Higher Education In Portugal: From Expansion To Quality Assessment

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ABSTRACT

After presenting a brief description of the Portuguese higher education evolution, since 1974 to the present day, and providing the indispensable legal framework, we discuss its structure, highlighting the actual binary nature that includes universities and polytechnics, public and private. Crucial statistics about the subsystems and the actual study programmes are also given. Finally we present the Portuguese Agency (a.k.a. A3ES) responsible for the assessment and accreditation of the study programmes imparted by Portuguese HEIS. An overview of the work carried out so far by the Agency and its assessment model is also presented.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

1. The evolution of Portuguese higher education in recent decades

The current Portuguese higher education system is a product of modernization, reflecting the dynamics of a complex web of societal transformations (Magalhães, 2004). In fact, Portuguese higher education institutions (HEIS) undergone profound changes for the last 40 years. As a significant expression of this we can refer not only the tremendous increase of young people that applied to higher education, but also the deep impact the process had on how HEIS are being structured and carrying out their mission.

Following the democratization movement, after the 1974 'Carnations Revolution', access to education, hitherto the privilege of a few, was wide open to everybody, as the State sought to create the conditions for equal educational opportunities for all citizens, regardless of gender, economic or social condition (Arroteia, 1996). The principle was enshrined in Article 73 of the Portuguese Constitution that states the following:

1. Everyone has the right to education and culture.

2. The State shall promote the democratization of education and the conditions for education, both at school and elsewhere, to contribute to the development of the personality and the progress of democratic and socialist society.

3. The State shall promote the democratization of culture, encouraging and ensuring access for all citizens, especially workers, to cultural enjoyment and creation, through popular grassroots organizations, associations of culture and recreation, media and other appropriate means.

The expansion of higher education Portuguese system necessarily implies two facets: the growth of the number of students and of HEIS. Acoording to Pordata[2] in 1980 there were 73.869 higher education students, while in 2012 the number

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[1] Centro de Estudos Interdisciplinares do Século XX da Universidade de Coimbra – CEIS20.

raised to 311.574, which corresponds to a growth of 421%. Corresponding to this massive demand increase, we watched the proliferation of a rich diversified offer provided by the new state universities or private universities, which began to emerge on a large scale around the eighties. The system developed since then presents a significant variety of organizational structures, size and different legal nature, counting with public institutions – including Open University and military and police institutions of higher education – as well as with private ones, including the concordatary Portuguese Catholic University.

A fundamental aspect to be taken into account pertains the differentiation between universities and polytechnics. Urbano (2011, 97-98) resumes the introducing of the binary system as follows:

The political project based on the expansion and diversification of education, presented by Veiga Simão in the mid-70s, in which the polytechnics would integrate higher education with universities and other institutions of similar educational nature, was an important milestone. Actually, the polytechnic system, a surrogate of higher education short cycles, was then created by the so called Veiga Simão Reform (with Law 5/73 and Decree-Law 402/73). The change became definitively consecrated with the substitution of the designation of 'short cycle higher education' by 'polytechnic higher education', undertaken by the Decree-Law 513-T/79, which states the new system 'equal dignity in relation to university', although assigning to the newcomer specific objectives.

With the Decree-Law 131/80 and the subsequent 303/80 some amendments are introduced to the referred 513-L1/79, in order to correct certain aspects of the polytechnics' installation system. Finally, the Law 29/80 came to settle the polytechnic education network in Portugal, which integrates 27 schools in 15 national districts. Such network, strongly regionalised, was expected to be a very important factor for local development, once it could supply the trained technicians with the practical preparation for addressing the regional scientific and economic specific needs.

However the legislative framework of the binary construction of higher education, turned out to be the Law on the Bases of the Education System from 1986, which enshrined definitely the polytechnic subsystem. Nevertheless the law eventually provide an ambiguous distinction between the two subsystems of higher education regarding the objective, scientific depth and the theoretical and practical components. Supposedly conceptual education would be left to universities and pragmatic ability to polytechnics. The Law states the following in its Article 11th:

3 - University education provides a solid scientific and cultural preparation as well as technical training that enables to perform professional and cultural activities and to foster the development of the skills to conceive, innovate and produce critical analysis.

4 – Polytechnic education aims to provide a solid cultural and technical training of higher level, as well as to develop the capacity of innovation and critical analysis and of imparting scientific knowledge of theoretical and practical nature and its applications for the pursuit of professional activities.

