

Identifying barriers in promoting the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at institutional level (IBAR)

FINAL SYNTHESIS REPORT

By

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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



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INTRODUCTION

For more than twenty years, concerted efforts at quality assurance have been central to higher education all over the world. In Europe, centrality of assuring quality education provided by universities and other institutions of the higher education sector (polytechnics) can be documented upon the Bologna process developments. Since the initiation of the Bologna process in the final years of the twentieth century, quality has become one of its top agendas, which helped towards the adoption of a pan-European quality assurance policy initiative, known as the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance. The adoption of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) in 2005 (ENQA 2005), aimed at creating comparable criteria and methodologies for quality assurance applicable across the European Higher Education Area, has brought a significant momentum to the Bologna process.

The multi-national project entitled ‘Identifying Barriers in Promoting European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at Institutional Level’ (IBAR) reflects the wide importance of the ESG by focusing on how these standards and guidelines are taken up by individual higher education institutions in several European countries that contribute to the successful building of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Based on such exploration, the IBAR project further seeks to identify major barriers in the ESG implementation in institutional settings and to make recommendations as to how these barriers should be addressed.

Correspondingly, this synthesis report on the IBAR project aims:

- to present and highlight the major findings of the IBAR project including the identification of main implementation barriers and formulation of relevant policy recommendations;
- to disseminate these findings to a wider audience including (inter-)national policy-makers, institutional leadership, staff and students along with higher education experts and researchers.

All information on the IBAR project can be found on the following project website:

<<http://www.ibar-llp.eu/>>.

RATIONALE, AIMS AND SCOPE OF IBAR PROJECT

The adoption of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance has been considered the major achievement within the Bologna process quality assurance domain to date¹. The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) were jointly created by the E4 Group, comprising the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, the European University Association, the European Students' Union and the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education, with the aim of developing comparable criteria and methodologies for quality assurance applicable across all Bologna countries through a set of non-prescriptive standards and guidelines while maintaining room for institutional diversity and autonomy². Following such a rationale, the ESG contain a set of standards along with the corresponding guidelines for internal quality assurance (ESG Part 1), for external quality assurance and for quality assurance agencies³.

Since the time of their adoption (2005), the ESG have been studied especially in relation to significance for external quality assurance and quality assurance agencies⁴. Analyses investigating implementation of the ESG in the context of individual higher education institutions have been rather sparse, the more so if the international comparative perspective is taken into consideration. To fill this gap, the project entitled 'Identifying Barriers in Promoting European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at Institutional Level' (IBAR) has been initiated for the period of 2011-2013.

The international IBAR project (<http://www.ibar-llp.eu/>) aimed at mapping implementation of the ESG Part 1 in seven Bologna signatory countries. The countries are the United Kingdom (UK), Portugal (PT), the Netherlands (NL), Poland (PL), the Czech Republic (CZ), Slovakia (SK) and Latvia (LV). More specifically, the research enquiry was conducted on the sample of 28 higher education institutions (HEIs). There were four institutions per each country participating in the project, selected mainly on the basis of institutional size and profile. Based on the mapping of the corresponding implementation processes at selected HEIs (exploratory part), the IBAR project seeks to identify the major barriers to the ESG implementation in institutional settings and to make recommendations how these barriers could be overcome (analytical part). Identification of these barriers at sample higher education institutions is to help ascertaining issues that European HEIs face

¹ Reichert (2010).

² Westerheijden et al. (2010).

³ ENQA (2005).

⁴ Crozier et al. 2011; Langfeldt et al. 2010; Stensaker et al. 2010.

when putting the ESG Part 1 content into reality. At the same time, efforts were directed towards identifying effective practices of ESG Part 1 implementation that would be conducive towards successful emulation in other institutional contexts.

The IBAR project was undertaken within the framework of the EU-funded Life-long Learning Programme by the international research consortium. The research consortium, composed by institutions with significant expertise in higher education policy research, was led by the Prague-based Centre for Higher Education Studies (CZ), further including Durham University (UK), the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (NL), the Centre for Research in Higher Education Policies (PT), Warsaw School of Economics (PL), Constantine the Philosopher University (SK) and the University of Latvia (LV). The research enquiry undertaken within the IBAR project encompassed eight thematic areas, i.e. institutional quality assurance systems, access, student assessment, management/governance, stakeholders, teaching staff, information and cooperation of HEIs with secondary education providers. It was presumed that such a focus of the enquiry, including not only the areas directly referred to in the ESG 1 (student assessment, teaching staff, information) but also those of a cross-cutting or transversal character (access, management/governance, stakeholders, cooperation of HEIs with secondary schools), would have a capacity to enrich the empirical investigations by findings relevant for the intended ESG revision⁵.

