

## **Internal quality assurance units: empirical evidence from Italy**

This article uses the theoretical framework developed by Elken and Stensaker (2018) to examine the characteristics of the QA internal bodies in terms of composition, activities and factors perceived as critical for the success of QA implementation within HEIs. 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 organization solutions are different in relation to HEIs dimension 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.

### **Introduction**

The prevailing institutional perspective, which considers quality assurance as an induced and exogenous mechanism (Elken and Stensaker, 2018; Martenson et al., 2014) 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 and Reith, 2021). This paper addresses this strand by acquiring empirical evidence from the Italian case.

The Italian university system has had a quality assurance system called AVA (Self-assessment, Periodic Evaluation, Accreditation) 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, i.e. 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 and Turri, 2011). With AVA, universities were instead

asked to implement a quality system that would ensure compliance with certain predefined quality standards (Capano et al., 2016).

In the following, we examine 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 set up 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. Thus, we hope 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 (2018) conceptualisation, institutional responses of HEIs to external quality assurance practice can be analysed focusing on three different approaches, and 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, we refer to some works in the literature that are useful for understanding 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 and Kogan 2007; Enders and Westerheijden 2014; Veiga, Magalhaes, and Amaral 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 widespread use

(2011). In this respect, quality management – the response of universities to a QA governmental demand – takes form in terms of managerial skills’ strengthening, or, using Elken and Stensaker’s works, it Stensaker “*has contributed to the strengthening of a more managerial and ‘governed’ university*” (2018, p. 191).

Another approach involves quality culture, which focuses on the collective and cultural value of QA. In this sense, HEIs answers to quality assurance is connected to the diffusion of cultural transformation of values, beliefs and cultural practices (Elken and 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 analysis (1988), Stensaker & Leibe (2015) argue 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, B., 2008; Haapakorpi, 2011; Bleiklie et al., 2017): in this sense, within HEIs the 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 being perceived as being in opposition, but rather as synergic and. This is clear in Agasisti et al (2017), which exactly in relation to Italy examine the development of the quality assurance system in relation to new public management-based expectations and verify the existence of an implementation gap between the legislator's intention and the results achieved in 2015 (the year data collection). Results of this preliminary study on AVA, despite being based on partial data (59 universities examined and 6 in-depth studies), show the organisational solutions internal to HEIs in relation to QA only partially managerial oriented. Rather, the organisation of internal bodies in charge of implementing quality assurance emerged often connected to disciplinary belonging and to the capacity of QA diffusion, as well as those who operates in peripheral universities’ structures.

The third and last approach is called “quality work” by Elken and Stensaker (2018). Drawing on Lawrence et al. (2011)’s work, 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 QA external demands is not standardized and pre-determined. Rather, it is the results of a dynamic interpretation different actors have also in light of

institutional norms, idiosyncratic preferences and interests (Elken and Stensaker, 2018). The focus is here on the interaction among actors considered as critical in shaping QA processes. It is worth to mention here the work of Seyfried & Reith (2021), which extend 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 the 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 and Pohlenz, 2018).

### **The Italian quality assurance systems**

Nel 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 Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (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, 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 7 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 paper, the cornerstones of the Italian higher education quality assurance system include the examination of the internal QA system within each university, in relation to accreditation standards defined by ANVUR as according 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 upon universities, i.e. 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 ensure 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 terms of 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 HEIs by the national group of Italian PQAs – COMPAQ. While not all universities answered all the questions the response rate was of 100%.

The survey includes three different sections, with the first two including close questions only, and respectively focusing on the composition of Italian PQAs and on their activities; in addition, another section includes a single open question focuses on the perceptions of the respondents around critical factors for the success of quality assurance process. Data have been analysed maintaining confidentiality of data released by institutions. In the first section, respondents were asked to reply to a series of questions around members composing these organs and their role in the institutions. Instead, the second section of the survey investigated the range of activities implemented by PQAs. These two sections contain a range of questions entirely showed

by Table I below. Instead, the third section includes a single open ended question. In this last part, universities were asked “*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?*”. Answers were classified by authors who identified the most common factors, as illustrated by table III.

These data constitute the playground for the analysis of key on-going dynamics in PQAs establishment and about the factors explaining their success. To this ends, results are interpreted basing 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 significative association. Results of significative association found are reported by table II.

## **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 impact Italian PQAs, as visible by table II. Here, the average value of PQAs members rises from 8.17 in small institutions to 15.58 in very big ones, passing by value of 9.37 in medium HEIs 12.22 in big ones. Furthermore, the nature of HEIs emerges as significant to the CHI2 test, with non-state universities showing smaller PQAs. More in detail, they show an average value of 7.24, while the state universities’ stands at 11.40.

The composition of PQAs varies to a relevant extent, and it results predominantly academic, including in the also technical and administrative staff as well as students. Only a minority included the rector or one of his/her delegates, while non state universities resulted to favour the inclusion of external staff with specific skills in relation to AQ in contrast to state universities. As showed by table II, the non-state nature of the university eventually results as significative to a CHI2 test. The percentage of HEIs including external members within non state universities rose to 41.18% in comparison to state universities including them only in the 2.99% of cases.

In a large majority of cases (71,43%), PQAs are appointed by the Rector or following its proposal. More in detail, rectors appeared to nominate the PQAs in the 40.48% of cases, with another 30.95% of cases where institutional organs appoint PQAs members following the rectors’ proposal. Table II shows this variable is significant both in relation to nature and size. In relation to HEIs nature, 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 percentages rises to more than half in the case non state universities, with the 52.94% where the appointment is more often reserved to the board of directors. Small and very big institutions show then important values of appointment not in charge of the rector, the 48.48% and the 33.33 respectively, while in medium and large HEIs the rectors or his/her input result to be decisive in the very large majority of cases.

