QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION
Evaluating the impact and challenges in Portuguese institutions

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Abstract This study aims to analyse academics' perceptions of the effectiveness of Quality Assurance Systems (QAS) in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Portugal — universities and polytechnics —, identifying the factors that influence their implementation, such as the engagement of faculty and students, management support and the quality of infrastructure. A qualitative methodological approach was adopted, centred on analysing the responses collected through an online survey. The analysis was carried out using NVivo 14 software, which facilitated the categorisation of emerging themes and the analysis of sentiments, allowing patterns to be identified in the participants' perceptions. The results revealed that the lack of training in Quality Assurance (77%) and excessive bureaucracy are significant barriers to the effectiveness of QAS. In addition, the engagement of faculty members, management support, the quality of the infrastructure and student engagement were identified as key factors in the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of the QAS. The disconnect between external evaluations and institutional needs was also identified as a critical area for improvement. This study fills a gap in literature by offering a detailed analysis of academics' perceptions, contributing to a deeper understanding of the factors that influence the effectiveness of QAS in HEIs.

Keywords: academic perceptions, quality management, higher education institutions, quality assurance system effectiveness, institutional performance.

Garantia da qualidade no ensino superior: avaliação do impacto e dos desafios nas instituições portuguesas

Resumo Este estudo tem como objetivo analisar as perceções dos docentes sobre a eficácia dos Sistemas de Garantia da Qualidade (SGQ) nas Instituições de Ensino Superior (IES) em Portugal — universidades e politécnicos —, identificando os fatores que influenciam a sua implementação, tais como o envolvimento do corpo docente e dos estudantes, o apoio da gestão e a qualidade das infraestruturas. Foi adotada uma abordagem metodológica qualitativa, centrada na análise das respostas recolhidas através de um inquérito *online*. A análise foi realizada utilizando o *software* NVivo 14, que facilitou a categorização dos temas emergentes e a análise de sentimentos, permitindo identificar padrões nas perceções dos participantes. Os resultados revelaram que a falta de formação em Garantia da Qualidade (77%) e a burocracia excessiva constituem barreiras significativas à eficácia dos SGQ. Além disso, o envolvimento dos docentes, o apoio da gestão, a qualidade das infraestruturas e o envolvimento dos estudantes foram identificados como fatores-chave para a eficácia (ou ineficácia) do SGQ. A desconexão entre as avaliações externas e as necessidades institucionais foi também identificada como uma área crítica a melhorar. Este estudo preenche uma lacuna na literatura ao oferecer uma análise detalhada das perceções dos académicos, contribuindo para uma compreensão mais profunda dos fatores que influenciam a eficácia dos SGQ nas IES.

Palavras-chave: perceções académicas, gestão da qualidade, instituições de ensino superior, eficácia do sistema de garantia da qualidade, desempenho institucional.

Garantie de la qualité dans l'enseignement supérieur: évaluation de l'impact et des défis dans les établissements portugais

Résumé Cette étude a pour objectif d'analyser les perceptions des enseignants quant à l'efficacité des systèmes de garantie de la qualité (SGQ) dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur (EES) au Portugal — universités et écoles polytechniques —, en identifiant les facteurs qui influencent leur mise en œuvre, tels que l'engagement du corps enseignant et des étudiants, le soutien de la direction et la qualité des infrastructures. Une approche méthodologique qualitative a été adoptée, axée sur l'analyse des réponses recueillies par le biais d'une enquête en ligne. L'analyse a été réalisée à l'aide du logiciel NVivo 14, qui a facilité la catégorisation des thèmes émergents et l'analyse des sentiments, permettant ainsi d'identifier des tendances dans les perceptions des participants. Les résultats ont révélé que le manque de formation en garantie de la qualité (77 %) et la bureaucratie excessive constituent des obstacles importants à l'efficacité des SGQ. En outre, l'engagement des enseignants, le soutien de la direction, la qualité des infrastructures et l'engagement des étudiants ont été identifiés comme des facteurs clés de l'efficacité (ou de l'inefficacité) du SGQ. Le décalage entre les évaluations externes et les besoins institutionnels a également été identifié comme un domaine critique à améliorer. Cette étude comble une lacune dans la littérature en proposant une analyse détaillée des perceptions des académiques, contribuant ainsi à une compréhension plus approfondie des facteurs qui influencent l'efficacité des SGQ dans les EES.

Mots-clés: perceptions académiques, gestion de la qualité, établissements d'enseignement supérieur, efficacité du système de garantie de la qualité, performance institutionnelle.

Garantía de calidad en la educación superior: evaluación del impacto y los retos en las instituciones portuguesas

Resumen El objetivo de este estudio es analizar las percepciones del profesorado sobre la eficacia de los sistemas de garantía de calidad (SGC) en las instituciones de educación superior (IES) de Portugal — universidades y escuelas politécnicas —, identificando los factores que influyen en su implementación, tales como la implicación del profesorado y de los estudiantes, el apoyo de la dirección y la calidad de las infraestructuras. Se adoptó un enfoque metodológico cualitativo, centrado en el análisis de las respuestas recopiladas a través de una encuesta en línea. El análisis se llevó a cabo utilizando el *software* NVivo 14, que facilitó la categorización de los temas emergentes y el análisis de los sentimientos, permitiendo identificar patrones en las percepciones de los participantes. Los resultados revelaron que la falta de formación en garantía de calidad (77 %) y el exceso de burocracia constituyen obstáculos significativos para la eficacia de los SGC. Además, la implicación del profesorado, el apoyo de la dirección, la calidad de las infraestructuras y la implicación de los estudiantes se identificaron como factores clave para la eficacia (o ineficacia) del SGC. La desconexión entre las evaluaciones externas y las necesidades institucionales también se identificó como un aspecto fundamental que requiere mejoras. Este estudio llena un vacío en la literatura al ofrecer un análisis detallado de las percepciones de los académicos, contribuyendo a una comprensión más profunda de los factores que influyen en la eficacia de los SGC en las IES.

Palabras-clave: percepciones académicas, gestión de calidad, instituciones de educación superior, eficacia del sistema de garantía de calidad, rendimiento institucional.

Introduction

At the European level, national quality assurance systems are framed by the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG), developed within the Bologna Process. These guidelines promote institutional responsibility for quality, stakeholder participation and continuous improvement,

establishing a multi-level governance architecture that shapes how QAS are experienced and evaluated within national systems.

In the Portuguese context, internal quality assurance systems typically comprise governance structures, evaluation and monitoring processes, feedback mechanisms and continuous improvement cycles. Their core objectives include ensuring accountability, supporting institutional decision-making and fostering the enhancement of teaching and learning. Key processes usually involve systematic self-evaluation, collection of stakeholder feedback, analysis of performance indicators, preparation for external accreditation and implementation of improvement actions. These systems are therefore designed to integrate quality into everyday institutional practices rather than operate solely as compliance mechanisms.

Although QAS formally involve the entire academic community, their operationalisation typically relies on collaborative processes between teaching staff, administrative services and students. For example, programme-level quality procedures are usually prepared by academic teams in articulation with quality units and support services, combining pedagogical input with technical documentation and performance indicators. Student participation mainly occurs through feedback mechanisms and representation in governance structures. The effectiveness of QAS therefore depends not only on individual engagement, but also on the quality of coordination among these actors.

