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Proposal

Title: Obstacles to quality in higher education institutions: The views of academics

Abstract (150 words max):

Academics are at the heart of higher education, being key actors for assuring and promoting their institutions and systems' quality. This paper explores academics' views

on quality in higher education, by analysing the answers of Portuguese academics to an open question on the factors hindering quality within their higher education institutions.

Overall the content analysis performed reveals that Portuguese academics tend to identify obstacles related to higher education institutions' external context, the institutional dynamic, the core aspects of the institutional mission and the institutional actors. These findings are especially relevant for those working either in higher education institutions or governmental agencies. They may contribute to the design of quality assurance systems more likely to be supported by academics and therefore more likely to be successful, effectively contributing to quality improvement.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Introduction

Quality assurance in higher education (HE) has been quite an active field in Europe since the emergence of the 'Evaluative State' (Neave, 1988), in the late 1980s. As Schwarz and Westerheijden (2004) have reported, while at the beginning of the 1990s only about 50% of European countries had initiated quality assessment activities, by 2003 all countries, except Greece, had entered some form of supra-institutional assessment. Furthermore, the Bologna Declaration (1999) and its emphasis on the need to develop comparable criteria and methodologies for assuring quality in HE also contributed to new developments in the field. The more prominent probably was the draft of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and the establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

Despite all these developments research in this area still seems to overlook the higher education institutions (HEIs) micro processes, which quality assurance (QA) is supposed to improve. The transformational aspects of QA, meaning the concrete effects it has in HE, are difficult to trace, as are the levers that stimulate improvements in teaching and learning. It seems that the institutional consequences of QA have not yet contributed much to actual improvements in teaching and learning or to transforming the student learning experience (Harvey and Newton 2004; Rosa, Tavares and Amaral 2006). More studies are needed on the micro-level, looking not only at the impact QA has on, for example, "the learning experience, pedagogic development, or the nature of research outcomes" (Harvey and Newton 2004: 154), but also on examining various perspectives for improving teaching and learning (Westerheijden et al., 2007; Westerheijden et al., 2006).

Furthermore much of QA has been a game between policy makers, QA agencies, institutional managers and quality professionals, leaving aside academics at the shop-floor level (Westerheijden et al., 2007).

Academics' support of QA (namely of its goals and purposes) is essential for its successful implementation and a crucial factor influencing the accuracy and meaningfulness of the results achieved (Cardoso et al., 2013; Laughton, 2003). This means that a more relevant role should be given to these actors in the QA 'game', especially at a time when HEIs are asked to implement their own internal quality assurance systems and to be responsible and accountable for them. But for academics to play their role, it is important to understand their own views on QA.

Academics' Views on Quality Assurance

While both students and employers are asked quite frequently to give their perspectives on quality in HE, teaching staff is rarely given the same opportunity (Barandiaran-Galdós et al., 2012). Furthermore, academics' perspectives on QA is still a rather underdeveloped topic in the higher education literature (Lomas, 2007; Newton, 2000; Westerheijden et al., 2007), which has nevertheless been enriched in the last years through the contribution of different studies. As the concern with the transformational character of QA increased, the need to explore its consequences at the shop-floor level has led to different studies on the effects of QA and the perceptions academics have about it.

In a previous study (Cardoso et al., 2013), we have introduced, based on some of the available literature (Bell and Taylor, 2005; Laughton, 2003; Lomas, 2007; Newton, 2002; Stensaker et al., 2011; Watty, 2006), a list of factors explaining academics' resistance to and support for quality assurance. Resistance was found to be due to different reasons, including academics' perceptions that QA: is an imposition and prescription; has a highly bureaucratic character; is not aligned with the 'academic endeavour'; has unintended consequences upon personal and organisational behaviour; promotes inspection, regulation and standardisation; relates more to monitoring and control and less to enhancement and transformation; grasps the 'academic world' through the language and ideology of managerialism; and is based on procedures that are not entirely reliable and capable of addressing the 'essence' of the educational process, inducing improvements.