The results of the IBAR project, presented more fully in Sections 1-8, are relevant for several groupings of higher education stakeholders ranging from supra-national policy-makers via national policy-making authorities and members of quality assurance bodies to leaders, staff and students of individual higher education institutions. The IBAR consortium maintains that the project results will also be of significant value to higher education researchers, policy analysts and, last but not least, representatives of the secondary education sector.

⁵ As foreshadowed in the Bucharest Communiqué issued in 2010.

DISSEMINATION OF IBAR RESULTS

The results of the IBAR project were disseminated to a wide range of higher education stakeholders at a number of public events. In this respect, the relevant part of the IBAR website⁶ registers 15 project-related presentations at international conferences held by major organisations with the European/worldwide reach, such as the European University Association (EUA), the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER) or the European Higher Education Society (EAIR). In addition, the project consortium held a closing conference (Prague, 10-12th November 2013) during which a presentation was made of main IBAR findings to the national and international audience, including not only representatives of participating HEIs, national authorities (the Ministry of Education) but also the members of the Bologna Follow-Up Group, the European University Association and the European Students' Union. Furthermore, the event was also attended by editors-in-chief of leading research journals in the field of higher education, i.e. Higher Education, Higher Education Policy or Quality in Higher Education. The closing conference also provided a platform for making the attendees familiar with the major output of the IBAR project, i.e. the book brought to the market by the Sense Publishers as a major publishing house with global reach. The book, entitled '*Drivers and barriers to achieving quality in higher education*', presents the results of empirical inquiry into barriers to and factors enabling the ESG 1 implementation. More specifically, the enquiry, framed by the concept synthesising relevant theoretical approaches, was done at 28 HEIs participating in the project and made the ground for comparative analysis resulting in the specification of barriers to and drivers in the ESG 1 implementation in institutional settings. Regarding the process of the ESG 1 implementation, the comparative analysis further made it possible to identify several examples of effective institutional practice.

High expertise of research teams involved in the project further helped towards cooperation of the IBAR consortium with the abovementioned major international organisations (EUA, CHER, EAIR) reaching beyond conference presentations. These organisations thus also provided a platform for disseminating the IBAR results directly to the Bologna process actors, including members of the Bologna Follow-Up Group, as well as to broader international audience. However, as suggested, IBAR impact does not stop at supranational level, further reaching down to the level of national policy-makers and quality

⁶ <<http://www.ibar-llp.eu/promotion.html>>

assurance agencies, benefiting from the synthesised perspectives on the ESG Part 1 implementation, and, importantly, managers, academics and students of HEIs who may access detailed institutional cases of the ESG Part 1 implementation as available on the IBAR project website. Such intensive promotion of IBAR results to institutional, national and European higher education stakeholders constitutes a major added value of the IBAR project for the development of the EHEA.

CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH

The enquiry into implementation of the ESG 1 was done at 28 higher education institutions (also ‘sample HEIs, IBAR HEIs) of different size and profile, with four sample HEIs selected per participating country. In methodological terms, the IBAR enquiry was based on the qualitative design, combining in-depth reviews of relevant data and literature (secondary data analysis) with semi-structured interviews (primary data analysis). The interviews were conducted throughout the sample HEIs with respondents recruited from the most salient higher education stakeholder representatives (institutional management, academic staff, students, quality assurance managers, service staff, secondary school staff, school principals). The interviews were guided by pre-formulated research questions pertinent to one of the thematic areas of the project. In the course of IBAR lifetime (01/2011-12/2013), between 500-600 respondents in each participating country were directly contacted for their reply, thus keeping to the projected target group size as specified in the project proposal.

The individual thematic areas investigated in the IBAR project were formulated largely on the basis of the ESG Part 1 content as follows:

- Internal quality assurance systems
- Quality and access
- Quality and student assessment
- Quality and management/governance
- Quality and stakeholders
- Quality and teaching staff
- Quality and information
- Quality and secondary education

These eight thematic areas constituted the core of IBAR comparative research as far as identification of implementation barriers and effective practices was concerned. The first area—internal quality assurance systems—served as a primarily descriptive lead-in to implementation analysis focusing on the other thematic issues. The issues of access, governance, stakeholders along with quality and secondary education were included with the aim of enlarging the scope of the IBAR enquiry to explore implementation of quality assurance and/or enhancement procedures and outputs somewhat beyond the current scope of

the ESG Part 1. It was thought, and rightly so, that evidence obtained on such a basis would make a valuable contribution to the process of ESG revision. The remaining thematic areas (student assessment, teaching staff, information) are directly referred to in the current version of the ESG Part 1.

