

Internal quality assurance systems: “tailor made” or “one size fits all” implementation?

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to look at the characteristics of internal quality assurance (IQA) systems of higher education institutions to understand whether these systems tend to reproduce a given model, externally defined and suggested to institutions, or rather to be shaped by institutions' features and interests.

Design/methodology/approach – The study is supported in the analysis of the content of self-assessment reports of 12 internal QA systems certified, in Portugal, between 2012 and 2015. An analysis grid was used based on three categories: IQA systems' historical framework, structural/managerial component and monitoring, assessment and continuous improvement.

Findings – Institutions tended to follow a “one size fits all” approach, meaning that external (European and national) quality assurance (QA) references were used in an identical way, giving origin to rather similar IQA systems. Institutional characteristics do not seem to have played a relevant role, eventually due to institutions' will to obtain their systems' certification and, thus, achieve a light-touch external QA.

Research limitations/implications – The study was based on the analysis of only certified IQA systems and relies on document analysis. It would be interesting to also include non-certified systems, in a comparative perspective, complemented with data deriving from interviews and/or questionnaires with some of the actors involved in the certification process.

Practical implications – The study provides an understanding of how IQA systems are being implemented in Portugal. Thus, it can be of interest to other institutions as well as to QA agencies.

Originality/value – The study addresses a topic still relatively absent from research on QA in higher education, being of interest for researchers in the field.

Keywords Portugal, Quality, Quality assurance, Higher education institutions, Internal quality assurance systems

Paper type Research paper



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Introduction

Although quality has always been a concern of higher education institutions, since the 1980s, a shift has occurred in the objective of quality assurance (QA) from improving quality to promoting institutions' accountability towards governments and society (Rosa and Amaral, 2007). This shift has become especially visible over the past decade, with the emergence of "more radical" evaluation methods, materialised in accreditation by independent accrediting agencies (Amaral, 2007; Maassen and Stensaker, 2011; Schwarz and Westerheijden, 2004), which "added further to the apparatus of verification" (Neave, 2004, p. 30).

More recently, a trend towards a quality enhancement approach has been noticed (Amaral, 2014; Filippakou and Tapper, 2008). Although quality enhancement remained an undefined concept, it implied that the responsibility for quality was located within institutions and that external assurance of quality relied on institutional audits of internal quality assurance (IQA) systems rather than on more intrusive forms of QA, such as programme level accreditation (Amaral, 2014; Amaral *et al.*, 2013; Filippakou and Tapper, 2008). In this context, and induced by external and internal drivers, institutions started to establish or to systematise and strengthen their own IQA systems better (Sursock, 2015; Gover *et al.*, 2015). The EUA Trends Report (2015) argued that the development of IQA processes was one of the important drivers of institutional change, in Europe, during the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The paper looks at IQA systems' "structural/managerial" component – institutional structures, processes and procedures designed to assure quality (EUA, 2006) – with the aim to understand their main characteristics and implementation features. It explores whether, in the design of their systems, institutions tend to follow a "one size fits all" model, suggested particularly by QA agencies, or implement systems "tailored" according to institutional characteristics (e.g. nature, subsystem, scope and dimension). The empirical analysis focused on the Portuguese case.

Internal quality assurance systems' implementation

The implementation of IQA systems is shaped by factors extrinsic and intrinsic to institutions. Among the extrinsic factors, external QA plays a preponderant role, with systems being often designed to "fit" its requirements, philosophies and aims (Gover *et al.*, 2015; Houston and Paewai, 2013; Kristensen, 2010; Loukkola and Zhang, 2010; Stensaker, 2007; Sursock, 2011; Vukasovik, 2014).

One external QA's expectation is that institutions develop processes to assure and enhance their own quality (Kristensen, 2010). To help institutions achieving this goal external QA usually provides information and support (Kristensen, 2010). At the European level, it is worth noting the relevance of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). The translation of the ESG into QA policies, regulations and frames of reference, such as those issued via QA agencies, is an important factor for the development of IQA systems (Gover *et al.*, 2015; Sarrico and Veiga, 2014; Vukasovik, 2014).

