

## SEMINARIO EUROPEO DE DIFUSIÓN PROYECTO ALFA

“Aseguramiento de la Calidad: políticas públicas y gestión universitaria”

Barcelona, 11, 12 y 13 de enero de 2012

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The existence of quality assurance systems in higher education institutions, in Portugal, must be understood and articulated with the acceptance of the Bologna Reform and its consequences by the State and the HEIs.

It is true that previously in accordance to the principles set out in the first law on the Assessment of Higher Education in 1994 the assessment activities of higher education were developed under the responsibility of the Foundation of the Portuguese Universities (1995 and 2000) and the National Council for the Assessment of Higher Education (2000 and 2005).

In both cases, the impact of these processes on the HEIs was virtually none, and it was globally considered as incipient and with no prospect of continuity.

Later while it became clear that the HEIs in Portugal would be compelled to take the necessary measures to meet the requirements of the Bologna Process, it became consensual that new times were coming to the universities in Portugal. Some people wanted the changes, others less so.

I remember the uncomfortable feeling that at that time the Universidade Lusófona—that I represent and that was the largest non-state university (currently, the 8th in Portugal regarding the number of students and members of the academic staff with a PhD)—created amongst the most conservative sectors of the Portuguese academia when we published two books in defence of the Bologna Reform under the coordination of the then Rector Professor Fernando dos Santos Neves.

“Who is Afraid of the Bologna Declaration?” (2005) and “Adimplenda Bologna” (It Is Mandatory to Fulfil Bologna!)” (2006).

And our defence of the Bologna Reform and the obvious introduction of measures for the assessment and quality assurance were as determined as were the doubts we had about the way both were going to be implemented in practical terms.

Thus, in 2006, the *Law-Decree n° 74/2006, of 24 March approved the new legal system of degrees and diplomas of higher educated and consecrated for the first time*

*the accreditation of study cycles and higher education institutions (adaptation to Bologna).*

The “Law of Quality” Law No. 38/2007, of 16 August, published in 2007, approved the legal framework for the assessment of quality in higher education and already announced the forthcoming creation of an assessment and accreditation agency aimed at ensuring the quality in higher education.

And thus, we came to the Law-Decree n. ° 369/2007, of 5 November that established the Agency for the Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education also regulating some relevant aspects of the accreditation system of higher education institutions and study cycles.

This Agency named A3ES after the beginning of its operation analysed 330 proposals for new programmes in 2009, and 431 in 2010. These proposals included state and non-state higher education institutions.

In terms of preliminary accreditation, the A3ES analysed 4376 applications of the 5200 study cycles registered in the country.

The first assessment processes began in 2010 and 2011 and they included self-assessment combined with external assessment, which is the Agency’s responsibility. We expect the first results in February this year. Thus, it is now complicated to assess the performance of the Agency itself. For now, we just know that we have already paid **xxxxx** Euros in 2011 and we will pay **xxxxx** in 2012.

We hope that the present cycle of assessments continues and thus a true continuous improvement process of Higher Education begins in Portugal. The most important is to understand the dynamics of the institutions and programmes, not just the photos at the time of the assessment.

We have concerns regarding three issues that were presented to the Portuguese Parliament in a petition of which we were the first signatories.

- 1) That the rules of appointment, composition and functioning of the Board of Curators and Board of Directors, as main organ of A3ES, be reviewed in order to ensure with full transparency the principle of independence, established in the Law-Decree n. 369/2007, 5 of November, and what has been established on this matter by the European reference body, recognized by the Government itself, that is the case of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) regarding *third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders*

- 2) *The creation of the legal conditions that* enable the establishment in Portugal of an independent Agency This Agency shall offer full warranty of exemption, transparency and independence together with respect for the framework provided by the ENQA.
- 3) That the Higher Education institutions may ask that their institutional and/or study cycles assessment is undertaken by any European Assessment Institution that is recognized as a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA ), and that the respective outcomes and consequences must be fully recognized for all purposes, both by the MSHE and by the Higher Education Institutions that choose to resort to such international assessment

Naturally, the Agency, the Minister and the Council of Rectors of state Universities do not consider these issues relevant and, for now, we must renew and maintain our concerns on the agenda, particularly the establishment of an independent Agency and the internationalization of the free access to the European Assessment Agencies.

Regarding the project "Quality Assurance: Public Policies and University Management", we must mention that at this early stage of the assessment processes of the programmes there is a permanent need for the evaluation of the processes themselves, aiming at the improvement of their flexibility and the clarification of objectives.

For Portugal, the results of this study are particularly important since the effective implementation of a quality assurance system is recent and both the Agency and the HEIs need to consolidate concepts and ways of working.

