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### **Governing quality in European Higher Education: a comparison of three member states.**

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#### Abstract

The changing face of European Higher Education has brought the issue of quality assurance into sharp focus. At a pan European level it has resulted in the introduction of the ESG Part 1 in 2009 and a plethora of national policies and codes of practice in individual countries across Europe. These policies and codes of practice have implications for the nature of Higher education governance at the institutional level and the role of the different stakeholders within the management of institutions. This paper utilises case study data drawn from three EU countries; Latvia, Poland and the United Kingdom and explores the extent to which quality assurance procedures, and in particular the ESG part 1, are embedded within Higher Education governance systems and frameworks in these countries.

Research within the field of Higher Education governance and management identifies a shift in the nature of institutional governance that has been taking place over the past twenty years (Amaral, Jones & Karseth 2003; Braun & Merrien, 1999; Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007; De Boer, Enders & Schimank, 2008; Rhoades, 1992). Such research suggests that increasingly at a national, and even international level, management of Higher Education is moving towards a more unified or common discourse (Magalhaes, Viega, Sousa & Ribeiro, 2012). This unified discourse, at least at the national level, brings with it an increasing expectation, if not practice, of a more unified or central approach to governance and management of Higher Education institutions. Increasing tendency towards a marketisation of education, with students being described as customers of, or stakeholders in, their own education Cardoso (2012) and heads of institutions being described as corporate managers or chief executive officers (Melo, Sarrico & Radnor, 2010), has resulted in a change of managerial style in Higher Education and increasing levels of institutional accountability (Westerheijden, Stensaker & Rosa, 2007). In response to this increased need for accountability, a number of different agencies, bodies and frameworks have been established and implemented in an attempt to provide a minimum standard of quality in Higher Education both nationally and at a pan European level. The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG part 1) for quality assurance in Higher Education as outlined by the ENQA (2009) represents one such attempt. ESG Part 1, whilst not specifically identifying institutional governance as a distinct area in need of standardisation in relation to quality assurance, embeds governance in Standards 1.1, 1.2 and 1.5. In so doing it acknowledges that the implementation of practices and procedures for quality assurance in Higher Education cannot be managed independently of institutional governance processes

and procedures. The omission of a specific standard relating to governance from ESG Part 1 is reflected in a body of research literature which has considered issues of governance and quality assurance in Higher Education separately but has largely neglected the relationship between the two (Salter & Tapper, 2002).

Project IBAR is a three-year large-scale collaborative research initiative funded by the European Commission to identify barriers to the implementation of the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education area (ESG part 1 see <http://www.enqa.eu/files/ENQA%20Bergen%20Report.pdf>). This study is primarily focused on the implementation of ESG policy at the institutional level. Seven countries are collaborating (Czech Republic, United Kingdom, Latvia, Portugal, Poland, Slovakia and the Netherlands) and are undertaking comparative analyses of current practice in twenty-eight European universities. In the light of its findings, the project aims to provide relevant recommendations for the future modification of ESG Part 1 and, distinctively, to identify the extent to which ESG Part 1 implementation impacts upon the inter-relationship between Secondary and Higher Education. Specific dimensions of institutional quality that the project is addressing include; access, assessment, students, management and governance, employment (including the private sector) and professional development of staff. Through the production of institutional case-studies, comparative analyses, a final integrative synopsis and subsequent book, the project seeks to inform policy making in the quality assurance domain, and should be of interest to a range of stakeholders including; ENQA partners, Higher Education managers, chairs/head teachers of secondary schools, ministries of education, and the Higher Education research community.<sup>1</sup>

- ❖ This paper presents the mid-term findings with respect to the management of quality assurance as it relates to governance at an institutional level in European Higher Education. By means of three comparative case-studies from the UK, Poland and Latvia the paper explores the extent to which there is synchrony across European Higher Education in relation to the management, role and status of quality assurance procedures and practices and the place of the ESG Part 1 within these. In particular the paper focuses on the style of governance that permeates the Higher Education institutions in the case-study countries and the place of the student voice within the governance and quality assurance procedures adopted by these same institutions.

All three countries have experienced changes with regards to institutional governance and quality assurance procedures in recent years. The nature of these changes however, is not uniform. Indeed the interplay of quality assurance mechanisms and institutional governance is complex and has the potential for tension (Rasanen, 2011). In Latvia and Poland, for example, individual institutions must align their internal governance procedures with either a directly imposed quality management system, as in the case of Latvia, or an external accreditation of internal quality assurance procedures, as in the case of Poland. The United Kingdom, has no such externally imposed or accredited mechanism for quality assurance but institutional processes and quality management practices are frequently part of institutional evaluations both internally and externally and national codes of practice have been established i.e. QAA guidelines. The extent to which quality assurance mechanisms are imposed upon Higher Education institutions and the nature of that imposition seems to influence the style of governance adopted by the institution and the extent to which students, as stakeholders, are part of the governance of the institution. The UK for example seems to

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the IBAR project see <http://www.ibar-llp.eu/project.html>

be moving toward a more top-down approach to decision making, partly in response to the rapid changes that are taking place in UK Higher Education, and at the same time involving more students in the decision making process. Increased student participation has been linked to an increased need for quality.

The extent to which the ESG Part 1 currently influences quality assurance policies in the three case-study institutions is questionable few of the respondents in either Latvia or the UK had any real knowledge of ESG and tended to focus instead on national frameworks or codes of practice and it is these that appear to influence the governance practices and procedures rather than the pan European guidance.

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