The least one can say is that the difference, if there is one, is very blurred. Even so it means that along with the explosion of higher education access, Portugal undergone the expansion of training opportunities, arising from the creation of the new polytechnic subsystem but also due to the diversification of courses and departments in classic universities. Besides, bridging the responsiveness gaps of public services, private offering accelerated the process of higher education 'massification', bringing Portugal close to the statistical reality of other European countries.

Having surpassed the quantitative leap –which ensured a greater ease of access to higher education, and incorporated the pedagogical changes required by Bologna–, it is now evident a clear new inflection assumed by educational policies governing Portuguese higher education. Once recognized the dysfunctions resulting of an anarchic system growth, the cycle of

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[2] http://www.pordata.pt/Portugal/Alunos+matriculados+no+ensino+publico+total+e+por+nivel+de+ensino-1003

'unlimited expansion' is now being closed, in favor of a growing concern with the 'rehabilitation' and the regulation of 'supply' in view of the actual social trends and the labor market demand.

In tune with what has been happening in the rest of Europe, and although we cannot properly speak of a paradigm rupture, we have witnessing a push for settling quality assessment standards in higher education. We can divide the process in two phases: the first one corresponding to an initial system of mutual evaluation among peer institutions; and the second one coinciding with the introduction of an independent Agency in 2007. The main subject of this paper is precisely to describe the system established by the implementation of the referred Agency, however we will start by presenting a sketch of the Portuguese current higher education system.

2. The Portuguese higher education system

According to the latest report from the National Board of Education (Conselho Nacional de Educação, 2012), Portuguese Higher Education Portuguese is currently maintaining a dynamic transformation, by virtue of the adequacy of their training provision to the Bologna Process, the new legal framework of the organizational and management institutions – established by the Law 62/2007– and the financial constraints that the country's situation imposed on the functioning of higher education institutions. Each of these factors has been forcing HEIS to carry out structural changes, particularly concerning their operation processes, but also regarding the ways of envisaging the fulfillment of their mission.

Figure 2 presents the current higher education Portuguese network by subsystem and institutional nature.

	Public institution	Private institutions	Total
University			
Universities	14	10	24
Universitary institutes	1	2	3
Universitary institutes (not integrated)	5*	25	30
Polytechnic			
Insitutes	15	2	17
Schools (not integrated)	6**	53	59
Total	41	92	133

Figure 1: Higher education Portuguese network (Source: Conselho Nacional de Educação, 2012)
*4 military; 1 for police corps

***One military school (health service)*

Portuguese Higher Education network consists of private establishments belonging to private and cooperative entities, including the concordat education, represented by Catholic University. Currently it comprises universities and polytechnics, in a total of 92 institutions. In 2010/11 the total number of courses in operation was 4222, of which 3321 were imparted by public institutions and the remaining 1121 by private ones (Figure 2). One should notice that overall, the private higher education sector is responsible for more than one quarter (1088 courses) of the existing educational provision. Universities major effort has focus on offering masters courses, whose weight is 54% (1553 courses) in the total existing supply of university education (2883 courses). Yet in public universities, doctoral courses already correspond to about 24%. The figures also show that nearly half (49.3%) of the courses are Masters (2nd cycle), 37.2% of degree (1st cycle) and 13.5% of doctoral (3rd cycle).

		Licenceship	Master	PhD
Public	Universitary	441	1190	512
	Polytechnic	587	404	-
	Sub-total	1028	1594	512
Private	Universitary	318	363	59
	Polytechnic	225	123	-
	Sub-total	543	486	59
		1571	2080	571
Total		4222		

Figure 2: 2010-2011 Study cycles by subsystem (Source: A3ES, 2012)

It is important that one also consider the geographic distribution of these institutions in order to construct a global perception of the system. Figure 3 gives us an overview of the actual national coverage by the HEIS' Portuguese Network.

