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Broadening the scope of QA

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Proposal

Title: Quality assurance of third mission activities in Portuguese universities

Abstract (150 words max):

Since 2009, Portuguese higher education institutions have been developing their own internal quality assurance systems and policies as a result of the reforms of higher education quality assurance in Europe and Portugal. This paper analyses how far Portuguese universities, within the remit of their internal quality assurance systems, define and employ mechanisms and procedures in order to assess the quality of their third mission activities. The analysis was conducted on documents submitted by institutions to the Portuguese quality assurance agency (A3ES) under the institutional evaluation process. Findings suggest that although the analysed Portuguese institutions apparently embrace the third mission, the quality assurance of this core activity is still in an embryonic stage of development. This suggests that quality assurance systems need to be developed so as to integrate the various core missions of an institution (e.g. teaching and learning; research and third mission), ensuring they receive similar levels of consideration.

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? No.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Introduction

Over the past decade, Portuguese higher education institutions have been developing their own internal quality assurance systems and policies as a result of the reforms of the quality assurance system (Law 38/2007). The purpose of internal quality assurance systems is to improve the institutions' core missions: teaching and learning, research and activities related to community engagement. However, extant studies suggest that these missions do not receive equal attention in terms of their monitoring and improvement (Manatos et al. 2017b) and that higher education institutions are still far from achieving the integration of these different missions as far as quality assurance is concerned (Kettunen 2012). A recent systematic literature review (Manatos et al. 2017b) revealed that the third mission is the most neglected dimension. Against this background, this paper examines the extent to which Portuguese universities, within the remit of their internal quality assurance systems, define and employ mechanisms and procedures in order to assess the quality of their third mission activities.

Third mission and quality assurance

Higher education's relevance for the society, its proactive engagement with the community and its impact on the surrounding region are relatively recent concerns, triggered especially by the advent of the knowledge society and the importance attributed to knowledge as an engine of social and economic progress (Pinheiro et al. 2015). Higher education institutions' key role as knowledge producers and transmitters has elevated their status to 'primary institutions', that is, institutions that fulfil a central purpose in society (Etzkowitz 2003). According to Etzkowitz (2003), industry and government used to be such primary institutions, whereas universities used to occupy a secondary status.

The knowledge-based society reconfigured academic institutions as a source of regional economic development and broadened their missions to include this purpose (the case of Silicon Valley is an example in this sense). Therefore, higher education institutions nowadays integrate a triple helix of university-industry-government relations as an influential actor and equal partner (Etzkowitz 2003). This purpose is often designated as higher education's 'third mission'. As the term suggests, it comes after teaching and learning (the first mission) and after research (the second mission). The integration of economic and social development with teaching and research could be considered as 'the second



academic revolution', after the first academic revolution which transformed the university into a teaching and research institution (Etzkowitz 2003). The third mission implies the engagement of universities in business-related activities, in local and regional development, economic growth, and societal development in general (Laredo 2007).

However, these conceptual transformations do not always have equal resonance in practice. According to Kohtamaki (2015), third mission activities lack proper incentive structures at both the national and institutional levels, preventing the successful institutionalization of such activities. There can also be academic resistance since third mission endeavours can be perceived as non-academic or illegitimate (Watermeyer 2015). A likely explanation is the fact that the third mission is a latecomer and often sits uncomfortably alongside the other dimensions of higher education. Additionally, there is a need to develop methods and indicators which could measure the performance and the impact of activities related to knowledge transfer, entrepreneurship, alliances with industry and so on (Montesinos et al. 2008; Piva and Rossi-Lamastra 2013). For instance, Montesinos et al. (2008, 267-270) propose some indicators for lifelong learning and entrepreneurship as dimensions of society engagement. In the case of the former, they propose the number of hours or days per year academics commit to it, the number of courses organised each year, the number of academics involved in lifelong learning activities or the number of participants. As for the indicators that could measure entrepreneurship and innovation, these could be the number of spin-offs/start-ups created per year, the number of students trained in the entrepreneurial spirit, the number of companies located in science and technology parks, or the number of international patents registered per year. Piva and Rossi-Lamastra (2013) make recommendations about the evaluation of university-industry alliances, suggesting that any performance evaluation systems should distinguish between the different stages that a university-industry partnership implies (e.g. inputs, in-process activities, outputs and outcomes) and propose different indicators for each stage. According to them, it is not enough to evaluate the satisfaction of project members with the relationship. They argue for an ongoing monitoring of alliance activities, which requires 'evaluation of the resources committed in the alliance at each stage, the costs engendered by the alliance, the results of alliance activities, and the competences that the company has developed through the alliance' (Piva and Rossi-Lamastra 2013, 50).