In Portugal, this process is coordinated by the "Agência de Avaliação e Acreditação do Ensino Superior" (Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education — A3ES), which since 2007 has been conducting regular assessments of study programmes and institutions, based on national legislation (*Legal Framework for Higher Education Assessment*, Law 38/2007) and benchmarks adapted from the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* — ESG, 2005, 2015. Since its establishment, A3ES has progressively institutionalised quality assurance in Portuguese higher education through a multi-level framework that combines external evaluation and accreditation mechanisms with the mandatory development of internal quality assurance systems within HEIs. Its intervention encompasses institutional assessment cycles, the accreditation and re-accreditation of new and existing study programmes, and the evaluation of internal quality management systems within institutional review processes. This articulation between external accountability and internal quality management has contributed to consolidating a systemic model aligned with European standards and embedded in institutional governance structures (A3ES, 2025).

Over time, quality assurance frameworks have also progressively incorporated transversal institutional values, such as sustainability, gender equality and social responsibility, reflecting broader governance agendas that extend beyond the traditional focus on academic accreditation.

Recent analyses have highlighted the structural and strategic challenges currently facing Portuguese higher education institutions. Castilho (2026) underscores the ongoing revision of the *Legal Framework for Higher Education Institutions* (*Regime Jurídico das Instituições de Ensino Superior — RJIES*) governing higher education,

debates concerning institutional autonomy and governance models, and tensions surrounding the binary structure of the system. Beyond regulatory reform, Portuguese HEIs are confronted with wider societal transformations, including the expansion of artificial intelligence and digitalisation, shifting labour market demands, demographic pressures, global competition and sustainability imperatives. These dynamics require greater institutional adaptability, strategic coherence and accountability.

In this context, quality assurance systems acquire renewed relevance, as their effectiveness depends not merely on formal compliance with external standards but on their capacity to operate as strategic governance mechanisms capable of mobilising internal resources, coordinating institutional actors and supporting performance in increasingly complex environments.

Those guidelines aim to promote an internal culture of quality and continuous improvement, encouraging HEIs to demonstrate how their quality assurance systems (QAS) support strategic objectives, guide management and encouraging engagement across the academic community. The second cycle of institutional assessment, completed in 2024, showed significant progress, particularly in terms of strengthening institutional accountability and involving institutional leaders in monitoring quality practices (A3ES, 2024).

However, despite its supposed relevance, QA has been criticised, particularly for its excessively bureaucratic approach, which is often distant from academic reality. As Lucander and Christersson (2020) point out, based on various studies, the costs and time consumed by the bureaucracy associated with QA have increased, diverting attention from the development of teaching and learning. In addition, it has been found that design and QA are often dissociated from the evaluation and improvement of teaching, learning and research (Houston and Paewai, 2013), which reinforces the perception of distance from the real dynamics of academia. This perception is shared by students and faculty, who believe that QA processes, far from translating into concrete pedagogical improvements, often become mere administrative exercises (Aburizaizah, 2022).

Academic resistance to QA is also widely discussed. Overberg (2019) introduces the concept of "quality abracadabra" to describe how QA mechanisms can turn into empty practices with no real impact on educational needs. As this author has pointed out, many faculty see assessment processes as bureaucratic impositions with no direct link to their teaching practices, contributing to a climate of scepticism and institutional resistance.

In this context, it is essential to rethink QAS, promoting their articulation with the academic context and reinforcing their impact on teaching quality. The literature points to the importance of actively involving all stakeholders — namely students and faculty — in the design and implementation of QA practices (Lucander and Christersson, 2020; Aburizaizah, 2022). Integrating external evaluations with internal continuous improvement initiatives is fundamental to fostering institutional transformations with a real impact on academic performance.

This article presents a qualitative descriptive content analysis of the perceptions of 159 academics about QAS at HEIs in Portugal — universities and

polytechnics. Through the responses collected in an online survey, we sought to understand their institutional experiences and critical perspectives regarding the factors that influence the effectiveness of QAS, namely student and faculty engagement, management support and the quality of infrastructure.

The qualitative methodology adopted made it possible to capture not only the thematic focus of the responses, but also the nature and intensity of the sentiments expressed by the participants. This approach revealed a set of institutional dynamics not always visible in quantitative studies, contributing to a richer and more contextualised understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing QAS. The study thus offers a critical and strategic perspective on QA processes, with implications for their reconfiguration and for promoting the effective improvement of teaching and institutional performance.

Based on this approach, an integrated theoretical model is proposed to assess the effectiveness of QAS and the institutional performance of HEIs, centred on variables such as faculty engagement, management support, infrastructure quality and student engagement. The model's structure is based on the premise that effective QAS should be translated into improvements in academic and institutional results.

The literature on QA in HEIs has largely been qualitative, providing a comprehensive understanding of the practices, challenges and perspectives of the stakeholders involved in evaluation processes. Authors such as Bejan *et al.* (2015), Rosa, Sarrico and Amaral (2012), Shah and Jarzabkowski (2013) and Tavares *et al.* (2017) have addressed the implications of QA in the context of HEIs, offering important qualitative perspectives on the topic.

However, there is still limited evidence how academics perceive the relationship between QAS effectiveness and institutional performance. This limitation has hindered a more accurate assessment of the real impact of QA in areas such as teaching and learning, research or the academic community's involvement.

This research seeks to fill this gap through a qualitative analysis of academics' perceptions, guided by a theoretical model that considers critical internal factors as institutional strategic resources.

These contributions reflect academics' perceptions of both the limitations and potential of QAS currently in place at Portuguese HEIs. The diversity and richness of these contributions enabled the identification of recurring themes related to key determinants of QAS, which are examined in the following sections and contribute to the theoretical framing of the proposed model.

The dimensions considered and how they manifested themselves in the participants' responses are detailed below, based on a thematic analysis assisted by qualitative analysis software (NVivo 14), allowing for a detailed and exploratory understanding of the respondents' perceptions and suggestions.

The uniqueness of this research lies in its significant contribution to the field of QA in HEIs in Portugal. The study investigates academics' contributions to QA practices, filling an important gap in existing literature. Considering a recent A3ES institutional assessment completed in 2024, this analysis deepens the understanding of the impact of faculty and student engagement, institutional support and the

quality of infrastructure on QAS. Anchored in a Resource-Based View (RBV), this approach assumes that these elements work as internal strategic resources whose appropriate mobilisation can strengthen the effectiveness of QAS and contribute to institutional performance. The analysis of the responses obtained offers a critical view of current QA practices, highlighting areas in need of transformation and providing suggestions for the strategic reconfiguration of QA processes at HEIs in Portugal.

The structure of the article is organised as follows: after the "Introduction", comes the "Literature review and development of the analytical model"; the "Methodology", which deals with sampling, data collection and content analysis; it continues with "Discussion of results"; and ends with "Conclusions and implications for management", with recommendations for future research aimed at improving QAS in HEIs.

Literature review and development of the analytical model

The literature on QA in HEIs has highlighted several key factors that impact the effectiveness of internal quality systems and, consequently, the performance of HEIs. Among these factors, faculty and student engagement, institutional support, especially from middle and top leadership, and the quality of infrastructure, both physical and digital, stand out as the most critical to the success of QAS (Harvey and Newton, 2004; Lucander and Christersson, 2020; Aburizaizah, 2022).

Recent research indicates that although QAS are formally implemented in many HEIs, their effectiveness depends on how they are internalised and used by the various stakeholders. Faculty and student engagement in evaluation, planning and continuous improvement processes is essential to ensure not only the legitimacy of QA practices, but also their real impact on teaching quality and institutional performance (Overberg, 2019; Cardoso, Santiago and Sarrico, 2012).

Given the gaps identified in the literature, an analytical model was proposed based on the Resource-Based View (RBV) theory, which focuses on the use of organisations' internal strategic resources. According to this theory, to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage, organisations must invest in and leverage valuable, rare and inimitable resources, which are the internal strengths that determine an institution's competitiveness (Barney, 1991).