Figure 3: 2011 Portuguese network of public and private HEIS (Source: Fonseca & Encarnação, 2012, 21)

University   Polytechni

Military   ●   ■
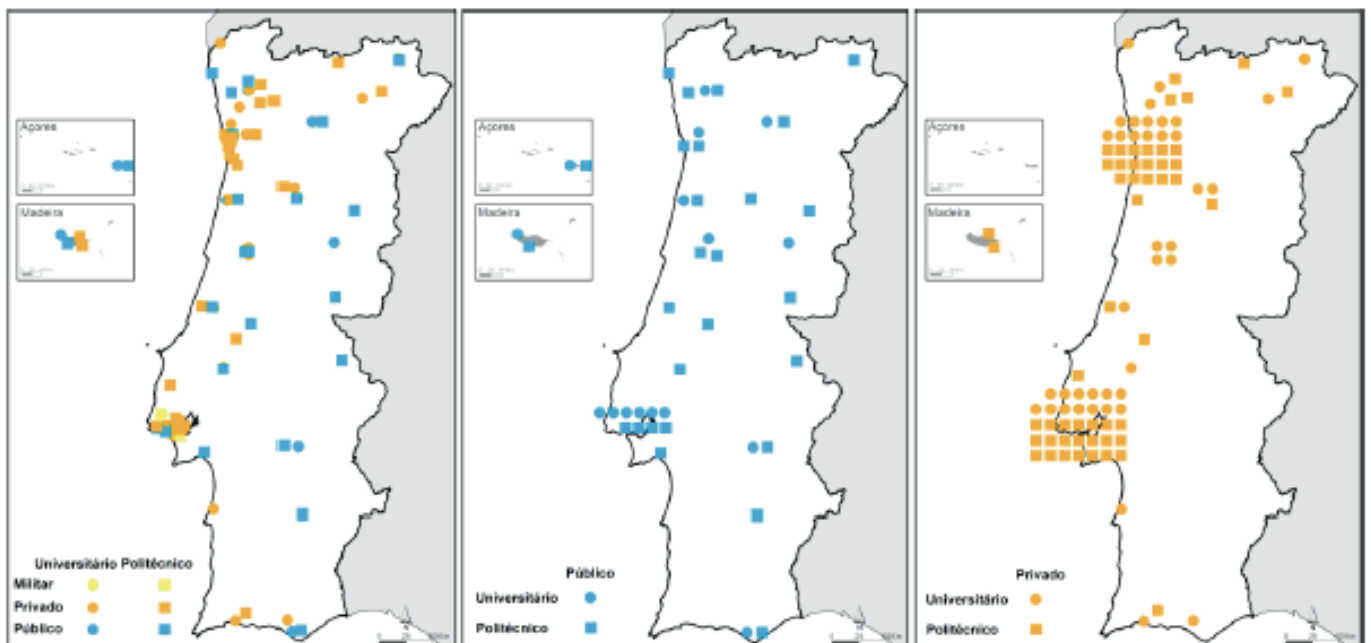
Private   ●   ■

A striking conclusion ... analysis of the three maps: as is very well highlighted by Fonseca and Encarnação (2012, 9-10),

Public   ●   ■ itory, presenting a more dispersed standard than private ones, which focus on the Lisbon and Porto metropolitan areas and regions, the more populated. Private institutions are concentrated in large urban areas, they are in greater number but of smaller size. The average size of public institutions is about 6,800 students, while in the private sub-system the average size drops to about 920 students per institution.

A main issue, stressed by the National Board of Education, refers to a complementary factor that has been shaping Portuguese higher education system in the last decade: the quality assessment standards push. According to the above quoted report (Conselho Nacional de Educação, 2012, 154),

The restructuring that has been observed in the higher education network, in particular with regard to training provision stems from the evaluation and accreditation of study programmes undertaken by the Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES) that has completed in 2012 the preliminary assessment of the established programmes.

This takes us to consider in detail the referred Agency in order to satisfy our main goal with this paper.

3. The Portuguese higher education quality assurance system

The current legal framework for the Portuguese higher education quality assurance system was defined by the Law 38/2007 of 16 August. Some months later, the Decree-Law 369/2007 of 5 November came to establish and endorsed the statutes of the new Portuguese quality assurance agency, known as *Agência de Avaliação e Acreditação do Ensino Superior* (A3ES). The later referred diploma that could be considered as the organic chart of the Agency stipulates its legal nature, of a private law foundation –independent both from the government and from higher education institutions –, as well as the fundamental organic structure and the organisational structure of its operational services. Figure 1 presents the main bodies of the Agency: the Board of Trustees, the Management Board, the Audit Committee, the Advisory Council and the Appeals Council.[3]

The Board of Trustees (BT) is composed of five members appointed by the Minister responsible for Higher Education in consultation with the bodies representing higher education institutions, public and private, from university and polytechnic subsystems.[4] The Board of Trustees appoints the members of the Management Board and the Appeals Council. Aside formulating views and recommendations about the operation of the Management Board, BT has the authority to reviews the Agency's Annual Activity Plan, as well as the Annual Management Report, the budget and the accounting.