The production of IBAR outputs from researching the eight thematic areas took a specific pattern. Starting with the survey of internal quality assurance systems, each of the research teams produced four institutional case studies (one per participating HEI) and the country-specific study taking account of all four HEIs investigated within a given country. Whilst the institutional case studies were written only in national languages, the national study was made both in a country's mother tongue and in English⁷. All these outputs already included the specification of barriers to and effective practices of ESG 1 implementation. Based on the content of the national studies, the research coordinating team (responsibility changing per every thematic area under investigation) in turn elaborated the English-written cross-country comparative study on the thematic area under investigation, summing up the barriers and effective practices for all HEIs surveyed within the project. This approach was followed upon for the other seven thematic areas. Altogether the IBAR enquiry thus generated 224 institutional case studies, 56 national studies (ENG), 40 national studies (languages other than ENG) and 8 thematic cross-country comparative studies (ENG). All the IBAR project outputs are summarised in the Final Synthesis Report.

To assure consistency of analysis and comparability of results across a variety of contexts, the enquiry into each thematic area was framed by a set of research questions. The questions were formulated on the basis of the corresponding ESG 1 content (standard and accompanying guidelines) and/or the findings from the relevant literature (laws, by-laws, strategic policy documents, statistics, (annual) reports, research articles, books, studies or reports). The precise wording of the research questions was specified at projects seminars held in regular intervals before the corresponding area became the subject for empirical investigation. The questions further helped to structure the interviews with the relevant stakeholders involved in a particular thematic area. The enquiry into each thematic area thus constituted document survey (secondary data analysis) and semi-structured interviews (primary data analysis). The information obtained through data analysis was used for identification of similarities and differences across the sample HEIs. The identified

⁷ The exception to this rule was the UK as well as the Netherlands, where only English-written studies (both institutional cases and national studies) were produced due to high-proficiency of project target-groups (incl. national policy-makers) in this language.

differences and similarities in turn allowed for identification of major implementation barriers and relevant effective practices (as well as for appraising the degree of convergence with relevant the ESG 1 part where applicable).

Finally, regarding the research timeline, the research started with enquiry into internal quality assurance systems mostly based on secondary data analysis. As suggested, the findings from this initial stage of research were not utilised for formulation of policy recommendations but rather used to inform and fed into the enquiries that topically followed in time⁸ of project research. In all cases, the research findings were conducive for identifying the barriers and relevant effective practices in the ESG 1 implementation.

⁸ Based on the timeline of project research, the individual domains were researched in the following order: internal quality assurance systems, quality and access, quality and student assessment, quality and management/governance, quality and stakeholders, quality and teaching staff, quality and information, quality and secondary education.

PRESENTING IBAR RESULTS

In its exploratory and analytical part, the IBAR project covers *eight thematic areas* (internal quality assurance systems, quality and access, quality and student assessment, quality and governance, quality and stakeholders, quality and teaching staff, quality and information, quality and secondary education). The results obtained for each of these areas at sample HEIs are now to be presented in more detail.

1. INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEMS

Policy context

It has been suggested that quality assurance within higher education institutions comes in different shapes and sizes. Institutional quality assurance, in most cases, develops under the increasingly regulatory and accountability-oriented external frameworks. In the EHEA, these external frameworks often seem to take the form of accreditation, partly as a result of harmonisation effects of the Bologna process. The institutional quality approaches, though, still retain their diversity. Making sense of a variety of institutional quality approaches within 28 IBAR HEIs by means of description thus seems to be a prerequisite for any further empirical research into their workings in relation to the ESG Part 1.

What we found:

Application of the policy-centred approach to sample HEIs revealed that, in their majority, sample HEIs had no *self-standing* quality assurance policies. Instead, the quality assurance was made topical in parts of official/strategic documents of the HEIs, such as the statute, institutional development strategy etc., with some of these made on a mandatory basis. This all-encompassing policy approach was found prevalent at IBAR HEIs.

Regarding the quality assurance policy sections in institutional documents, they made rare explicit reference to the ESG including the ESG Part 1. The same applies when it comes to the issue of cooperation of given HEI with the institutions of the secondary education sector to enhance its internal quality. The institutional policy documents were, in general, silent on this quality facet.

