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Proposal

Title: Accreditation outcomes 2010-2015: which programmes fall short of expectations and why



Abstract: The paper analyses the main outcomes of programme accreditation in Portugal further to the operations of the Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education, which were initiated in 2009. Tracking the evolution of study programmes, the paper found that out of the initial 5262 programmes on offer in 2009/10, 40% have been either discontinued or not accredited as of July 2015. The analysis revealed differences between the private and the public sector, with higher proportions of closure in the former. It also revealed differences by disciplinary area. For Law, the discipline with highest percentage of non-accredited programmes, the main reason for non-accreditation resided in the programmes' lack of compliance with legal requirements regarding teaching staff qualifications and full-time employment. The blurred identity of programmes, undifferentiated between university and polytechnic sectors, and curricular incoherence were other important reasons for non-accreditation.

Text of paper:

Introduction

Across Europe, the policy agenda for quality assurance was hoisted to prominence by the Bologna Process. The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for quality assurance, developed by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA 2009) were created as a common framework to guide the work of institutions and quality assurance agencies. The Portuguese Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (the Agency) was created in 2009 after having been legally established by Decree Law 369/2007. This was a consequence of the studies conducted by ENQA and by OECD in the previous years which recommended the reform of quality assurance in Portuguese higher education. The Agency has a remit for programme accreditation, certification of internal quality assurance systems and institutional accreditation. The Agency initiated its activities with programme accreditations and has recently begun the certification of internal quality assurance systems. It has not yet embarked upon institutional accreditation. In elaborating the requirements for accreditation, the Agency took inspiration in the ESG.

This paper will discuss the results of programme accreditation to date. It addresses one main research question: What are the main outcomes of programme accreditation further to the Agency's operations? To answer this question, the paper follows the evolution of study programmes. It starts by describing briefly the Portuguese higher education system in order to situate the Agency's activities in context. It then presents numerical data on the results of programme accreditation to date. Next, it analyses the reasons for non-accreditation in the disciplinary area with poorest performance. Finally, it reflects on the outcomes of programme accreditation.

Quality assurance in Portugal

The elimination of sub-standard educational programmes corresponds to the first phase in the phase model proposed by Westerheijden et al. (2007) to describe the evolution of quality assurance systems. According to the authors, the goal of accreditation was the pursuit of institutional accountability.

The necessity of programme accreditation was a consequence of the evolution of quality assurance in Portugal. Quality assurance was initiated in the 1990s with a system which entrusted institutions to assure their own quality through the coordination of their representative body. Initially, this system of quality assessments covered exclusively public universities. It was extended to public polytechnics and the private sector in 2000, after it had



started to operate under the coordination of the National Council for Higher Education Evaluation (CNAVES). By this time there had been a massive increase in higher education participation, favoured by successive policies that gave priority to expansion at all costs, sacrificing the overall quality of the system (Amaral 2008; Tavares, Sin & Amaral 2015). A drawback of the quality system was that assessments had no visible consequences, e.g. no degree programmes were closed, although many substandard programmes existed. Despite a new law in 2003 whose aim was to clarify the consequences of assessment, whose foreseen development through complementary legislation was never undertaken, many subsequent reports continued to be inconclusive. Additionally, the accreditation decision belonged to the government and not to CNAVES. In 2005 the Portuguese government commissioned the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) to review the national quality assurance system for higher education. Following the recommendations made, new legislation was passed in 2007 to reform the quality system. An independent Agency was created under the new legal framework, as a private foundation independent from both the government and higher education institutions (Amaral, Rosa and Fonseca 2013).

The Agency's initial activities, as mentioned, targeted programme accreditation to 'clean' the system of inherited sub-standard provision. This reflected concerns with accountability in the sense highlighted by Harvey and Newton (2007): the Agency intended to safeguard the core principles and practices of higher education, preventing them from erosion or neglect, both in private and public provision. Accreditation became a means of guaranteeing institutional compliance with legal requirements (e.g. the qualifications of academics).

Methodology

The analysis was based on the Agency's datasets on accreditation decisions of existing study cycles. A quantitative analysis revealed the numbers of discontinued programmes and non-accredited programmes in different disciplinary areas, higher education sectors (public and private), institution type (university and polytechnic) and study level (first degree, master degree and PhD). After this initial quantitative exploration, the discipline with the highest percentage of non-accredited programmes was analysed in depth to uncover the reasons for non-accreditation. This qualitative analysis was performed on the external accreditation reports, also provided by the Agency, with the help of the qualitative software MaxQDA.

