

IMPLEMENTATION OF EUROPEAN QUALITY STANDARDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF IBAR PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this research is to find out what are the barriers for implementation of European Standards and guidelines in internal quality assurance of HE institutions in European Higher Education Area. Quality assurance is mentioned as one of the main action lines of Bologna Process: *“Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies”*⁵. Along this line ENQA – European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (initially European Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education) has been established in 2000. Its mission is *„to act as a major driving force for the development of quality assurance across all the Bologna signatory countries”*⁶. As so far the main emphasis has been put on external QA Ministers of Education in their meeting in Berlin stressed that *„consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework”*⁷. They also called on ENQA, European University Association (EUA), European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and European Student Information Bureau (ESIB) (now European Student Union - ESU) *”to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance, to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies, and to report back through the Follow-up Group to Ministers in 2005”*⁸, nowadays known as Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). The ESG have been adopted by Ministers in Bergen in 2006, and it includes internal quality assurance as one of the chapters. It is important to find out what the practice of implementation of ESG in HEI is and what could be recommended to facilitate it.

THE SCOPE AND METHODS OF THE RESEARCH

The research is designed for 3 years, until the end of 2013. 7 European countries are participating: CZ, LV, NL, PL, PT, SK and UK. Each of the 7 countries had to select 4 HEIs for this study to cover all the types of HEI as much as possible. In each institution the documentation is studied and a series of interviews carried out. The results are analyzed in 3 stages: 1) 4 institutional case studies for each of the countries are compiled; 2) on the basis of these case studies and on additional knowledge of

policy developments in each country a National report is prepared; 3) on the basis of the National reports and on additional knowledge about policy developments in EU a Comparative report is prepared by one of the participating National teams. The first chapter – on policies and procedures has been lead by Latvian team and we are focusing on the issue of internal quality assurance policies.

One has to make some reservations on the conclusions and recommendations due to the fact that the chosen sample, strictly speaking, is far from being representative and the findings and conclusions of this research are rather an illustration of the situation not a sound evidence-based judgment.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS ACROSS 7 COUNTRIES

1. Is there an institutional quality assurance policy in place? If not, why?

In most cases National legislation does not explicitly prescribe creation of internal quality assurance policies. According to the National surveys in CZ and NL there are legal requirements to create an internal quality assurance system; also in UK there is a requirement to establish a quality 'framework' (not 'policy'); in PT in the new legal framework (since 2009) there is an indication that HEIs are responsible for developing their quality assurance systems. Only in NL and SK there is an explicit reference to ESG at the level of National legislation. After adoption of the latest amendments to the Law on HEIs in PL in January 2011 and LV in July 2011, it can be expected that institutional quality policies will be also orienting to ESG more directly. In all countries under survey National legislative acts prescribe adoption of the Constitution or Statute of the institution, and in most cases also a development strategy. They necessarily include chapters on academic quality; so even if there is no direct requirement for that, the institutions are implicitly driven to develop a kind of quality policy. Furthermore, the system of accreditation that is present in all the surveyed countries foresees self-evaluation and external evaluation by [foreign] academic experts, and in the requirements for these evaluations questions from ESG are included. Among the quality criteria one can always find the academic results, although only recently the institutions are attempting to directly derive them from learning outcomes as described in Bologna documents. Qualification of staff and the situation with learning resources (including equipment where appropriate), is an integral part of evaluations for accreditation, and therefore they are also included in internal policy documents. In most cases the documents concerning internal quality assurance policy are available publicly. So most of the elements suggested in ESG are present in the internal policy or in internal normative documentation, but only occasionally there is an explicit reference to ESG in institutional policy documents.

