Internal quality assurance systems in Portugal: what their strengths and weaknesses reveal

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In Portugal, the agency for assessment and accreditation of higher education has recently included in its remit, beyond programme accreditation, the certification of internal quality assurance systems. This implies lighter touch accreditation and aims to direct institutions towards improvement, in addition to accountability. Twelve institutions have already undertaken the certification, and both self-assessment and external assessment reports are available. Based on the qualitative analysis of the nature of institutional strengths and weaknesses highlighted in these evaluation reports, the paper aims to understand whether the identified strengths and weaknesses are related to procedural and organisational matters or to cultural change (values and beliefs), in turn offering an insight into the quality culture(s) which characterise higher education institutions in Portugal. Findings suggest that the quality culture of the analysed institutions is somewhere between responsive and reactive. Overall, all reports dwell more on the prioritisation of formal and structural procedures, both regarding strengths and weaknesses. External reports point towards more weaknesses related to stakeholders' participation. Both aspects are more frequent in polytechnics than in universities. These findings suggest that polytechnics are more reactive, whereas universities are more responsive. Therefore, accountability apparently continues to be, for the time being, a more pressing concern than improvement.

Keywords: internal quality assurance; certification; quality culture; strengths; weaknesses

Introduction

Compared to external quality assurance, internal quality assurance is a more recent research concern (Harvey and Williams 2010), likely reflecting the dominance of external agencies in quality issues. The proliferation of external quality agencies, of market-like mechanisms such as rankings or classifications, as well as the growth of programme accreditation schemes, has been signalling a lack of trust in institutions' capacity of guaranteeing their quality (Amaral, Rosa, and Fonseca 2013).

The Bologna Process has played a major role in the revision of the policy agenda regarding quality assurance. Programme accreditation arose as a response to the ambition to have transparent and comparable qualifications, whose equivalence could be easily gauged across European borders. Westerheijden, Hulpiau, and Waeytens (2007) claimed that the emergence of accreditation prioritised the accountability goal at the expense of the quality improvement goal. The European Standards

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and Guidelines (ESG) for quality assurance, published by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA 2009), were developed in the context of the Bologna Process as a common reference framework to guide the work of institutions and agencies in assuring quality. One of the principles which under-pinned their elaboration was 'the central importance of institutional autonomy, tem-pered by the recognition that this brings with it heavy responsibilities' (ENQA 2009, 11). This signals that institutions were viewed as holding the main responsibil-ity for the quality of their activities. Part 1 of the ESG contains standards and princi-ples for internal quality assurance. While taking into account the standards, the definition and implementation of quality assurance systems is undertaken by each institution according to their specific missions, goals and institutional culture (Santos 2011).

The Portuguese Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education, legally established in 2007, took inspiration from these standards when elaborating the requirements for the accreditation of programmes and the certification of internal quality systems. In line with the ESGs, the agency formally stated that the main responsibility for the quality of education lies with each higher education institution and has been encouraging and supporting institutions to implement internal quality assurance systems. Legislation also determines that institutions should develop an internal quality assurance policy for their programmes, a culture of quality and qual-ity assurance in their activities, and a strategy for continuous quality improvement.

At present, the first cycle of programme accreditation is underway, but simulta-neously the agency has initiated certifications of internal institutional quality assur-ance systems. Westerheijden, Hulpiau, and Waeytens (2007) proposed a phase model in the evolution of quality assurance systems, according to which accredita-tion belonged to a first phase. In this phase, the elimination of sub-standard educa-tional programmes was the problem to be solved. Once surpassed, new problems arose. The current problems faced by the Portuguese higher education system belong to a different phase related to doubts about the innovative or quality assurance capacity of institutions, which explain the newly introduced internal quality assur-ance certifications. The certifications, therefore, would represent a guarantee of the institutions' quality assurance capacity and, consequently, are intended to trigger lighter accreditation procedures. This development could be interpreted as an attempt to restore trust in universities, to restate quality as their responsibility and to give ownership for quality to their constituent bodies, in accordance with a quality enhancement approach (Amaral, Rosa, and Fonseca 2013).