The relative novelty of community engagement is also reflected in the fact that quality assurance activities still pay little attention to third mission activities (Kettunen 2012; Manatos et al. 2017a, 2017b; Srikanthan and Dalrymple 2002). As a result, an argument for the integration of the quality assurance of the different missions is found in several studies (Kettunen 2012; Manatos et al. 2017a, 2017b; Srikanthan and Dalrymple 2002). According to Kettunen (2012, p. 520), integration 'is a way to make a whole, or to unify disparate activities or parts... An integrated system works in conjunction with previously incompatible elements'. In an integrated approach, the three key missions of higher education – learning and teaching, research and third mission – are treated as processes (Kettunen 2012; Manatos et al. 2017b; Srikanthan and Dalrymple 2002). To these, one can add the support processes which cover administrative services as well as other support processes and activities (Manatos et al. 2017b).

However, the process approach – implying that the processes, their mutual interaction and management are interrelated – has not yet reached a strong position in higher education (Kettunen 2012). Several studies have reported that quality assurance in higher education pays primary attention to the process of learning and teaching and to students' educational experiences (Kettunen 2012; Manatos et al. 2017a, 2017b). The systematic literature review conducted by Manatos et al (2017b) found that the support processes are also a dimension which receives due attention (e.g. support activities for students, facilities and infrastructure or student counselling). Processes related to research come next, whereas the third mission is the dimension receiving least attention. This unequal attention to the different processes is due, at least in Europe, to the focus of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) on the learning and teaching dimension (Manatos et al. 2017a) and to the fact that the ESG have been used as a reference framework by European institutions to devise their internal quality assurance systems and by quality assurance agencies in their assessment and accreditation activities. According to Manatos et al (2017a), some European accreditation agencies are now starting to address this gap by introducing new standards and guidelines concerning research and scholarship, third mission and internationalisation.

This is also the case of the Portuguese agency for assessment and accreditation of higher education – A3ES (Santos, 2011). Thus, since A3ES guidelines address all institutional processes, internal systems



of Portuguese institutions generally make reference to all processes. However, they tend to be highly focused on teaching and learning (Cardoso et al. 2017), which is evident in the fact that QA processes and mechanisms as well as information systems are mainly oriented towards learning and teaching. However, while Cardoso et al. (2017) focused on a limited number of self-assessment reports which were at that time submitted to A3ES for certification of internal quality assurance systems, this study extends its scope to all Portuguese universities, public or private, either certified by A3ES or not. The purpose of this study is to understand whether the third mission activities that institutions refer to are actually matched by corresponding quality assurance activities. In other words, are there mechanisms and procedures for the quality assurance of declared third mission activities?

Data and methods

The study resorts to the analysis of documents provided by the A3ES on all the Portuguese institutions of a university nature, public and private, totalling 36. Besides universities, there are institutions in Portugal which cannot use the name 'university', as this is restricted to institutions which offer at least three doctoral programmes in three different disciplinary areas. Nonetheless, they have a university institute status. Unlike polytechnics, which have a more vocational nature, universities have been classified as 'ivory towers', having the traditional missions of teaching and research, and searching, in a disinterested way, for 'pure' knowledge. Since the third mission implies engagement with the community and an 'interested' search for knowledge, universities have been, in principle, more challenged than polytechnics to change their traditional role and have had to make a greater effort to adapt to it. This is the reason why the choice rested on universities/university institutes.

The documents include the institutional self-assessment reports submitted in 2017 to the Portuguese accreditation agency for the purpose of institutional assessment and accreditation, as well as the quality manuals of the respective institutions. The first set of documents included a section which elicited information on third mission activities and also a section on the organization of the internal quality assurance system. The quality manuals gave additional information on the coverage of internal quality assurance. The analysis was conducted with the software MAXQDA and used a grounded theory method adapted from Strauss and Corbin (1990). This involved open coding and selective coding. During the former, the data were broken down to yield categories. The codes and relationships between categories were constantly cross-checked against the data to ensure consistency. Then, selective coding generated the final categories and the final analytical framework. The framework allowed the systematisation of information around the following two dimensions: a) third mission activities institutions declared to be engaged in; b) quality assurance mechanisms and procedures employed to third mission activities. The aim was to find out whether these different third mission activities were effectively monitored and assessed within the internal quality assurance system with a view to continuous improvement.

Findings

All institutions provided information on the array of third mission activities they were undertaking. Irrespective of their motivations being intrinsically determined or simply responding to requirements set by external assessment, this finding suggests that Portuguese universities have embraced the engagement with the surrounding environment as one of their core missions, as literature in other contexts also suggests (see special issue of the *Journal European Journal of Higher Education on Institutionalizing Universities' Third Mission*, edited by Pinheiro et al., 2015). Under the dimension *third mission activities*, the following major categories emerged, in order of importance: collaboration with local/national organisations; services coherent with the institution's mission; events for the community; knowledge transfer; cultural/artistic/sports activities; lifelong learning; social responsibility/volunteering; entrepreneurship and career development; and alumni.