2. How does the policy involve the organization of the quality assurance system?

Although in some participating countries (LV, PL) creation of an internal quality assurance system has not been directly required by National legislation until recent amendments to the Law (2011), all the surveyed institutions have set up their Quality Assurance or Quality Management systems (QAS or QMS). Some of these systems

have been certified by external QM firms, some have been recognized at national level, some adopted by governing bodies of the institutions. For larger institutions where creation of a comprehensive QMS might turn out a very cumbersome task, there is a system for development and regular revision of curriculum, including all or most of the elements suggested by ESG. In smaller institutions the responsibility lies with the Rector's office, in larger institutions there is an academic department or quality management unit that maintains the system at the institutional level and organizes regular quality audits. In a few cases one can observe a system developed at Faculty level. QMS or QAS system is coordinated at the central management level, but there are variations about who is the responsible person, depending on the size of the institution and the national and institutional traditions. Typical examples are: Vice-rector for academic affairs (CZ, LV, PL), Quality Management/Assurance Unit/Department/Team (CZ, LV, PL, UK), Academic Department (LV), Education Centre (NL), Office for the Evaluation and Promotion of Institutional Quality (PT).

3. How does the policy involve the responsibilities of departments faculties and other organizational units?

In the cases when a QMS system has been developed according to an International standard (such as ISO 9000:2009), the responsibilities have been elaborately described in the QMS (along with the respective processes) and they include all levels from the central units down to faculties/ departments/chairs responsible for particular disciplines. The responsibilities are further confirmed in respective internal regulations (on the Academic department, on the studies, on the Promotion Councils, on the Student Self-Government, on the State exams etc.); this is also present in the few institutions where a concise QMS system has not been developed. The ultimate responsibility for the quality of study programmes (according to descriptions of processes and/or the Constitutional acts of the institutions) is fixed at the level of management of study programmes (the Director of the study programme, the Dean or Vice-Dean, the Academic board – the specific names and arrangements depend on the National and institutional traditions, and we can find some variations on the theme).

4. How does the policy address the involvement of students? If not, why?

Representation of students in decision-making and governing bodies at all levels of the institutions is a compulsory requirement fixed in the Constitutional act or Statute of the institutions. In the institutions under this survey we did not find any deviations from full membership, and where the students are present, they always have a full vote. In all the institutions students are involved in adoption of self-evaluation reports, but it depends on the National and local traditions to what extent they are involved in preparation of these reports; the usual approach is that student opinions are summarized and included in the evaluation as concerns the quality of courses or programmes. Representation of students in governing bodies is organized through student self-governments; this is described in the internal regulations of self-governments of students.

Apart from student participation in governing structures, a widespread form is use of student questionnaires. In all countries they are used in connection with self-evaluation done prior to accreditation. In SK there is an elaborate system of questionnaires, including electronic ones, designed by students and regularly used for evaluation of teaching staff and courses; students are participating in design of questionnaires in some (not all) institutions in CZ, LV. Students' judgments on the quality of education are a legal requirement in NL. A regular feedback from students in all study programmes is a formal requirement in the institutions in UK, and also there are formal requirements to staff to provide feedback and organize corrective actions.

5. How does the policy involve specification of the relationship between teaching and research?

In this respect we can find wide variations across countries and institutions. Firstly it depends on the National tradition. Thus, in UK the management of research units is rather separate from academic and defined in a separate set of documents, even in institutions with a significant share of research activities. In NL, similarly, research is legally a major task in universities (applied research in Universities of Applied Science); however, it is not considered a criterion in the quality of the academic work, except that it has to be part of the contents of student course work, especially in the 2nd and 3rd cycle. Applied research is indicated in polytechnics in PT. In LV, although the funding of research from the state budget has been permanently decreasing, the scientific papers of lecturers are considered as one of the main quality criteria for recruitment of staff in universities, and bachelor and master thesis are necessarily based on research in the respective subject area. In pedagogical institutions, and also in universities involved in teacher training, the research is oriented to educational science and didactics. In some newly established vocationally oriented institutions (e.g. some institutions in LV), there is no particular emphasis on research but rather on practical work – both when considering the qualification of staff and in the contents of studies. Linkage between research and studies is formally declared in all institutions in CZ, but question remains concerning the practical implications of this linkage.

