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Paper proposal form

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Proposal

Title:

Quality culture: embracing the academic community in a “creativity agenda”

Abstract (150 words max):

Literature recognises that a Quality Assurance System needs to be a stable, foreseeable, consistent and coherent framework. However, if this system is to be context-sensitive, projected in the future and conceived as a positive instrument to changing for the better, it has to host and to incorporate innovation and creativity. In this domain, like in others, the best idea rarely comes up through spontaneity or improvisation of one individual talent. Instead, creativity is a herd and demanding result of collective ideals, practices and conditions. In this paper we intend to address, discuss and exemplify factors which enhance Quality Assurance Systems as *milieux* for creativity, based on the ULisboa experience; besides, we focus means by which Higher Education Institutions (HEI) can involve academic communities in their purpose to nurture creativity and innovation in Quality Assurance processes.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Getting started

We start with a double statement in order to highlight that consistency and openness are not incompatible features in Quality Assurance Systems (QAS).

It is commonly accepted that QAS need a stable, foreseeable, consistent, coherent framework reflecting their founding mission and values. Moreover, QAS should be supported by formal and political structures, as well as implemented by professional staff. In fact, according to the Article 5 of the Statutes of the ULisboa (2013) QA is a key element of its mission, principles and responsibilities. There is thus an institutional recognition of the importance of building up an Integrated QAS as a way to consolidate a culture of quality and evaluation, to improve reflexivity and willingness to change for the better.

But, on the other hand, QAS should also be open, reliable and context-sensitive structures. This is crucial in contemporary Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and in societies where unexpected and complex changes encompass all spheres of life. The openness is, in this way, especially relevant in academic environments, where knowledge and culture are created. Institutions should not only look to (and learn from) the past but need to be projected in the future and constitute positive elements to change for the better. Not trying to intertwine consistency and openness is thus a risk for the continuity and vitality of HEI.

Quality Culture and Quality Assurance

QAS are part of the structural building of an institution and include all activities related to defining, assuring and enhancing quality. They are key components of Quality Culture (QC), a broader concept that relates cultural/psychological elements, consisting in values, beliefs and expectations, on one hand; and, on the other, structural/managerial elements defined by specific processes on QA (EUA 2006, p. 11).



QC emerges as a visible founding pillar of the ULisboa because, among other features, quality policies are formally enounced as a priority and there is a commitment of the whole academic community towards continuing evaluation and improvement. This commitment is transversely observable from management bodies to students, teachers/researchers and other stakeholders from varied nuclear processes of the University. A self-evaluation attitude and the desire to improve is clearly announced at all levels, and formative assessment practices (quality improvement) are separated from summative ones (decision making).

Forging its way along the last 10 years, either centrally or at the Faculties level of the two former universities, QC is now embedded in the founding mission, priorities and practices of the ULisboa.

About creativity

There is no simple or "one-size-fits-all" definition of creativity in HEI. However, the following four interconnected dimensions described by EUA (2007, p. 17) can be mentioned:

- Originality: not reproducing the past, engaging in new developments, defying the established status quo;
- Appropriateness: new approaches to solve specific problems at hand;
- Future orientation: aiming and leading to the future, dealing with insecurity and uncertainty;
- Problem solving ability: identifying solutions, thinking out of the box and approaching things from different perspectives, assuming risk-taking attitudes.

Moreover, change rarely happens randomly or by means of spontaneous individual acts. These ingredients, of course, can be at stake – but they have to be arranged, worked out and integrated in a coherent whole. Diversity of human resources play here an important role, encouraging different backgrounds and experiences to come together in innovative ways. To put it simply, creativity is a herd and demanding result of collective ideals, practices and conditions.

How can creativity be nurtured?

Having pointed out the importance of creativity in a QAS in HEI, we will now identify six factors that can be enhancers of creativity and inclusion according to our experience.

1. Independent QAS

Quality Assurance Systems should be autonomous and independent regarding the administrative/managerial structure of the institution. They should be placed under direct supervision of the political board, i.e., the Rector or the Rectoral Team. The perspective of a QAS being an *outsider* at the very heart of the institution will bring more room to decode unconventional and critical questions and to enable flexible crossings of established frontiers and barriers.

In our institution, the QAS is declined at three levels: one Pro-Rector responsible for the System, in direct connection with the Rector; the QA Council, which outlines the quality agenda in the University and coordinates the QAS, meeting on a monthly-basis, composed by one teacher/researcher of each and every Faculty/Institute, one representative of the non-teaching/researcher staff and three students chosen by the



Students Union; and, finally, the Office for QA, in direct dependency of a Pro-Rector and executing all the technical QA tasks in the University.