A number of institutions have already undertaken the certification, and both self-assessment and external assessment reports are available. One element common to both kinds of reports is the identified strengths and weaknesses of internal quality assurance systems. This paper intends to analyse the nature of institutional strengths and weaknesses highlighted in these evaluation reports, laying bare a double per-spective: an internal one offered by institutions themselves and an external one offered by external evaluation panels. In particular, it aims to understand whether strengths and weaknesses are related to procedural and organisational matters or to cultural change (values and beliefs). This would also offer an insight into the quality culture(s) which characterise higher education institutions in Portugal.

Theoretical approach

Quality is a multi-faceted concept which does not have an essential, universal meaning. Therefore, what is meant by quality cannot be understood in isolation, unrelated to an institutional context, characterised by a specific stage of development, priorities, strategies, mission, internal organisation and external conditions, such as higher education policies, economy and demography (Newton 2000). In turn, quality evaluation and assurance are not value-free and apolitical, but 'historically specific, situated in a holistic context and imbued with ideology' (Harvey and Newton 2007, 234).

An understanding of the Portuguese context is therefore necessary to situate the concept of quality assurance in this paper. Quality assurance was initiated in Portugal in the 1990s, with a system which entrusted institutions themselves to assure their own quality through the coordination of their representative body. Initially covering public universities only, the system of quality assessments was later extended to public polytechnics and the private sector, starting to operate in 2000, this time under the coordination of the National Council for Higher Education Evaluation (CNAVES). By this time, there had been a massive increase in higher education participation. This had been favoured by successive policies that gave priority to the expansion at all costs, sacrificing the overall quality of the system (Amaral 2008). Nevertheless, the assessments had no visible consequences; e.g. no degree programme was closed as a result of the assessments, although many sub-standard programmes existed, given the fast expansion which was promoted with quality as a secondary concern.

Despite a new law in 2003 which aimed to clarify the consequences of assessment, the subsequent reports continued to be inconclusive. In 2005, the Portuguese government commissioned ENQA to review the national quality assurance system for higher education. Following the recommendations of ENQA's report, the government passed new legislation reforming the quality system in 2007. Under the new legal framework, an independent agency was created as a private foundation, independent from both the government and higher education institutions (Amaral, Rosa, and Fonseca 2013).

Initially the agency's activities focused on programme accreditation to eliminate inherited sub-standard provision. This reflected concerns with accountability in the sense highlighted by Harvey and Newton (2007). The agency has been attempting to safeguard the core principles and practices of higher education, preventing them from being eroded or disregarded, both in private and public provision; and it has been using accreditation as a means to guarantee institutional compliance with policy (e.g. legal requirements about the qualifications of academics).

However, according to Harvey and Newton (2007, 230), accountability 'is supposedly a guiding force but, like a mirage in a desert, it is illusory as a quality destination. Quality assurance for accountability is … fulfilling a purpose. This may be admirable, but the purpose is not at the essential heart of quality'. What lies at the heart of quality is an improvement of the student experience, which requires creating the conditions which foster sustained change in higher education institutions, beyond adjusted national systems. This is in line with the definition of quality as transformation, as 'a process of change' which sees education as 'an ongoing process of transformation of the participant'. Consequently, transformative quality implies enhancing and empowering the consumer (Harvey and Stensaker 2008).

That the Portuguese agency has now included in its remit the certification of internal quality assurance systems, which implies lighter touch accreditation, could signal an intention of directing institutions towards improvement, in addition to accountability. In the early days of its operation, a study was undertaken in order to gain knowledge about the degree of development of internal quality assurance systems in Portuguese higher education institutions (Fonseca, n.d.). According to this study, almost 80% of higher education institutions declared that they had quality assurance mechanisms, even though they might not have been formally designated as such. The current move towards certification reflects an acknowledgement that ensuring quality is an institutional obligation and, at the same time, confidence that the institution is capable of improving quality. As Harvey and Newton (2004) argued, 'if we wish to shift the emphasis of quality evaluation to make it transforming, then … trust in higher education needs to be re-established, and attention focused on internal processes and internal motivators' (161).

Achieving transformative quality implies an understanding of how academics and institutions respond to quality assessment, and how they engage with improvement practices. The impact of quality assessment has been associated with structural, managerial and organisational processes, e.g. new routines and systems for handling data on educational performance and quality, and less with issues central for academic staff and students (Stensaker et al. 2011). Unsurprisingly, in institutional actors' perceptions, quality assurance has often emerged as an artificial, externally imposed burden (Kleijnen et al. 2009; Newton 2002), rather than part of their everyday activity. In Portugal, previous research has revealed academic alienation, showing that quality assurance processes did not pervade academic values and beliefs (Veiga et al. 2013).