However academics also tend to adhere to QA, especially when assessment processes and procedures are more directed at institutions as a whole rather than at individual academics' performance. QA is also seen as contributing to increase decision making processes' transparency, developing teaching and learning quality and hence benefiting students and the academic work.

In an analysis of the academics' perceptions about quality in a Spanish university, Barandiaran-Galdós et al. (2013) refer that the introduction of QA mechanisms in HE is controversial. While many academics see such development as an "excellent opportunity to improve certain operational aspects of universities about which they are highly critical", others perceive the quality assurance discourse and the proposals it includes as an "unacceptable interference in a world that should be governed by its own rules and regulations" (Barandiaran-Galdós et al., 2013: 93-94).

In a recent study, Cardoso et al. (2013) came to the conclusion that Portuguese academics tend to agree with quality assessment, namely to its alleged diverse goals and purposes. Nevertheless, academics tend to be more supportive when "quality assessment favours the improvement over the control of the higher education system, its institutions and staff (both academic and non-academic)" (Cardoso et al., 2013: 109). Kleijnen et al. (2011: 149) came to the same conclusion for the Dutch context, referring that "faculty were positive about the effects of quality management in terms of improvement and negative about its effects in terms of control."

This paper intends to go a step further and discuss academics' perceptions on quality in HE. Through the analysis of academics' opinions about the obstacles to quality in their own HEIs one expects to contribute to a better understanding of the micro-processes existent in these organisations and how the transformational character of quality assurance can be promoted.

Data and Methods

As part of a study conducted (2008-2012) with the aim to understand the general positions assumed by Portuguese academics towards QA, an online questionnaire was

sent to all Portuguese academics (36,215). Among the several questions included in the questionnaire there were two open ones addressing academics' opinions on both the enablers and obstacles to quality and its assurance. The aim was to provide academics with the opportunity to express their views without inducing a pre-defined set of factors contributing, or not, to quality in HEIs.

1,782 academics belonging to different types of institutions (university and polytechnic, public and private), with diverse disciplinary affiliation and experience in quality assurance activities answered the questionnaire.

From the total of respondents, 1,288 (72.3%) specifically answered the question on the obstacles to quality. However, from these, 8 academics gave answers from which it was not possible to objectively infer the factors identified as obstacles to quality; 8 have stated "*I do not know*" as answer or argued for the invisibility of such obstacles; and 6 have explicitly stated that there were no obstacles to quality.

The academics answering the obstacles question can be characterised as follows in terms of HE sector (public/private), subsystem (university/polytechnic) and sex (male/female) (Table 1).

Table 1 – Respondents' distribution by HE sector, subsystem and sex

		N	% of answers
HE Sector	Public	735	90.5
	Private	77	9.5
	No answer	476	-
HE subsystem	University	432	53.2
	Polytechnic	380	46.8
	No answer	476	-
Gender	Male	534	55.1
	Female	435	44.9
	No answer	319	-

The analysis of Table 1 allows for concluding that the respondents are mainly academics from the public sector (90.5%) and distributing evenly by universities and polytechnics (53.2% and 46.8%, respectively). Further, academics tend to predominantly be males (55.1%). These attributes approximately replicate the characteristics of the Portuguese academic population in terms of sex (56% of males and 44% of females) and HE subsystem (60% for universities and 40% for polytechnics). In relation to the HE sector, the public one is overrepresented in the sample, since in the population it accounts for 70% of academics (GPEARI/MCTES, 2010).

Academics' answers were systematised and studied using content analysis. This allowed for the construction of an analysis grid systematising the data related to the obstacles to quality (see Figure 1 in Annex). This systematisation involved the organisation of these data into several categories of analysis grouped, in turn, in four dimensions of analysis. Although content analysis was performed with the main aim of giving sense to the global meaning of the categories of analysis, the number of the references made by respondents to the several aspects included in these categories was also counted.