The benefits of independency are also related to the mix of freedom and power to raise "inconvenient", critical questions and do specific "out-of-the-box" requests. This can only be achieved with a formal and strong political support, of course. That is why we believe that a QAS like the one we have in the University can move softly through different paths and cross frontiers that very often are sharp and closed. For example: establishing communication and proximity between services of different faculties, professional and statutory hierarchies (like directors, pedagogical and management boards, professors and assistants). Bearing this in mind, the Council for QA accomplished the extension of the timetable of the Academic Services in order to make them friendlier to working students, negotiating with multiple institutional partners; as well as the inclusion of specifically QA related issues in the Teachers' Performance Evaluation Statute; or even the constitution of internal QA teams in schools/faculties, composed by members of a diversified academic community (teachers, students and staff).

2. Qualified staff

We believe that human resources qualification and diversity is extremely relevant. The system should be supported by highly qualified and stable staff with different disciplinary backgrounds. We support the idea that there should not be a professional specialized category of "QA professionals", very often self-assumed as a "caste of experts" closed in a bureaucratic tower. A network of very well prepared and diverse staff (from humanities, arts, sciences and technology, history or social sciences disciplinary backgrounds) can bring new perspectives and new insights on QA, new ideas thus emerging from intertwining their contributions.

Furthermore, these professionals should perceive themselves as engaged and competent learners. It is important to involve people that are willing to study, to learn, and to understand their environment, capable and curious to go through different experiences and to train themselves in this domain. Different disciplinary backgrounds, which result in multiple complementary approaches of the same reality can be a very positive factor.

In our University, the Council of QA, where all strategically decisions are taken, is composed by a qualified sample of teachers/researchers, staff and students that in their monthly meetings are able to bring new perspectives of what is the situation on their own specific contexts. When problems are discussed, the variety of interpretations and solutions reflects creativity and innovation. We encourage this multiplicity.

The QA Office team, composed by elements mainly from the social sciences, has, nevertheless, different backgrounds and working experiences. This ensures the growing of some areas of expertise over which we built our reputation in the academic community: construction of data basis and production of indicators, questionnaires, evaluation processes (institutional/external, degrees, services), among others.

3. Hands on

Quality Assurance structures and boards should be hands on, close to the ground and to reality. Their purpose is to support, to be partners of change. QA staff should not only *legislate*, *recommend* or *demand* but also *observe* and *listen* to actors in the field (students, teachers, researchers and staff). Participation is important because an accurate and up-to-date knowledge of the present enables a more effective intervention and projection of the future. The priority is to be "there", among the actors, understanding their perspectives – not judging them. Working side-by-side allows the QA



staff to be welcomed in schools and faculties, and thus to be more successful in obtaining positive results.

We feel that it is important to take into account expectations and previous experiences since there is no simple or “one-size-fits-all” procedure. In this way, establishing flexible and friendly networks between local and central domains (for example through the organization of seminars, research projects and giving close support to evaluation processes) we diminish barriers and enable fluid communication between the two levels. A creative partnership emerges where all parts are involved in the construction of the future.

With this in mind, the Council for QA organizes two open discussions per year under the motto “Known to intervene”: The Integration of 1st year students (2010); Questioning Bologna and Pedagogy (2010); Supporting inclusion - Students with Special Needs (2011); Failure and Dropout in Higher Education (2011); Social Responsibility in Higher Education - Consequences for the curriculum? (2012); Rankings and Higher Education System (2012); Research and Teaching - Tensions? Challenges? (2013). These seminars had a good acceptance among the academic community and were at the origin of new procedures and guidelines - for example, the Statute and the Network for Students with Special Needs, the publication of a book/compilation of all University initiatives under Social Responsibility area, among others.

Other examples of inclusion of the main players in QA structures can be referred. In one of the faculties (the School of Engineering), an effort was made to integrate specifically designed evaluation tools in the System, allowing the replication of the strengths and making everyone involved in a learning community towards quality improvement (IST 2010). In one way, the QAS embodied those tools in a collective campaign in order to give coherence to the various subsystems previously developed in a fragmented mode.

4. Failure and error

When things go wrong, sometimes very wrong, experience has told us that the way to address them is not by means of punitive attitudes. Instead, the ability to handle the situation and test our problem solving capacity must be enhanced in these delicate moments. The ability to handle failure and not to give up is important in order to seize the opportunity to change and to improve.