On the other hand, the study of institutional policy documentation on quality assurance revealed three major points worthy of notice. First, there seemed to be the tendency for centralisation of quality assurance policy-making at smaller-in-size HEIs. Second, the involvement of students in formulation of institutional quality assurance was mostly through their participation in representative bodies (senates). In terms of carrying out the formulated measures, students were participating through questionnaire surveys. This pattern of participation, however, tended to show a low response rate across the board as far as electronic distribution of the survey questionnaires was chosen. Third, there seemed to be a divide between current forms of undertaking quality assurance of research and those of teaching (education). In this respect, the document study at sample HEIs pointed to separate policy developments and some missing formal measures for achieving teaching enhancement through relevant research findings.

Overall, our enquiry into the internal systems of quality assurance at sample HEIs has identified the following types of barriers and effective practices:

Barriers at national level:

- Some inconsistencies (too frequent and/or unsystematic policy change) in formulation and implementation of higher education policy in Centran and East-European (CEE) countries.
- (Political) preference and support for fallible quality proxies (especially rankings) (UK, PT).
- Lack of support of legal levers and incentives to promote ESG Part 1 implementation (most IBAR countries).

Barriers at institutional level:

- Low awareness of the ESG Part 1 (most IBAR HEIs) (see ESG 1.1).
- Lack of coherence, attunement and synchronisation of top-down down and bottom-up quality approaches (some CEE and PT HEIs).
- Reluctance to invest resources (human, financial, material) into incorporating the ESG Part 1 explicitly into existing institutional quality assurance policies (most IBAR HEIs) (see ESG 1.1).

Effective Practises:

- Existence of some form of funding schemes (national, supranational) for enhancing capacities at institutional micro-level (EU-structural funding, UK Enhancement Themes etc.).

No Policy Recommendations were formulated at this initial stage of IBAR research.

Work led by: Team from the University of Latvia (LV)

2. QUALITY AND ACCESS

Policy context

In recent decades, practically all European higher education systems have experienced significant growth in the number of new entrants. Unceasing demand for higher education studies was fuelled by social and economic needs in reflection of the changeover from (post-) industrial economies to knowledge-driven societies. Mass expansion of higher education enrolments was characteristic of West-European countries as well as countries located in Central and Eastern Europe; the difference was, however, in the timing of the expansion process. Whilst in Western Europe, in the main, mass expansion of higher education (so called massification up to 50% of the given age cohort (the young between 18/19 and 23/24 years of age) took place between the 1960s and the 1980s, Central and Eastern European countries went through the massification process in the last two decades following their post-communist socio-economic transformation part of which was unsaturated demand for higher education studies (cf. Trow 2006). However, transition from elite to mass (and, in effect, to universal) stage of higher education entails changes in several structural and functional aspects of the corresponding higher education systems. As a rule, these changes comprise the size of the system, institutional diversity, access and selection policies, governance and administration, the curriculum and forms of instruction and academic standards. The issue of widening access is thus not purely of statistical importance but carries important socio, economic and cultural implications worthy of further investigation.

What we found:

In quantitative terms, our enquiry confirmed the ‘massification’ thesis showing that in all countries and higher education institutions surveyed, there has been a very substantial growth in overall student numbers. This is despite a demographic down-turn, particularly documentable in Latvia and Portugal, that is already affecting the overall numbers of higher education enrollments. As far as access measures for the underrepresented groups of applicants/entrants/students are concerned, our enquiry demonstrates that, in some cases, the national rules limit rather than endorse institutional capacities to engage in widening participation activities. Furthermore, in this respect, there was no one ‘common’ definition of fair access to higher education identified within sample HEIs (this is despite the fact that all of the IBAR countries are signatories to European directives, including equalities legislation, which have implications for higher education access issues). As a consequence, diverse national definitions of fair access to higher education have created diverse responses in terms of rules of data collection and handling. More specifically, in several IBAR HEIs, interpretation of equality legislation leads to the situation under which these institutions do not systematically collect and/or analyse the data on demographics or offer compensatory schemes for under-represented student groups (all this to assure strictly equal treatment of applicants disallowing e.g. for storage of applicant/student personal data). This finding does not apply to UK institutions surveyed, as the UK on the whole emerges as a significant outlier in operating a national access policy and monitoring systems to govern university commitment to widening participation.

Overall, our enquiry into access-related issues at sample HEIs has identified the following types of barriers and effective practices:

Barriers at supranational level:

- No common European definition of access or widening participation has directed pan-national practice in this area to date.
- Varied interpretations of European equalities legislation (for example, in inhibiting the collection of demographic or other data that could be used to inform widening access policies).

Barriers at national level:

- Stricness of national legislation or policy resulting in inhibiting the collection of demographic or other data that could be used to inform widening access policies (CZ, SK).
- State regulation of admissions to higher education limiting institutional initiatives or incentives to pursue widening participation policies (UK).
- Continuing functional exclusion of some minor groups⁹ from higher education entry because of specific national demographic and/or socio-economic backgrounds (LV, SK, UK).

