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Internal quality assurance units: empirical evidence from Italy

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ABSTRACT

This article uses the theoretical framework developed by Elken and Stensaker to examine the characteristics of the quality assurance internal bodies in relation to composition, activities and factors perceived as critical for the success of quality assurance implementation within higher education institutions. The article is based on data collected from a survey sent out to Presidi della Qualità (PQAs), the internal bodies in charge of implementing quality assurance in Italian universities, at the end of the first national accreditation round. Results point out that PQAs' activities are somewhat homogeneous while organisation solutions are different in relation to the institution's size and their nature (whether they are state-funded or non-state-funded universities). The results also make it possible to ascertain that the aspect of quality work is central in determining the success of quality assurance.

KEYWORDS

Internal quality assurance;
quality assurance internal
bodies; Italy;
higher education

Introduction

The prevailing institutional perspective, which considers quality assurance as an induced and exogenous mechanism (Mårtensson *et al.*, 2014; Elken & Stensaker, 2018) can be enhanced by considering an internal perspective in universities that can take into account both the ways in which universities develop and structure quality assurance and the dynamics that internal organisational units dealing with quality assurance develop in their relationship with other actors inside and outside the university (Seyfried & Reith, 2021). This article addresses this strand by acquiring empirical evidence from the Italian case.

The Italian university system has had a quality assurance system called Self-assessment, Periodic Evaluation, Accreditation (AVA) since 2014. AVA has a structure in line with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) and envisages an external audit

conducted by an independent national agency. It is a highly regulated process (Legislative Decree no. 19/2012, implementing the Law no. 240/2010) under which universities are granted institutional accreditation, that is, the power to operate, by the Ministry of Universities and Research. The introduction of AVA was a significant change for Italian universities since the evaluation experiences in Italy before that time had not been based on ESG and had instead favoured ministerial verification of minimum quantitative requirements such as the number of lecturers dedicated to a given degree course (Rebora & Turri, 2011). With AVA, universities were instead asked to implement a quality system that would ensure compliance with certain pre-defined quality standards (Capano *et al.*, 2016).

This article examines the organisational solutions adopted by the Italian universities at the end of the first round of accreditation focusing in particular on the set-up adopted by the organisational units that, within each university, were established to implement and manage quality assurance. The data collected are analysed on the basis of three categories of analysis derived from the conceptualisation of Elken and Stensaker (2018) with the aim of understanding the characteristics of the organisational units dedicated to quality assurance and the factors these units recognise as critical to the success of their work.

The discussion of the collected data is intended to contribute to a more operational, organisational and improvement-oriented understanding of how universities develop quality assurance mechanisms. The intention is to put forward some useful propositions for the implementation and management of quality assurance in universities by adopting a perspective centred on the organisational units within universities that are responsible for managing quality assurance processes.

Theoretical framework

According to Elken and Stensaker's (2018) conceptualisation, institutional responses of higher education institutions to external quality assurance practice can be analysed focusing on three different approaches, notably: quality management, quality culture and quality work. In illustrating these three lenses for analysing how higher education institutions address issues of quality in this section, without any claim to exhaustiveness, some works in the literature are referred to in order to convey their significance.

The issue of quality assurance is typically linked to the transition of universities to a more business-like model based on new public management principles. In the first place, quality assurance systems are seen in this sense as a means of fostering the adoption of managerial behaviours within universities by mitigating traditional collegial decision-making (Bleiklie & Kogan 2007;

Enders and Westerheijden 2014; Veiga *et al.* 2015). According to this perspective, quality assurance is a tool that alters power relations in universities, by favouring the strengthening of the academic leadership and the prevalence of a managerial culture more focused to citizens needs over the traditional and professional culture based on academic centrality (Csizmadia *et al.* 2008). Quality assurance facilitates decision-making capabilities within defined organisational structures and favour top-down decision-making over bottom-up decision-making mechanisms. In this sense, quality assurance favours and strengthens managerial tools by stimulating their more wide-spread use Cret (2011). In this respect, quality management (the response of universities to a quality assurance governmental demand) translates into managerial skills' strengthening, or, using Elken and Stensaker's (2018, p. 191) words, it 'has contributed to the strengthening of a more managerial and "governed" university'.

