An Account of the Historical Evolution and Future Prospects of the Portuguese Higher Education Evaluation System

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Abstract - This paper deals with the evolution and the announced ministerial new model for the Portuguese Higher Education Evaluation System. It will be developed in three main parts: the first one, a short description of what the Portuguese evaluation system has been; the second one, some criticisms at the system; the third one, the main lines of the governmental new project. The evaluation of the study programmes started in 1993 in all public universities and was extended to the whole system of Higher Education through the Decreelaw nr. 205/98, published on the 11th July 1998. The National Council for the Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions (CNAVES) was created in 1998. Some criticisms have arisen in relation to the evaluation practices and results. Now, the Portuguese Government intends to introduce a European dimension of the assessment. Three types of evaluation are announced: a) a global evaluation of the all Portuguese Higher Education System; b) the evaluation of the Portuguese Quality System of The Higher Education; and c) the institutional evaluation.

Reasons for the Evaluation

The first Portuguese university, the University of Coimbra, was created more than seven centuries ago, in 1290. In the first half of the Twentieth Century, three universities – the Universities of Lisbon and Oporto, in 1911, and the Technical University of Lisbon, in 1930- were created. All of a sudden, in the 1970 decade, eleven public universities, more than twenty polytechnic institutes and dozens of private Higher Education schools have been founded. After the Revolution of the 25th April 1974, all the Portuguese society changed drastically from a centralised and autocratic regime to a democratic and rooted participated system, with the University in the centre of the libertarian movement which then took place. Demands of the students and of the younger lecturers for the replacement of the traditional authoritarian rules at the University by a modern representative democracy were then of a paramount importance.

The number of students has increased exponentially in few years, jumping from some forty thousands in the early 1970s to more than three hundred thousands in the 1980s. The strong of increase of the number of students from the middle and working classes eroded the exclusive character of university education. The explosion of this plethora of Higher Education Institutions has not been duly prepared, organised, and accompanied.

Then, in the 1980s, the Academia, political bodies, and the Society at large became aware that the Higher Education System was at a drift, disqualification was growing, and an economical misrule was taking place. The growing worries and apprehensions have been felt and interpreted by the Parliament, the Government, and the Universities. In consequence, adequate legislation has been passed, inspired and accompanied by various practices and experiences.

As a matter of fact, the assessment of the Higher Education System started in 1993, led by the Foundation of the Portuguese Universities (Fundação das Universidades Portuguêsas – FUP). It is known as the 1st Cycle of Evaluation and has taken into consideration only the courses of Licenciatura taught in the public university sector. This
1st Cycle had 6 phases. In all these phases Engineering courses have been assessed. The 2nd Cycle Evaluation has started under the responsibility of the National Council for the Evaluation of Higher Education (Conselho Nacional de Avaliação do Ensino Superior - CNAVES). This 2nd Cycle has now come to a term: it includes public and private universities with common guidelines and public and private polytechnics with also their set of common guidelines.

The Published Legislation

The evaluation, up to now led by CNAVES, has its legal support on the following documents:

- The Law nr. 46/86, of 14th October, known as the Law of the Bases of the Educational System, which establishes that all the Portuguese System of Education must be continuously evaluated;
- The Law nr. 108/88, of 24th September, known as the Law of the Autonomy of the Universities, which recognizes to be the quality of teaching, research and services to the community of a great national priority and compels the government to present to the Parliament a proposal of Law on the evaluation and monitoring of the Universities;
- The Law nr. 38/94, of 21st November, the Law of Higher Education Evaluation, where the basis of the evaluation system for the public and private universities and polytechnics are defined;
- A protocol signed on the 19th June 1995 between the Ministry of Education, the Conference of Rectors of the Portuguese Universities (Conselho de Reitores das Universidades Portuguesas – CRUP), and the Foundation of the Portuguese Universities (FUP); and
- The Decree-Law nr. 204/98, of 11th July, which organizes and regulates the above referred Law nr.38/94, and creates the National Committee for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CNAVES).

Principles and Objectives of the Quality Assessment

The main guidelines of Quality Assessment, proclaimed by Law, are:

- The Higher Education Quality Assessment System is unitary, based on the methodological and institutional parallelism between the Public and Private Sectors;
- The regime of Higher Education Quality Assessment is based on the independent and impartial character of the Evaluating Agency, as a guarantee of the reliability of the results;
- The Evaluating Agency must define mechanisms and procedures that lead to impartial and independent judgements and conclusions.