Barriers at institutional level:

- Challenges of demonstrating *evidence-based approach and quality* on entry when undertaking widening participation strategies for learners with under-average SSLE results (UK).
- Limited capacities of some HEIs to independently influence admissions procedures and/or selection of entrants from underrepresented groups (PT, UK).
- Lack of demographic or other data that could inform policy strategy in this area (SK).

Effective Practices:

- Systematic collection and utilisation of data on student demographics, retention and progression rates and graduate destinations (UK, NL).
- Sophisticated web-based tools to assist applicants for higher education study choice tailored to their needs (NL – StudyChoice 123, UK – FutureFirst).
- National funding to support efforts to improve entry and progression for targeted under-represented groups (most IBAR HEIs).
- Requirement for nationally demonstrable institutional action/strategies on widening participation (UK).

Policy Recommendations:

Based on the barriers and effective practices identified, the IBAR consortium recommends that the E-4 Group might give proper consideration to the inclusion of access as one of the

⁹ These groups include students with disabilities, students from low socio-economic backgrounds and students from minority ethnic groups (such as in Latvia, Slovakia and the UK).

key dimensions in the revised version of the ESG Part 1. Second, at systemic level, national policy-making authorities might encourage higher education institutions to take ‘ownership’ of access, embedding a culture of good practice in this area. In this respect, national policy centers (Ministries of Education) may think of involving representatives of higher education institutions in access policy-making so that institutions of higher education are given adequate capacities to choose their students under less cumbersome measures and state-established rules. Within institutional settings, the parts of institutions responsible for student admission can put greater effort into tracking of applicants and into improving outreach measures. Third, all actors concerned ((supra-) national, institutional, societal) should keep on institutionalising the measures promoting access of underrepresented student groups including the implementation of relevant incentives (financial, organisational) and effective techniques of data collection and analysis. Taking all these reasons into account, the IBAR consortium recommends the issues of fair access bearing on the social dimension of higher education be addressed in the revised version of the ESG.

Work led by: Team from the University of Durham (UK)

3. QUALITY AND STUDENT ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES

Policy context

Teaching, learning practices and curriculum development, rarely figure among the higher education quality assurance literature produced in large numbers since the mid-late 1980s. This situation has arisen despite the (recent) incorporation of student-centred learning and learning outcomes into methods of educational delivery which have been widely known to factor into micro-level quality assurance processes. As a result, in broader international perspective, there are still unexplored links between the ESG Part 1 and their implementation on institutional level.

To increase our understanding of how the ESG, Part 1 translate into quality assurance micro-processes, this section focuses on implementation of ESG 1.3 Standard “Assessment of Students” in institutional settings. Student assessments have been conducted at educational institutions for good many years and have traditionally served three major purposes, i.e. formative, summative and diagnostic. These purposes thus qualify for any corresponding enquiry. However, in reflection of the ESG 1.3 Standard, the scope of our enquiry is broader,

reflecting on assessment procedures as regards other relevant aspects (organisational responsibilities, examination rules, marking, appeals systems) and with a variety of institutional contexts taken into account.

What we found:

Our enquiry into student assessment practices at selected HEIs revealed that, as far as responsibilities for these practices are concerned, practical realisation of student assessment was (still) highly devolved to front-line academic staff. However, whilst such evidence holds across analysed HEIs, there were also clear signs of formalisation of assessment practices emergent in some contexts (NL, UK). This formalisation was to be achieved through institutionalisation/standardisation of assessment rules and the increasing role of supervisory bodies (examination boards). The formalisation aspect seemed to be augmented by an increasing preference for summative assessment over formative one, not least due to the pressures of sectoral massification. All kinds of assessment practices in place were found corresponding to official regulations (with little signs of deviation from standardised rules noted in PT case), leading to the conclusion that, overall, discretionary authority of front-line academics was not abused.

As to the incorporation of learning outcomes into practices of student assessment, the shift to learning outcomes-based curricula and assessment was evident in most cases. At the same time, however, uneven progress in institutionalising learning outcomes-based curricula and assessment was documented, with the UK on the one end of the continuum (such curricular and assessment design in place) and Czech and Slovak HEIs on the other (the initial phase of introducing learning-outcomes oriented assessment practices). Regarding implementation of criteria for marking, types and assessment methods, cross-country differences were observable, with the use of marking scales (0-10 NL, 0-20 PT, 2-5 PL) or grade schemes (A-F SK, CZ) and also inter-institutionally (no single marking system across UK universities). Similarly, country and institution (type) specific attitudes to involvement of single or multiple examiners were observed, with UK HEIs showing advanced institutionalisation of double marking somewhat in contrast with situation of PL, CZ, SK and LV HEIs where single examiner assessment practice was found as dominant. The same finding is applicable to the rigour of verification checks (most advanced at Dutch and UK HEIs). Finally but not less importantly, we found out that, within the analysed sample, little evidence could be found on reflection of secondary education outputs in assessment practices of higher education institutions *beyond the procedures on entry to higher education studies*.