These systems' development can, nevertheless, serve other purposes than just endowing institutions with their own quality cultures and QA mechanisms (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010). For instance, it can be a result of an unwritten "deal" between external and internal QA, where IQA systems emerge as a counterpart for a lighter-touch external QA (Kristensen, 2010). So, institutions with well-developed systems will need only minimal external inquiry. Based on the argument that periodic assessments of study programmes are costly and induce significant disruption to the normal activities of the institutions, QA agencies have

started auditing (and certifying) IQA systems (Manatos *et al.*, 2016; Sursock, 2015) aiming at “lighter touch” assessment/accreditation.

Furthermore, the development of IQA systems may result from an institution’s will, need or even compulsion, to comply with external QA frameworks to enhance their “reputation, or status” (Houston and Paewai, 2013, p. 267). The alignment with external references allows institutions to preserve their reputation (Houston and Paewai, 2013) or legitimacy (Stensaker, 2007; Westerheijden and Kohoutek, 2014).

Based on isomorphism (Dimmagio and Powell, 1983; Powell, 2007), it is possible to argue that when designing and implementing IQA systems institutions reveal a coercive isomorphic tendency. Coercive isomorphism refers to externally induced organisational change, in response to external pressures. Coercive factors involve political pressures and state steering through regulatory supervision (Dimmagio and Powell, 1983; Powell, 2007). It can then be assumed that when implementing IQA systems higher education institutions tend to respond to the external requirements, as reflected in the frameworks and guidelines proposed by QA agencies. Institutions’ compliance with external frameworks might explain why IQA systems’ design and implementation tend to become similar.

Nevertheless, IQA systems are not just the result of external “forces”. Institutions also influence the way these systems are set up (Manatos *et al.*, 2016). External QA references and guidance are translated at the institutional level into an implementation influenced by the institutions’ culture, characteristics and actors (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010; Santos, 2011). This is likely to confer the systems with specific features, despite the standardising effect of external influences.

The institutions’ responses to external demands appear mediated by their specificities (Greenwood *et al.*, 2011). The institutions’ nature and mission, linked to their higher education subsystem and sector, are examples of such specificities. Another example is the institutions’ governance and management (Houston and Paewai, 2013; Kristensen, 2010) and its attitude towards the “development of an operational quality system and the development of a quality culture” (Kristensen, 2010, p. 156). Institutional management might decide on the adoption of a system similar to that of other more prestigious institution. This tendency to copy similar organisations, perceived as successful, as a way to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity, is called mimetic isomorphism (Dimmagio and Powell, 1983; Powell, 2007).

The Portuguese context

Similarly to what has been occurring in most European countries (Eggin, 2014), in Portugal, European references on internal QA, namely, the ESG, were translated into the QA legal framework and specific references defined by the national QA agency (A3ES). Law 38/2007, establishing a new national QA system, that aligns with the first part of the ESG by setting out the basic rules and procedures for IQA (Fonseca, 2010). In this context, while the state held the responsibility for assessing and accrediting quality, through the QA agency, quality assurance and improvement rested with the institutions (Sarrico *et al.*, 2013). Institutions are thus expected to develop a quality policy closer to quality enhancement and the adequate procedures for its pursuit, a quality culture and a strategy for continuous improvement (Rosa and Sarrico, 2012) which should materialise in an IQA system.

This was a cornerstone of the Portuguese QA agency (Amaral *et al.*, 2013). A3ES has publicly discussed the different possibilities for implementing IQA systems, aiming to provide guidance without imposing a single model. From that discussion, the agency put forward a frame of reference for “a sound and well developed IQA system, consonant with the ESG and the applicable legal requirements” (Santos, 2011, p. 98). The audit model, so

defined, covers a set of target areas and criteria for IQA systems' auditing and certification (A3ES, 2013):

- the institutional policy for quality and how it is documented;
- the scope and effectiveness of the procedures and structures for QA related to the core aspects of the institutional mission;
- the relationship between the QA system and the governance and management bodies of the institution;
- the participation of internal and external stakeholders in the QA processes;
- the information system;
- the publication of information relevant to external stakeholders;
- the systems' monitoring, evaluation and continuous improvement; and
- the system as a whole.