This system was set on the following principles:

- The institutions own the evaluation system;
- It is based in self-assessment and peer review;
- It is cyclical;
- It is nationwide;
- Teaching and research are evaluated separately;
- The reports of the expert commissions are made public;
- The Faculties/Departments to be assessed have nothing to say about the composition of the external evaluation committees;
- There is no link with subsequent funding.

As far as the objectives of the Quality Assessment System, the following ones can be listed:

- To promote and improve the quality of teaching and research activities;
- To stimulate the self-regulation based on quality, as a need of substituting the detailed regulation beforehand by control afterwards
- To inform and make clear to the educational community and the Portuguese society at large on the performance of each Institution about the various domains, namely the scientific and pedagogical ones.

The Process of Evaluation

An evaluation always includes both an internal and an external stage. Observing a questionnaire, the institution being evaluated prepares its own internal evaluation and analyses its strengths, weaknesses and future prospects. The external stage consists of a peer review that includes a site visit and results in the external report, which is only made public after a contradictory hearing of the assessed institution. The evaluation involves a quantitative and qualitative approach, with the statistical data used as a basis for analysis and for nationwide homogeneous treatment.

The up-to-now process of evaluation was established by CNAVES with the agreement of all the Institutions and it goes as follows:

- Firstly CNAVES announces that the evaluation of the Courses of a given disciplinary area will take place in the following year;
- The Faculties/Departments or Institutes prepare the Self-Evaluation Report (Relatório de Auto-Avaliação);
- The Report is distributed among the members of the External Evaluation Committee (EEC), who usually request additional information;
- A 2-3 days site visit takes places by a Visiting Committee, integrated by three to five members of the EEC;
- The chair of the Committee gives the preliminary comments and judgements at the end of the visit and, afterwards, an interim report with the findings of the Visiting Committee is written;
- Finally the EEC approves its final report, which is then sent to the corresponding University for a contradictory process

The self-evaluation report contains the following chapters: a) Genesis and evolution of the programme; b) Structure and content of the programme; c) Curriculum organisation; d) Learning and teaching environment; e) Intake; f) Success rates; g) Quality of the graduates; h) Effectiveness of organisation and staff qualities; i) The
facilities; j) Internationalisation and external contacts; k) Internal quality assessment.

It has been assumed and already empirically proved that the self-evaluation reports are the cornerstone for the quality improvement: through self-evaluation, universities become aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and as far as what was at their reach they started to eliminate their weaknesses.

The external quality assessment is assured by a Visiting Committee, which has three to five members who are experts in the disciplinary area of the Course. There is a guidebook, issued by CNAVES, to help the Visiting Committee in fixing the terms of reference and in formulating the external report. During the visit, the Committee interviews all the constituencies involved in the educational programme. Basically, the Committee has: a) to form an opinion on the basis of information supplied by the faculty and by means of discussions held on the spot; and b) to make suggestions on quality improvement. The structure of the external reports and the relevant data are prescribed in such a way that the courses of the different Universities can be compared.

The Visiting Committees do not pass a single, summary judgement about the quality of a course. It was understood that the multi-dimensional nature of the concept of quality implies that only general and balanced reports could be issued.

**Criticisms at the Present Evaluation System**

So far evaluation has only been used for study programmes. Although the law also implies institutional evaluation, no steps were yet made in this direction, with the exception of some pilot exercises. The present evaluation of study programmes has been well received both by institutions and the public at large, although there are demands for increased clarity of the conclusions of the evaluation reports, thus allowing for further transparency and comparability of the evaluation’s results. Within the present context of great multiplicity of higher education institutions, it is urgent to establish a system for evaluation/accreditation of other academic degrees, such as masters and Ph. Ds. Criticisms at the present evaluation system come from different origins: some from Higher Education institutions, others from professors who did not participate in the process and, yet, others from individualities outside Higher Education.