In the context of higher education, applying the RBV implies valuing the human and organisational resources that directly contribute to the effectiveness of QAS. This means that HEIs must develop and use their own internal capabilities, involving both faculty and non-faculty staff, to ensure that everyone is aware and committed to QA processes. The RBV thus offers an analytical lens to understand QAS not just as an external requirement, but as a strategy that depends on the effective mobilisation of internal resources.

RBV's application made it possible to identify internal factors that act as strategic resources — namely faculty engagement, management support, the quality of infrastructure and student engagement. These elements underpin the proposed

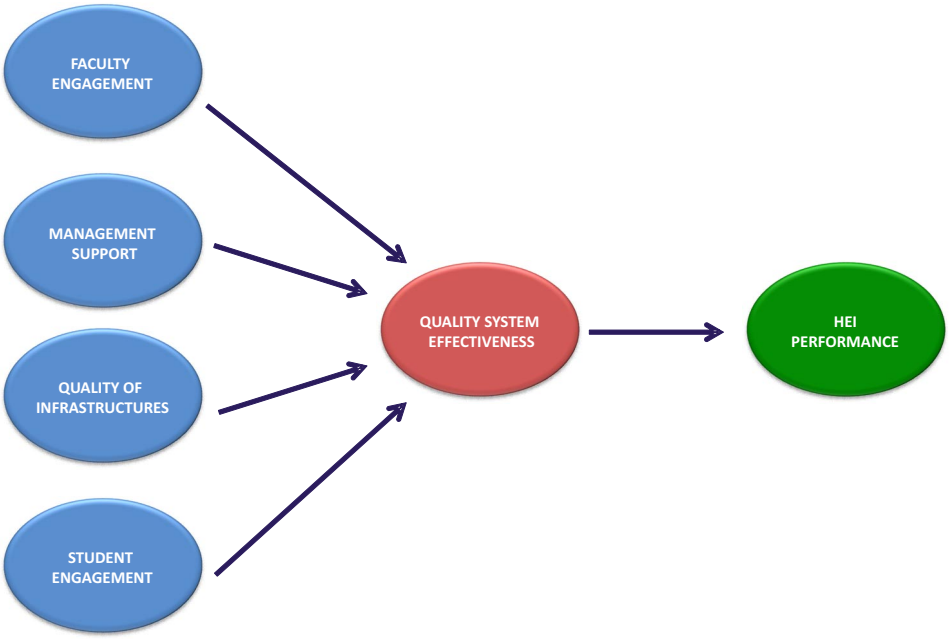


Figure 1 Proposed model

analytical model (figure 1) and were analysed since academics' perceptions. The criticisms expressed regarding the implementation of QAS show that these resources are not always fully activated or valued, which jeopardises the potential for institutional improvement highlighted by the RBV.

Faculty engagement

Faculty engagement is widely recognised as a critical factor for the effectiveness of QAS in HEIs. Literature suggests that faculty engagement in the practices of QA contributes significantly to the improvement of teaching, the development of good pedagogical practices and institutional performance (Lucander and Christersson, 2020). Committed faculty tend to be more motivated to invest in innovative and collaborative teaching practices, besides being more willing to engage in processes of self-evaluation and improvement of academic programmes (Sharabi, 2013; Hou *et al.*, 2022). Their contribution is essential to adjust the QAS to the real needs of students, faculty and the labour market, reflecting the ongoing dynamics of higher education.

However, the effective engagement of faculty members in QA processes is not always achieved. In many contexts, QA is seen by academics as an administrative and bureaucratic imposition, disconnected from the fundamental pedagogical

values of the institution (Harvey, 2024). According to Manatos, Rosa and Sarrico (2018), many faculty members feel that QA processes are impersonal and merely fulfil formalities required by external bodies, without any genuine involvement in the creation or development of teaching practices that promote pedagogical innovation. This view is reinforced by Harvey (2023), who argues that QA, as it is implemented in many institutions, is perceived more as an administrative task than as a mechanism for transforming teaching and learning. This leads to faculty members distancing themselves from quality processes, since instead of contributing to academic development, these processes are seen as an additional burden that diminishes faculty autonomy.

The lack of significant faculty engagement in QA processes is a substantial barrier to the success of any quality system. The literature indicates that when the faculty does not feel an integral part of evaluation and improvement processes, the results of these practices are limited, affecting the effectiveness of QAS (Tuyet and Pham, 2022). In many cases, resistance to QA processes stems from a lack of understanding and alignment between the institutional goals of accountability and the academic values of innovation, flexibility and continuous improvement. By not incorporating the faculty perspective into the development and implementation of QA processes, there is a risk of creating a quality system that is seen as something external and disconnected from daily teaching practice (Lucander and Christersson, 2020).

Furthermore, the involvement of academics in governance and decision-making processes at HEIs has been identified as an essential element in ensuring that QA policies are not only effective but also contextualised to the specific realities of each institution. When academics participate in decisions that affect the quality of teaching and learning, there is greater adherence to QA policies and more effective integration of quality practices into everyday teaching (Beerkens and Udam, 2017; Michelsen and Stensaker, 2011). This involvement allows academics not only to flag up areas for improvement, but also to actively contribute to redesigning processes so that they better meet the needs of students and other stakeholders.

Finally, improving faculty engagement in QAS requires overcoming structural and cultural barriers within HEIs. It is essential that institutions adopt a more inclusive and collaborative approach, in which academics feel valued and recognised in the development of quality policies. The support of institutional management is crucial in this regard, as leadership must promote a quality culture that is not only focused on meeting formal criteria but also involves faculty in creating innovative solutions that improve teaching and learning (Tuyet and Pham, 2022).

Management support

Management support is widely recognised as a determining factor for the success of QAS in HEIs. The literature emphasises that institutional leadership plays a key role in the implementation and effectiveness of these systems, promoting not only a culture of quality, but also stimulating the involvement of stakeholders in the process of continuous improvement (Tavares, Sin and Amaral, 2016; Alves *et al.*, 2016).

Management support implies an active commitment to creating an organisational culture focused on quality and is essential if QA processes are to be truly effective and sustainable.

Senior managers are often seen as driving forces in defining strategic objectives and promoting quality within HEIs. According to Manatos, Rosa and Sarrico (2018), the presence of strong leadership committed to QA processes can be the key to ensuring that quality practices are appropriate and integrated into the daily life of the institution, especially in contexts with limited resources. Institutional management should be the first to adopt QA as a priority, offering the necessary resources, such as funding, time and training, to ensure the effective implementation of quality policies (Seyfried and Pohlenz, 2018; Mussawy and Rossman, 2021).

In addition, management support contributes directly to creating an environment that values continuous improvement by encouraging the faculty and students' engagement in QA processes. This type of involvement is essential for transforming assessment and control processes into real mechanisms for pedagogical innovation and improving teaching and learning. Aldhobaib (2024) emphasises that when institutional management is engaged, not only demonstrates its commitment to maintaining high standards but also sets an example of accountability and transparency for the entire academic community.

On the other hand, a lack or superficial support from management can lead to the failure of QA processes. Without the leadership and commitment of management, QAS can become ineffective, functioning only as bureaucratic formalities with no real impact on improving educational quality. Research by Seyfried and Pohlenz (2018) suggests that without proper management involvement, QA efforts can be considered as "toothless tigers", *i.e.* efforts with no real power to generate significant change. This lack of involvement can result in demotivation on the part of faculty and staff, undermining the quality system's potential for transformation.

The literature also suggests that good management support can promote a culture of responsibility, in which all members of the institution, including teaching and administrative staff, feel accountable for QA results. When managers are actively involved in evaluation and feedback processes, it is more likely that academics and other HEI members will feel encouraged to contribute their own ideas and suggestions for the continuous improvement of teaching quality. This strengthens QA processes, making them more effective and better aligned with the real needs of the academic community (Basbeth, Saufi and Sudharmin, 2021; Kumar, Singhal and Kansal, 2023).