Although no prescriptive implementation guidelines were put forward by A3ES, the audit model can be seen as creating some constraints, as compliance with the model may facilitate the systems' certification. Furthermore, to encourage institutions to certify their IQA systems, A3ES suggested offering them a lighter-touch accreditation in the future (Sursock, 2011; Tavares *et al.*, 2016). If on the one hand, the autonomy given to institutions is expected to promote a "tailor made" approach to the institutions' characteristics, on the other hand, the advantage of having these systems certified, to achieve a lighter-touch external QA, might lead institutions to a standardised, "one size fits all" model.

Method and data

In 2012, the A3ES conducted a first certification exercise of IQA systems. From a population consisting of both universities and polytechnics from the public sector (14 universities, 15 polytechnics and 13 polytechnic schools integrated in universities) and the private sector (80 institutions, both universities and polytechnics) (Tavares *et al.*, 2016), five institutions participated. The following year, the certification was opened to the remaining institutions and two of them applied, followed by another five in 2014. At the time the study was conducted (2015), these 12 institutions were the only ones with certified systems. Notwithstanding the sample's limitations in terms of representativeness, the fact that this is a qualitative study, the diversified nature of the institutions and the richness of the information collected were considered sufficient to empirically validate the research.

The study was empirically based on the analysis of the 12 self-assessment reports, considered as a privileged source of information on the characteristics of the IQA systems, providing information on how institutions had interpreted and responded to the external QA guidelines. Although the reports drafted by the external panels could also provide useful information, these were not used, as the aim was to look at these systems through the lenses of the institutions and not those of the audit teams.

The institutions can be characterised as mainly belonging to the public sector (except two from the private sector), evenly distributed in terms of subsystem (university and polytechnic) and dimension (small or large, based on the number of students), and as being mainly comprehensive, i.e. offering programmes in a wide range of scientific areas. These attributes were assumed to influence IQA systems' design and implementation, as they could configure different institutional contexts and, as such, different options of systems.

Data from the self-assessment reports were organised and examined using category content analysis (Bardin, 1995; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Resorting to qualitative analysis

software (MAXQDA), a content analysis grid (Table AI), was constructed systematising the data on the IQA systems' in three categories development over time; "structural/managerial" component; and monitoring, assessment and continuous improvement. Data were interpreted looking for the main trends for each of the categories of analysis. Differences in the content of the categories, based on the institutions' characteristics (nature, subsystem, scope and dimension) were also tentatively examined. Nevertheless, maybe due to the sample features (size, nature and scope), such differences could not be identified.

Internal quality assurance systems: main characteristics

This section systematises the main characteristics of the implemented IQA systems. It starts by presenting an overview of their evolution; then it introduces the features of their structural/managerial component; finally, it addresses the way systems were monitored, assessed and continuously improved.

Internal quality assurance systems' development over time

The historical evolution of Portuguese IQA systems finds its roots in developments before the 2007 national legislation was enacted. Nine institutions declared having implemented such mechanisms previous to this enactment (five during the 2000s, three during the 1990s and one during the 1980s) and only three after it. This aligns with Neave's (1994) "law of anticipated results", evidencing that institutions are able to anticipate external influences, by interpretation of developments occurring in the higher education environment.

Before 2007, IQA arrangements seem to have been influenced by both external and internal factors (Table I). Besides suggesting the assumption of quality and its assurance as something important to institutions, such factors also revealed the key-role played by external QA, both at European and national level, in the definition of IQA arrangements.

Following the passing of the 2007 legislation, these arrangements were further developed through the formalisation of internal systems. Again, this seemed to have been influenced by factors both external and internal to institutions (Table I).