Although some of the criticisms can be interest biased, many others deserve to be respected and seriously considered. Next, some of them are listed:

- The assessment system is not yet comprehensive, with separate education and research evaluations;
- The results of the institutional evaluations as well as the progress reports must be more visible and widely publicized;
- Some parameters and items must be clarified with assignment of minimum values in such a way that comparisons can be made between different courses;
- The non-existence of good data systems to allow potential candidates to Higher Education to make informed and rational choices;
- Lack of indicators and parameters, which, in the future, must be integrated in a data set accessible to the public;
- The lack of good quantitative information from the institutions;
- The need of effective and clear articulation between evaluation and inspection;
- The need to make clear the relation and interdependence between Higher Education institutions, the evaluation system and the professional organizations;
- Rationalization and increase of the financial resources in order to include foreign experts more frequently;
- Consideration of the market but respecting the independence and creativity of the Institutions;
- More attention to the European dimension or even to the world dimension of the assessment process and results.

**The Announced Governmental New Model for the Evaluation**

In the Bologna Declaration (1999) the European Ministers of Education committed themselves to establish the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. The Bologna Declaration encourages, among other things, the European co-operation in quality assurance of Higher Education with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies. Other important goals agreed in Bologna are: easily comparable degrees, a system based on two main degree cycles (subsequently a third cycle has been included), a common European system of credits and mobility of students and teachers.

In 2001, the European Ministers of Education met in Prague and agreed to collaborate in establishing a common framework of reference for quality assurance, which would directly work towards the establishment of the European quality assurance framework by 2010. In the Berlin communiqué of 19th September 2003, the Ministers of the Bologna Process signatory states invited the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) ‘through its members, in cooperation with the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and The National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB), to develop ‘an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance’ and to ‘explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies, and to report back through the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) to Ministers in 2005. It must be emphasised that the report is no more than a first step in what is likely to be a long and possibly arduous route to the establishment of a widely shared set of underpinning values, expectations and good practice in relation to quality and its assurance by institutions and agencies across EHEA. The consistency of quality assurance across EHEA will be improved by the use of agreed standards and guidelines. The ministers affirmed that the quality of higher education had proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education
Area. They committed themselves to supporting further development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level and stressed the need to develop mutually shared criteria and methodologies on quality assurance. In the Bergen meeting of May 2005, the European Ministers of Education adopted the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, drafted by ENQA. The Ministers committed themselves to introducing the proposed model for peer review of quality assurance agencies on a national basis. They also welcomed the principle of a European register of quality assurance agencies based on national review and asked that the practicalities of its implementation would be further developed by ENQA in co-operation with EUA, EURASHE, and ESIB, with a report back to the Ministers through BFUG.

This European movement was considered in the Resolution of the Portuguese Council of Ministers nr.67/2004, 29th May 2004, Strategic Orientations for the Restructure of the Portuguese Network of Higher Education Institutions. Accepting the results of a study for the reforms of higher education, Bologna, An Agenda for Excellence (2004), this Resolution points out that the best way to regulate and rationalize organic units and graduation courses, within the framework of constitutional freedom rights, is through the implementation of an accreditation system, based on quality indicators for teaching and research, to be analysed and measured by an independent entity, the Academic Accreditation Agency for Quality. Two fundamental ideas should be accentuated: co-operation at European level and co-operation for regional development. The following basic principles should be adopted in relation to the efficiency and credibility of the quality assurance system:

- The definition of criteria, linked to strategic multi-annual programmes;
- The measurability of the performance of the institutions and organic units;
- The publication of the results achieved in teaching and research; and
- A follow-up of European benchmarking, in the construction of the European higher education and European research dimensions.

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- Systematic and continuous improvement of the quality related processes and practices; and
- Better management of evaluative processes to ascertain the relationship between quality assurance systems and educational outcomes.

It was thought that the best way to regulate and rationalize Portuguese Higher Education, in terms of the excessive number of institutions, organic units and graduation courses, within the framework of constitutional freedom rights, is through the implementation of an accreditation system, based on quality indicators for teaching and research. The introduction of platforms or centres of competitiveness for economic and social development, taking due account of administrative boroughs of the Portuguese territory and without losing the global concept of Portugal as a distinctive integrated European region, should be consistent in order to exploit emergent and future activities and the evolution of existing social and economic clusters. A strategic vision is decisive to the new roles of higher education institutions in a knowledge society.