Values and beliefs bring into discussion the concept of 'quality culture'. Stensaker et al. (2011) highlighted two different conceptions of culture: one which consisted of deep and embedded norms and values, and another which sees culture as influenced by formal structures, hierarchies, leadership and decision-making. In the former understanding, culture is deep and inseparable from an organisation – something an organisation *is*. In the latter understanding, culture is an element to be changed, and it is something an organisation *has*. These two understandings are both present in European University Association's (EUA) definition of quality culture: first, as a set of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality (a psychological aspect, which refers to understanding, flexibility, participation, hopes and emotions) and second, as a structural or managerial element with well-defined processes that enhance quality and coordinate efforts (which refers to tasks, standards and responsibilities of individuals, units and services) (EUA 2006, 10). Since each higher education institution is unique, it follows that there can be as many quality cultures as there are higher education institutions.

In order to simplify and help to operationalise the concept of quality culture, Harvey and Stensaker (2008) proposed four ideal types inspired by cultural theory (Douglas 1982; Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990). The typology captures the degree of group control and the intensity of external rules. The combination of these two dimensions results in four different quality cultures: regenerative, responsive, reproductive and reactive (see Figure 1).

Harvey and Stensaker (2008) described the main features of each type. The *regenerative quality culture* is characterised by strong group control and weak sensitivity to external rules. It is focused on internal developments and follows a

Intensity of external rules

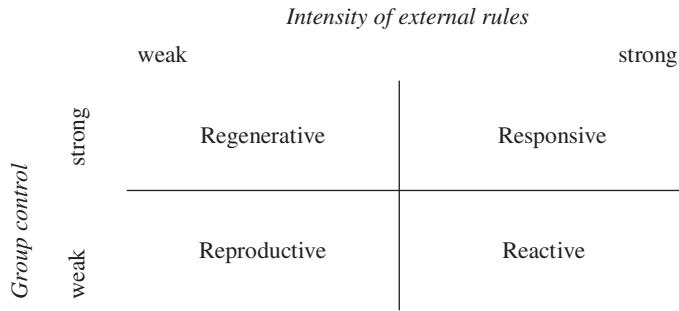|	weak	strong
strong	Regenerative	Responsive
weak	Reproductive	Reactive

Group control

Figure 1.   Ideal types of quality culture.
Source: Adapted from Harvey and Stensaker (2008).

coordinated plan for internal regeneration which is widely shared and owned. It is indistinguishable from everyday activities. It incorporates opportunities or imperatives promoted by external forces as long as they make a positive contribution to the internally developed vision and goals.

The *responsive quality culture* is strong on both dimensions: group control and intensity of external rules. Yet, external imperatives are the dominant drivers, and the institution takes advantage of these in order to devise an internal, forward-looking improvement agenda, but not losing sight of accountability and compliance. Its shortcoming resides in a lack of staff ownership of the quality culture, unconnected with their everyday practice.

The *reproductive quality culture* is weak both as regards group control and the influence of external rules. In a reproductive mode, the institution has established norms and is reluctant to redefine future goals. The quality culture is indistinguishable from everyday practice, but it is not transparent because embedded in taken-for-granted practices. Attempts to rethink quality in a critical way meet heavy resistance.

The *reactive quality culture* is characterised by a strong influence of external rules, and a weak degree of group control. It is driven by compliance and accountability, imposed by and constructed around external drivers, and there are reservations about the potential positive outcomes of quality evaluation. In the reactive mode, there is little or no sense of ownership and quality is delegated to a specific unit (quality office). For academics, it amounts to a box-ticking exercise.

The implementation of internal quality assurance systems is likely to bear the mark of institutional quality cultures. Bearing in mind that the above typology presents ideal types and that institutional specificities and complexities will not perfectly fall into those types, it is nonetheless expected that the analysis of the identified weaknesses and strengths will shed light on the predominant type of quality culture(s) which characterises the institutions. Based on this information, it might be possible to ascertain whether these institutions are embracing improvement alongside accountability.

