Why is quality in higher education not achieved? The view of academics

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Whether quality assurance (QA) is actually being able of promoting quality is still an open question. The study tries to shed light on this issue by identifying the main obstacles to quality as perceived by Portuguese academics. Quality as culture, as compliance and as consistency were the theoretical lenses used to read academics' perceptions on such obstacles (Figure 1).

Quality as culture refers to the institutional commitment to quality reflected in initiatives and structures aiming at continuously improve it and even attain 'perfection'. Quality as compliance refers to quality as resulting from the alignment with external requirements aiming at increasing transparency, accountability, fitness for purpose and, even, value for money. Quality as consistency links to the use of new academic standards for the assessment and validation of higher education processes and end results.

Empirically the study uses data collected through an online questionnaire sent to all Portuguese academics with the aim to understand their positions towards QA. Specifically it addresses the answers (N=1288) given by different academics to a question about the obstacles to quality and its assurance. Answers were analysed resorting to category content analysis which implied constructing an analysis grid (Figure 2).
The analysis revealed that academics put forward several obstacles preventing quality and its assurance. Obstacles tend to be mainly connected with the view of quality as culture, with a special emphasis on those associated with institutions' governance and management. This suggests the need for institutions to build up stronger integrated quality cultures as well as to improve the link between quality work and the strategic build-up of managerial capacity.

Less relevance is given to obstacles associated with the notion of quality as consistency, highlighting processes and end results, and quality as compliance, linked to accountability. This is so despite a trend for European QA schemes to focus on these dimensions, especially the ones induced by QA agencies.
By suggesting culture, compliance and consistency as the three perspectives through which grasp quality, the study can pave the way for more systematic research on what academics think about the factors hindering quality, strengthening the understanding of the links between quality and quality assurance.

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FIGURE 1

Theoretical lenses to read academics' perceptions on the obstacles to quality and its assurance.

FIGURE 2

Distribution of academics' answers by dimensions and categories of analysis.

Dimensions of analysis		Categories of analysis	N	%
Quality as Culture	Structural element	Governance and management	395	24,8
		Infra-structures, resources and support services	189	11,8
		Internal QA mechanisms	110	6,9
		Institution's financial situation	100	6,3
		Category total	794	49,8
	Psychological element	Academics	385	24,1
		Dimension total	1179	73,9
Quality as Compliance		Public funding of HE	100	6,3
		Access	58	3,6
		HE policies	40	2,5
		External QA	24	1,5
		Bologna process	25	1,6
		Dimension total	247	15,5
Quality as Consistency		Teaching and learning	109	6,8
		Research	42	2,6
		Relations with society	18	1,1
		Dimension total	169	10,6
		Total	1595	100

Note: the number of answers does not correspond to the number of academics answering the question on obstacles to quality since some academics referred more than one obstacle.