A recent internal crisis turned out to be an opportunity, an occasion for a reflexive and constructive effort that led us to creative procedures and solutions. One of our faculties, under an evaluation process by the Portuguese Accreditation and Evaluation Agency for Higher Education (A3ES), submitted a weak and last minute self-evaluation report, despite the mobilization and pressing along the preparation period. Eventually, the degree under evaluation could be poorly evaluated and, consequently, closed. Once the *fait accompli*, and once the faculty government got conscious of this adversity, the QA Office (with the students’ complicity), forced a second round to minimize the impact of the first stage. It was the moment to seize our readiness to help. We installed ourselves inside the faculty for some days, working with them, meeting with academic decision-makers, removing barriers, challenging previous neglecting attitudes. The process which resulted from this effort was astonishing: a new trust-worthy relationship was established between us and them, an “internal evaluation board” was elected and immediately started working on an alternative self-evaluation report. Currently, a large internal debate is on-going inside the Faculty to discuss it and enrich it and they are already preparing very carefully the external evaluators visit (2nd phase of the evaluation process). We never thought they would go so far and so good.



Similarly, specific improvement plans in one other Institute have become the starting point for institutional audits to challenge situations in learning-teaching processes, and joint efforts were made to implement realistic solutions to problematic cases, non-satisfactory results. Teachers and students delegates get together in order to discuss and recommend measures to overcome weaknesses in the teaching & learning process. The maturity of this process has given rise over time to innovation, and practices have been redesigned several times in recent years to cover, among other purposes, a larger number of actors. Initially only focused on students, it has now been extended to collect inputs from teachers and some student representatives.

The ability to think, re-work and re-structure procedures and behaviours after failing is, thus, vital.

5. *Keep it simple*

We believe that simplicity is a fundamental aspect when designing a QAS. Being a large university, with different faculties, historical legacies and *modus operandi*, the necessity of a simple and minimalist (although structured) system in the ULisboa enables the different units to maintain their differences and to produce adjustments to their own needs and specificities. Being so, we defend the idea of a comprehensive but open system, capable of incorporating the diversity of technical and administrative management. A system that is simple, coherent, stable and, in a certain way, predictable promotes transparency and accountability (regarding actors, stakeholders and regulatory authorities). Also being easy to understand, it promotes participation at all levels of the University, facilitating interactions and comprehension between the parts.

At the same time, we believe that it is important to benchmark successful experiences from other Institutions, at the national or the international level. In this domain, we guided our system according to the ENQA Standards and Guidelines. They were crucial to structure the new University QAS.

Similarly, our experience with the National Accreditation and Evaluation Agency uncovers the necessity of keeping it simple. The process of evaluation of degrees, for instance, is based on a form with more than 150 questions and several *swot* analyses. Each study cycle is evaluated *per se* and the faculty must submit the self-evaluation report per degree. To do so, teams in all faculties are constantly producing data and making analyses for different programmes (but in a way, similar, since teachers/researchers take part in multiple degrees). After the self-evaluation report a visit of an Evaluation Committee is scheduled (5 to 12 months) and afterwards the result of the evaluation is known (5 to 12 months): the degree can be failed or approved (with or without recommendations). This complex and bureaucratic process is, in a way, understood by Portuguese HEI as a sign of mistrust from the Agency. The amount of data and work load that is necessary for each study cycle is time consuming and very heavy. So, in a way we need to be prepared for these administrative conservative activities, it is our objective to "lighten" the system so that it is also easy to understand and work with.

6. *Seize the instability*

Rupture, turbulent and transitional institutional periods can be seized as strategic moments to innovate and to be creative. Times of uncertainty and insecurity, where established positions are shaken and people don't look backwards, are critical to break boundaries and to move further ahead. This is presently the case of our University. Effectively, the Classical University of Lisbon and the Technical University of Lisbon have recently merged, in an unprecedented process (in the history of the Portuguese higher



education system), giving birth to the biggest university in the country. This process was formally concluded in July 2013 with the election of the new Rector.

Taking advantage of this unique in-between situation, we are designing and developing, *ab initio*, the QC inside the new university, benefiting from contributions and experiences of the two previous institutions. We are now in a nonstop transition, a turning point and, concerning QA, the thought is "now or never". Teams from both universities have been working together over the last months, inspired by the best national or international practices, to implement an integrated QAS and to elaborate the new Quality Manual.

Final remarks

Going back to the mission of a QAS: (1) We support the relevance of stability, consistency and permanence in a QAS, which make it a foreseeable "establishment". A structured system will attract students, teachers, researchers and staff into Quality issues and will allow them to experience a positive commitment, corresponding to academic ideals such as democracy, engagement and collegiality; (2) However, a *milieux* that is open to new questions and approaches, future-oriented and risk taking will facilitate the emergence of creativity and innovation – after all the core ingredients of which academia is made of. Better QAS are precisely those which host both dimensions.

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Questions for discussion:

How is creativity and innovation enhanced in your HEI QA system?

What do you think about the necessity of QA professionals?

What do you think about the necessity of independent quality management councils?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 2 August 2013 to Ivana Juraga (Ivana.Juraga@eua.be). Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.