Another approach involves quality culture, which focuses on the collective and cultural value of quality assurance. In this sense, higher education institutions' answers to quality assurance is connected to the diffusion of cultural transformation of values, beliefs and cultural practices (Elken & Stensaker 2018). Studies focusing on the impact of quality assurance systems on universities underlines evidence of the cruciality of factors beyond those more managerial oriented.

In this regard, drawing on Birnbaum's (1988) analysis, Stensaker and Leiber (2015) argued that quality assurance mechanisms impact on four distinct dimensions: (1) the collegial dimension related to the identity and reputation of university institutions; (2) the bureaucratic dimension related to the administrative, standardisation and resource allocation dimensions; (3) the political dimension related to consensus building and balancing needs and interests; (4) the anarchical dimension related to the ability to create innovation and engage the academic community. Further, several studies underline how quality assurance processes can have different impacts depending on the disciplinary context in which they are confronted (Stensaker, 2008; Haapakorpi, 2011; Bleiklie *et al.*, 2017): in this sense, within higher education institutions quality assurance must reckon with an organisational resilience of universities that has precisely in the disciplinary dimension a denoting element.

The managerial and cultural approaches should not be perceived as being in opposition but rather as synergic. This is clear in Agasisti *et al.* (2017), which, exactly in relation to Italy, examines the development of the quality assurance system in relation to new public management-based expectations and verifies the existence of an implementation gap between the legislator's intention and the results achieved in 2015 (the year data collected). The results of this preliminary study on AVA, although based on partial data (59

universities surveyed and 6 in-depth studies), provide an overview of internal organisational solutions within the universities in relation to quality assurance that are only partly managerial in inspiration. Instead, organisational solutions are often connected to the ability to involve the various disciplines and to spread the culture of quality among those working in degree courses and departments.

The third approach is called 'quality work' by Elken and Stensaker (2018). Drawing on Lawrence *et al* (2011), it focuses on actors' behaviours within universities, as well as on the process of balancing and evolution of their practice. According to this view, which is more practice-oriented than the previous ones, the response to quality assurance external demands is not standardised and pre-determined. Rather, it is the results of a dynamic interpretation that different actors have also in light of institutional norms, idiosyncratic preferences and interests (Elken & Stensaker, 2018). The focus is here on the interaction among actors considered as critical in shaping quality assurance processes. It is worth mentioning here the work of Seyfried and Reith (2021), which extends the discussion by addressing the role of quality managers as agents of multiple principals who not only act as agents of the university academic top management but have multiple other principals such as the administrative structure of the university, the students, the subject areas and their needs, the national accreditation agency. The presence of several principals opens a space of opportunity for those responsible for quality assurance processes to customise their set-up and operations and thus position themselves among the various principals by strengthening their role. In this sense, autonomy intended as capacity to autonomously choose how to decline operative solution constitutes an added value for the success of quality assurance (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018).

The Italian quality assurance systems

In 2010, the Law 240 revised the governance structure of the Italian university system with a series of measures that modified and strengthened the top-level functions of government (in particular the Rector and the Board of Governance) in universities and abolished faculties in favour of departments, in which the functions of teaching and research management at local level were concentrated (Capano *et al.*, 2016).

Alongside these reforms, which have attracted the most attention in the public debate, Law 240/2010 established a reorganisation of the evaluation system, aligning it with the provisions of the ESG and entrusting the Italian national agency for the evaluation of universities and research institutes (ANVUR) (legally established in 2006 although it started to operate in 2011) with the task of implementing it (Turri, 2014; Andreani *et al.*, 2020). It is

precisely the law that lays down the establishment of a 'system of evaluation and quality assurance of universities in line with the agreements adopted at European level, in particular according to the guidelines endorsed by the Ministers of Higher Education of the countries in the European Higher Education Area'. Law 240/2010 thus provides guidelines on quality, which will later be further detailed in Legislative Decree 19/2012 that in turn led to the launch of the university accreditation system in 2014.

