscious that nothing will essentially change because of that. The way to progress towards reflection and action to improve quality is something that institutions are slowly addressing. This seems to be realised by all types of interviewees: top managers, middle managers, lecturers and students alike. It is also positive that most consider it a responsibility of themselves to act in this respect, rather than allocating it to others.

‘The premise in the implementation of any quality system is that all those involved participate in it’ (Polytechnic Arts lecturer)

There is some talk of this happening by itself, i.e. just the existence of quality measures and reports affects individual behaviour; others mention some more proactive actions to change the quality culture, such as training courses, workshops for students and lecturers, briefings relating to quality issues, etc. One institutional manager reckons that their quality system is now consolidated enough to start demanding improvement plans from the units and start monitoring their implementation.

Lecturers are seen as very independent minded, very individualistic, lacking a collective conscience. The new statutes in all institutions, but especially the foundation status operating under private law in a few, require a unique strategic direction for the university, and that is seen as imposing some discipline on irreverent academics. That, to some, makes it easier to manage the institution, also in terms of quality arrangements. Conversely, some worry about the general lack of civic duty, of being a good academic citizen in taking responsibility for management duties, and situations where people reach some managerial positions out of lust for power rather than a sense of duty. Some fear that these traits might be reinforced by current arrangements, which have migrated power from collegial to executive bodies.

Students realise that quality is greatly dependent on good lecturers and good students. However, they clearly conclude that that is not enough. One example given is that if the lecturers do not talk to each other about the syllabus in their courses then often students will have an unrealistic workload. Students too complain of a rather individualistic culture among academics that needs to be overcome in order to increase quality. In that sense governance arrangements that give added coordination power to directors of degrees go some way to resolving this problem, helping to create a more collective quality culture. For instance, typically lecturers know what they put in their course content sheets, but they do not know what colleagues do in their courses. This is taking time to change (although it seems the polytechnic institutions analysed are ahead in this respect).

Academics do feel the pressure to change their role 'in a brutal way', according to an Arts university academic, to undertake more managerial duties, be more responsible for the administrative aspects. This has not yet become part of the culture of most academics. Academics have a culture of independent operators and now they are requested to think collectively, which is not in their nature.

The new governance and management provisions give more authority to heads, but also bring a culture of responsibility, accountability and performance. Some also associate a more hierarchical culture with the new bodies, with clearer lines of reporting and accountability, even in matrix organisational formats where there is a functional (to the head of department, school/ faculty, president/ rector) and a project accountability (programme director, research programme director, or any other programme or project where the academic is involved). It seems that academics are not against a further centralisation of power, as anticipated by RJIES. Indeed they seem to think that the centre ought to make decisions and give direction to the institution, and that this is a welcome development, in the sense that institutions do seem to have become more agile. However, academics are happy with the new arrangements provided they feel they are listened to before decisions are made; and opinions vary as to how committed some top managers are to listening to academics down below. In this respect, it appears that often, despite the fact that some senior academic managers can choose their underlings, they often do it after gathering the opinion of front-line staff.

In general, as previously said, people seem to consider the decision-making culture as being a hybrid between top-down and bottom-up arrangements. Some even go further in adding that that tension is a good arrangement, as it provides the necessary checks and balances in decision making processes.

'(...) is this mixture of top-down with bottom-up which is the best solution, the best scenario' (Engineering university lecturer)

Ultimately, there are different degrees of hybridisation in terms of top-down and bottom-up decision making cultures in the institutions analysed, although the evidence collected gives credence to the fact that the final say rests squarely with the centre. A3ES has facilitated this in terms of how the quality management system is conceived and implemented by institutions, since reporting to A3ES is the responsibility of the centre, this fact created the opportunity for the centre to set up quality assurance processes and indeed processes beyond the quality arena.

## **5 Conclusion**

The implementation of policy and procedures for quality assurance should be read in context. National and institutional features will either hinder or foster the implementation of policy and procedures regarding quality, and the degree of effectiveness of checks and balances in governance and management arrangements will swing the pendulum one way or the other.

Larsen et al. (2009) give a discussion of some of the dilemmas faced by governance reform in European higher education, where the need for a dynamic equilibrium is made obvious.