Members' selection takes into account the disciplinary focus of the institution in the very large part of cases (77.83%). Here, HEIs size results significant at the CHI2 test, with the disciplinary focus increasing with the increase in size. Larger universities tend to involve representatives of different subjects in the PQAs, with the aim to favour a finer coverage of the subjects present at the university.

In the 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 his/her delegates. Only in a minority of cases, instead, PQA members must have prior experience to join this body (28.57%). According to the results of the survey, PQA coordinators meet the rectors in average 4 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 HEI 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 AQ, often appointed by the board of directors. Two figures emerged to be central: PQA coordinator/president and the Rectors. The first one has, in more than the half of cases, other roles within the top governing bodies of the HEI. The rector, instead, beyond his/her crucial role in appointing PQAs directly or via a proposal to the organs, has also a role given the meetings with PQAs, a matter which testify a direct link of connection.

The second section of the survey highlights 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 QA process. In the half of cases, moreover, PQAs produce minutes of their activities which are published online. Here, the difference between non state and state universities is evident, with the 61,19% of state universities publishing results against the 5,83% of non-state ones. Eventually, the nature of universities emerges as significant at the CHI2 test, as visible below in table II. 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 QA procedures. Moreover, each universities PQA performs activities related to learning and teaching activities and research, and the very large majority also about third mission activities.



TABELLA I (Dichotomous questions in bold)

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

**Table II | Values of CHI2 and P Significant at the 5% level for the significance association**

SIZE	Q1	N. of PQA members	Chi2=10.955959 / p=.01196642
	Q8	PQA members / fields belonging	Chi2=8.4924162 / p=.03685915
	Q9	PQA nominated by rectors/organs/other	Chi2=14.180813 / p=.00266909
NATURE	Q1	N. of PQA members	Chi2=10.628996 / p=.00111328
	Q6	PQA includes external members	Chi2=15.638051 / p=.0000767
	Q9	PQA nominated by rectors/organs/other	Chi2=6.5682977 / p=.01038112
	Q14	Public PQA minutes	Chi2=18.998161 / p=.00001308

**Key:**

**Size:** Small university (until 10.000 students); Medium (between 10.000 and 20.000), Large (between 20.000 and 40.000), Mega (beyond 40.000).

**Nature:** ‘Statale’ means an university funding is largely based on national public, while ‘Non statale’ means an university funding is largely bases on students’ fees/taxes.

**Source:** Elaboration of the authors

In relation to the open question, the PQAs point to a number of factors as critical success factors, often referring to them simultaneously, which can be summarized 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 QA 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 QA processes in a pervasive way while being adaptive and flexible to local needs;
- **Accuracy:** ability to design QA activities at a micro level, accurately scheduling and designing the different activities in order to ensure consistency in QA 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 HEIs staff, between students and professors, as well as internal and external needs plus institutional exogenous and endogenous logics.
- **External QA:** interaction with the external QA process, intended as the ability to positively exploit external evaluation to focus effort and attention on QA activities.

Table III shows that involvement, accuracy, hybridisation and commitment are perceived as critical factors for the success of PQAs’ activities by many HEIs: they are considered so by about the half of PQAs. Instead, external QA activities have been mentioned as critical by only 7 HEIs. 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 oftentimes appear in different PQAs, and answers collected were very similar among each other's.

**Table III – Open question' Answers' classification**

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?"

<b>Category</b>	<b>Institutions (the lines below report the code for each university, showing how many HEIs named each of the following factors)</b>
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 QA	7 (1,31,42,44,54,68,72)

## Discussion

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 allow us to identify QA 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 QA 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 QA is "Integration of QA processes into the governance mechanisms of the university" and another emphasises (#83) that QA "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 QA 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 and Moscati 1998; Capano, Regini and Turri, 2016).

Non-state universities embrace the managerial dimension of QA 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 QA 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' QA.

The top-down dynamic does not only concern the interior of the universities but also the relationship between governmental bodies and the university where QA, in a logic of steering at a distance, balances institutional autonomy by replacing hierarchy and direct coordination with the (Kickert, W. 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 QA is underestimated in the open response, it is constitutive, as shown in section two of the questionnaire: it is external QA that dictates the agenda and activities of the internal QA system in each university beyond the characteristics of the university in terms of size and nature.

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 QA: the one most frequently mentioned in the responses of the PQAs is precisely involvement, i.e. 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 QA 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 & Leibe 2015; Stensaker, B., 2008; Haapakorpi, 2011; Bleiklie et al., 2017) emphasising the cultural value of QA.

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 QA 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 and Stensaker, 2018) that are affected by the characteristics of the universities in terms of size and nature 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 hybridation as critical success factors. The first relates to the ability of the PQA to assume its own autonomy in designing QA 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 and 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 hybridation 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 QA.

First of all, the organisational units of QA present a rather similar spectrum of activities determined by the extension of external QA and instead inhomogeneous organisational solutions affected at least in part by the size and nature of the university. It is therefore possible to state that internal QA is determined in terms of the activities carried out mainly by external QA and its extension but defines

its own structure and mode of operation on the basis of the university's characteristics in terms of size and on the basis of its market orientation (state or non-state nature).

Secondly, 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 QA 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 QA system loses relevance and without a strong involvement of the academic units with a focus on disciplines QA 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 QA. 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 QA 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 QA 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 QA of universities is subject to induced and exogenous influences, as clearly emerged in relation to the influence of external QA, but it cannot be analysed merely in terms of these aspects. Instead, it is necessary to consider an internal perspective linked to the characteristics of the universities, designing and constructing tailor-made QA mechanisms capable of balancing and hybridising the needs of the multiple organisational actors operating around academic activities.

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