External factors	Internal factors
<i>Before 2007</i>	
Alignment with the Bologna Process	Institutional concern with quality
Submission to evaluations promoted both by European and national organisations	Institutions' anticipatory movement in relation to the emergence of the first national attempts to assess higher education quality (early 1990s)
Influence of the national structure regulating QA previous to the A3 ES (1998–2006)	
<i>After 2007</i>	
ESG–European Standards and Guidelines	Perceived need to consolidate and improve the existing IQA systems
Other European QA references (ENQA and EUA)	Perceived need of making procedures more systematic
Training on QA issues	Desire to bring quality at the heart of the institutions' concerns
A3ES guidelines, standards and benchmarks for QA and for IQA systems	
National legal frameworks regulating both QA and higher education institutions	
Influence of the ISO 9001 standard	

Table I.
External and internal
factors influencing QA
arrangements

As for the three institutions that implemented their systems only after 2007, two of them used the ISO 9001 standard, meaning they were not strictly influenced by the external QA framework. However, after the implementation of its IQA system, one of the institutions introduced changes based, again, on external QA references issued both at European (by ENQA – the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) and national (by A3ES) level.

In sum, the data collected evidence of the importance of external QA references for IQA systems' design and implementation. This can be partially explained by a coercive isomorphism phenomenon: institutions are "coerced" to follow and adopt what is externally proposed in terms of QA frameworks and guidelines.

Internal quality assurance systems' structural/managerial component

IQA systems' structural/managerial component encompasses institutional structures, processes and procedures designed to assure quality (EUA 2006). From the reports' analysis, six issues emerged as relevant to characterise the systems: documentation structure; coordination and support structures; scope and processes covered; quality assurance mechanisms; support information system; and link with the institution's governance and management. Overall, these issues correspond to the target areas and criteria for IQA systems' auditing and certification (A3ES, 2013). This evidences that institutions show an isomorphic tendency, following what is externally proposed.

Institutional policy for quality assurance and documentation structure

One of the criteria for IQA systems' auditing and certification (A3ES, 2013) is the institutional policy for QA and its documentation. In most cases, institutions identified a set of documents that sustain the internal systems' definition and operationalisation. This comprised the institutional policy for quality, a commitment to meeting their objectives and its continuous improvement; the strategic documents supporting this policy; and operational plans.

All except four institutions argued using a more or less explicit reference to their quality policy in strategic documents. Therefore, in most cases, the quality policy seemed to be part of the institutions' mission, translated into their visions, objectives and strategic plans. The quality policy was recognised as basis for the IQA systems' definition and implementation, including the reference to the different levels of responsibility and competences inherent to QA, as well as the objectives and procedures of the institutional strategy for quality.

Following a trend common to most European institutions (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010), and aligned with A3ES suggestions, all except three institutions mentioned having a "strategic document" supporting IQA systems' design, implementation and development – the quality manual. Its existence seems again to denote the influence of external QA references. The quality manual included, in most institutions: the institutional policy for quality and its translation into the IQA system; mechanisms for quality assessment and assurance and for the systems' monitoring, assessment and improvement; these systems' scope, objectives, structure and organisation; and the roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders involved in IQA.

In addition, some institutions mentioned the existence of other documents (e.g. procedures or best practice manuals, quality regulations, frameworks or guides), which could be considered as operational plans supporting the institutional strategy for quality and IQA systems. The existence of a quality plan, translating the institution's strategic programme into concrete actions, was also mentioned.

Such a multitude of documents seemed to indicate that IQA systems were, or at least could easily become, over-bureaucratic. This trend is in line with what usually happens regarding the implementation of quality management systems.

Coordination and support structures

IQA systems' certification takes into account the scope and effectiveness of the procedures and structures for QA. Overall, the systems tend to be coordinated and supported by a significant number of structures characterised by great variety of designation and functions. This denotes a certain level of creativity in translating the A3ES guidelines. Nevertheless, these structures existed at two main levels: one linked to the coordination and strategic decision-making in relation to IQA systems' implementation (e.g. QA committees, commissions, boards and councils) and the other related to running the system on a daily basis (e.g. QA services and offices). Therefore, these structures tend to be relatively similar, which may suggest an alignment towards what the institutions think are A3ES' expectations. It can also be a consequence of institutions copying each other when designing IQA systems, using pioneering institutions as references.

Most institutions stressed the involvement of different stakeholders, both internal (academics, non-academic staff and students) and external (professional organisations, alumni, employers and institutional partners), as a cornerstone of their systems, which, again, is in line with the external QA references.