These platforms of knowledge should have a global strategic governance involving enterprises, universities, polytechnic institutes and other entrepreneurial and cultural entities. Bearing these concepts in mind, the following basic principles should be adopted in relation to the efficiency and credibility of the quality assurance system:

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To establish adequate regulation and accreditation mechanisms for Higher Education is necessary, in the first place, to define a set of clear and rigorous requisites to be fulfilled in order to qualify as a particular type of institution or to award a specific degree. The requisites to be met by universities, polytechnic institutes and, also, university and polytechnic schools follow the same guidelines, except in quantitative features.

The directives of the Portuguese Minister of Research, Technology and Higher Education assume the European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions. Thus, the Dispatch nr.484/2006, of the Portuguese Minister of Science, Technology and Higher Education, published in the Official Journal (Diário da República) on the 9th January of 2006, determines three types of evaluation to be applied to the Portuguese System of Higher Education:

- A global evaluation of the all System of Higher Education, led by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD);
- The evaluation of the system of guarantee of the quality of the Higher Education System, under the guidance of ENQA with the cooperation of CNAVES; and
- A programme of voluntary institutional evaluation, internationally based, conducted by the EUA, in collaboration with EURASHE.
The global evaluation, led by OECD, has the following main objectives:

- Evaluation of the systemic performance of the all Portuguese Higher Education;
- Evaluation of the mechanisms of entry and exit of the System;
- Analysis of the role of scientific research in Higher Education;
- Evaluation of the government structure of the institutions;
- Evaluation of the financial mechanisms;
- Counselling on the processes of accreditation and evaluation;
- Evaluation of the interaction between the Higher Education System and the economic and social agents; and
- Analysis and counselling on the practices of internationalisation of the Higher Education System.

The evaluation of the Portuguese guarantee system of the quality in Higher Education, conducted by ENQA, in coordination with CNAVES will include:

- The evaluation of the practices of the existing practices of accreditation and quality guarantee;
- The evaluation of the activities of the Portuguese agencies of quality assessment; and
- The evaluation of the practices of the existing professional accreditation.

Finally, the evaluation exercises above referred will be completed through a voluntary institutional evaluation programme steered by EUA, in collaboration with other agencies, namely, EURASHE. This evaluation programme will consider mainly the following aspects:

- The main characteristics, positive and negative, of the Portuguese Higher Education institutions, in the European context;
- The level of institutional autonomy and the mechanisms of government and management;
- The institutional capacity to the adaptation and change;
- The entry into the Higher Education, including the ways by which the students are chosen, and the ways they answer to the emergent opportunities of life-long education;
- The mechanisms of exit of the Higher Education System; and
- The methodologies and the procedures used in the distribution of resources and the level of financing.

An independent entity, the Evaluation and Academic Accreditation Agency for Quality, with mandate inside EHEA, will be created, whose processes, criteria and procedures to be used by the national agencies will be pre-defined and publicly available. These processes will normally be expected to include:

- A self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process;
- An external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, student members, and site visits as decided by the agency;
- Publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes; and
- A follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.

The Agency will assure and improve the quality by using agreed standards and guidelines adopted across EHEA. It commands that the following aspects have to be taken into account:

- Policy and procedures for quality assurance: Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality. The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available;
- Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards;
- Assessment of students;
- Quality assurance of teaching staff;
- Learning resources and student support;
- Information systems; and
- Public information.

The external quality assurance of higher education is orientated has to obey to the following standards:

- Use of internal quality assurance procedures;
- Development of external quality assurance processes;
- Criteria for decisions;
- Processes fit for purpose;
- Reporting;
- Follow-up procedures;
- Periodic reviews; and
- System-wide analyses.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The Portuguese Higher Education Evaluation System has started fourteen years ago and has been appreciated by the large majority of academics, and the Society at large. A new model for the evaluation is now starting in Portugal, which accompanies the creation of the European Higher Education Area, emerging from the Bologna Declaration. It is hoped that this new model will mean a real improvement not only as far as the assessment is concerned but also and in relation with the improvement of the Portuguese Higher Education quality.

**REFERENCES**

Besides the Laws and other legal directives above referred, for the much of the paper the author has used the following bibliography:
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