One cannot find much in terms of specific incentives to promote research as an integral part of teaching and learning processes. There are attempts to establish certain criteria for promotion of research in HEI in Latvia by modulating the state funding. At present part of the funding from EU structural funds (notably ESF) is used to stimulate participation of lecturers in EU research programmes (such as FP7) or doctoral studies in the fields where it is considered crucial for development of staff. There are incentives at National level in NL to stimulate obtaining master and doctoral degrees by lecturers in vocationally oriented institutions coming from the employers' organizations. Specific financial incentives for promotion of research are present in some institutions in CZ and SK.

6. What are the ways of policy implementation monitoring and revision?

The implementation of quality policies in most institutions under the review can be defined as top-down measure. There are a few cases where part of the responsibility

has been moved to lower managerial levels (1 institution in SK, 1 in PT). By way of necessity, the QM or QA is more decentralized in large institutions with large number of study programmes, because only at the programme level all the necessary data can be collected for self-evaluation or for external assessment. However the system as such is organized and maintained by central management units. What can be considered as a real bottom-up approach is preparation and organization of new study programmes, especially in cooperation with partners from other institutions and other countries.

7. How does the policy involve the statement regarding the collaboration with the secondary education sector?

It seems to be a common tradition in all the participating countries that National legislation for these 2 sectors is separate and administration of schools at National level is done by different ministerial departments. So although it is clear that secondary education is dependent on new ideas for contents and methods of teaching coming from universities and HEIs are dependent on secondary education for getting quality entrants, there is not much one can find in institutional policies concerning collaboration with schools in general strategy documents or short descriptions on institutional policy. Where teacher training is one of the main tasks of the institution, collaboration with the secondary education sector is noticeable in the contents of research activities, involving also students at bachelor and master level aiming at different aspects of contents of the secondary education and on methods and aids in teaching specific topics or subjects. Secondly, there is a national policy and institutional policies on recruitment of students; this is described in the internal normative documents on admission and admission bodies. Thirdly, there are specific initiatives at discipline level, such as national competitions (in general subjects such as mathematics, languages, chemistry, physics or concerning certain professions such as business management, tourism, maritime affairs), project weeks, open door events, visits to schools to raise interest for studies. As the teacher training seems to be one of less represented fields in the sample surveyed, we do not find much information on the 1st mentioned direction in the National studies (University of Latvia in LV can be mentioned as one of typical examples for this direction). The second direction is one of the subjects of study for the next work package, and it needs to be included in all the institutions; there are certain reflections on this issue concerning the quality of studies (UK). Information on the third one can be found in plans and activity reports of faculties and specific departments, (e.g. in some institutions surveyed in LV, CZ, SK, PT), its main purpose is to increase the interest of would-be students to specific institutions or specific fields of studies thus getting a better quality of 'raw material', which is one of the preconditions for good quality of the 'product' of HE.

CONCLUSIONS

So far in most countries there is no specific policy for implementing the ESG for internal quality assurance in HEI, except for recommendations to accreditation bodies and to external experts. The exception is NL where the National policy clearly

orients the HEI towards adoption of the principles of the ESG. Nevertheless, most of the contents of ESG is implicitly present in the institutional policies; some institutions have started work on inscribing ESG as such into their quality management or quality assurance systems. So far most institutions in all participating countries have developed QMS, and they include processes and procedures that are not inconsistent with ESG. As far as the barriers at the National level are concerned, it can be concluded that ESG has not been one of the focal points in the National legislation although in all participating countries there is an unambiguous requirement to ensure quality of studies. The situation is changing rapidly and in 2011 ESG has been included in legislative acts in several countries. At the institutional level the central administrative bodies mostly are reluctant to invest extra effort to perhaps create additional bureaucracy and extra work. That does not mean resistance to quality assurance as an issue altogether, because in most cases the quality matters are dealt with in a regular way, only according to the understanding and the liking of authorities of each institution. There is a shortage or lack of communication between different involved actors concerning ESG. There is not enough practical advice on how to develop a proper quality culture and more often than not it is replaced by introduction of more top-down control and more bottom-up paper reports. As the barriers are mostly depending on the attitudes of staff involved, the solution, perhaps, has to be mainly sought in advising and encouragement of movement in the right direction.

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