Overall, our enquiry into the practices of student assessment at sample HEIs has identified the following types of barriers and effective practices:

Barriers at (supra)national level:

- Top-down imposition of learning outcome oriented strategies for curricular modification limiting individual initiatives and fostering compliance culture (CZ, SK, LV, PT).

Barriers at national level:

- Different understandings and interpretations of learning outcomes among national policy-makers as well as members of the academic community (PT, CZ, SK) (see ESG 1.2).

Barriers at institutional level:

- Significant inter- and/or intra-institutional variation in some aspects of assessment practices (single/multiple examiners, student absence, class participation, exam enrolment, marking strategies) despite the implementation of relevant regulatory frameworks (most IBAR HEIs) (see ESG 1.3).

Effective Practises:

- Assessment procedures and outputs regarded across the board as robust, valid and undertaken by committed staff. This reinforces stakeholders' level of trust in them (all IBAR HEIs) (see ESG 1.3).
- Clearly identifiable trend towards implementation of learning outcomes based curricula and assessment methods modified accordingly (UK, also PL) (see ESG 1.2).
- Staff special training in assessment methods and procedures (UK, NL) helping towards their higher professionalisation and objectivity (see ESG 1.4).
- Regular assessment of effectiveness of final examinations (incl. the functioning of the examination boards) and institutionalisation of corrective measures (CZ) (see ESG 1.3).

Policy Recommendations:

Our enquiry into student assessment practices across the sample institutions leads us to argue for continuous monitoring of assessment practices and allowing for their modification when necessary (e.g. to combat plagiarism with the use of special software). In the process of designing student assessment, we are in favour of developing and implementing institution-wide tools and feedback loops, especially into the format of the first year of higher education studies, to assure greater transparency and comparability of assessment practices and outcomes. In this respect it is also important to reflect on secondary education sector assessment practices, especially if a given HEI has ‘feeder school(s)’ providing core input as far as admissions are concerned. As far as implementation of learning outcomes-based curricula and assessment methods are concerned, the pivotal task is to initiate/keep on (nation-wide) discussions on the optimal level of institutionalisation of learning outcomes, with special efforts put into *follow-up measures*. Aside from implementation of learning outcome-oriented assessment practices, more active and widespread promotion of the ESG Part 1 is in order (e.g. through follow-ups to EUA Quality Culture project series), ultimately helping towards modification of the ESG 1.3 Standard by taking account of evaluation of academic staff teaching practices by students.

Work led by: Team from the Centre for Higher Education Studies (CZ)

4. QUALITY AND MANAGEMENT/GOVERNANCE

Policy context:

In the last two decades a lot has been written about the changing face of governance and management in higher education but much less about the relationship of changing governance structures and developments in quality in higher education (Salter and Tapper, 2002). Speaking of the ESG 1 content, there is no direct link between governance and management structures and quality. However, and especially, Standard 1.1 by focusing on strategy, policy and procedures for quality assurance as well as the role of different stakeholders is implicitly talking about issues of management and governance. To a lesser extent, this also applies to Standard 1.2 and 1.5, as they regard procedures for the review of programmes, and management of resources, respectively. Thus, building on these observations, the European higher education quality developments, interacting with national policies, can be considered

an important steering mechanism for higher education institutions in the EHEA. In this respect, existing research has been pointing to governance processes grounded on the creation of a common grammar that provides models, concepts and resources, and influences national discourses and decisions on higher education issues (Magalhães et al., 2012).

Therefore, another important steering mechanism with impact on higher education institutions' management and governance arrangements are the national states. In this regard, in some national policy settings (especially UK), there seems to be a move inspired by New Public Management (NPM) in reconceptualising higher education institutions as corporations and their top management as chief executive officers. As far as governance of quality assurance processes in HEIs is concerned, setting-up of the quality offices becomes more common, with the processes of quality assurance becoming somewhat more systematised and formalised, often more top-down oriented, more managerial in character, and somewhat more centralised.