Methodology

An experimental exercise of the certification of internal quality assurance systems was initiated in 2012, and currently every institution can apply for certification.

Public sector institutions include 14 universities and 15 polytechnics. Additionally, there are 13 polytechnic schools integrated in public universities. The private sector comprises 80 higher education institutions, both universities and polytechnics. In total, twelve institutions have to date completed the certification: five universities, all public; six polytechnics, five public and one private; and one private institution which covers both the university and the polytechnic sectors. In the illustrative quotes, these institutions are designated as follows: public universities as *PubUni*, public polytechnics as *PubPol*, private polytechnics as *PrivPol,* and the private institution with both university and a polytechnic sector as *PrivUniPol*; institutions are also numbered.

During the certification process, institutions had to conduct a self-assessment which ended with a report. The visit of an external evaluation team followed, and the team in turn produced its own report. In order to grasp both external and internal perspectives, this study analyses both sources. The reports were available from the database of the Portuguese Agency. Both self-review and external reports addressed the strengths of the internal quality assurance system. Self-evaluation reports discussed the weaknesses in a separate section, whereas the external reports addressed the weaknesses in recommendations, in a more constructive approach. Therefore, to understand the weaknesses from the external perspective, the recommendations for improvement made by the review panels were considered. The source of the quotations in the paper is indicated as *self* or as *external*.

The documents were imported into MaxQDA, a qualitative analysis software, to enable data organisation and systematic analysis. The analysis followed a grounded theory methodology in a two-step process adapted from Strauss and Corbin's method (1990): open and selective coding. First, during open coding, the data were broken down to yield categories. Throughout the coding process, the categories were constantly checked, validated or discarded against new data, based on consistency criteria. Subsequently, selective coding generated the final categories which were integrated into an overarching framework. The codes and relationships between categories were constantly cross-checked against the data in the reports, which ensured that the final framework emerged from the raw data, in accordance with grounded theory methods.

The analysis revealed five main categories in the following order of importance: *organisation of internal quality assurance* (e.g. policies, structures, procedures, regulations, tools); *information management* (e.g. efficiency and fitness-for-purpose of information system, articulation with quality system, data collection/analysis); *participation of stakeholders* (internal/external); *staff* (recruitment, appraisal, development, reward and recognition); and *information dissemination* (internal/external, transparency). These categories were prevalent both in the case of identified strengths and weaknesses for the internal quality assurance systems.

In the following, the strengths and the weaknesses will be addressed, comparing internal and external perspectives and differences between universities and polytechnics. Regarding the internal vs. external perspectives, it is important to note that external reports were not written from a blank sheet. They discussed and reflected on the self-evaluation reports. Therefore, it is probable that the external reports, to some extent, refer to the issues raised in the self-evaluation reports, responding to them, although with a critical eye. Thus, external reports bring additional insights not contemplated by the internal reports. Additionally, the comparison between universities and polytechnics is relevant because of their different history (polytechnics

were only established in the late 1970s) and mission (polytechnics have a vocational orientation). Because only two institutions were private, data were insufficient to legitimate a comparison between public and private institutions.

Strengths of internal quality assurance systems

The great majority of strengths (about two thirds) that emerged during the analysis were related to the *organisation of internal quality assurance*. This included aspects such as the existence of a policy, structures, regulations and tools, or the definition and operationalisation of indicators. In some cases, these strengths referred to the monitoring of the system or to the long practice of the institutional quality policy.

> The mechanisms established for the supervision and monitoring of the system's performance, supported by a well-defined strategy which fosters the continuous improvement of the system. (*PubUni1, Self*)

> The establishment of a quality management system based on ISO 9001:2008 which has been certified, maintained, adapted and improved for more than five years, which indicates both the existence of an appropriate internal structure, with monitoring mechanisms, and the involvement of the whole institute. (*PubPol4, External*)

The category with the second highest number of codifications for strengths was *information management*. In these cases, information management was described as efficient and fit for purpose, well-articulated with the quality system, and engaging in the collection and analysis of relevant data:

> The existence of a flexible information system, anchored in an internally developed and controlled platform, constructed in phases to respond to the specific needs of the institution at each moment, through effective interlinking between the various platforms. (*PubUni3, Self*)

> The institution has an information system which provides consistent and credible information that supports the processes of monitoring, detection, analysis and decision-making. (*PubUni2, External*)

In third place came the *participation of stakeholders* (internal and external). The participation of internal stakeholders, with some emphasis on the participation of students in quality assurance, emerged to a greater extent than that of external stakeholders. This category was followed by the *support and involvement of top institutional leaders* in the development of the internal quality assurance system.