The analysis of the Portuguese case characterized governance reform as an opportunity to raise the awareness of quality assurance at institutional level, which entails with the requirement of higher education institutions to establish their own systems and procedures for quality assurance (Bergen Communiqué 2005; CHEPS 2007). Additionally, external evaluation processes conducted under the framework of A3ES have impacted on the reorganisation of structures and processes at institutional level. While identifying 'agencification' (Gornitzka and Maassen 2000) as a tendency taking place, the influence exercised by A3ES triggers specific adaptations to meet external evaluation requirements.

Managing quality also emerged in data analysis. Institutional management of quality is apparently influential in implementing the governance reform in interaction with quality assurance. The governance reform in the higher education institutions sampled is inducing (i) the centralisation of quality management activities, (ii) the development of information and communication systems and (iii) increasing bureaucracy. These consequences bring about institutional leadership power in setting the rules for quality assurance in their institutions, in tune with other studies (see for instance, CHEPS 2007).

A number of our findings are also in line with Stensaker et al.'s (2011) comprehensive study of the impact of external quality evaluation in Norway, namely that institutional leadership is most positively inclined towards the effects on governance structures and on the establishment of new routines and procedures, and that the effects of evaluation seem to be more relevant to the institutional leadership than for academics and students.

The dynamics of governance and management reform in the Portuguese context also acknowledges the existence of hybrid, top-down and bottom-up decision-making cultures, which corresponds to the fragmentation of decision-making power (Magalhães et al. 2012b). An earlier study by Stensaker (1997) of the Norwegian case states as much: "For the departments, and in part for the institutions, the assessments have contributed to creating new possibilities to influence the higher levels that govern them." The phenomenon is also described in Rhoades and Sporn (2002) in relation to Austria, and an acknowledgement is made that in Europe where higher education systems had been more bottom (academics) and top (State) heavy historically, over the years more authority has been devolved to institutional management. Bauer and Kogan (1997), in a confrontation of the Swedish and UK cases regarding higher education evaluative systems, reiterate the idea: "most institutions (...) undertake often radical organisational changes to decentralise and delegate authority and at the same time strengthen the leadership and the management structure, the latter, obviously, leading to conflicts with traditional collegial forms of governance". These aspects, together with the development of reporting mechanisms to improve decision-making processes, stress the need to develop coordination or meta-governance instruments at an institutional level. The need for meta-governance at institutional level aligns extant research as "autonomous institutions might develop their strategies dissociated from governments' objectives and goals and central administration level" (Magalhães et al. 2012b).

Regarding quality culture, our results are very much in line with those of the EUA report Examining Quality Cultures (Loukkola and Zhang 2010), namely that "quality assurance systems are largely in place (...) Yet, developing a quality culture takes time and effort", which is patent

in the fact that institutions collect a mass of data but find it more difficult to use it to foster continuous improvement. Also the tension between the individual and the collective reported in our study has a parallel with the findings of Bauer and Kogan (1997): the new “more systematic and collective approach to quality matters” causes antagonism in “faculties in which a very individualistic culture prevails, where one is responsible only to oneself for the quality of one's teaching”.

Furthermore, institutional quality cultures vary across disciplines, but the higher education institutions sampled find it hard to acknowledge this in their quality assurance systems. This raises the question of how to find the appropriate evaluation tools for teaching and learning across all disciplines since “Typically, institutional systems for quality assurance focus on teaching and learning, and fewer institutions have developed their own systems for assuring the quality of research” (CHEPS 2007: 37). Then again different paces and content of governance reforms across Europe also may become known at institutional level, which is something that underlines the uniqueness of higher education governance systems stemming from informal networks, collegial arrangements and decision-making structures focused on teaching, learning and research processes (Gornitzka et al. 2005).

This is a small scale study with a small, albeit diversified, sample. As such, one has to be cautious about any generalisations based on its findings, as we do not have a statistically representative sample. The main contribution of the study is that it provides some understanding of how governance and management arrangements relate to quality management in Portuguese higher education institutions, and can be used to inform the design of more comprehensive studies, possibly using other methods, such as a survey of a bigger sample of institutions. This may also allow similarities and differences between types of institution to be uncovered, which this study was not designed to accomplish. On a more practical note, the study aims to feedback its findings to the participating institutions, as well as other Portuguese institutions. While these institutions are in the middle of a journey of implementing quality assurance systems to, at a minimum, comply with accreditation, hopefully, this will follow through to improve the quality of their study programmes and the student experience.

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