Obstacles to Quality in Portuguese HEIs

Obstacles identified by academics can be systematised in four groups expressing their nature or type: (1) External context; (2) Institutional dynamic; (3) Institutional mission; and (4) Institutional Actors.

1. External context

This first group of obstacles to quality and its assurance relates to the HEIs' external context, including current HE policies; funding; access; external QA; the Bologna process; specific aspects linked with the HE system; and particular characteristics of the Portuguese society.

The most referred to obstacles have to do with the public funding of HE (100 references). Respondents specifically stress the insufficiency of the financing assigned to HEIs and research, due to state budget cuts, and/or to an unbalanced distribution of that funding by the different institutions.

Also relevant are the obstacles related to access to HE (58 references), such as some shortcomings verified at the level of students' school background and of the practices for student recruitment, and the existent HE policies and regulations (40 references). This last obstacle includes the current political approach to HE, translated in specific policies and legislation, as well as aspects linked to the system's operation and organisation.

Less systematically, academics identify obstacles connected with the Bologna process (25 references), namely its rationale, implementation features and consequences (specifically for teaching and learning), and with external QA (24 references). At this level, special emphasis is given to obstacles referring to the implementation of the quality assessment and accreditation processes by A3ES, the Portuguese Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education.

Finally, two more residual obstacles are identified. The first has to do with some characteristics of the Portuguese society (5 references), such as its centralisation, closed character, and the current socioeconomic and political condition of the country that negatively impact HE. The second refers to certain characteristics ascribed to the HE system (5 references), namely the number of HEIs, the system's binary character inducing a university 'elitism', and an overall resistance to change.

2. Institutional dynamic

A second group of obstacles has to do with HEIs' (schools/departments) operation. This includes institutional governance and management, internal QA, bureaucracy (bureaucratisation of management and teaching processes and activities), specific characteristics, internal 'climate', financial situation, infrastructures, resources and support services.

Among all these obstacles those assuming most relevance are linked to HEIs' governance and management (395 references). These include aspects associated with HEIs, faculties/schools or study programmes' management; the institutional leadership and managers' action; the decision-making processes; and/or the institutional strategy. Obstacles further relate to human-resources management (including academics' recruitment practices, such as inbreeding); the devaluing of academics' work (reflected in the non-recognition and lack of support to academics and their work, namely through an absence of incentives, rewards and the possibility for career progression); and overvaluing of research over other academic activities, namely for career progression.

A second sort of obstacles deals with HEIs' (schools/departments) infra-structures, equipment and support services (189 references). Respondents emphasise several shortcomings at this level.

Also relevant are the obstacles linked to HEIs' internal QA mechanisms (110 references), financial situation (100 references) and, less significantly, bureaucracy (74 references). Among the first obstacles, respondents emphasise the absence, incipient character or ineffectiveness of a quality culture (strategies and procedures promoting quality and its assurance), of the assessment exercises promoted by HEIs, of incentives/rewards and recognition of good practices based on assessment results, and the lack or low quality of institutions, study programmes and academics. The second sort of obstacles comprise HEIs' current financial situation, marked by difficulties derived mainly from insufficient public funding; inability to find other sources of funding besides the governmental ones; deficient financial management; and the overall impact of these aspects in teaching, research and support processes. The last sort of obstacles is linked to the growing and/or excessive bureaucratisation of HEIs' daily processes and activities and, consequently, of the academics' activity.

Finally more residual references were made by respondents to obstacles related to HEIs' characteristics (such as their dimension or size and geographic location) (18 references) and their internal 'climate' (44 references). Among these respondents emphasise the overall environment characterising institutions, marked by conservatism and resistance to change as well as by a lack of cooperation or sense of community.