Management support also makes it easier to adapt QA processes to the particularities of each institution, allowing quality systems to be not just imposed, but collaboratively moulded according to local realities and the needs of faculty and students. In this sense, institutional support is not limited to providing resources, but also to ensuring that everyone involved is aware of the importance of QA and the need for its continuous improvement.

Quality of infrastructure

The quality of the infrastructure at HEIs plays a key role in supporting the successful implementation of QAS and the institutional performance of HEIs. The necessary infrastructure is not limited to providing adequate physical spaces such as classrooms, libraries and laboratories, but also involves creating an environment that favours learning, pedagogical innovation and academic development.

Research indicates that high-quality infrastructure is essential for providing faculty and students with a favourable environment for teaching and learning. According to Mourato *et al.* (2017), the integration of technological platforms and monitoring systems into university infrastructure can facilitate the management of quality processes and support transparency in educational results, promoting continuous improvement. The implementation of technologies in the learning environment, such as digital resources and teaching platforms, contributes to the modernisation of the educational process, which is an important factor in the success of QA (Aldhobaib, 2024).

In addition, the quality of infrastructure directly affects the educational experience of students. According to Douglas, Douglas and Barnes (2006), students can tolerate deficiencies in physical facilities if the teaching is high quality, but satisfaction with the physical environment of the institution still plays an important role in the educational process. Physical infrastructure, such as the quality of classrooms, access to state-of-the-art technology, and the maintenance of study spaces, is key to creating a learning environment that encourages student participation and satisfaction. The importance of infrastructure goes beyond the question of basic functionality and is essential for student motivation and engagement, positively influencing their academic performance (Petruzzellis, Duggento and Romanazzi, 2006; Kärnä and Julin, 2015).

The literature also emphasises that quality of infrastructure can have a considerable impact on student choice, especially in a competitive educational market. According to Vidalakis, Sun and Papa (2013) and Yeo and Li (2014), the quality of infrastructure can be a determining factor in attracting new students. Institutions that invest in good physical and technological conditions, offering high-quality learning environments, can differentiate themselves, despite others boasting a reputation for academic excellence. This may be a factor to consider when potential students choose where to study, reflecting the strategic importance of infrastructure in the context of QA.

On the other hand, a lack of adequate infrastructure can hinder the effective implementation of quality policies. When facilities are inadequate or poorly maintained, this can result in an unfavourable learning environment, which limits students' academic success and the effectiveness of QA processes. This can negatively affect the quality of education offered and lower the institutional performance of HEIs (Seyfried and Pohlenz, 2018). The maintenance and ongoing development of infrastructure is therefore essential for the proper functioning of QAS and to ensure that HEIs align with international educational quality standards.

Finally, the studies also show that infrastructure management plays an important role in the success of QAS. The ability to identify areas for improvement in

infrastructure and set targets for continuous development is decisive for the progress of HEIs, as pointed out by Kärnä and Julin (2015). Effective infrastructure management not only impacts the quality of teaching, but also the student experience and the reputation of institutions.

The quality of infrastructure is a strategic factor for the effectiveness and sustainability of QA in HEIs. Investing in modern, well-equipped and technologically up-to-date learning environments not only improves educational experience, but also promotes pedagogical innovation, student engagement and institutional performance. Therefore, the management and continuous improvement of infrastructure must be prioritised, ensuring that HEIs are prepared to face the challenges of future education and respond to the high-quality standards demanded at a global level.

Student engagement

The involvement of students in QA processes at HEIs has been an area of growing interest. According to Serrano *et al.* (2025), students are often considered key elements in quality assessment and improvement processes, not only as addressees of educational policies, but also as active participants in defining and monitoring these processes. This involvement is particularly relevant in two aspects: the teaching and learning process, as well as governance and institutional decision-making.

In the area of teaching and learning, several studies highlight the contribution of students to improving educational processes, mainly through feedback on teaching, evaluations and satisfaction with courses. Student participation in these areas has been shown to be essential for adapting pedagogical practices to student needs, allowing institutions to respond more effectively. The literature shows that student feedback is a fundamental tool for improving teaching methodologies, with an impact on the effectiveness of QAS (Elassy, 2015; Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Richardson, 2005; Jara and Mellar, 2010).

In addition to participation in teaching, students have also been prominent in the governance structures of HEIs. The literature shows that student involvement in evaluation committees and decision-making processes is essential to ensure that institutional policies are aligned with their expectations (Beerkens and Udam, 2017; Palma *et al.*, 2023). This level of participation is not limited to providing feedback, but involves students as partners in policy-making, promoting a more democratic and inclusive learning environment, as advocated by Cook-Sather (2006) and Bovill, Felten and Cook-Sather (2014).

Student engagement is not only limited to participation in feedback or governance processes; it is also reflected in their commitment to academic quality, which can positively influence institutional performance. According to Elassy's model (2013), student commitment to QA processes is fundamental to transforming the QAS into an effective tool for continuous improvement. Commitment goes beyond participation, encompassing the deep involvement of students in institutional decisions and the implementation of changes (Ncube, 2020). Strengthening students' commitment to quality, combined with adequate training, can result in a more substantial impact on improving educational quality (Shah, Hartman and Hastings, 2014).

Effectiveness of quality assurance and performance of HEIs

The effectiveness of QAS in HEIs has been a central theme in the field of higher education, especially due to its direct influence on institutional performance. The literature highlights that while QAS has the potential to improve educational quality, there is often a disconnect between the evaluation processes and the actual results they are supposed to achieve, such as pedagogical innovation and improved student learning (Harvey and Newton, 2004). This gap is largely attributed to an overemphasis on bureaucratic requirements and compliance with external standards, to the detriment of the educational transformation that these systems should promote (Lillis, 2012; Stensaker *et al*., 2011).

Recent studies point out that for QAS to be effective, quality practices need to be integrated directly into the institutional heart of HEIs, influencing both organisational culture and pedagogical practices. The effectiveness of QA cannot only be measured by compliance with assessment criteria, but by the ability to generate practical changes in teaching and learning by aligning quality policies and practices with the real needs of students and faculty (Simangunsong, 2019; Sarrico, Veiga and Amaral, 2013). Implementing an effective quality system depends on creating a culture of continuous improvement that involves all stakeholders — students, faculty, managers and administrators — backed up by committed and strategic leadership (Kumar, Singhal and Kansal, 2023; Tavares, Sin and Amaral, 2016).

HEI performance is a multidimensional variable that encompasses academic, social and financial aspects. The literature suggests that institutional performance is intrinsically linked to the ability of HEIs to balance their core functions — teaching, research and services — effectively. Each of these functions is influenced by QAS behaviour. In the field of teaching, the quality of pedagogical practices, innovation in the teaching-learning process and student satisfaction are key elements that affect the performance of HEIs (Agasisti and Bertoletti, 2019; Edgar and Geare, 2013). For research, scientific impact, the relevance of research projects and adequate funding are fundamental, which are driven by the organisational structure and quality mechanisms within HEIs. As for services, their contribution to social inclusion and regional development is also a reflection of the quality of infrastructure and the effectiveness of internal processes (Yilmaz and Kesik, 2010).

Furthermore, globalisation and growing competition between HEIs, especially in the context of international rankings, have intensified the need for effective quality management. HEIs are now challenged not only to fulfil local expectations, but to stand out in a global arena, where performance is often assessed by indicators such as academic quality, innovation and social impact (Ulker and Bakioglu, 2018; Acevedo-de-los-Ríos and Rondinel-Oviedo, 2022). This pressure requires HEIs to implement robust QAS that ensure their practices meet stakeholder expectations and contribute to their reputation and international competitiveness.

