THE PORTUGUESE SYSTEM FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

1.   The Portuguese Higher Education System

The Portuguese system may be seen as doubly binary, in the sense that it includes Universities and Polytechnics and, in another dimension, public and private institutions.

University Schools may confer the degrees of Bachelor, Licentiate, Master and Doctor (*Bacharel*, *Licenciado*, *Mestre*, *Doutor*) and the title of *Agregado* which is necessary to access a post of full professor. Polytechnic Schools may only confer the degrees of Bachelor and Licentiate.

There are a few Polytechnic Schools integrated in Universities. University Schools, as such, very seldom confer the degree of Bachelor.

2.   The Development of a Quality Assurance System

The process of Quality Assurance (QA) in Portugal was launched in 1993 by the public Universities, in an initiative of the Portuguese Universities Rectors' Conference (CRUP) concerning a pilot project to assess all its member institutions (14 public Universities and the Portuguese Catholic University) in four scientific areas ranging from Sciences and Technology to the Humanities. The methodology used was very similar to the Dutch model, assessing study programmes in a 2-phase methodology: self evaluation followed by on site peer review. In cooperation between CRUP and the Foundation of Portuguese Universities (FUP), an independent Evaluation Council was established within FUP to coordinate all the process of evaluation, namely the establishment of guidelines for the self-evaluation reports and the organisation of external evaluation.

The pilot project provided excellent conditions for a fruitful dialogue between CRUP and the Ministry of Education, leading to the Law for the Evaluation of Higher Education (Law 38/94) passed by the Parliament in November 1994, which follows very closely the principles proposed by CRUP.

Following the publication of the Law, the pilot project was automatically extended to all fields of study, to became the first cycle of the evaluation of public universities for the period 1994-1999. It took much longer to launch the evaluation process in the other sectors of higher education, for reasons that, al least in part, are external to the institutions themselves.

3. **The Portuguese QA System**

The main characteristics of the QA system established by Law 38/94 may be summarised as follows:

- the system applies to all higher education institutions;

- the system aims at the improvement of the quality of the scientific and pedagogical performance in the different fields of study, taking specially into account the nature and typology of teaching, the qualifications of the academic staff and the conditions of functioning;

- there are no direct links between the results of the evaluation and the financing of teaching activities, although continued negative results may have consequences on financing and on the registration/permission for functioning;

- the evaluation process develops in two phases: self-evaluation and external evaluation;

- the responsibility for the coordination of external evaluation lays with Evaluation Agencies (*entidades representativas*) which must be recognised as such by the Ministry of Education;

- the composition of the peer review teams for the external evaluation is formally approved by the Minister of Education under proposition from the evaluation agencies.

Basic principles of the QA system are: the right and the duty of participation of the institutions, the autonomy and impartiality of the evaluation agencies, the participation/hearing of staff and students and the publicity of the reports from external evaluation including the reactions from the assessed institutions.

4. **Evaluation Agencies and the National Council for the Evaluation of Higher Education**

The Evaluation Council created inside FUP to coordenate the pilot project and later the first cycle of evaluation for the Universities in CRUP was recognised by the Ministry of Education soon after the publication of the Law of Evaluation. The conditions to be fulfilled by the agency were established in a protocol signed by CRUP, FUP and the Ministry.

The other sectors of higher education organised themselves for the creation of their own evaluation agencies, but had to wait for regulation that was finally established by Decree-Law 205/98, published in July 1998, which instituted the practical principles for the recognition of the evaluation agencies and created the National Council for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CNAVES) as a coordinating body for the sectorial agencies. The protocols for the recognition of the new agencies were signed in late 1998 and early 1999.

There are, therefore, four evaluation agencies for QA, each responsible for the organisation of the external evaluation of higher education institutions in the corresponding sector:

- Conselho de Avaliação do Ensino Universitário Público;

- Conselho de Avaliação do Ensino Politécnico Público;

- Conselho de Avaliação do Ensino Universitário Privado;

- Conselho de Avaliação do Ensino Politécnico Privado.

The responsibility for the harmony, cohesion and credibility of the national QA system rests with the National Council, CNAVES, bearing in mind the observance of standards of excellence for the overall functioning of the system. Specific responsibilities of CNAVES are:

- to coordenate the proposals from the evaluation agencies, in order to ensure that the same review teams for external evaluation apply to both the public and the private sectors in each field studies;

- to ensure the same guidelines for self evaluation in all the University subsystem and equally in Polytechnic subsystem, allowing however for differentiation between these two subsystems;

- to produce global and prospective reports concerning QA in higher education, as well as to issue recommendations for the rationalisation and improvement of the higher education system.

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