In July 2021, the cycle of quality assurance exercise initiated with the first assessment visits of 2014 was concluded. In about seven years, all universities were assessed. The Italian quality assurance system (AVA) verifies that Italian universities comply with the quality standards set by ANVUR. AVA provides for evaluation both at the launch of new initiatives (establishment of a new university or a new degree course) and periodically by looking at both universities and degree courses. Limited to this second periodic evaluation, which is the focus of this article, the cornerstones of the Italian higher education quality assurance system include the examination of the internal quality assurance system within each university, in relation to accreditation standards defined by ANVUR as according to the ESG (Vinther-Jorgensen *et al.*, 2019). The examination is carried out by a committee of experts (peer review) appointed by ANVUR to verify internal quality assurance system through a prior examination of the self-evaluation carried out by the universities and through an on-site visit that examines the university, a sample of its degree courses (usually around 10%) and its departments.

On the basis of ANVUR's assessment, the Ministry of Higher Education and Research (MUR) awards accreditation to universities, that is, the power to establish degree courses. Although all academic activities, teaching, research and third mission, are taken into consideration, accreditation is granted only to a university as a whole and its degree courses. The assessment is associated with a scoring system ranging from A (best result) to E (insufficient). In case of an insufficient score, the Ministry orders the termination of a university or a degree course. If a judgement is conditional (D), the validity of the accreditation has a shorter duration than the ordinary one. The Italian higher education quality assurance system has three main objectives (Vinther-Jorgensen *et al.*, 2019):

- to assure the MUR that universities operating in Italy uniformly deliver a quality service that is adequate for their users and society;
- to make sure that universities are responsible in their use of public resources and in carrying out teaching and research activities;
- to improve the quality of academic activities (teaching, research and third mission).

The responsibility of the internal quality assurance system is assigned to the top management of the university (rector, academic senate and board of governance). Its effective implementation is entrusted to a specifically created body called Quality Assurance Unit (PQA), which is in charge of implementing and supervising the quality assurance system on the basis of the guidelines of the university top management and in accordance with the quality standards defined by ANVUR. The specific tasks of the PQA are to organise the procedures for quality assurance for the university, for each degree course and for each department, to facilitate the circulation of useful information for quality assurance (data on each degree course, research activities and third mission) among different actors, to encourage a critical review of the quality assurance structure in relation to tasks, functions and responsibilities.

The launch of Italian higher education quality assurance system has led to the establishment of an internal quality assurance system that demonstrates the university's ability to adopt and pursue strategic guidelines in relation to its activities and, at the same time, guarantee compliance with the quality assurance requirements defined by ANVUR. For this purpose, universities are required to pass an external independent evaluation. An important process that, especially in the initial phase of the quality assurance system, has in the PQA a central actor that promotes the implementation of the quality assurance system by guaranteeing quality. The PQA is supported by evaluation functions:

- some joint committees of representatives of teaching staff and students for the monitoring of degree courses;
- an evaluation unit with predominantly external members that liaises between the university and ANVUR.

Both joint committees and the evaluation unit draw up annual evaluation reports (joint committees focus on individual degree courses and whereas the evaluation unit cover all academic and administrative activities of the university). These reports represent the core of the self-assessment activities of the internal quality assurance system and are acquired by ANVUR for the purposes of external quality assurance.

Whilst the functions and composition of joint committees and evaluation units are generally regulated by law (in particular Law 240/2010), the composition and functions of the PQA are not established by law, nor by the Italian higher education quality assurance system, which provides that each university is free to determine its composition and functioning (ANVUR, 2017). It is precisely this situation that offers the opportunity to examine the choices made by the universities at the end of the first evaluation cycle.

Data and methods

A survey has been developed and sent out to 84 universities to collect data about PQA characteristics, meaning all 84 Italian universities except online and special institutions, as it was felt that the latter might have different organisational arrangements. The survey has been submitted to Italian higher education institutions by the national group of Italian PQAs – COMPAQ. While not all universities answered all the questions the response rate was 100%.

The survey includes three different sections, with the first two including closed questions only, asking a series of questions focusing on the composition of Italian PQAs, their activities and their role in the institutions (Table 1). The third section includes a single open question focuses on the perceptions of the respondents around critical factors for the success of quality assurance process. Universities were asked 'In your opinion, what are the