> Commitment and proximity of the entire academic community: professors, students and nonteaching staff. (*PubPol3, External*)

> The internal quality assurance system provides various forms of stakeholder participation and promotes partnership with the external community. (*PubPol1, Self*)

> Students' participation in the continuous improvement processes (class representatives, participation in the quality team). (*PrivPol1, Self*)

> A clear involvement and commitment of the Rector and his team in the development of a policy for institutional quality and social responsibility. (*PubUni4, External*)

Aspects related to *staff* quality (both academic and non-academic) emerged with less, although noteworthy, frequency. In this case, reports referred to issues such as recruitment and appraisal, competences, or development and training.

> The existence of regulations for the performance appraisal of teachers, in response to the requirements of the quality program, and participation in the National Scientific Repository to ensure and improve the quality of its academic. Staff. (*PubPol4, External*)

> There is a Pedagogical Training Office which aims to develop teaching techniques that enhance the effectiveness of teaching, to complement the technical expertise and to adapt pedagogical methods to the challenges posed by the Bologna Process, customized according to student typology and course nature. (*PrivUniPol1, External*)

Another strength mentioned was related to *information dissemination*, both regarding circulation of information inside the institution and communication with the external community. A *genuine commitment to quality* and the *coherence between the quality policy and the institutional strategy* as well as the accumulated *experience in undertaking (self-)evaluations* were also identified as strengths, although not as prominently as the previous aspects.

Comparing internal with external perspectives, it was noted that, in both cases, the main strengths of internal quality assurance systems were related to the *organisation of internal quality assurance*, although with a higher incidence in the case of self-evaluation reports. Consistency in perceptions was encountered in the internal and external reports about the importance of the *information management* for the effective functioning of internal quality assurance systems. In the case of *information dissemination*, this was seen as a strength only from the internal perspective. Internal reports also portrayed the *participation of stakeholders* and *staff* quality as a strength more than the external reports.

Comparing universities and polytechnics, the analysis revealed that, although for both the main strengths were associated with the *organisation of internal quality assurance*, this aspect was emphasised much more in the case of polytechnic institutions. Furthermore, this aspect featured almost disproportionately in relation to other identified strengths, while in universities, the strengths were more balanced in the dimensions identified in reports. Self-identified strengths in polytechnics, when compared with universities, were also more linked to the *participation of stakeholders* and to *information dissemination*. Conversely, aspects like *information management*, accumulated *experience in undertaking (self-) evaluation* or the *coherence between quality policy and institutional strategy* were more frequent as strengths in universities. Table 1 shows the frequency of main codifications for strengths by category, and the distribution between internal and external perspectives and university and polytechnic institutions.

Weaknesses of internal quality assurance systems

The weaknesses highlighted by evaluation reports fell under the same broad analytical categories in which strengths, too, were predominantly identified. The category under which most weaknesses were codified was the *organisation of internal quality assurance*. Shortcomings were related to the insufficient development of the policy quality or procedures; limited scope of instruments, indicators, or procedures (e.g. no coverage of the research or community service dimension); the limited use of the existing structures and tools; the incipient formalisation, e.g. insufficient formal rules and regulations; the lack of monitoring; or the missing articulation of the quality system across the whole institution.

Table 1. Frequency of codifications for strengths by internal/external and university/ polytechnic distribution.

Strengths	Perspectives			Subsystems			
	Internal	External	Total	University	Polytechnic	University/ Polytechnic	Total
Organisation of quality assurance	66	41	107	34	65	8	107
Information management	22	19	41	22	16	3	41
Participation of stakeholders	21	13	34	11	23	0	34
Support and involvement of top institutional leaders	12	11	23	8	12	3	23
Staff	11	6	17	5	8	4	17
Information dissemination	14	1	15	4	11	0	15
Commitment to quality improvement	6	6	12	6	5	1	12
Coherence between quality policy and institutional strategy	6	5	11	7	4	0	11
(Self-)evaluation experience	6	2	8	6	2	0	8