Some differences were noted between the public and the private universities, with a higher intensity of the activities of knowledge transfer, cultural/artistic/sports activities, regional development, and entrepreneurship and career development in the public universities; and a higher engagement with activities related to lifelong learning, services coherent with the institutional mission, collaboration with local and national organisations, events for the community and social responsibility/volunteering among the private universities. Some of these differences are understandable given the fact that public universities are much less dependent on the generation of own revenue, given the state funding they



benefit from and their greater capacity of attracting higher education candidates (Tavares 2013; Teixeira 2012). In this sense, it is not surprising that the services coherent with the institution's mission, generally provided for remuneration, are more prominent in the case of private universities. For example, one private institution specialised in Health Sciences sells health services to the public:

The clinics provide not only oral health care (dentistry), for adults and children, but also appointments and treatments, and complementary diagnostic tests in the area of Nutrition, Physical Therapy, Psychology, Speech Therapy, Cardiology and Pulmonology. These activities allow an exchange of experiences and increase the range of training opportunities, facilitating and completing the overall preparation of students, as well as developing an important social support action to the inhabitants of the Municipality and neighbouring areas.

Similarly, the fact that public universities are spread throughout the Portuguese territory, compared to the concentration of private universities in the great urban centres (Teixeira 2012), explains the higher incidence of regional development activities in public institutions. The fact that the research dimension is generally stronger in public universities (compared to private ones which tend to be more teaching-focused) also justifies why knowledge transfer activities are more visible in the case of the public sector. For example, the report of an inland public university states:

As a consequence of its research work, [University] has established wide-ranging strategic partnerships with companies. Furthermore, in order to establish contact networks and facilitate the development of partnerships, [University] regularly participates in technology transfer networks and in brokerage events and sector fairs.

Considering that the study aimed to assess the correspondence between declared third mission activities and their respective quality assurance mechanisms and procedures, the same categories were replicated under the quality assurance dimension. However, the level of detail encountered in the description of third mission activities was hardly found in the description of the respective quality assurance mechanisms explained in the quality manuals. This occurred despite the fact that the majority of institutions stated that the third mission represented a principle or a reference point underpinning their quality assurance system. This may reveal a lack of incentives to institutionalise the third mission (Kohtamaki 2012), which is still an undeveloped process in terms of quality assurance (Kettunen 2012; Manatos et al. 2017a, 2017b).

Generally, there is no information on the concrete procedures and tools used to monitor the different individual activities with a view to improvement. Instead, several quality manuals limit themselves to repeating information on third mission activities they engage with, but say nothing or little on their quality assurance. This means that although institutions are aware that the third mission is an area which needs their attention, they have not yet reached the point of developing specific procedures to monitor its quality (Montesinos et al. 2008).

Information is generally restricted to a few paragraphs, standing in stark contrast to the description of quality assurance of learning and teaching (Cardoso et al. 2017; Kettunen 2012; Manatos et al. 2017a, 2017b) which, in general, is very detailed. When information exists, quality manuals make rather general statements on the comparison between annual activity plans and annual reports to verify whether the intended objectives have been achieved, or attribute responsibility for the monitoring of third mission activities to specific units/roles. The quality manual of a public institution states:

In this context, the annual results, presented according to the Activity Plan and their compliance with the goals and objectives established for the same period by the Vice-Rector in charge of this area, are analysed based on the description of actions and initiatives taken by the different departments and units responsible for the articulation with the outside world.

In very few cases, the quality manuals explain that work is underway to mainstream and standardise procedures for the quality assurance of third mission activities. Only one institution (a large public university with a certified internal quality assurance system) describes quality assurance mechanisms and procedures discriminating between each of its third mission activities. To the other extreme, the quality manuals of a few institutions (generally private ones) give no information altogether on the quality



assurance of third mission activities, while two others (also private) state that the quality assurance of the third mission dimension is under development.

Conclusions

Summing up findings suggest that although the third mission is apparently embraced by the analysed Portuguese institutions, the quality assurance of this core activity is still in an embryonic stage of development. This is likely related to the fact that the third mission is a latecomer (Etzkowitz 2003) among universities' activities and methods and indicators to measure the performance and the impact of such activities are yet to be developed (Montesinos et al. 2008; Piva and Rossi-Lamastra 2013). Thus, the integration of the different processes in one quality assurance system and its expansion beyond teaching and learning (see Manatos et al. 2017a, 2017b) are a next step to be considered in the further development of internal quality assurance systems.

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Discussion questions:

What is the practice in different countries (represented by the audience) regarding the quality assurance of third mission activities? Can you share any good practices in this sense?

What incentives could help HEIs to develop mechanisms to assure the quality of third mission activities?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 24 July 2018 to QAForum@eua.eu. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.