Table 1. Composition and activities of Italian PQAs

N. Variable	Question	Yes (%)	Mean	Min	Q1	Median	Q3	Max
Q1	How many members compose the PQA?		10.51	3	7	8	12	50
Q2	The PQA includes: The Rector	5.95						
Q3	The Rector or one or more Pro-Rector	28.57						
Q4	Administrative staff	78.57						
Q5	Students	63.10						
Q6	External members	10.71						
Q7	Does the PQA President/Coordinator have other official roles inside the university?	54.76						
Q8	Are PQA academic members selected taking into account the various disciplinary focus of the institution?	77.38						
Q15	In general, how many times did the PQA (or his President/Coordinator) meet the Rector in 2020?		4.21	0	2	4	6	12
Q9	Is the PQA appointed by the Rector or as according to his/her proposal?	71.43						
Q10	Is former experience necessary to become a PQA member?	28.57						
Q11	Is the PQA supported by an administrative office?	89.29						
Q12	Does PQA have learning and teaching activities among its tasks?	100.00						
Q13	Does PQA have research activities among its tasks?	100.00						
Q14	Does PQA have third-mission activities among its tasks?	92.86						
Q16	Are minutes published online in the institution website?	50.00						
Q17	Does the PQA produce an annual report of its activities?	96.43						
Q18	Does the PQA have learning quality assurance activities among its tasks?	100						
Q19	Has the PQA produced methodological guidelines on the institution quality assurance procedures, currently or in the past?	96.43						

Non-dichotomous questions in bold.

Table 2. Values of chi-square and p significance at the 5% level (items by size and by nature of institution)

Size	<i>Q1 N. of PQA members</i>	$\chi^2 = 10.955959/p = .01196642$
	<i>Q8 PQA members/fields belonging</i>	$\chi^2 = 8.4924162/p = .03685915$
	<i>Q9 PQA nominated by rectors/organs/other</i>	$\chi^2 = 14.180813/p = .00266909$
Nature	<i>Q1 N. of PQA members</i>	$\chi^2 = 10.628996/p = .00111328$
	<i>Q6 PQA includes external members</i>	$\chi^2 = 15.638051/p = .0000767$
	<i>Q9 PQA nominated by rectors/organs/other</i>	$\chi^2 = 6.5682977/p = .01038112$
	<i>Q14 Public PQA minutes</i>	$\chi^2 = 18.998161/p = .00001308$

Key: **Size:** Small university (up to 10,000 students); Medium (between 10,000 and 20,000), Large (between 20,000 and 40,000), Mega (beyond 40,000). **Nature:** State university ('Statale') means a university funding is largely based on national public funding; non-state university ('Non statale') means university funding is largely based on students' fees/taxes.

Source: Elaboration by the authors.

most relevant factors that positively influence the capacity of the PQA to promote quality culture and the functioning of the quality assurance system?'. Answers were classified by authors who identified the most common factors, as illustrated by [Table 3](#).

Data have been analysed maintaining confidentiality of data released by institutions. These data constitute the setting for the analysis of key on-going dynamics in PQAs establishment and about the factors explaining their success. To this end, results are interpreted based on Elken and Stensaker (2018), as introduced above.

The following section provides a synthetic overview of the findings of the analysis. Results are for the large part descriptive and reveal unknown information about the composition and activities of Italian PQAs.

The interlinkages among the institutional nature and PQA characteristics (section one and two of the survey), were studied. Given the nature of the variables, the chi-square tests were chosen to measure significant association ([Table 2](#)).

Results

Findings reveal there is no standard set up of PQAs. The number of members range from 3 to 50, with a median value of 8 and a mean of 10.51. The analysis also reveals the size of universities affects Italian PQAs, as evident in [Table 2](#). The average (arithmetic mean) value of PQAs members rises from 8.17 in small institutions, 9.37 in medium institutions, 12.22 in big ones and 15.58 in very big ones. Furthermore, the nature of higher education institutions emerges as significant (chi-square test), with non-state universities showing smaller PQAs (average value of 7.24) compared to state universities' (average value of 11.40).

The composition of PQAs varies, although predominantly academics, PQAs also include technical and administrative staff, as well as students. Only a minority included the rector or the rector's delegate. Non-state universities

favoured the inclusion of external staff with specific skills in relation to quality assurance, in contrast to state universities. The percentage of higher education institutions including external members within non-state universities rose to 41.18% significantly different to state universities that included them in only 2.99% of cases (Table 2).