Processes

Different processes are addressed by the A3ES audit model, namely, teaching and learning, research and development, cooperation with other institutions and with the community, human resources policies, support services and internationalisation. Institutions tended to emphasise those closely related to their mission, namely, teaching and learning; research and development; and third mission. Nonetheless, some institutions also mentioned support processes (administrative services; human resources; documentation, information and communication services; infrastructures and material resources; social services; and student support services), as well as internationalisation activities.

It can be argued that, to some extent, IQA systems seemed to have a comprehensive character, covering different institutional processes. This may be explained by the influence of A3ES references, as these address all institutional processes and not only teaching and learning. However, internal systems tended to be highly focused on teaching and learning. The centrality of this process (Fonseca, 2010; Loukkola and Zhang, 2010; Manatos *et al.*, 2015; Sursock, 2011) was evident in the importance it assumed in both the QA mechanisms implemented and the information support system (see subsequent section). This might be related to the fact that teaching and learning constituted the initial focus of internal quality arrangements and, although progressively addressing other processes, institutions still tended to give it primacy (see also Manatos *et al.*, 2015). The focus on teaching and learning also seemed to evidence that, despite external references, institutions shaped their IQA systems according to their interests, even if only to a small extent.

Quality assurance mechanisms

Only half of the institutions explicitly identified mechanisms implemented to assure and continuously improve quality. These included procedures to operationalise the teaching and learning process; student surveys; self-assessment and quality monitoring indicators for different processes, again with special focus on teaching and learning; and appraisal systems for academic and non-academic staff.

These mechanisms allowed institutions to gather information on their quality, monitor their processes and make decisions on future improvements. Such mechanisms tended, however, to be quite standardised, revealing a trend recognised in the literature (Sarrico *et al.*, 2013; Sursock 2011). This might be a consequence of institutions' interpretation of external QA references on what should be the "ideal" or "desirable" mechanisms to implement.

Maybe due to the focus of IQA systems on the teaching and learning process, the mechanisms to assure and improve quality were also much centred on this process (see also Manatos *et al.*, 2015). However, it was possible to note some concern with other processes, most probably due to the influence of the A3ES references for IQA systems.

Support information system

Two certification criteria have to do with the existence of an information system and the publication of information relevant to stakeholders. In line with other studies (Sarrico *et al.*, 2013), our findings revealed that all institutions recognised information systems as playing a relevant role for IQA systems.

Information systems presented somewhat different degrees of development and comprehensiveness due to their different stages of implementation. Some institutions were upgrading these systems, namely, in terms of comprehensiveness and integration of information needed for IQA systems. This upgrade was probably both a response to increasing external accountability demands and the recognition of the systems' "inability to respond to the needs of the quality system" (Tavares *et al.*, 2016, p. 9). The information systems' implementation and further development seemed to be a response of institutions to the external QA references to these systems (e.g. ESG and A3ES).

As with QA processes and mechanisms, information systems also tended to focus on the teaching and learning process. A few institutions had somewhat more comprehensive systems, encompassing other processes such as research, third mission and support. Other institutions did mention that their information systems reached other aspects besides teaching and learning, although not describing these processes. This suggests again the tendency for institutions to recognise the model proposed by the QA agency as something "to be" followed.

Data from surveys to internal and external stakeholders, performance indicators (graduate employability, student success rates) and reports produced under internal and external review processes, fed the information systems. This information supported decision-making at the level both of IQA systems' coordinating structures, and governance and management bodies.

Information dissemination was mainly internal, with external dissemination emerging as an aspect generally recognised as needing to be further improved. This confirmed other studies' findings (Fonseca, 2010; Tavares *et al.*, 2016), evidencing that information dissemination, mainly the public one, emerges as a weakness of Portuguese IQA systems (Sarrico and Machado, 2013). Moreover, it suggests that external QA references are not being completely followed.