3. Institutional mission

A third group of obstacles relates to the core aspects and activities of HEIs' mission, that is: teaching and learning, research, and third mission, including the interactions both with other HEIs and society.

At this level, academics especially address the obstacles linked to teaching and learning (109 references), including insufficiencies of the process itself, of the organisation of HEIs' training offer, of the structuring of study programmes, and the increase in the teacher/student ratios, motivated by the massification of HE, which also affects teacher/student relation.

Next, respondents emphasise obstacles related with the research activity (42 references), namely the lack or insufficiency of research, its low quality, the inadequacy of the decision-making process regarding research and the insufficiencies of the resources allocated for this activity.

Finally, with a more residual character, obstacles linked to HEIs' third mission emerge (18 references). That is the case of the shortcomings at the level of institutions' (faculties/schools) interaction with society and collaboration with external stakeholders (labour market, business, other HEIs and/or research centres), as well as some features of the intra and extra-institutional competition (between faculties/schools of the same HEI or between HEIs).

4. Institutional Actors

The final group of obstacles has to do with HEIs' actors, in general (e.g. academic community), and academics and students, in particular. In this context, special emphasis (385 references) is given to some academics' (individual or group) characteristics; issues related to their training/qualification; to their interaction as a group; the multiple activities (teaching, research and management) they have to perform and the current workload; and their position and progression in the academic career. Along with the

obstacles related with 'governance and management' (395 references), the ones linked to 'academics' (385 references) emerge, for respondents, as the most important ones hindering quality and its assurance.

More residually, other two types of obstacles are identified, linked to students (44 references) and the academic community (21 references). Academics emphasise some students' characteristics as factors hindering quality, namely their average low quality academic background, lack of attendance to classes, low interest and absence of study methods. They also refer aspects connected with the relation between different institutional groups (especially academic and non-academic staff), the quality of their work and/or some of their characteristics.

Conclusions

Respondents put forward several obstacles preventing quality and its assurance, related to HEIs' external context, their internal dynamic, mission and actors. Most of these obstacles lie in the micro-processes taking place in institutions, with those linked to HEIs' dynamic (930 references) and, more specifically, to institutional governance and management (395 references), and to institutional actors (480 references), namely academics (385 references), as the ones assuming a greater preponderance.

These are very interesting findings especially when compared with a previous analysis of Portuguese academics' views on the factors contributing to quality in higher education (Rosa, 2012). Indeed, this analysis shows that quality enablers mainly relate to institutional actors (762 references) and, among these, to academics (593 references). Although in a less systematic way than in the case of obstacles quality further emerges as enabled by some characteristics of HEIs' governance and management (184 references). These factors are referred to immediately after those related to teaching and learning (235 references). Therefore it seems that institutional actors, and more specifically academic staff (their individual and group characteristics, qualifications, interaction, activity, etc.), as well as HEIs' governance and management, might act simultaneously as factors promoting and hindering HE quality and its assurance.

At least to our knowledge, there are no other studies that we can use to corroborate or refute the previous findings, which indicate the need for more research about the obstacles to quality in HEIs. In fact, most of the studies on academics' views about quality refer to their adherence or resistance to QA mechanisms and processes, not focusing on the factors enabling or hindering HE quality. If more knowledge is developed on these factors, it will be more likely that QA mechanisms (both internal and external) can be designed as effective quality improvement tools. It is possible that the full implementation of ESG part 1 by HEIs may play a role in this respect. By proposing a set of standards and guidelines for the development of internal quality assurance systems, the ESG might constitute a step forward towards the prevention and disabling of many of the identified barriers to quality.

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Questions for discussion:

- **What strategies can HEIs implement in order to overcome the obstacles to quality identified by academics?**
- **To what extent can the ESG implementation be one effective strategy?**
- **How to promote an effective involvement of academics in HEIs' quality improvement mechanisms?**

Annex 1

Figure 1 – Dimensions and categories of analysis for obstacles to quality