In a large majority of cases (71.43%), PQAs are appointed by the rector or following the rector's proposal. Rectors appeared to nominate the PQAs in 40.48% of cases, with another 30.95% of cases where institutional organs appoint members of PQAs following the rectors' proposal. Table 2 shows this variable is significant both in relation to nature and size. State universities follow the rectors' input in the large majority of cases, with only a 22.39% of institutions where rectors do not appoint PQAs. This percentage rises to more than half in the case non-state universities, with 52.94% where the appointment is more often reserved to the board of directors. In both small and very big institutions appointment was not in the hands of the rector (48.48% and the 33.33 respectively), while in medium and large institutions the rector's input was decisive in the very large majority of cases.

Members' selection takes into account the disciplinary focus of the institution in the large majority of cases (77.83%). Here, institutions' size is significant, with the disciplinary focus increasing with the increase in size. Larger universities tend to involve representatives of different subjects in the PQAs, aiming to favour a finer coverage of the subjects present at the university.

In half of PQAs, the coordinator of the unit also has other roles in the institution (54.46%), such as in the situation where the PQAs include rectors or the rector's delegates. Only in a minority of cases must PQA members have prior experience to join this body (28.57%). According to the results of the survey, PQA coordinators met the rectors on average four times in 2020, with some universities reporting at least one meeting per month.

In summary, the first section of the survey points out that PQAs usually include mainly academics but also higher education institution administrative staff and students. Moreover, the former experience of PQA members does not emerge as a central factor. Furthermore, the analysis shows that the larger the size of the institution, the larger PQAs are with a more pronounced disciplinary representation.

Non-state-funded universities tend to have a PQA characterised by a more 'managerial' profile: fewer members, external professionals included, as well as members with previous experience in quality assurance, often appointed by the board of directors. Two figures emerged to be central: PQA coordinator or president and the rectors. The first one has, in more than half of the cases, other roles within the top governing bodies of the higher education institution. The rector, beyond the crucial role in appointing PQAs directly or

via a proposal, also has a role in the meetings with PQAs, a matter that testify to a direct connection.

The second section of the survey shows that the large majority of PQAs (89.29%) are supported by an administrative office. Typically, the PQA produces an annual report regarding its own activities (96%), as required by AVA to record the contribution of PQA to the quality assurance process. In the half the cases, moreover, PQAs produce minutes of their activities that are published online. Here, the difference between non-state and state universities is significant, with 61.19% of state universities publishing results against the 5.83% of non-state ones (Table 2). In short, non-state universities appear more reserved than public ones.

Activities of PQAs emerge to be very homogenous: every PQA carries out learning activities and also releases guidelines related to quality assurance procedures. Moreover, each university's PQA performs activities related to learning and teaching activities and research and, in the very large majority, also about third-mission activities.

In relation to the open question, the PQAs point to critical success factors, often referring to them simultaneously, which can be summarised in five categories.

- **Commitment:** the presence of strong engagement of the university governance intended as the ability of the PQA to steer the attention of the university's top management and to obtain support for its quality assurance initiatives.
- **Involvement:** ability of the PQA to involve staff working in degree courses and departments by creating a widespread culture of quality capable of supporting local quality assurance processes in a pervasive way while being adaptive and flexible to local needs.
- **Accuracy:** ability to design quality assurance activities at a micro level, accurately scheduling and designing the different activities in order to ensure consistency in quality assurance activities also through pervasiveness in administrative processes and the use of information systems, web and databases.
- **Hybridisation:** the ability to let different groups dialogue among each other, favouring information exchange between academics and higher education institution's administrative staff, between students and professors, as well as internal and external needs plus institutional exogenous and endogenous logics.
- **External quality assurance:** interaction with the external quality assurance process, intended as the ability to positively exploit external evaluation to focus effort and attention on quality assurance activities.

Table 3. Classification of responses to the open question (Q. 20 on the survey)

Q20: 'In your opinion, what are the most relevant factors that positively influence the capacity of the PQA to promote quality culture and the functioning of the quality assurance system?'