> Reduced coverage and rather limited scope of instruments for evaluating the quality of support services, as some do not include explicit procedures and mechanisms to guarantee continuous improvement. This is also related to the weak connection between the production of information by the information system and the specific needs of different types of users. (*PubUni3, Self*)

> The visibility of information, particularly information to external stakeholders, requires a better structure. The area of services to the community may not be considered properly integrated in the internal quality assurance system, lacking the necessary systematization. Neither are procedures defined to enable the evaluation of partnerships. (*PubPol4, External*)

The second category with most codifications for weaknesses was *information management*. In this case, the evaluation reports found a lack of articulation of the information management system, both among its different components as well as, for example, with the quality system. Problems were also identified with respect to data collection or the information management system's inability to respond to the needs of the quality system.

> The information system should be used to ensure the organization of information by establishing the conditions of synchronisation, consistency, reliability, and timeliness in the production of information necessary for decision-making. (*PubPol3, External*)

> Data collection and analysis are not yet conducted with total efficiency between all the offices and services, programme coordinators and pedagogical council, delaying the process. (*PrivPol1, Self*)

Weaknesses related to *staff* came third. In this case, most shortcomings derived from: missing competences or insufficient staff development, staff resistance, lack of recognition and work overload.

> The youngest faculty should start their PhD programs. It is important that a proper survey of the current stage of development of skills training is done, and that support is granted to teachers already involved in research and development. (*PubPol2, External*)

Weaknesses related to the low *participation of stakeholders* in quality assurance, mainly internal, held a similar weight to staff issues:

> The conceptual and physical communication platform with employers and other external stakeholders and the support for their intervention should be developed and consolidated, for example by efficiently supporting the creation of a training and employment pool in various areas, which should naturally be connected to the Alumni Office. (*PubUni4, External*)

Other identified weaknesses were related to *information dissemination* (both internally and with the external community); a *lack of strategic orientation* of the quality system and/or institution; the priority given to *procedures over quality improvement*; and *bureaucracy*.

> Need to improve internal and external communication. (*PrivUniPol1, External*)

> It is essential to implement a mechanism ensuring the alignment of the goals of the services with the institution's strategy, as well as a differentiation mechanism allowing the reward of excellent performance in a systematic way. (*PubUni2, External*)

> The team believes that the process of monitoring, evaluation and continuous improvement of the internal quality assurance system should be more comprehensive, reinforcing attention to the essence of the processes, rather than to its mechanics. (*PubPol2, External*)

> The insufficient effectiveness of the system arises from the inability to act in certain situations, which may be the result of insufficient internalization and absorption of the quality culture. The gathering and treatment of information is sometimes seen as a bureaucratic process. (*PubUni3, Self*)

The comparison of self-evaluation and external reports yielded some differences in the weight attached to weaknesses within each category. Despite the self-evaluation reports identifying more strengths in the *organisation of internal quality assurance* than external reports, these latter highlighted more weaknesses than the former in this category. The same observation applies in the case of the *participation of stakeholders*. According to the external perspective, stakeholder participation presents more weaknesses than according to the internal perspective. The external reports also pinpointed more weaknesses than internal reports in the case of *information dissemination*.

Internal reports identified more weaknesses than external reports in the following categories: information management, staff, resources and bureaucracy. Additionally, the analysis revealed some weaknesses which were only identified by the external reports: the lack of strategic orientation of the quality system and/or institution; the priority given to procedures over quality improvement; and governance issues.

Table 2. Frequency of codifications for weaknesses by internal/external and university/polytechnic distribution.

Weaknesses	Perspectives			Subsystems			
	Internal	External	Total	University	Polytechnic	University/ Polytechnic	Total
Organisation of quality assurance	40	62	102	35	56	11	102
Information management	23	20	43	18	20	5	43
Staff	19	12	31	13	17	1	31
Participation of stakeholders	11	19	30	7	21	2	30
Information dissemination	4	13	17	5	9	3	17
Lack of strategic orientation	0	15	15	4	10	1	15
Procedures over quality improvement	0	12	12	4	8	0	12
Bureaucracy	7	3	10	2	7	1	10
Resources	7	2	9	3	6	0	9

A consistent pattern of differentiation between universities and polytechnics was noted in the case of all categories exposed by the analysis. In all of them, more weaknesses were identified in the case of polytechnic institutions than in the case of universities. Table 2 shows the frequency of main codifications for weaknesses by category, and the distribution between university and polytechnic institutions (comprising both internal and external perspectives) and between internal and external perspectives (comprising both university and polytechnic institutions).

