

Information for quality management in Portuguese higher education institutions

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Introduction



Information for quality management

Higher education has had an increased interest in performance since the last quarter of the twentieth century.

In this context, new quality assurance systems arise.

Performance indicators, an integral part of information systems, have been incorporated into the management of HEIs at different levels.

By the eighties, performance measurement is transformed by the quality movement.

In the nineties the quality movement moves its emphasis to a more external perspective, with quality measures focusing on customer and other stakeholders satisfaction.

More recently, a further interest of making an effective use of the data collected for improvement purposes has been developed – see quality development or enhancement rather than just assurance.

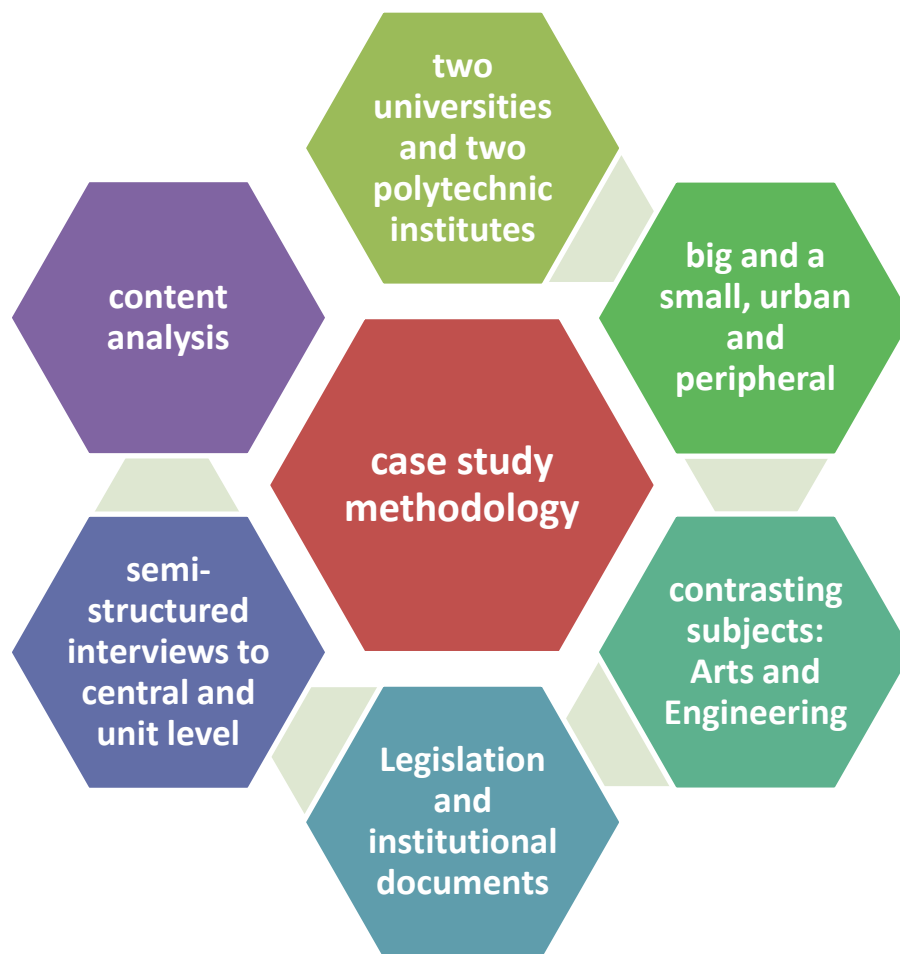
The relevant ESG

The ESG (ENQA, 2005) explicitly include references to the need to use information for improvement and enhancement of quality and the accountability dimension in ESG 1.6 and ESG 1.7, respectively:

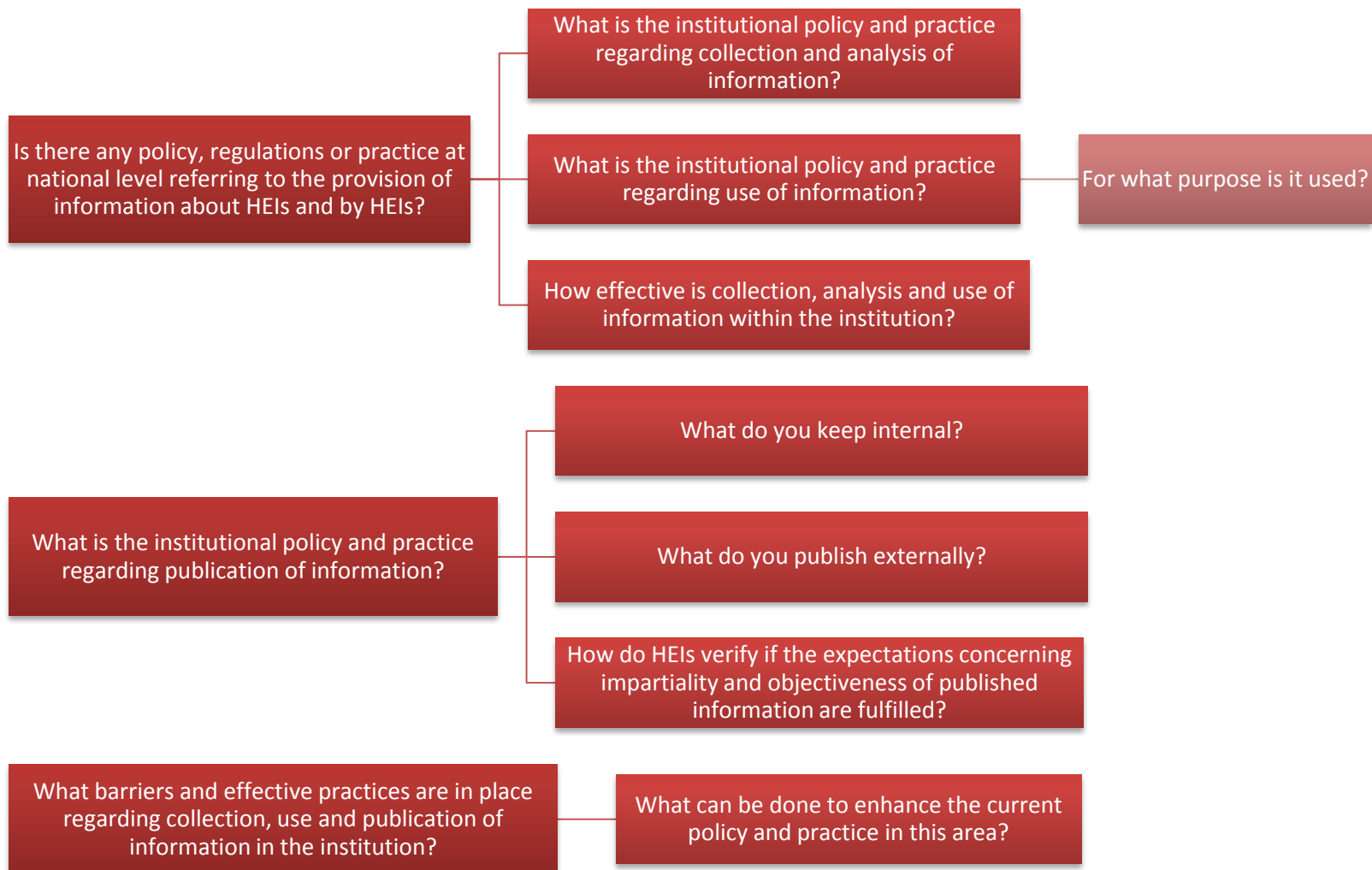
ESG1.6 - Information systems:
Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes of study and other activities.

ESG1.7 – Public information:
Institutions should regularly publish up to date, impartial and objective information, both quantitative and qualitative, about the programmes and awards they are offering.