Link with governance and management

IQA system's link with the institution's governance and management was another topic in the auditing process. As identified in other studies (Fonseca, 2010; Sarrico *et al.*, 2013), the IQA systems analysed tended to be centralised, with procedures defined by top institutional leaders, "the final say" resting "squarely with the centre" (Sarrico *et al.*, 2013, p. 387).

When referring to the levels where the interconnection between the systems and governance and management took place, several institutions emphasised the top level. Indeed, institutional "leadership" seemed to be "the driving force" of internal quality, given

its “important role in the definition” of quality policies, culture and practices (Manatos *et al.*, 2015, p. 8). However, in some cases, some specific actors located at the middle level (organic units) or at the bottom organisational level (study programmes) were also recognised as holding substantial influence on internal systems’ functioning.

Overall, although institutions claimed that a link existed between IQA systems and management and governance, this link did not appear to configure an effective integration of QA in governance and management. Indeed, interconnection and articulation with IQA systems was mainly based on QA decisions being taken by representatives of different management and governance bodies. The only exception was the adoption of some mechanisms to promote this articulation, the most relevant being the use of the information provided via QA systems as a management tool supporting decision-making (see also Manatos *et al.*, 2015).

These results suggested that rather than effectively integrating the IQA system in their governance and management, institutions created a parallel management system. Although evidencing institutions’ failure in achieving A3ES’ expectations, previous development also highlights institutions’ ability to adapt the IQA model proposed externally to their interests (in this case, to their “traditional way of functioning”).

Internal quality assurance systems’ monitoring, assessment and continuous improvement

The certification of internal systems by A3ES implies the implementation of adequate mechanisms for their monitoring, assessment and continuous improvement. Despite the differences regarding the type of mechanisms and the extent of their characterisation, some common features could be identified.

Most institutions mentioned having a structure or body responsible for IQA systems’ monitoring, assessment and improvement. In general, this body corresponded to the structure that coordinated and made strategic decisions regarding the systems’ implementation.

Information from several external and internal reviews (such as study programmes’ external accreditation, research assessment exercises, self-assessments, or quality audits) often systematised into different types of reports, usually served as the basis for the definition of solutions and actions to overcome weaknesses, and continuously improve IQA systems.

Overall, the variability of the mechanisms put in place seemed to evidence that institutions are somehow adapting the external references to their own interests. This suggests that institutions can act beyond the external frame of reference and are able to define the features of IQA systems without necessarily imitating each other.

Internal quality assurance systems: “Tailor made” or “one size fits all” implementation?

This paper aimed to explore IQA systems’ implementation features, analysing how much they converged with the “model” proposed by external QA references, giving rise to “tailor made” or “one size fits all” systems. Findings suggested that the national references, informed by the ESG and issued by the A3ES, were followed. This gave rise to similar systems, even though some creativity was found. Therefore, it seems that institutions have adopted a “one size fits all” model rather than a “tailor made” model. This also evidences that institutions tended to minimise their characteristics, which was not expected taking into account the results of other studies’ (Tavares *et al.*, 2016).

These findings might be explained by the coercive action of the external QA reference framework. In trying to have their systems certified and, thus, achieve a lighter-touch external QA, institutions avoided deviating from the model drafted by A3ES, thus

eliminating potential differences related to their characteristics. Based on what some studies argue about the homogenising effects of external QA (Skolnik, 2016), it is possible to assume that the auditing model was, even if unintentionally, constraining institutional diversity in IQA systems. As suggested by other studies (Westerheijden *et al.*, 2014), institutions tried to achieve external legitimation by copying a quality model proposed at the national level, despite the fact that most institutions, in an anticipation movement, originally established IQA arrangements prior to the issuing of external guidance in the field.

The first five institutions to submit their IQA systems to the auditing process and get them certified may have served as a model to the remaining ones. If this was the case, maybe the homogeneity observed was not only a consequence of the coercive influence of A3ES model but also of a mimetic behaviour: institutions did not want to stay behind the “pioneer” ones, so they followed the externally proposed model but did so by ensuring that they were acting like the rest.