Evolution of programme accreditation and results to date

According to the General Directorate for Higher Education, 5262 programmes were in operation in 2009. In a first phase, the Agency invited institutions to submit documentation for all functioning programmes these intended to keep, so as to demonstrate compliance with clearly stated quality criteria. Higher education institutions submitted a total of 4379 programmes. Preliminary accreditation was granted to 3623. The remaining 756 programmes were deemed to be borderline, requiring a more thorough assessment procedure. The Agency held meetings with the representatives of the institutions which proposed these programmes. Further to the discussions, institutions decided to cancel 335 programmes, while the remaining 421 underwent an accreditation process involving a visit over the following year. Further to this, 114 programmes were not accredited.

After this first phase, in 2011/12 the Agency initiated the first regular accreditation cycle to last 5 years. Programmes from varied disciplinary areas were allocated to each year. The cycle has now completed its 4th year, with the following programmes still to be assessed in 2015/16: Arts; Portuguese Language and Literature; Philosophy and Theology; Geography;

Physics and Physics Engineering; Earth Science and Extraction Industries; Health Sciences; Nursing; Dentistry; Pharmaceutical Sciences; Gerontology; Public Health Services; and Military Sciences. As in previous years, these programmes belong to diverse disciplines.

CNAEF code	Disciplinary Area (CNAEF)	Preliminary accred.	Discontinued	%	Submitted for accred.	Not accredited	%
14	Education and Teacher Training	353	87	24,6%	266	34	12,8%
21	Arts	237	48	20,3%	189	3	1,6%
22	Humanities	176	54	30,7%	122	4	3,3%
31	Social and Behavioural Sciences	354	69	19,5%	285	46	16,1%
32	Information Science and Journalism	58	16	27,6%	42	10	23,8%
34	Business and Management	368	49	13,3%	319	28	8,8%
38	Law	57	4	7,0%	53	14	26,4%
42	Life Sciences	146	33	22,6%	113	2	1,8%
44	Physical Sciences	32	5	15,6%	27	2	7,4%
46	Mathematics/Statistics	63	15	23,8%	48	1	2,1%
48	Computer Science	150	14	9,3%	136	2	1,5%
52	Engineering	265	42	15,8%	223	10	4,5%
54	Industries and Manufacturing	63	17	27,0%	46	1	2,2%
58	Architecture	95	11	11,6%	84	3	3,6%
62	Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	79	17	21,5%	62	0	0,0%
64	Veterinary Medicine	13		0,0%	13	0	0,0%
72	Health	124	52	41,9%	72	11	15,3%
76	Social Services	47	10	21,3%	37	7	18,9%
81	Personal Services	128	11	8,6%	117	10	8,5%
85	Environmental Protection	74	19	25,7%	55	2	3,6%
	Total	2882	573	20%	2309	190	8,2%

Table 1. Distribution of study programmes in the disciplinary areas allocated to the first four years of regular accreditation, by discipline. Programmes with preliminary accreditation, discontinued, submitted for accreditation and not accredited.

Of the 3623 programmes with preliminary accreditation, 2309 already underwent assessment (corresponding to the disciplinary areas assigned to Years 1 to 4 of the regular accreditation cycle). A further 573 programmes were discontinued through the decision of the providing institution, representing 20 % of the programmes in these disciplinary areas. Further to the accreditation commissions' visits, which comprised disciplinary experts, 190 programmes were denied accreditation, amounting to just over 8 %. Table 1 shows the disciplinary distribution of discontinued programmes and programmes which underwent assessment but were denied accreditation, in absolute numbers and percentages.

Health Sciences is the disciplinary area with the highest percentage of discontinued programmes (Diagnosis Technologies; Therapy and Rehabilitation; Nutrition), with a staggering 41.9% of programmes withdrawn by the institutions. A likely explanation resides

in the reform of education provision in Health Technologies which merged eight disciplines into three. As a result, it is probable that institutions discontinued some programmes and replaced them with new ones. Second highest comes the area of Humanities (Foreign Languages and Literature and History and Archaeology), with 30.7% of programmes discontinued through institutional initiative. The largest proportions of non-accreditations are found in Law (26.4%) and in Information and Journalism (23.8%).

Tables 2, 3, 4 present the distribution of programmes by higher education sector, institution type and degree level. Regarding the distribution between public and private institutions (Table 2), the majority of programmes with preliminary accreditation were offered in public institutions (2308 representing 80% of programmes). According to national statistics, in 2009/10 the public sector offered 71.2 % of programmes, against 28.8% in the private sector, which suggests a higher rates of preliminary accreditations in the public sector. The private sector also represents a much smaller share than the public sector regarding total enrolments, with 23.4% of Portuguese students enrolled in the former in the same year. The share of discontinued programmes was also larger in the private sector (28% opposed to 17.9% in the public sector). In the case of non-accreditations, this gap between sectors was much wider (2.3% non-accreditations in the public sector versus 35.6% in the private sector). This suggests that quality deficiencies were far more frequent in the private sector.