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[3] The members of the Agency's Management Board were appointed in December 2008 and the Agency started its operation in 2009.

[4] The period in office is five years, which can be extended in a further additional year but cannot be renewed.

The Management Board (MB) is responsible for performing all the necessary actions for fulfilling the Agency's objectives that the statutes do not commit to other bodies. It is stated to be composed by a maximum of 4 executive members and 3 non-executive members, for a 4-year term of office that can be renewed.[5] MB has the following main competencies: to start any assessment and accreditation procedure; approval of reports resulting from assessment and accreditation procedures; and to make final assessment and accreditation decisions[6]. MB can also decide to adopt the results of assessment or accreditation carried out by other quality assurance bodies, national or foreign, as well as the approval of regulations in the area of quality assurance in higher education.

Figure 4: A3ES' Organisational Structure (Source: A3ES website)
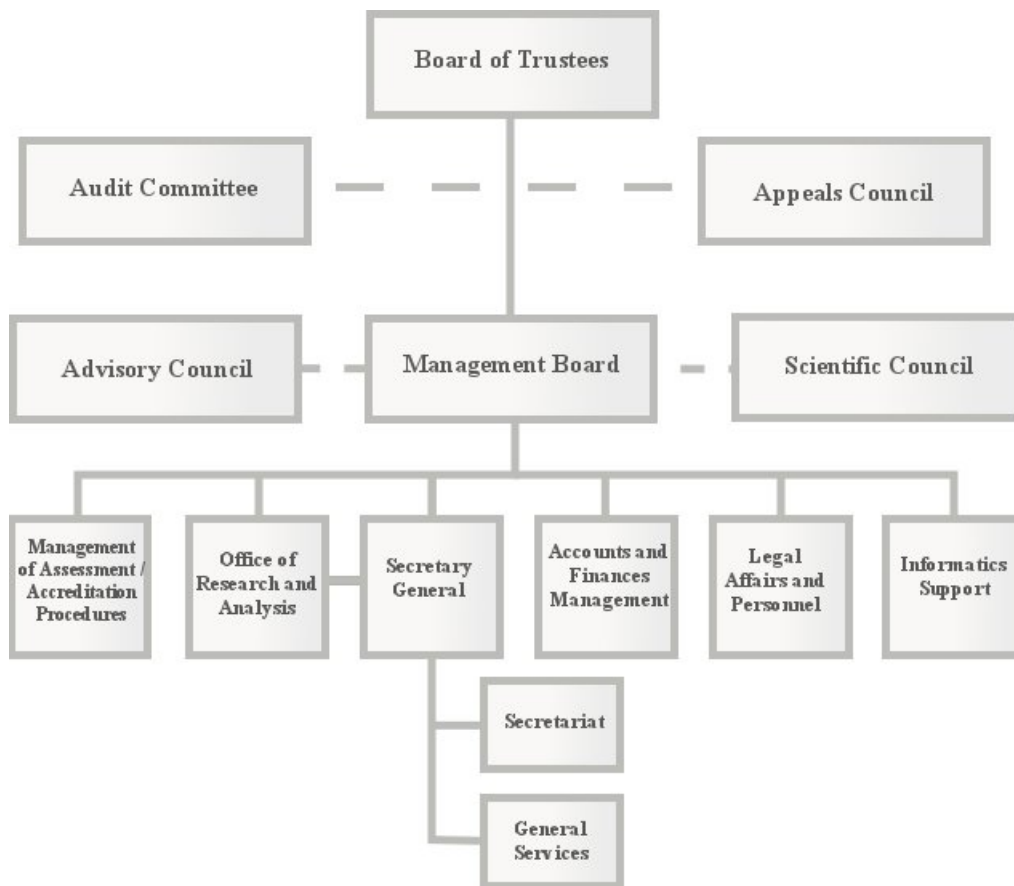
The Audit Committee has the responsibility of checking the legality, regularity and proper management of the Agency's finances. Of the most relevance for ensuring quality assessment equity, A3ES relies on the Appeals Council, which is responsible for considering the appeals against the decisions of the Management Board on assessment and accreditation.[7]

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[5] Currently MB is comprised of 4 executive members and 1 non-executive member who were appointed on 18 December 2008 and then re-appointed in 2012 for another term of office.