Discussion

The findings revealed that both strengths and weaknesses of internal quality assurance systems generally fell under the same broad categories, with some minor variations. This is indicative of these dimensions being deemed as the most important for the robustness and functioning of an internal quality assurance system. Internal and external reports from both types of institutions considered the *organisation of quality assurance* as the main strength of internal quality assurance systems. However, it was recognised unanimously that an insufficiently developed/formalised organisation constituted a weakness of the internal quality assurance systems. A noteworthy difference is evident between university and polytechnics. The latter place considerably more emphasis on the organisation of quality assurance than the former, denoting more concern with structural elements and formal procedures. Since polytechnics have a more recent history than universities and were included in quality assessment later, this could reflect the more incipient stage in the development of their quality systems. The ISO quality management system has become a common practice among polytechnics in their endeavour to prove their concern with quality. This might induce them to believe that, by acting in compliance with certified norms,

they are also achieving quality and improvement. This betrays a higher preoccupation with setting up structures and procedures, evident not only when the reports reflect on the strengths, but also on the weaknesses.

Consistency in perceptions about the importance of *information management* for the effective functioning of internal quality assurance systems was encountered in the internal and external reports, both for universities and polytechnics, although in the case of universities slightly more strengths are emphasised than in the case of the polytechnics. The other dimensions considerably represented in the analysis showed less consensus between external and internal perspectives and, in some cases, between universities and polytechnics. Self-evaluations identified *stakeholder participation* primarily as a strength and less so as a weakness. In contrast, it was identified more as a weakness than as a strength by external reports. This suggests that the analysed institutions appear more confident about how they engage stakeholders than the external reviewers, who are more critical in this respect.

A noteworthy finding is that the participation of external stakeholders was not frequently mentioned in the self-evaluation reports. Yet, the external reports signalled it as a weakness in several instances. Regarding university/polytechnic differences, aspects related to the participation of stakeholders emerge much more in polytechnics than in universities, both with respect to strengths and to weaknesses. When identified as a weakness, this might be due to the polytechnics, given their more vocational orientation, employing staff who at the same time maintain professional practice outside the institution, hence making it more difficult to fully engage these staff with their everyday activities which go beyond teaching. The lack of participation of external stakeholders was also predominantly criticised in the case of polytechnics. As their mission implies more responsiveness to their local environment, expectations of involvement of external stakeholders are higher than in universities.

The *staff* dimension was more frequently highlighted as a weakness of internal quality assurance systems, rather than as a strength, both by internal and external reports. At the same time, internal reports pinpoint this dimension more than external reports, suggesting it is a rather sensitive issue for the analysed institutions. Again, it emerged much more in the case of polytechnics. As the *staff* category included not only issues related to competences, but also to resistance, ownership, work overload or recognition, some explanations could be put forward. First, the nature of staff, both professional and academic at the same time, and consequently, their reduced availability might pose problems for their engagement with quality processes and procedures. Second, the qualifications of polytechnic teachers have been under constant review and change, which might explain the sensitivity of the topic of expected competences.

For *information dissemination*, internal reports saw this predominantly as a strength, whereas external reports identified it almost exclusively as a weakness. These mismatched perceptions could suggest that this is an area which needs more attention by institutions. A study undertaken in order to gain knowledge about the degree of development of internal quality assurance systems in Portuguese higher education institutions around 2010 (Fonseca, n.d.) found that, at the time, the only European standard not reflected in the quality assurance practices of institutions was related to public information, while a standard only marginally reflected referred to information systems. It was mainly in polytechnics that weaknesses related to information dissemination were highlighted. The underrepresentation of these

practices around 2010 might explain why institutions highlight aspects related to information dissemination as strengths, since they may have made progress since then, while at the same time the external panels considered the development was still insufficient.

The emphasis on formal, structural and procedural aspects – as denoted by the prevalent emphasis on the organisation of the quality system and the information management system – is indicative of the understanding of quality more as a structural or managerial element with well-defined processes (including definition of tasks, standards, responsibilities and units), and less as shared values and commitment to improvement (EUA 2006). This betrays that the analysed institutions are, at the moment, more concerned with accountability when implementing quality assurance systems.