We acknowledge some particular results of the Project:

1 – The difficulty in measuring the real impact of the implementation of quality assurance processes – the qualitative nature of the impact measurement is highlighted, there is to say, the clear perception of the positive impact is highlighted, but there is a lack of quantitative data that allow for a scale of impact.

- Initially, the HEIs dedicated to the formalization of quality mechanisms and instruments that in many cases were already being used to control some processes. The HEIs feel now the need to use them in an integrated manner and show it to the exterior – in external audits and before all the stakeholders.

– on the other hand, only now the HEIs worry about the establishment of metrics to assess the HEIs position in each of the quality items subject to internal and external assessment.

2 – The recognition that the HEIs, regardless of the legal requirements, takes on quality and quality assurance mechanisms as a way to respond to a big challenge: to ensure their long-term survival in an increasingly competitive environment where competition for resources and the requirements of the stakeholders are a source of increasing pressure.

As any organization, the Higher Education Institutions' main objective is to meet the needs and expectations of their customers (both in aspects of teaching, research or extension activities), ensuring an appropriate work environment for its academic staff, students and employees.

This growing need to serve the community, better than the competitors, demands innovation in working methods and techniques and new decision-making perspectives based on equality goals.

The implementation of robust quality assurance processes is particularly important in the higher education institutions since they are services institutions and spaces for the generation and dissemination of knowledge in society.

It is now time to learn from the work produced. By presenting our own reality, we submit to you some issues focusing on new training activities.

Due to their interdisciplinary nature, HEIs interact with a greater number of society segments than any other organization on its own.

On the other hand, they are multidimensional institutions, there is to say, they involve a wide range of functions and activities: teaching and academic programmes, research and academic careers, human resources, students, infrastructures and academia.

HEIs are structured to respond to the labour world, to the scientific and the academic world and their quality is the greatest expression of their highest respect and sense of mission to society the same way the lack of quality is questioned and looked upon with suspicion.

The challenges presently faced by HEIs occur in highly dynamic scenarios.

Faced with new paradigms, quality assurance systems position themselves as central in the lives of the HEIs.

- The improvement of teaching, research and service delivery;

- The provision of public information and transparency to students and the labour market;
- As an instrument of accountability to the government and society;
- The preparation of mechanisms for the accreditation of study cycles, programmes and institutions;

Society has an expectation regarding the quality of the services provided by the HEIs and a growing awareness that continuous improvements are necessary to achieve and ensure a high scientific, economic and social development of all.

However, universities have still to position themselves as institutions that provide services and thus act as real providers of services.

In recent years, a new area of research and teaching has been taking shape. It is generally known as SSME Service Science Management and Engineering. This area integrates different areas of knowledge that contribute to the dynamics of the services sector, whatever their field of application, transport, health, entertainment, computing and of course education and research.

**Service Science, Management and Engineering (SSME)** has become a growing multi-disciplinary research and academic effort integrating computer science, engineering, management, social and cognitive sciences, aiming at improving productivity, quality and innovation rates across the services sector and is currently developed with the highest excellence levels in many universities and research centres in many countries.

As is the case of the Department of Service and Information Systems Engineering (ESSI) of the *Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya* that focuses precisely on the common ground between service science, management and engineering (SSME) and information systems and technology, created in November 2009.

But everything happens as if the universities hold knowledge of services but in practice refuse to apply that knowledge to improve their performance.

Nowadays Universities need to understand the meaning of the approach that will be able to recognise, support and sustain them as service providers, in the same way that specialists in services, researchers and academics, need to receive a request from Universities to reflect specifically on the specificities of these institutions which, in many ways, are socially and economically central in the contemporary world.

In brief, I wish to stress two issues:

Firstly, we believe that a line of training guided to the HEIs and the Agencies should take on the need for a higher level of knowledge regarding a broader and more inclusive vision of what services are effectively in the contemporary society. Secondly, we also think that studies on the integration of the Agencies need to be carried out in order to allow each HEI to use freely the assessment and quality assurance services (programmes and institutions) of any member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) in what concerns the European universities. Obviously, we think this principle may be valid in similar processes in Latin America universities and universities belonging to the Higher Education Lusophone Space (HELS). In this context, it would be obvious that the States should recognize the result of such processes for all purposes. This would enable the institutions to take advantage of the experience of each Agency according to their particular features while fostering a true international cooperation.

To conclude, I dare to intend that the awareness that HEIs are providers of services, they should be treated as such, and that they act in a world full of questions is the foundation of a new awareness that will lead to a greater social responsibility exercise that ultimately should sustain the permanent dynamics of all universities.