[6] MB is not obliged to follow the recommendations of the External Assessment Teams.

[7] The Appeals Council consists of five members, appointed by the Board of Trustees, with relevant professional experience, without permanent ties to Portuguese higher education institutions, and must include people with experience in foreign counterpart bodies.

Regarding matters of higher education quality assurance and decisions making, MB can rely on the Advisory Council, which must issue an official opinion on the Agency's annual activity plan and its strategic orientation.[8] In addition, the Management Board can also take the advices of the Scientific Council, a non-statutory body integrating six foreign experts with recognised international competency in the area of higher education quality assurance (Agência de Avaliação e Acreditação do Ensino Superior, 2013).[9]

The Agency started its activity by implementing a preliminary accreditation system: institutions were simply asked to reorganise their study programmes offer by demonstrating they have sufficient resources to support the ones they wish to maintain. Thus, the responsibility for adjusting the offer of study programmes was passed to HEIS. Study programmes no longer viable should be discontinued.

Some study programmes with indicators above a given threshold were exempt from a full assessment/accreditation and were considered as pre-accredited until the start of the regular accreditation process in the academic year 2011/2012. Those which could produce sufficient evidence that their study programs complied with minimum quality standards went through a formal assessment/accreditation process by external assessment teams that included foreign experts. According to A3ES above quoted report (2013, 19):

The preliminary accreditation process allowed the testing of the assessment/accreditation procedures using a limited number of cases. It also gave a clear sign to institutions and society that the Agency could act in an efficient and effective way by removing study programmes with evident quality problems. This was combined with the implementation of internal quality assurance systems, aiming at promoting consensus between the Agency and its partners regarding a common concept of quality.

As a direct consequence of this process institutions only submitted 4379 programmes to accreditation and decided to remove 883, which represents 20,1% of the 5262 existing study programmes. Until February 2013, the Agency has granted preliminary accreditation to 3 384 programmes, while institutions have by themselves removed 1 457 programmes. Meanwhile, 421 programmes that did neither receive preliminary accreditation nor were removed were submitted to a full assessment/accreditation process with a site visit by an external assessment team and consequently 307 became accredited whereas 114 were not.

The first regular accreditation cycle is underway and will be completed in 2016, when expectedly 3384 study programmes should have been processed.

One way to transmit a general idea of how the process of review and possible approval of a study programme is carried out, can perhaps be made explicit by presenting the script of self-evaluation (a.k.a. ACEF)[10] submitted by a HEI, which is afterwards discussed with the A3ES experts' team during the on site visit to the concerned institution.

The introductory section of the script asks the proponent to characterise the request: studies cycle, degree, prevailing scientific area, number of ECTS credits required by the degree, duration of the course, access conditions, curriculum framework, cv of the responsible for the course coordination, internships and in service training and existing cooperation protocols, among others.

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[8] The membership of the Advisory Council integrates representatives of higher education stakeholders, including the Council of Rectors of Portuguese [Public] Universities; the Coordinating Council of the [Public] Polytechnic Higher Institutions; the Portuguese Association of Private Higher Education; the student unions for higher education, one of them representing university higher education and the other representing polytechnic higher education; the existing professional associations; the Council of Associated [Research] Laboratories; associations representing industry, commerce and services and agriculture; trade union confederations; interested ministries; up to five specialists co-opted by the Council itself.

[9] The Scientific Council convenes once a year and produces a report containing its views and recommendations.

[10] We used the script for polytechnics, available at http://www.a3es.pt/sites/default/files/Gui%C3%A3o_ACEF_2011_2012_Poli_PT.pdf

The first section focus on the description of the general objectives of the course, their consistency with the mission and strategy of the institution and ways of disseminating the objectives for teachers and students.

The second section Relates to the internal organization of the study programme and the existing mechanisms for quality assurance, namely asking for: the description of the organizational structure responsible for the study cycle, including its approval, revision and updating of the syllabus and the distribution of teaching service; the way to ensure the active participation of teachers and students in decision -making processes that affect the process of teaching/learning and quality; the eventual structures and mechanisms of quality assurance for the study programme; the mechanisms responsible for the implementation of quality assurance and its role in the institution; the procedures for collecting information, monitoring and periodic evaluation of the study programme; the discussion and use of evaluation results of the course in the definition of improvement actions.