Methods and data



The script



National policy and regulations on the provision of information

National legislation establishes quite comprehensive rules.

- for the State
- And for HEIs

It is a general responsibility of the State regarding higher education to ensure the public disclosure of information relating to educational projects, higher education institutions and their study cycles.

The law specifically mentions the need for information on the transition to the labour market.

It also mandates that HEIs have to publish an annual report on their activities.

To ensure increased transparency, the law mandates that institutions use the Internet to make information available.

One of the quality assessment parameters is “The information about the institution and about the education provided”.

Collection and analysis of information

Portuguese HEIs represented in the study tend to collect and analyse information connected to the quality management of their programmes.

Not all the information mentioned in the ESG is collected or always systematised and monitored by specific services.

It seems that universities are more organized than polytechnics.

The aspect 'employability of graduates' is the weakest one, because some actors are not aware of this information, and the ones who are, feel that only now is the collection made in a more reliable way.

The creation of specific services in HEIs to make the collection and analysis of information turns this process more systematic and reliable.

Use of information

There is no systematic use of the information, sometimes it is used because there is an external pressure to do so.

There is a general perception that information is not used optimally.

There are actors, particularly students, that are not aware of use of information.

Effectiveness of collection, analysis and use of information

The process of collection, analysis and use of information is not optimal.

Pedagogic surveys: the students do not see the use of it, and consequently they do not feel motivated to respond.

Employability: collecting data on employers and graduates is not effective, because it is difficult to reach them.

The views of top managers seem to be more optimistic.

Publication of information

websites were analysed looking for information

interviews were analysed to find the different actors' perceptions

the HEIs publish most of the information envisaged by the ESG

academics are aware that the institution publishes information and it is available through a website dedicated to future candidates

all four websites have links to a specific page dedicated to future candidates or visitants

some students are not aware of information about employability

Barriers to effective practice regarding information

Resource-related

- lack of human resources available to work on this issue and being responsible for monitoring it;
- lack of training on “how to collect and analyse information”;
- lack of time to analyse information; academics especially complain of excessive paper work.

Organisational

- lack of standardized and systematic processes;
- lack of formalization regarding collection of information (especially employability data);
- lack of confidence on how information is collected (especially regarding the concept of employability);
- information systems are little intuitive and functional;
- lack of information visibility (“make it visible without one having to look for it”);
- lack of optimal use of the collected information for improvement purposes;

Cultural:

- the perceived pointlessness of information collection, if it will not be used anyway;
- low response rates in surveys related to pedagogical matters;
- lack of academics’ involvement in decision making regarding information matters;
- lack of involvement of people of specific areas, especially Arts, in designing the collection instruments;
- a culture of disaggregated information only for management’s eyes.

Effective practice

existence of an office inside the HEI responsible for collecting and analysing data

appropriate response to external pressures by creating systematic processes to collect information

existence of websites targeted to candidates

training new students on how to use the existing information systems

an award (similar to the ECTS Label) for attesting the quality of information on the study programmes' offer published in the website

Conclusions

National legal texts quite comprehensively, and even redundantly, determine and stimulate the collection, analysis and use of diverse information.

Only after the start of the assessment and accreditation processes have some HEIs felt the need to create or further develop internal mechanisms and to make them formal.

Collection, analysis and use of information does take place in Portuguese HEIs.

But HEIs do not have standardized mechanisms for it and do not collect it in a systematic way.

Some monitoring but still informal.

But is the quality cycle being closed by the effective use of information?

Recommendations

Recommendations for *institutional managers*

- promote the use of information;
- avoid multiplication of data collection exercises;
- give reliable feedback to students about the pedagogic surveys' results, showing that there are corrective actions resulting from them;
- formalize and systematize processes regarding collection of information;
- improve information systems in terms of accessibility and user-friendliness;

Policy-makers should define a unique employability concept for all HEIs.