Effective QAS behaviour is therefore directly linked to HEI performance. Institutional quality is a central metric for measuring academic and institutional success, reflecting the ability of HEIs to adapt to change and meet the needs of their

stakeholders, while ensuring the excellence of their educational and research practices (Dill *et al.*, 1996; Knight, 2007; Blanco-Ramirez, 2015). Thus, for QAS to be effective, they must not only be aligned with formal assessment criteria, but also with institutional objectives and values, promoting a continuous cycle of improvement that positively impacts teaching, learning and institutional results.

Methodology

The qualitative analysis is centred on academics' perceptions of the effectiveness of QAS and their impact on institutional performance in Portuguese higher education.

The sample consisted of academics from 97 higher education institutions (HEIs) in Portugal. As there is no unified national database, contacts were identified through publicly available information on institutional websites, ensuring broad institutional coverage and diversity. The study adopts a cross-institutional exploratory design aimed at identifying general patterns in academics' perceptions of quality assurance systems, rather than analysing or comparing specific institutions. For this reason, individual HEIs are not identified, in line with anonymity commitments and data protection requirements.

This study follows a qualitative descriptive content analysis approach, suitable for analysing large volumes of open-ended survey responses. Rather than pursuing an in-depth interpretative qualitative design, the study adopts an exploratory and descriptive perspective aimed at identifying recurring themes and patterns in academics' perceptions of QAS.

The participating HEIs are spread across different regions of the country (North, Center, Lisbon Metropolitan Area, Alentejo, Algarve, and autonomous regions), ensuring diverse geographical coverage. They also vary in size, including institutions with fewer than 3,000 students and others with more than 40,000 students. This institutional heterogeneity allows the perceptions gathered to be contextualized, while preserving the anonymity of the organizations involved.

The analysis focussed exclusively on responses to the open-ended question: "Would you like to leave any comments or suggestions for improving the quality system at your institution?"

Data collection took place between December 2024 and March 2025. The survey was distributed by email, accompanied by information on the study's objectives, guaranteeing the anonymity and confidentiality of the data. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent.

A total of 233 responses to the question were received, of which 159 were considered valid. The general characterisation of the sample is summarised in table 1.

The study does not aim to analyse differences in perceptions according to sociodemographic variables; rather, it seeks to identify cross-cutting patterns across academics from diverse institutional and professional backgrounds.

Table 1 Sample characteristics (N=159)

Variable	Description	%
Gender	Male	58.0
	Female	41.0
	Prefer not to answer	1.0
Age	Under 30	1.0
	30-39 years old	5.0
	40-49 years old	21.0
	50-59 years old	38.0
	60 years old or older	35.0
Professional category	Assistant	6.0
	Assistant professor	26.0
	Associate professor	12.0
	Adjunct professor	26.0
	Coordinating professor	18.0
	Other academic categories[a]	12.0
Field of knowledge	Humanities and Social Sciences	47.0
	Exact/Natural Sciences (STEM)	53.0
Type of institution	Public	75.0
	Private	25.0
Participation in QM processes	Yes	51.0
	No	49.0
Participation in QM decisions	Yes	54.0
	No	46.0
Training	Yes	23.0
	No	77.0

[a] Includes academic categories with low individual representation.

Content analysis

For the qualitative analysis of the responses obtained, NVivo software version 14 was used, a tool widely recognised for its ability to process large volumes of qualitative data (Ioannidis and Kontis, 2024; Shah, Cheng and Fitzgerald, 2017; Sharma and Gupta, 2015), within a qualitative descriptive content analysis framework. With this software, it was possible to organise and visualise the data efficiently, facilitating the identification and categorisation of emerging themes related to QAS in HEIs. The use of the "word frequency" tool made it possible to identify the most recurrent keywords, and the creation of the word cloud helped to simplify data comprehension as an exploratory visual aid (Capistrano and Notorio, 2021; Creswell, 2013; Feng and Behar-Horenstein, 2019; Kaefer, Roper and Sinha, 2015; Wiltshier, 2011).

The coding process followed an inductive approach, allowing categories to emerge from the responses. Initial coding was conducted independently and subsequently reviewed by the three researchers, who discussed discrepancies and reached consensus on the final categorisation scheme. The classification of responses according to predominant sentiment (very negative, moderately negative,



Figure 2 Word cloud extracted from NVivo 14

moderately positive, very positive) was supported by NVivo and subsequently reviewed manually to ensure interpretative coherence.

The word cloud presented in figure 2 is used only as an exploratory visualisation to facilitate initial familiarisation with the textual *corpus*. It does not constitute the analytical basis of the study. The substantive analysis derives from the inductive thematic coding process conducted in NVivo, through which categories and patterns were systematically identified.

Quality and institution

The predominance of the terms "quality" and "institution" confirms that academics attach centrality to QAS in the organisational context. The term "quality" is associated with concerns about "evaluation", "procedures", "assurance" and "improve", reflecting the perception that QAS tend to emphasise formal processes to the detriment of significant pedagogical changes. In turn, "institution" appears linked to "management", "communication" and "conditions", suggesting criticism of the way HEIs structure and communicate quality objectives. Thus, academics question the ability of institutions to make quality a shared value, aligned with real improvements in "teaching" and "education".

Management and communication

The terms "management" and "communication" appear prominently in the word cloud, reflecting the importance attributed to institutional leadership and clarity of information in QAS. Many academics say that the absence of committed and informed "management" hinders the effective application of "quality" "assurance procedures" and practices. Weak institutional "communication" — especially regarding "objectives", the "procedures implemented" and the lack of adequate "response" — was associated with a lack of alignment between faculty and leadership. These weaknesses reinforce a perception of strategic distance, hindering the "engagement of academics" and effective progress in "improving" practices.

Resources and working conditions

Words like "resources", "conditions" and "training" highlight recurring concerns about the means available to guarantee the effectiveness of QAS. Academics emphasise that institutional "requirements" are often disproportionate to the "training" available and the absence of better "working conditions". The "implemented procedures" are not adjusted to the real needs of the institutions and are perceived as an obstacle to improving "education" and "teaching". Furthermore, the disconnection between "management" and the concrete challenges of everyday academic life reinforces the sense of imbalance between expectations and reality.

Faculty and student engagement

The terms "academics", "students", "engagement" and "involved" highlight the importance attributed to the active participation of both groups in quality systems. The perceptions gathered suggest that the effectiveness of QAS depends on collaborative processes that recognise the experience of "academics" and integrate the perspective of "students". The genuine "engagement" of these stakeholders is seen as fundamental to ensuring that "evaluation" and "improvement" procedures are relevant, understood and accepted by the entire academic community.

The dendrogram shown in figure 3 hierarchically organises the lexical associations identified in the *corpus*. This exploratory technique makes it possible to highlight semantic patterns by grouping words based on their proximity and co-occurrence, revealing shared meanings (Alves, Figueiredo Filho and Henrique, 2015). The terms are grouped by semantic affinity, allowing identification of the most frequent and interconnected thematic clusters, such as "quality", "academics", "system", "management" and "improve". This graphical representation complements the thematic analysis and reinforces the understanding of how concepts are articulated in academics' perceptions of QAS.

These techniques supported the qualitative interpretation conducted by the researchers, contributing to a structured understanding of the factors influencing QAS effectiveness.

