A winding stair: implementing and establishing a common framework for QA in European higher education.

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The trend towards a global higher education brings with it increasing demands for institutions to effect changes mandated not just at an institutional or national level but those demanded by a growing international context. This paper employs the notion of an 'implementation staircase' (Reynold and Saunders 1985) to analyse seven types of implementation barrier identified by the international IBAR project during the adoption of common standards and guidelines for quality assurance processes at pan-European level. Through illustrative vignettes arising from the empirical data of the IBAR project, the paper explores the interplay of the national and international contexts that were examined in the project, and highlights the complexities that arise when attempting to map quality assurance at a global level

The increasing shift towards a global higher education sector has brought with it important changes in the way that higher education institutions (HEI's) are managed and organised (Amaral, Jones & Karseth 2003; Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007; Braun & Merrien, 1999; De Boer, Enders & Schimank, 2008; Rhoades, 1992). This shift from regional or national higher education sectors to international HE blocs such as the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has resulted in increasing calls for the centralisation or standardisation of higher education policies designed to facilitate greater global engagement with an area beyond that of a student's home country. In order to facilitate the implementation of these policy initiatives at a managerial level we have seen a move away from the "'republic of academics' ideal to the 'stakeholder university' ideal" ((Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007; p. 478). Arguably such

a move reflects a view of institutional change that is best brought about by means of a more managerial approach to organizational change.

The process of enacting policy change at any level brings with it a number of important challenges and potential pitfalls to be negotiated as policies are translated and implemented at different organisational and contextual levels (Caldwell, 2003; Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008). Research demonstrates that even at an institutional level effecting policy change is by no means a simple or straightforward process. At each stage of the implementation process the various actors and communities responsible for the delivery, maintenance and operationalisation of the specific policy are required to be able not just to follow a set of guidelines in relation to the policy change but to understand the thinking behind the change if implementation is to be successful (Reynolds & Saunders, 1985). These difficulties are potentially magnified when the policy shifts that are required emanate not from institutional or even national priorities but instead are driven by pan-European policy initiatives. This paper considers typical barriers that have to be negotiated if European Standards and Guidelines for assuring quality in Higher Education (ESG Part1) are to be fully implemented across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It employs Reynolds and Saunders (1985) notion of an 'implementation staircase' (1985) as a framework through which to analyse these barriers and their implications for the future of the ESG Part1.

After an initial exploration of Reynolds and Saunders' (1985) concept of the 'implementation staircase', the paper outlines how an original policy initiative might undergo various stages of treatment, becoming subject to differing degrees of transformation as it is progressively modified at the hands of different stakeholder groups at the macro, meso and micro levels of implementation. It illustrates the way in which policy necessarily changes during implementation through local 'resistance and reconstruction' (Trowler 2002). Policy signalling tends to be interpreted differentially and hence 'readings' become difficult to predict. The paper traces implementation through to what Lipsky (1980) terms the 'street level', where individual organisational actors may assume considerable discretionary autonomy in the process of implementation, or bear significant responsibility should matters go awry. In this way implementation comes to be seen as 'a mutually adaptive process' (Taylor 1999 p.75) in which both intentions and practices change. Such change is substantially influenced by culture, tradition and memory.

Having established a theoretical framework or lens through which policy implementation might be viewed, the paper then turns specifically to aspects of ESG Part 1 and the barriers that have been identified in relation to its implementation across European Higher Education (Westerheijden & Kohoutek, in press). Westerheijden and Kohoutek argue that seven specific barriers exist in this respect. Two of these operate at an institutional level and the remaining five operate at the national or pan-national level. Drawing on data from Project IBAR the paper focuses on two of these barriers in detail, one institutional and one national. It explores the various national contexts to offer representative vignettes which address issues of strategy, access, assessment, governance, stakeholder involvement, academic practice, and the flow of information through institutions and sectors.

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.

The paper concludes by identifying a set of issues arising from these vignettes that have wider implications for quality cultures and standards in the European Higher Education Area and beyond. It explores the extent to which such global policy initiatives in relation to quality assurance in the HE sector can be mapped onto a core set of standards, or whether national and regional contexts are too pervasive to make such initiatives meaningful.   .

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