Category	Institutions (the lines below report the code for each university, showing how many higher education institutions named each of the following factors)
Commitment	32 (4,6,7,9,10,11,15,17,19,20,22,28,31,33,35,36,38,39,40,47,49,51,52,54,55,56,58,60,65,74,83,84)
Involvement	42 (1,2,5,6,7,8,9,12,13,14,18,19,20,21,23,24,29, 30,32,37,39,42,43,47,49,50,52,53,54,55,61,65,66,69,71,73,74,75,79,82,84)
Accuracy	39 (2,3,6,8,10,11,13,15,16,18,20,22,23,25,26,27,30,31,32,37,38,41,42,44,47,52,56,61,62,63,64,66,67,69,70,73,77,83,84)
Hybridization	34 (1,4,5,10,12,13,14,18,20,24,28,30,31,37,41,42,43,47,49,52,53,54,59,60,61,62,63,64,65,66,72,73,75,79)
External quality assurance	7 (1,31,42,44,54,68,72)

Table 3 shows that involvement, accuracy, hybridisation and commitment are perceived as critical factors for the success of PQAs' activities by many higher education institutions: they are considered so by about the half of PQAs. Conversely, external quality assurance activities have been mentioned as critical by only seven higher education institutions. The strong homogeneity of activities developed by PQA (see the second part of the survey) suggests that this data could be underestimated. More generally, however, these factors often appear in different PQAs and answers collected were very similar.

Accuracy and hybridisation as key factors for internal quality assurance units

The results examined in the previous section can be interpreted on the basis of Elken and Stensaker's (2018) conceptualisation.

From a managerial point of view, the collected data identifies quality assurance as a tool of the university top management to govern academic activities with a top-down approach. This is demonstrated by both the relevance of the rector in the choice of the PQA and the centrality of the PQA president/coordinator showing the existence of a hierarchical dimension of quality assurance that favours the central coordination of academic activities. In this sense, governance commitment is recognised as a key element for the action of the PQAs. One PQA (#31) summarises in this regard that the essential element for the success of quality assurance is 'Integration of quality assurance processes into the governance mechanisms of the university' and another emphasises (#83) that quality assurance 'becomes a tool for strategic planning'. The presence in practically every PQA of a supporting administrative office is a further element testifying to the managerial character of the PQA. The quality assurance is an instrument through which the

governing bodies exercise a coordinating function over academic activities. AVA in this sense confirms the trend already found by other authors: evaluation has traditionally been a factor in strengthening top management in Italian universities (Boffo & Moscati 1998; Capano *et al.* 2016).

Non-state universities embrace the managerial dimension of quality assurance particularly strongly. This is why the size of the PQA is kept small in order to favour functionality and speed of decision-making, external professionals are brought in to strengthen quality assurance skills, and the minutes are not made public outside the university to emphasise the executive value of the body for internal accountability. The market focus of non-state universities, which derive most of their funding sources from university fees, reinforces the managerial orientation of these universities' quality assurance.

The top-down dynamic does not only concern the interior of the universities but also the relationship between governmental bodies and the university where quality assurance, in a logic of steering at a distance, balances institutional autonomy by replacing hierarchy and direct coordination (Kickert, 1995; Huisman & Currie, 2004). It is no coincidence that the process of granting autonomy to universities has coincided with the strengthening of evaluation mechanisms (Turri, 2014). It is significant in this regard that the spectrum of activities carried out by the PQAs is essentially identical among all universities. Despite the fact that the relevance of external quality assurance is underestimated in the open response, it is constitutive, as shown in section two of the questionnaire: it is external quality assurance that dictates the agenda and activities of the internal quality assurance system in each university beyond the size and nature of the university.

The data show very clearly that alongside the managerial logic there is the logic of quality culture. First of all, the choice of the members of the PQA shows a strong focus on involving the different disciplinary areas, especially as the size of the university increases. The larger the university, and consequently the less specialised it is, the more the collegial and disciplinary dimension must be taken into account. A further element that highlights the cultural dimension is the examination of the critical factors for quality assurance: the one most frequently mentioned in the responses of the PQAs is involvement, that is, the ability to build quality systems capable of connecting the university's top management with the courses of study and the departments by creating a transmission belt between the level of government and the level where academic activities are carried out with special attention to disciplinary differences. One PQA (#12) in this respect states that the key factor in promoting quality assurance is 'close contact with course leaders, school directors, educational managers and reference offices' and another (#21) states that the 'composition of the PQA by university areas' is essential. The collected results confirm in this sense the literature (Stensaker,

2008; Haapakorpi, 2011; Stensaker & Leiber 2015; Bleiklie *et al.*, 2017) emphasising the cultural value of quality assurance.