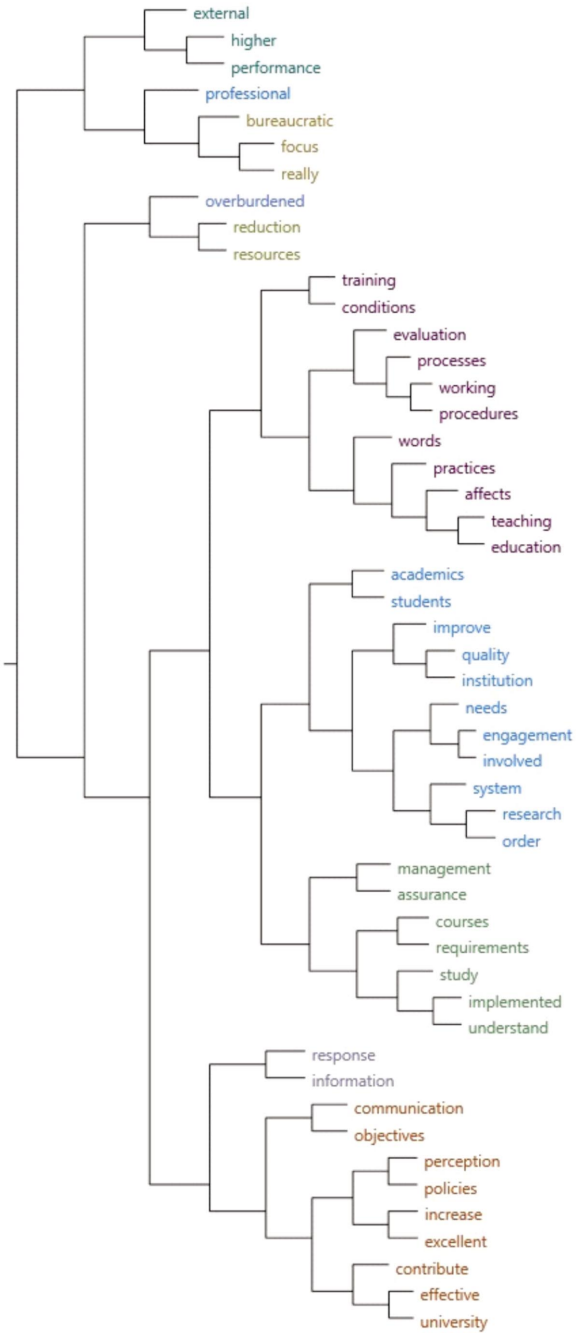


Figure 3 Dendogram extracted from NVivo 14

Analysing sentiment and emerging patterns

Data organisation began in a spreadsheet (Microsoft Excel), followed by import into NVivo 14. Sentiment classification was conducted through an iterative coding process, supported by NVivo functionalities and subsequently reviewed manually by the research team to ensure interpretative consistency. This procedure enabled the identification of recurring evaluative patterns in academics' perceptions of QAS.

Sentiment coding was based on the overall evaluative orientation expressed in each response, distinguishing between predominantly negative and positive appraisals and grading their intensity ("moderately" or "very"). From the 159 valid responses, 107 contained evaluative content and were classified accordingly, while 52 responses were neutral or purely descriptive (*e.g.*, "No comments", "Nothing to add") and were excluded from sentiment categorisation, as they did not convey a clear evaluative stance.

As shown in the graph with the coding matrix (figure 4), most responses were classified as "moderately negative" (53 responses), suggesting significant criticism of QA processes. The "very negative" responses (11) revealed more radical criticisms. The "moderately positive" (31) and "very positive" (12) responses denote less pessimistic / more optimistic views, albeit to a lesser degree.

The analysis of sentiments reinforces the thematic patterns previously identified. The predominance of "moderately negative" and "very negative" responses is strongly associated with criticism of excessive bureaucracy, the lack of real impact of QAS and the perception of management lack of commitment. On the other hand, the more positive responses value the potential of QAS, especially when there is effective engagement of faculty and students, consistent support from

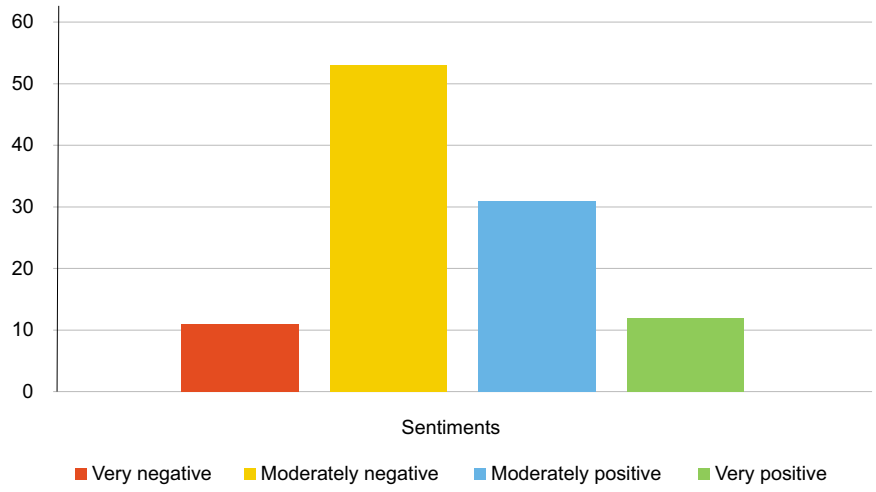


Figure 4 Encoding sentiments.

management and investment in appropriate material conditions. Thus, the data suggests that success in achieving quality objectives depends not only on their formal structure, but also on their ability to generate trust, relevance and concrete improvement in pedagogical and organisational practices.

The three researchers' participation was decisive throughout the analysis process, especially in coding the data and interpreting the emerging categories.

Discussion of the results

Key factors for the effectiveness of QAS in HEIs

The results show that the factors most frequently influencing the effectiveness of QAS in HEIs were faculty engagement, management support, the quality of infrastructure and student engagement (to a lesser extent). Qualitative analysis of academics' perceptions reveals a gap between the formal QAS model implemented in the Portuguese higher education system and its operationalisation in institutional practices, with perceived negative effects on institutional performance.

This result is consistent with the literature that has pointed to the dissociation between the normative architecture of quality systems and their effective organisational appropriation, suggesting that the formal existence of mechanisms does not, in itself, ensure substantive effectiveness (Harvey and Newton, 2004; Lillis, 2012; Stensaker *et al.*, 2011).

The literature review had identified as problematic the gap between the formal structure of quality assurance systems and their effective impact on institutional performance, making it important to deepen the understanding of academic perceptions of this relationship.

In line with the dimensions discussed in the literature review, the results obtained in this study are organised around four internal factors — faculty engagement, management support, infrastructure quality, and student engagement —, examining for each dimension, what literature suggests, what empirical results show, and how these findings contribute to clarifying the relationship between QAS effectiveness and institutional performance in the context of Portuguese HEIs.

The literature has emphasised the strategic role of faculty engagement in the effectiveness of QAS, highlighting how the active participation of academic staff is a key internal resource for institutional improvement (Lucander and Christersson, 2020; Sharabi, 2013; Hou *et al.*, 2022). In many cases the engagement of faculty and students, although recognised as central to quality benchmarks, tends to be predominantly formal or limited, often with no visible impact on decision-making processes or teaching practices, contributing to perceptions of weakness in the QAS (Manatos, Rosa and Sarrico, 2018; Harvey, 2023, 2024). Based on the analysis carried out, the participation of both faculty and students in QA processes was identified as an essential and potentially decisive factor in the (in)effectiveness of QAS. This result reinforces the argument developed in the literature review that internal human resources are strategic elements for the success of QAS, but pointing

for constraints that limit their effective mobilisation. However, some areas for improvement were highlighted, particularly regarding faculty training, as 77% of respondents indicated that they had not received specific QA training. This lack of training can compromise the quality of participation and limit critical engagement with evaluation and continuous improvement processes. Therefore, the results respond to the question identified in the review regarding the gap between formal participation and substantive engagement, providing evidence on the factors that conditioning the effective faculty mobilisation.