The differentiating aspects that emerged, besides being residual, seem eventually more justified by the way and depth institutions displayed information in the reports than by their characteristics. This may have been influenced by the study sample’s limitations. Its small size determined its bias in terms of nature and scope, which probably did not allow for uncovering the specificities of private or specialised institutions. Furthermore, the subsystem and the dimension were strongly associated, which made it difficult to identify differences based on these variables.

Another finding, which corroborates, to some extent, the lack of influence of institutional characteristics, was that even when institutions distance themselves from the auditing model, they tended to follow a similar path. Institutions tended to present diversity on the same aspects (documents issued to substantiate their quality policy, designations of the structures for IQA systems’ coordination and support, and mechanisms for their monitoring, assessment and improvement); and to present the same limitations in adapting the audit model (tendency to focus QA on the teaching and learning process and difficulties with integration of the IQA system in their governance and management). As previously suggested, these findings can eventually be the result of a mimetic behaviour of institutions.

Concluding remarks

The analysis of the IQA systems implemented by these 12 institutions allows for some general reflections on QA and specifically on the link between external and internal QA. As suggested by several authors (Gover *et al.*, 2015; Houston and Paewai, 2013; Kristensen, 2010; Loukkola and Zhang, 2010; Stensaker, 2007; Sursock, 2011; Vukasovik, 2014), and corroborated by this paper’s findings, external QA plays a significant and highly determining role regarding the definition and shaping of internal QA, often under the argument that only by answering external requirements, institutions are able to set up internal mechanisms to assure and improve their own quality. Although this may be true to a certain extent, external QA entails “hints” to the development of institutions’ QA that ultimately may end up acting as real constraints on institutional autonomy and singularity. Against this backdrop, it is maybe the time for a joint reflection between institutional and external QA actors, leading to new QA frameworks capable of providing institutions with more “space” to incorporate their unique characteristics in their IQA systems. This would, in turn, allow QA as a whole to move on from a goal of simple compliance with rules and frameworks to one of really contributing to higher education institutions and systems’ continuous improvement. Under this rationale, institutions would be able to “regain” control of, and full responsibility for, their own quality, in line with the quality enhancement approach (Amaral, 2014; Filippakou and Tapper, 2008). QA frameworks could, hence, move

from a more prescriptive approach to a more interpretive one, i.e. more dependent on institutions' interpretation and adaptation.

The study presents some limitations, namely, empirical, as it was based on the analysis of the self-assessment reports of the only 12 certified IQA systems. Further research comprising more cases would be pertinent to find out if the tendencies identified were common to other systems, namely, noncertified ones. Furthermore, the study relied only on document analysis of the self-assessment reports. It would be interesting to complement this analysis with that of other documents and data from interviews and/or questionnaires with some of the actors involved in the certification process. However, the study provided an understanding of how IQA systems were being implemented by Portuguese institutions, and, as such, it is of interest to other institutions as well as quality assurance agencies. Finally, the study addressed a topic still relatively absent from research on quality and its assurance in higher education, being also of interest for quality researchers.

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Categories of analysis

Historical note on internal QA systems' development

Historical note on the development of mechanisms for internal quality assurance within the institution and which ultimately served as framework for the "creation" of the internal QA system

Internal QA systems' structural/managerial component

Elements characterising the internal QA system, including its documentation structure; coordination and support structures; processes covered and respective scope; support information system; and link with the institution's governance and management. Each of these elements corresponds to one of the following themes of analysis:
 Documentation structure: internal QA system's documentation structure, including documents sustaining the system's definition and operationalisation, e.g. quality policy, strategic documents, operational plans
 Coordination and support structures: internal QA system's coordination and support structures
 Processes: the institutional processes covered by the IQA system, e.g. teaching and learning, research, third mission, support processes (services, human resources, documentation, etc.)
 QA mechanisms: the institutional mechanisms covered by the IQA system for assuring and continuously improving quality
 Support information system: institutional mechanisms for the collection, analysis and internal disclosure of information supporting the IQA system
 Link with governance and management: IQA system's interconnection with the institution's governance and management, including the mechanisms facilitating it
 Mechanisms for IQA system's monitoring, evaluation and continuous improvement

Table AI.
Analysis grid

Internal QA systems' monitoring, assessment and continuous improvement

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