Sector	Preliminarily accredited	Discontinued	%	Submitted for Accreditation	Not accredited	%
Public	2308	412	17,9%	1896	43	2,3%
Private	574	161	28,0%	413	147	35,6%
<i>Total</i>	<i>2882</i>	<i>573</i>	<i>19,9%</i>	<i>2309</i>	<i>190</i>	<i>8,2%</i>

Table 2: Distribution of study programmes in the first four years of regular accreditation, by higher education sector: preliminarily accredited, discontinued, submitted for accreditation, and not accredited.

Regarding the distribution between universities and polytechnics (Table 3), 1980 of preliminary accreditations (or 68.7%) were for university programmes. This is consistent with national statistics. In 2009/10 universities offered 70.6 % of the study programmes in Portugal, according to the General Directorate for Education and Science Statistics. No major differences were noted between universities and polytechnic institutions as regards the share of discontinued programmes and non-accredited programmes.

Type	Preliminarily accredited	Discontinued	%	Submitted for Accreditation	Not accredited	%
University	1980	380	19,2%	1600	132	8,3%
Polytechnic	902	193	21,4%	709	58	8,2%
<i>Total</i>	<i>2882</i>	<i>573</i>	<i>19,9%</i>	<i>2309</i>	<i>190</i>	<i>8,2%</i>

Table 3: Distribution of study programmes in the first four years of regular accreditation, by institution type: preliminarily accredited, discontinued, submitted for accreditation, and not accredited.

Regarding the distribution by study cycles (Table 4), the largest share of preliminary accreditations belongs to master degrees. This reflects the explosion in their provision following the Bologna reforms. While in 2007/8 master degrees enrolled 22580 students, by 2009/10 the number of students had reached 44252, according to the General Directorate for Education and Science Statistics. This increase happened at the same time as total enrolments in higher education were declining. Decree-Law 64/2006, which required the

adaptation of study programmes to the Bologna degree structure by 2009/10, established that a pre-Bologna first degree programme could only lead to one post-Bologna first degree programme, while this limitation was not posed in the case of second cycles. The number of these latter grew exponentially, arguably not always mindful of quality. This might explain why master degrees had the highest discontinuation rate by the institutions (24.4%).

Type	Preliminarily accredited	Discontinued	%	Submitted for Accreditation	Not accredited	%
First-degree	1134	181	16,0%	953	65	6,8%
Master degree	1391	340	24,4%	1051	95	9,0%
PhD degree	357	52	14,6%	305	30	9,8%
<i>Total</i>	<i>2882</i>	<i>573</i>	<i>19,9%</i>	<i>2309</i>	<i>190</i>	<i>8,2%</i>

Table 4: Distribution of study programmes in the first four years of regular accreditation, by degree level: preliminarily accredited, discontinued, submitted for accreditation, and not accredited.

As to programmes denied accreditation, the highest share was verified in the case of third cycles (9.8%), followed by master degrees (9%). The non-accreditation rate for PhD programmes could be explained by another legal initiative. Law 62/2007 stated that universities, to be considered as such, had to offer at least three PhD degrees. This led private universities to create them to maintain their university status, in some case with less consideration for quality.

Reasons for non-accreditation

In order to understand the reasons for denied accreditation, the disciplinary area with poorest performance was selected for analysis: Law, with a non-accreditation share of 26.4 per cent of the programmes submitted for accreditation (14 out of 53). These comprised two programmes in Law (one master degree and one doctoral degree) and twelve programmes in Legal Practice for Solicitors (eleven first degrees and one master degree). The large majority (12) were offered by private institutions, with only two by public institutions; nine in universities and five in polytechnics. The reports of the accreditation panels were analysed to understand the reasons which led to non-accreditation.

The largest share of aspects which failed to meet the accreditation conditions were related to teaching staff. Legal conditions, established in Decree-Law 74/2006 (amended by Decree-Law 115/2013), stipulate the criteria to be met regarding *proportions of full-time staff members* and their *qualifications* in university and polytechnic programmes (Table 5 and 6). The majority of programmes failed to fulfil these criteria. This is at least partially explained by the fact that most programmes were offered in private institutions which, to a large extent, relied on recruiting part-time staff with commitments elsewhere (either in another institution or in industry). Teaching staff qualifications were another serious concern. Reports often referred to the lack of sufficient PhD holders among teaching staff and, especially, in the core area of the study programme. In fact, recent research found that Portuguese higher education institutions complied only partially with the ESG on teaching quality, particularly in relation to the professional development of teaching staff (Cardoso, Tavares & Sin 2015). Additionally, teaching staff have to be research active, and in several cases this was found to be lacking. The research demands are higher for universities compared to polytechnics and are greater in the upper cycles. The research inactivity might be related to teaching overload, which was another critical point highlighted in the accreditation reports.