Concerning management support, the literature has also highlighted the support of institutional leadership and management as a necessary condition for consolidating a culture of quality (Kumar, Singhal and Kansal, 2023; Tavares, Sin and Amaral, 2016). Analysis of emerging categories revealed frequent criticism regarding weak management commitment and the perception that QAS primarily functions as an external compliance mechanism. The results show that the absence of committed leadership and effective monitoring compromises the perceived QAS effectiveness weakening its ability to produce concrete effects on institutional performance.

In relation to infrastructure quality, the literature recognises that material and technological resources are an important support for the implementation and operationalisation of quality systems (Mourato *et al.*, 2017; Seyfried and Pohlenz, 2018; Aldhobaib, 2024). The testimonies show that the lack of adequate classrooms, modern equipment, and appropriate logistical conditions compromises not only teaching, but also the credibility of QAS itself. These results provide a deeper understanding of the role of structural conditions as a mediating factor in the QAS effectiveness, showing that quality does not depend exclusively on regulatory mechanisms, but also on institutional capacity.

With respect to student engagement, the literature also highlighted its importance in quality assurance processes, both pedagogically and institutionally (Elassy, 2015; Beerkens and Udam, 2017; Palma *et al.*, 2023). The analysis shows that students are perceived as actors who should play a more active role in decisions regarding quality, although this participation is not always effectively integrated. Thus, the results help to clarify how student engagement, although valued in theory, proves to be limited in institutional practice, reinforcing the need for more structured participation mechanisms.

Regarding institutional performance, the literature has debated the relationship between the existence of formal QAS and effective improvements in institutional outcomes (Harvey and Newton, 2004; Lillis, 2012; Stensaker *et al.*, 2011). The testimonies collected reveal a recurring perception that QAS does not generate concrete improvements in performance and it's often associated with formal procedures with no real impact. In this way, the study provides qualitative evidence that contributes to understanding how academic actors perceive the relationship between QAS and institutional performance, an issue that has not yet been sufficiently explored in the context of Portuguese HEIs.

In addition, the analysis of key words and emerging categories (to be developed in the subsection "Forms of resistance identified") revealed a growing concern about the bureaucracy involved in QA processes, as well as the disconnect between

Table 2 Key factors for the effectiveness of QAS in HEIs — Results of content analysis

Key factor	Main results	Representative comment
Faculty engagement	Perception of QA as an administrative obligation. Lack of pace for participation in decisions.	QA systems are more about filling in forms…(Asst. Prof., PrU)
Management support	Lack of management commitment jeopardises the effectiveness of QAS. Need for committed and active leadership.	Without real management commitment, QAS become an administrative burden. (Adj. Prof., PP)
Quality of infrastructure	Lack of suitable rooms and equipment jeopardises teaching and QAS.	Without adequate rooms and up-to-date equipment, the QA system cannot thrive. (Adj. Prof., PP)
Student engagement	Students should be more involved in quality decisions.	Students should have a more active voice in defining quality parameters. (Asst. Prof., PU)
Institutional performance	Perception that QAS does not generate real improvements in institutional performance.	QA does not reflect concrete results at our HEI. (Asst. Prof., PU)

Note. Professional category abbreviations: Asst. Prof. = assistant professor, Adj. Prof. = adjunct professor.
Institutional type abbreviations: PU = Public University, PP = Public Polytechnic, PrU = Private University.

external evaluations and the real needs of HEIs. These results converge with critical perspectives that associate excessive bureaucratisation with a reduction in the transformative impact of QAS, suggesting that effectiveness depends on internal appropriation and not just compliance with external benchmarks.

The quotations presented below (see table 2) were selected for their illustrative value, representing typical or contrasting expressions within each analytical category. They do not aim at statistical representativeness, but rather at exemplifying the thematic patterns identified. For ethical and confidentiality reasons, the quotations are not associated with full individual profiles (*e.g.*, age, gender or specific institutional identification). However, minimal contextual information (professional category and type of institution) is provided alongside excerpts in order to enhance interpretative clarity while preserving anonymity.

The representative comments illustrate critical perceptions about QAS implementation, highlighting the need for greater integration, training and institutional commitment so that quality processes generate concrete effects on educational practices and institutional performance.

The results associated with key factors (model variables or categories) — represented through respondents' testimonies — that significantly influence, either positively or negatively, QAS effectiveness in HEIs, are briefly presented in table 2.

Forms of resistance identified

Given the general trend of dissatisfaction with QAS already noted in the respondents' answers, it was possible to identify various forms of resistance from academics. These

Table 3 Academic resistance to QAS

Perceived characteristics of institutional performance						Forms of academic opposition		
Bureaucracy	Commitment	Impact	Relevance	Quality	Culture	Critical compliance	Avoidance	Rejection
There are too many administrative tasks assigned to faculty. (Adj. Prof., PrP)	The leadership is not really involved. (Asst. Prof., PU)	The system exists to fulfil objectives, not to improve. (Adj. Prof., PP)	Nobody cares what we write in the reports. (Asst. Prof., PU)	Quality isn´t about guaranteeing a pass, it's about training students well. (Coord. Prof., PP)	QAS is alien to academic life. (Asst. Prof., PU)	QAS are important, but they should be simpler and closer to reality. (Coord. Prof., PrP)	I'm not involved in these processes; they're only dealt with by management. (Full Prof., PU)	Do away with the system, it's useless. (Asst. Prof., PU)
Filling out paperwork that adds nothing to the quality of teaching. (Coord. Prof., PP)	Without institutional support, everything is meaningless. (Assoc. Prof., PU)	So many enquiries and nothing changes. (Asst. Prof., PU)	The QAS only serves to "annoy". (Assoc. Prof., PU)	The pass rate shouldn't be the only indicator of success. (Coord. Prof., PP)	You can't impose quality from the outside in. (Asst., PrP)	You fulfil what's asked you, but there's no real reflection on the results. (Adj. Prof., PP)	I've never been asked for my opinion on QAS, so I haven't thought about it. (Assoc. Prof., PU)	Don't implement any quality systems. (Asst. Prof., PU)
Less bureaucracy and more time for teaching. (Full Prof., PU)	Management doesn't value faculty contribution. (Asst. Prof., PU)	The QAS doesnt bring real improvements to teaching. (Coord. Prof., PP)	Faculty opinions are ignored. (Asst. Prof., PU)	The pressure for quantitative results distorts teaching and assessment. (Adj. Prof., PP)	A culture of dialogue and cooperation is lacking. (Asst. Prof., PU)	QAS are useful in theory, but in practice they need more flexibility. (Adj. Prof., PP)	I have no idea how the quality system works. I've never taken part. (Adj. Prof., PP)	It's just to fulfil formalities and feed Cvs. (Adj. Prof., PP)
I spend more time filling in forms than preparing lessons. (Adj. Prof., PP)	They just want pretty reports to satisfy external demands. (Coord. Prof., PP)	It's just filling in papers, and in the end nothing changes. (Asst. Prof., PU)	Nothing that comes out of the QAS has any effect on the ground. (Adj. Prof., PP)	Everything seems to be geared towards statistics, not quality. (Asst. Prof., PU)	It doesn't respect the specificity of each scientific area. (Adj. Prof., PP)	Reforming the QAS is necessary, but it requires institutional will. (Asst. Res., PU)	I avoid getting involved in the QAS because it's all too formal and unclear. (Adj. Prof. (Inv.), PP)	A farce or pure bureaucracy just for show. (Coord. Prof., PP)
A lot of bureaucracy and formalism that serves no useful purpose. (Asst., PP)	The Rectorate delegates quality but doesn't monitor or value the results. (Full Prof., PU)	They do nothing to improve the quality of teaching and learning. (Asst. Prof., PU)	It exists as an apparatus to show to exterior. (Adj. Prof., PP)	There is a lack of clarity about what is meant by quality in the institution. (Asst. Prof., PrU)	It doesn't do justice to academic diversity. (Assoc. Prof., PU)	These are systems that can help, if they stop beeing merely formal. (Asst. Prof., PrU)	I don't usually take part in quality-related activities. I've never been invited. (Adj. Prof., PP)	They refuse to collaborate with a quality make-believe. (Coord. Prof., PP)