Another important steering mechanism which may have an impact on quality issues is that of the market of higher education. Higher education provision through a competitive market is a rationale well grounded in some world regions, namely North America and Australia, but also in some European higher education systems, namely the UK. For higher education institutions located in these countries, it has become increasingly common to compete for students, staff and resources under (quasi-)market conditions. This competition is enhanced by the demographic developments, registering overall decreases in population cohorts, including the young between 19-23 years of age, in many European countries. Often, however, the differentiator of performance is not educational quality but research productivity and impact, which will probably concentrate institutional efforts towards a research drift and will do little for the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning at the micro-level (Harvey and Williams 2010).

What we found:

When tackling the issues of governance relating to institutional quality assurance, we arrived at a general observation that the national quality assurance agency *could serve*, to an extent, as a major actor for ESG transposition to country-and institution-specific policy contexts. However, this was hardly ever the case recorded at sample HEIs. Our second general observation concerned the patterns of managerial/academic (re-)configuration in governing institutional quality assurance procedures. On this issue, we found out that reconfiguration of institutional management in terms of widening composition and increasing decision-making

powers was mainly documentable at UK and Dutch higher education institutions rather than at institutions located in Central and Eastern Europe for which a more collegial, peer-view oriented style of management was (still) characteristic. In this regard, Portuguese higher education institutions occupy the middle ground in adopting more managerial, NPM-led approaches. The systemic path-dependencies, configurations and characteristics further tend to factor into the design and arrangements of governance patterns of quality assurance processes at institutional level. In this regard, combinations of top-down and hybrid decision-making cultures (top-down and bottom-up) were found prevalent at sample HEIs. Still, there were documentable differences with some UK HEIs displaying tendency towards organised top-down solutions whilst Slovak HEIs tended to show a more balanced approach in quality assurance governance coordination. Further still, the existing and/or emergent tensions between institutional top management and shop-floor level were found to have taken place or have been likely in the majority of higher education institutions in our survey (CZ, LV, PT, NL, SK). However, on the positive side, institutional management of quality assurance of programmes and awards was found conducive to developing, implementing and making public the explicit learning outcomes.

Overall, our enquiry into governing quality assurance processes at sample HEIs has identified the following types of barriers and effective practices:

Barriers at national level:

- Missing national-level instruments helping to translate the ESG Part 1 for institutional realities; the untapped potential and capacity of national quality assurance agencies (most IBAR countries).
- Tension between the development of a devolved quality culture and centralised control management (top-down vs. bottom-up approach) conducive towards formal compliance, also relevant for institutional level (some LV, SK, PL, CZ, PT HEIs).

Barriers at institutional level:

- Low awareness of the ESG Part 1 among members of (top) institutional management (most IBAR HEIs) (see ESG 1.1).

- Tension between academic and managerial perspectives on institutional quality conducive towards insulation of teaching from other micro/meso-level activities (some CZ, PL, PT, UK HEIs) (see ESG 1.2).
- Increased risk of ‘selling out’ education as a (managerial) solution to economic crisis, particularly for HEIs operating in market-intensive environments (UK) (ESG 1.5).

Effective Practises:

- Diversification of management designs by organisational level(s) (UK).
- Institutional quality audit combined with bottom-up consultation processes as a quality assurance (managerial) approach more receptive to capture the essence of education quality at the point of curriculum delivery to students (CZ) (see ESG 1.1).
- PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) cycle effective for clear lines of accountability, enhancing transparency and stimulating benchmarking intra-institutionally (NL).
- High/increasing participation of students in institutional decision-making processes in some country contexts (UK, LV, PL, CZ) (see ESG 1.1).

Policy Recommendations:

The present-day design and application of governance approaches to assuring quality in settings of sample HEIs points to four issues to which our recommendations can be directed. First, in the wake of observation that national quality assurance agency often serves as a channel for translating supra-national quality content, it seems proper to (financially) foster the effective application/translation of the ESG Part 1 to working practices of these agencies. At the same time, second, assurance of sufficient ‘voice’ for the organisational micro-level to minimize the top-down vs. bottom-up decision-making tensions seems necessary, which relates this recommendation to the need of continuously monitoring the level of student participation in national and institutional governing bodies. Finally, our enquiry also reiterates the aspect of striking and/or maintaining a balance between managerial and academic lines of accountability in quality assurance governance processes.