Finally, the dimension of quality work turns out to be very significant. At least two factors clearly demonstrate this. The first one is that although a strong homogeneity emerges in the activities developed by the PQAs, and therefore in the response to external quality assurance by the universities, the organisational solutions chosen are different, underlining that the response to external quality assurance is not univocal and predetermined but instead is the result of the dynamic interpretation work of the different actors (Elken & Stensaker, 2018) that are affected by the size and nature of the universities but also preferences and interests, such as the choice of entrusting other tasks to the president/coordinator of the PQA. The second is shown by the responses of the PQAs in emphasising accuracy and hybridisation as critical success factors. The first relates to the ability of the PQA to assume its own autonomy in designing quality assurance processes tailored to the university's specific characteristics with close integration with administrative functions and information systems in an effort to focus on micro-processes (Mårtenson *et al.*, 2014). The second, somewhat of a complementary nature, relates to connecting academic and administrative components, professors and students, internal and stakeholder needs by fostering processes of dialogue, contamination and indeed hybridisation. In this way, the PQA is not only an agent of the university academic top management but also assumes its own autonomy by becoming an actor that fosters dialogue between different principals each with their own portfolios and expectations (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018). A PQA (#41) in this regard indicates as critical success factors:

to have promoted an 'active' monitoring for each AVA process (with subsequent return of the take-up, or not, of the recommendations/suggestions made by the PQA, justifying in the case of non-acceptance). Having promoted a circular discussion with the other Athenaeum actors, starting from the Delegates, to the Evaluation Board, to the Heads of the Offices directly involved in the quality assurance processes

Accuracy and hybridisation as key elements that go beyond the organisational and hierarchical dimensions to embrace a more practice-oriented dimension that does not depend on pre-determined or hetero-directed arrangements but on the daily work of the PQA of interpretation, dialogue and connection. From this perspective, the PQA, in addition to its instrumental value, takes on its own autonomy, becoming an autonomous actor that pursues its own objectives by balancing the demands of the different internal (top managers, departments, courses of study) and external (ANVUR, stakeholders) principals with whom it relates.

Conclusion

The analysis of the Italian case provides some evidence on the organisational units in charge of internal quality assurance.

First, the organisational units of quality assurance present a rather similar spectrum of activities determined by the extension of external quality assurance and instead in homogeneous organisational solutions affected at least in part by the size and nature of the university. It is therefore possible to state that internal quality assurance is determined by the activities carried out mainly by external quality assurance and its extension but defines its own structure and mode of operation on the basis of the university's size and its market orientation (state or non-state).

Second, the study confirms the findings of Agasisti *et al.* (2017) in relation to the absence of predefined recipes for determining the set-ups and success of internal quality assurance activities. The managerial dimension, while necessary, is complemented in determining the success of PQAs by the ability to connect the different organisational levels operating in the university by creating processes and opportunities for dialogue and learning that complement and mitigate the hierarchy-centred managerial dimension. Quality assurance is, therefore, about a balancing effort between managerial and cultural dimensions. The PQAs' answers are very clear in this respect. Both dimensions must be present in a meaningful way: without a strong commitment of the university top management the quality assurance system loses relevance and without a strong involvement of the academic units with a focus on disciplines quality assurance loses operational capability.

Finally, this study confirms the approach of Elken and Stensaker (2018) by corroborating the importance of considering quality work to understand the dynamics of operation and success of internal quality assurance. It is precisely this micro dimension that is essential for building accurate operational processes, which take into account the needs of the various operators and to foster the hybridisation function of quality assurance systems between external accountability and internal accountability, between academia and administration, between students and professors, between community demands and internal university logic. In this respect, the findings are in line with the work of Seyfried and Reith (2021) on Germany, which states that internal quality assurance plays a mediating role between multiple principals' divergent interests by carving out its own space of autonomy in the midst of this negotiation process. In practice, there is no one-size-fits-all structure but rather different structures generated by the ability to adapt to the different principals.

The evidence gathered from the Italian case can be tested in other contexts in order to be corroborated. They certainly testify that the internal quality assurance of universities is subject to induced and exogenous influences,

as clearly emerged in relation to the influence of external quality assurance, but it cannot be analysed merely according to these aspects. Instead, it is necessary to consider an internal perspective linked to the characteristics of the universities, designing and constructing tailor-made quality assurance mechanisms capable of balancing and hybridising the needs of the multiple organisational actors operating around academic activities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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