The third section considers the institutional available material resources and partnerships: the physical facilities allocated to and/or used by the study programme (teaching spaces, libraries, laboratories, computer rooms, etc..); the equipment and material resources used by the study programme (didactic and scientific equipment, materials and ICT); existing partnerships (national and international); the procedures established to promote interagency cooperation; the relationship practices with corporate stakeholders and the public sector.

Section fourth asks for a complete and thorough description of the teaching team assigned to the study program[11], namely: category, degree, scientific area, year that was obtained this degree, institution that conferred this degree, time basis at the institution that submits the proposal, 5 papers in international peer reviewed journals, books or chapters of books, technology development activities, services or relevant training in the study programme area and relevant work experience.

The fifth section pertains the description of the students enrolled and the study programme teaching and learning environments: regarding the former subject it asks for: gender, age, region of origin and socio-economic background (education and employment status of parents), as well as the Study cycle demand; regarding this last subject, it asks for the structures and measures of educational support and counselling on the academic record of students, the measures to promote the integration of students in the academic community, the structures and advice measures on funding opportunities and employment, the use given to the results of surveys about students' satisfaction for improving the teaching/learning process and the structures and measures to promote mobility, including mutual recognition of credits.

Section sixth section focus on the teaching objectives, the curriculum and on each syllabus record. It asks respectively for the following: learning objectives (knowledge, skills and competences) to be developed by students, operational objectives and the measuring of their degree of compliance; the demonstration about how the curriculum meets the Bologna Process principles; the frequency of curriculum revision and how is ensured the scientific updating; how the curriculum ensures the integration of students in scientific research; individual syllabus (teacher in charge and their teaching load for the course, other teachers and their teaching loads for the course, learning objectives – knowledge, skills and competencies to be developed by the students, demonstration of consistency of the syllabus with the objectives of the course, teaching methodologies– including evaluation, demonstration of consistency of the teaching methodologies with the learning objectives of the course and main bibliography); methods of teaching/learning.

The seventh section focus on the study programme results: the Graduation efficiency; Employability; Results of scientific, technological and artistic activities; Real contribution to the national, regional and local development in relation to the technological, scientific and cultural domains; Internationalisation level.

The eighth section demands a SWOT analysis of the study programme regarding: the general objectives of the course; the internal organization and quality assurance mechanisms; the material resources and partnerships; the teaching and non-teaching staff; the teaching/learning environments; the processes and results.

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[11] The section also asks for the description of assigned staff.

The ninth section refers to eventual proposal of measures to improve the study programme, which must provide the following information: general objectives of the course; mechanisms and internal quality assurance organization; material resources and partnerships; teaching and non-teaching staff; teaching/learning environments; processes and results.

Finally the tenth section open up a space for proposing an eventual curricular reformulation by providing the new study plan and respective syllabus.

Someone who has went through the process, which is our case, knows it has some virtues, being one of the more obvious the fact of inducing HEIS to focus on the quality and consistency of their work. Minimum requirements are checked and an effective 'introspection' about the study programme's objectives and processes could be undertaken. Among the major adverse implications we may refer: the enormous amount of time consumed; the bureaucracy increase; and the (perhaps unintended) consequences of focusing in a shallow 'managerialistic' approach to assess teaching and learning, that could miss the essential by insisting in a quantitative and perfomartive obsession (Díaz 2010, 2012a, b & c; Cachapuz, 2009). Among other things, one could ask why teacher education has been left for so late within this process. Only very recently a report from the High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education (European Commission, 2013), entitled *Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions*, came to stress the need to immediately and effectively undertake pedagogical training for high education teachers. There is a Portuguese saying that states "first of all one must pack the house" and maybe it was this the underlying intention of the planners, however structural changes of education quality are hardly achieved without addressing the referred two aspects simultaneously.

After three years of full operation, A3ES had to correspond to Article 25 of Law 38/2007 that determines a periodic international review of the higher education quality assurance system. In May 2012, the Ministry of Education and Science requested the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) to coordinate the review of the Agency. In Annex 1 we present the SWOT analysis provided by the above quoted report referring to the process. It gives one an insight about the essential achievements so far attained as well as about the gaps to be fulfilled. A main conclusion can be drawn: Portugal is striving to keep up the pace in higher education quality assessment.

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