				Lack of resources and infrastructure jeopardises the quality of teaching. (Adj. Prof.j PP)		I think QAS should be reviewed more regularly and the community invited to make suggestions. (Adj. Prof., PP)	I don't know the objectives and functioning of the QAS. (Assoc. Prof., PU)	
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				Lack of resources and infrastructure jeopardises the quality of teaching. (Adj. Prof., PP)		I think the QAS should be reviewed more regularly and the community invited to make suggestions. (Adj. Prof., PP)	I don't know the objectives and functioning of the QAS. (Assoc. Prof., PU)	

Note. Professional category abbreviations: Asst. = assistant, Asst. Prof. = assistant professor, Assoc. Prof. = associate professor, Full Prof. = full professor, Adj. Prof. = adjunct professor, Adj. Prof. (Inv.) = adjunct professor (Invited), Coord. Prof. = coordinating professor, Asst. Res. = assistant researcher.

Institutional type abbreviations: PU = Public University, PP = Public Polytechnic, PrU = Private University, PrP = Private Polytechnic.

manifestations were grouped into analytical categories, reflecting different forms of opposition or criticism of QAS, as summarised in table 3, supplemented with representative quotes from the participants. Identifying these forms of resistance deepens our understanding of the tensions between external regulation, academic autonomy, and institutional culture, dimensions that are widely discussed in the literature and supported here by qualitative analysis of participants' testimonies. Criticisms focus mainly on excessive bureaucracy, the lack of concrete effects, weak management involvement, perceived irrelevance of processes and the conceptual fragility of quality. In addition, there is a clear lack of organisational culture oriented towards cooperation and pedagogical improvement.

These results do not constitute a rejection of quality as a principle, but rather a questioning of how QAS are operationalised in the institutional context, highlighting the importance of internal dynamics in shaping their perceived effectiveness.

The academic resistance identified, especially face of bureaucracy, lack of real impact and weak management commitment, reinforces the need to rethink QAS so that they are more effectively linked to teaching practices, specific institutional contexts and the real needs of academic communities.

In this sense, the results suggest QAS effectiveness depends on adopting a more collaborative approach, involving faculty, students, and institutional leaders in structured continuous improvement processes. The articulation between pedagogical practices, adequate infrastructure, and consistent institutional commitment emerges as a determining condition for QAS to translate into perceived improvements in HEI's performance.

Conclusions and management implications

This study has provided a detailed qualitative analysis of academics' perceptions of QAS at HEIs in Portugal, focusing on four critical factors: faculty engagement, management support, infrastructure quality and student engagement. The analysis, conducted with the help of NVivo 14 software, allowed identifying emerging patterns and obtaining a comprehensive view of the challenges and opportunities associated with QAS, based on participants' critical perceptions of their effectiveness.

Based on the responses of 159 academics, there was a clear predominance of critical perceptions — many of them incisive — reflecting frustration with the bureaucratisation of processes, the lack of real impact on teaching practices and the lack of commitment from institutional leadership. Although some answers expressed more moderate or constructive views, these were clearly a minority and did not mitigate the general scepticism shown by most respondents.

Among the most relevant results, it was emphasised that the limited effectiveness of QAS is largely attributable to the inexpressive faculty and students' participation, as well as weak or distant support from management. The literature suggests that human and organisational resources play a central role in the effectiveness of QAS. The data from this study reinforces this premise in reverse: when

these resources are not properly mobilised, valued or integrated, the systems tend to be perceived as ineffective.

Poor material conditions — namely inadequate physical and digital infrastructure — emerged as an additional obstacle to the effective implementation of QAS. At the same time, the lack of effective internal communication and the lack of transparency regarding the QAS's objectives, processes and results contribute to the distrust and detachment of academics regarding the real usefulness of these systems.

The analysis also highlighted the need to reduce bureaucracy and adapt QA processes to the specificities of each institution, course or scientific area. This adaptation — or personalisation — consists of introducing greater flexibility into the assessment criteria and instruments, adjusting them to local pedagogical practices and organisational realities, rather than applying uniform and decontextualised models. Such an approach can generate more effective impacts on teaching quality and institutional performance.

The sentiment of detachment is illustrated by responses such as:

> The quality system doesn't do justice to academic diversity, being more a set of roles that allows heads to give the impression that they are doing something, but which doesn't contribute to improving the quality of teaching and learning for our students.

This criticism reinforces the perception that QAS, rather than instruments for improvement, are often seen as bureaucratic impositions with little practical use.

The academic resistance to QA, widely discussed by Overberg (2019), supports this reading. The author introduces the concept of *quality abracadabra* to describe how QAS can become formal practices devoid of real meaning. As in this study, many faculty report that external evaluation processes are not in line with their actual practices, contributing to an institutional climate of scepticism and resistance.

Although the theoretical basis argues that internal strategic resources — such as faculty, students and management — are decisive for the consolidation of QAS, the results reveal a marked gap between the ideal model and the institutional reality. The faculty's engagement was low, that of students practically non-existent and that of management insufficiently committed. This mismatch jeopardises the potential of QAS as instruments for pedagogical and institutional transformation, reducing them to mere formal accountability procedures.

In the light of the Resource-Based View (RBV), the conclusions reinforce that the lack of adequate mobilisation of human and organisational resources — such as faculty engagement, management support and student engagement — compromises the strategic value of QAS. The resistances identified, communication failures and lack of tangible results show a misalignment between the RBV theoretical framework and the reality of Portuguese HEIs. Instead of constituting a competitive advantage, as the RBV preconises, QAS often remain formal requirements with no practical translation into service quality.

Integrating the RBV in this study thus allows for a critical reading of the untapped potential of QAS, emphasising that their effectiveness and institutional relevance depend directly on the valorisation and activation of the internal strategic resources available in each institution.

This study reinforces the need to reformulate QA processes to ensure that they are more effective, contextually sensitive and aligned with the real needs of HEIs. To this end, it is important to promote more transparent institutional communication, guarantee ongoing training for faculty and ensure the involvement of all stakeholders, especially faculty and students, in evaluation and improvement processes. The successful implementation of QAS will depend on a collaborative approach, critical and adjusted to institutional specificities.

Although this research has provided an in-depth insight into the perceptions of academics, the lack of quantitative data limits the generalisability of the results. Future work should adopt quantitative methodologies, such as structural equation modelling, to empirically validate the proposed theoretical model and explore the impact of QAS on institutional performance with greater accuracy.

It would also be interesting to develop comparative analyses between public and private HEIs, exploring how organisational differences influence the effectiveness of QAS. Extending the sample to other groups — such as students, managers and technical- administrative staff — will also enrich the understanding of the effectiveness and legitimacy of quality systems.

Finally, further research could assess the contribution of QAS to specific areas such as pedagogical innovation, internationalisation and employability, broadening the understanding of their role in strengthening the competitiveness of HEIs in a global context.

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