The four ideal types of quality culture (Harvey and Stensaker 2008) captured the interplay between the intensity of external rules and group control. In the light of the recent legal requirements that institutions should develop and implement internal quality assurance systems, reinforced by the incentive of lighter accreditation once these systems obtain external certification, one could assume that the intensity of external rules is strong in Portugal. For this reason, the quality cultures of Portuguese institutions applying for certification will be either reactive or responsive. A reactive culture is solely concerned with accountability and compliance, seeing external rules as an imposition which will not bring any additional value. In contrast, a responsive quality culture pursues improvement alongside accountability, and external drivers are seen as an opportunity to change practices for the better.

From the aspects identified as strengths and weaknesses in the analysis, the intensity of group control can, to some extent, be inferred, particularly from one main analytical category, stakeholder participation. According to the description of the ideal types, the degree of group control is stronger in the responsive quality culture. As a result, the higher the participation of stakeholders, the more responsive the institutions tend to be. The participation of stakeholders, mainly internal, in quality assurance was deemed more as a strength in the internal reports. In contrast, in the external reports, the participation was highlighted more as a weakness. This could suggest that the quality culture of the analysed Portuguese institutions appears responsive judging by the internal perspective, and reactive judging by the external perspective.

The external perspective goes further by alerting that institutions, in their concern for getting the processes and procedures right, tend to lose sight of the greater aim of quality improvement. This criticism gave rise to a separate analytical category under weaknesses, and *procedures over quality improvement* (see Table 2). The following quote is suggestive:

> The institution should be concerned that internal stakeholders do not feel fully satisfied by simply complying with the requirements stipulated for each process. It should encourage them to participate in the continuous improvement and innovation not only of the internal quality assurance system, but also of the quality process. (*PubPol1, External*)

The pursuit of improvement is one key aspect that distinguishes a responsive quality culture from a reactive one. In a responsive quality culture, the institution goes beyond mere accountability and compliance, embracing improvement as an opportunity to capitalise on externally induced policies. On the contrary, in a reactive

culture, the main focus lies on compliance. Implementing procedures and formal requirements might create among polytechnics a false feeling of 'doing things right', while the institution might lose sight of the greater purpose of improvement. Thus, since the external reports point towards more weaknesses related to the prioritisation of procedures over improvement in polytechnics rather than in universities, one could argue that the former appear more reactive, whereas the latter are more responsive.

Conclusion

The paper aimed to analyse the strengths and weaknesses identified by institutions and by external evaluation teams related to the implementation of internal quality assurance systems. The analysis intended to understand whether these strengths and weaknesses are associated with procedural and structural matters or with cultural change manifest in values and beliefs. It aimed to gain insight into the quality culture(s) of the analysed institutions and, by extension, whether these were embracing improvement alongside accountability, in line with the intentions of the agency when introducing the certification of internal quality assurance systems.

The identified strengths and weaknesses were predominantly associated to the organisation of the quality assurance system and to information management, namely with formal structures and procedures rather than with quality in the transformative sense of the concept (Harvey and Newton 2007). With the objective of avoiding burdensome accreditation in the future, institutions feel compelled to implement an internal quality system and apply for its certification. Although the agency's intentions were to encourage a shift towards improvement, it appears that accountability continues to be, for the time being, a more pressing concern than improvement. This, in turn, reveals that the analysed institutions find themselves somewhere on the continuum between a reactive and a responsive quality culture. Since, in the case of polytechnics, external reports highlighted more weaknesses related to stakeholder participation and to a preoccupation with procedures rather than improvement, they seemed to appear more reactive and universities more responsive.

One must bear in mind that the analysis targeted those institutions which were pioneers in the implementation and certification of their internal quality assurance systems. Since only a limited number of Portuguese institutions have so far applied for certification, it would be unwise to draw general conclusions for Portuguese institutions as a whole. However, the findings can provide helpful insights (e.g. good practices or issues requiring attention) for the institutions which have yet to apply for certification. Moreover, the systematic analysis of the strengths and weaknesses identified so far in the implementation of internal quality assurance systems could be a helpful tool for the quality agency in its decisions on further support and guidance to institutions.

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