Teaching/Research Staff	1 st Cycle	2 nd Cycle	3 rd Cycle
Own teaching staff (FTE staff members)	60%	75%	75%
Staff with PhD qualifications (FTE)	50%	60%	100%
Specialised teaching staff Teaching staff with PhD qualifications or specialised in the core disciplinary area of the study cycle (FTE)	50%	50%	-
Teaching staff with PhD qualifications in the core disciplinary area of the study cycle (FTE)	30%	40%	75%

Table 5: Legal requirements for the composition of teaching staff in university programmes.

Teaching/Research Staff	1 st Cycle	2 nd Cycle
Own teaching staff (FTE staff members)	60%	75%
Staff with PhD qualifications (FTE)	15%	40%
Specialised teaching staff Teaching staff with PhD qualifications or specialised in the core disciplinary area of the study cycle (FTE)	50%	50%
Teaching staff with PhD qualifications in the core disciplinary area of the study cycle (FTE)	-	20%

Table 6: Legal requirements for the composition of teaching staff in polytechnic programmes.

Problems related to the study programmes' identity and distinctiveness came second in order of frequency. In the case of the cycles of Legal Practice for Solicitors, these were often criticized for not being distinctive in relation to the more generic programmes in Law. This was found to generate problems at the level of the curriculum, not adequately designed as either a Legal Practice or a Law degree. Related to this, the objectives of the study programmes were criticised for lack of clarity. Another issue referred to the lack of differentiation of programmes which were not clearly tailored to either university or polytechnic missions.

Aspects related to teaching and learning came in third place. These included curricular issues such as: coherence; curricular composition, which reflected the areas of teaching staff expertise while ignoring some of the core areas of the discipline; the absence of internships; lack of procedures for the design and approval of study programmes, as well as lack of reflection for improvement. Regarding assessment, issues were raised in about half the reports. Assessment was criticised for not being sufficiently rigorous, for lacking variety, or for not contemplating continuous assessment methods. In the case of the three postgraduate degrees, they were found to fall short of offering students an adequate research environment, essential in the case of master degrees and PhD programmes. The lack of library materials and resources was identified in the majority of non-accredited programmes, as an obstacle both to teaching and learning and to research.

Conclusion

This study aimed to analyse the main outcomes of programme accreditation in Portugal further to the Agency's operations initiated in 2009. The analysis has revealed that out of the 5262 programmes registered with the General Directorate for Higher Education in 2009/10, as of today 2095 have been eliminated, representing a percentage of 40%. This occurred through a double process: as a result of non-accreditation by the Agency (304 programmes), or through the institutions' own decisions to discontinue programmes (the remaining ones),



probably because institutions believed these would not meet the quality standards set by the Agency. Some might also have been closed for other reasons, for instance reorganisation of the educational offer following the reflection induced by the Bologna Process reforms or insufficient student numbers.

The private sector holds the largest share of both discontinued programmes and non-accredited programmes, with 28% and respectively 35.6%. No difference was noted between the polytechnic and the university sectors. Regarding study cycles, the largest proportion of discontinued programmes were master degrees, while the largest share of non-accreditation decisions were taken for PhD degrees (9.8% of programmes submitted to accreditation), closely followed by master degrees (9%). These programmes have higher levels of demand regarding the research activity of teaching staff and the research environment which should be provided to students. Regarding disciplinary differences, the larger proportion of non-accreditations occurred in Law. For this reason, the justifications given for non-accreditation in the accreditation reports were analysed.

Reasons for non-accreditation were related to three areas: teaching staff; programme identity; and teaching and learning. The main reason was programmes' lack of compliance with legal requirements regarding teaching staff qualifications and proportions of full-time staff members. Research inactivity was also a critical issue, especially for second and third cycles. Programme identity was often criticised as imprecise, not reflecting a clear discipline (e.g. Legal Practice for Solicitors not different from Law), or a university or polytechnic profile according to the institution's mission. Teaching and learning shortcomings referred to curricular inconsistencies or lack of procedures for design/approval of programmes.

The data clearly shows that the cleaning up operation was successful. Success was the result of a combination of clearly defined and measurable accreditation standards with permanent discussion of the Agency with all higher education institutions. The main lesson learned during this process has been the importance of maintaining constant dialogue with institutions, which created a climate of openness and confidence in the Agency's performance and decisions. That the institutions voluntarily discontinued far more programmes than the number of non-accredited programmes was a consequence of those permanent discussions. A second lesson has been that programme accreditation, although necessary in a first stage, is too burdensome both from an administrative and financial point of view and that the next stage needs to adopt a different approach. Thus, at the end of the current accreditation cycle the system will be changed by introducing a lighter touch approach for those institutions which have demonstrated higher quality standards.

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