CHAPTER 2

QUALITY AS POLITICS AND AS POLICIES
AND THE IMPORTANCE OF INSTRUMENTS

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This chapter aims at contributing to understand the development
of European higher education quality assurance politics and
policies. Drawing on discursive institutionalism, it analyses
policy documents (reports, recommendations and guidelines)
on quality assurance issued by institutions at the European
level underlining the role of ideas in the construction of
quality as a political driver. The argument is that the principles
construing the politics of quality assurance at the European
level are being diluted in the enactment of quality assurance
policies, practices and their instruments. This is a case of
goal displacement with regard to the major political objective of a more integrated higher education in Europe. Discursive institutionalism allowed identifying the role of normative and cognitive ideas in the shift from the centrality of ultimate political values to instrumental ideas reflecting proceduralism. This shift illustrates the process of goal displacement of quality assurance policies coordinated at the European level.

Introduction

Quality assurance is an enduring topic in the construction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The European dimension of quality assurance is visible in the European level dynamics developed since the 1990s. European quality assurance policy is an instrument of European governance as it relies on the interaction of policies at the institutional, national and European levels. In this sense, a common grammar has been developed privileging accreditation to ensure coherence to evaluation policies (Magalhães, Veiga, Ribeiro, Sousa, & Santiago, 2013). However, from the perspective of the European Commission (2009), the membership of higher education quality assurance agencies in ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) and their registration in the EQAR (European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education) is not fulfilling the objectives of encouraging mobility as is one of the aims of European cooperation in the fields of education and training. In order to deal with this goal displacement (Hood, 2000), European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for quality assurance were revised in 2015 with the explicit aim of improving readability and user-friendliness of quality assurance systems.