Work led by: Team from the Centre for Research in Higher Education Policies (PT)

5. QUALITY AND STAKEHOLDERS

Policy context:

Stakeholders, from their different positions regarding the higher education system, are expected to hold different opinions of what higher education, and quality in higher education, mean for them. As it was phrased a long time ago: 'there are (at least) as many definitions of quality in higher education as there are categories of stakeholders (such as students, teaching staff, scientific communities, government and employers), *times* the number of purposes, or dimensions, these stakeholders distinguish' (Brennan et al., 1992, p. 13). Stakeholders, defined as those that have a 'stake', i.e. have an ability to influence the institution's behaviour, direction, process or outcomes, could, therefore, bring different perspectives, expectations and requirements to bear on quality work in the higher education institutions. In that way, they might enrich the debate on quality in the institution. If they focus on a single dimension, however, their contribution would be less enriching; think of the employers focusing only on immediately usable skills, or the students focusing only on gaining a degree at minimum effort. But without stakeholders having guaranteed access to higher education institutions, the possibility of an enriched conception of quality being actually used 'on the ground' are lowered—hence the ESG's 1.1 insistence on this point.

What we found

In ascertaining context and conditions of stakeholders' involvement in institutional quality assurance, we found out that this involvement generally took place under fairly stable national binding regulations on stakeholder representation in higher education institutions incl. faculties (as in other cases, the UK is an exception here with no overarching legal act on higher education). Analysis of the content of these regulation revealed that students and academics were (still) in position of most important stakeholders. This means that, in most cases, students were included as actors having a say on quality assurance decision-making frameworks. Nonetheless, our interviews suggested that *practical involvement* of students in institutional quality assurance processes (incl. quality surveys) was still rather insufficient (too low in most cases to allow for general conclusions).

Furthermore, our analysis showed that proportion of stakeholder representation was legally prescribed (except again the UK, where stakeholder *requirements* for UK HEIs were checked regularly by the national Quality Assurance Agency). In some cases, different regulations for *private higher education institutions* were found to be applied. This is the case

of the CR, where stakeholder composition of the governing board was fully up to the institution's owner, and PT having in place the legal obligation to set up a governance body fully made up of external stakeholders. However, there was also increasing evidence for involvement of non-academic external stakeholders. Here, we found a possible divide in interpreting the profile of external stakeholder representation: more as national/regional *public* authorities (Central and East-European HEIs) or more as *private* sector representatives (West-European HEIs). However, exceptions from this functional pattern may exist, as CR HEIs under our survey showed the balanced representation of national/regional *public* authorities and representatives of private companies. Finally, it is worth stressing the important role of professional bodies/associations and/or sectoral committees for defining study programme requirements (especially in the UK, NL), with their more common general representation in the institution's decision-making bodies.

Overall, our enquiry into stakeholders' involvement in quality assurance at sample HEIs has identified the following types of barriers and effective practices:

Barriers at national level:

- Lack of/different interpretations of which categories of stakeholders—beyond students—should be involved at which levels (institution, faculty, programme) and in which committees or procedures (most IBAR countries) (see ESG 1.1).

Barriers at institutional level:

- Lack of incentives (reputational, financial) for some groups of external stakeholders (esp. private businesses) to *regularly* participate in institutional decision-making bodies (SK, PL, PT).
- Low participation of students in internal quality assurance/enhancement processes (especially in electronic quality questionnaire surveys) (most IBAR HEIs) (see ESG 1.1).

Effective Practises:

- 'Tailor-made' co-optation of stakeholder representatives into the decision-making bodies (councils, boards) of a given HEI based on the institutional profile (typically professionally-oriented vs. academic) (NL, UK, LV);

- Active participation of representatives of a particular employers' union in the decision-making bodies (councils, boards) of HEIs, with the intensity of participation dependent on the kind of agenda dealt with (LV).

Policy Recommendations:

Our enquiry into stakeholders' involvement in institutional quality assurance makes it possible to formulate a couple of resulting policy recommendations. First, there is a need to increase the diversity of levels and committees/procedures where stakeholder opinions are input into institutional decision-making. This measure should be accompanied by increasing the diversity of external stakeholder group representation (esp. by alumni, profession, regional public partners). Moreover, when legislating or implementing stakeholder regulations, it is of importance to pay a specific attention to diversification of the role of internal and external stakeholder representatives. The same applies to the inclusion of non-traditional students (adult, part-time, physically handicapped) in institutional decision-making bodies (e.g. by their share in overall student population within higher education institution). Finally, we plead for the implementation of sufficient (organisational) incentives to increase in electronic quality questionnaire surveys through prompt feedback, mediation (on-line) faculty newsletters) or prize-winning contests (as found in some organisational units of UK, NL or CZ HEIs).

Work led by: Team from the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (NL)

6. QUALITY AND TEACHING STAFF

Policy context

Implementation of internal as well as external forms of quality assurance has, over the years, started having significant implications for academic staff of higher education institutions. The point is that the managerial turn that started to be characteristic of design and application of (many) of the internal/external systems of quality assurance seems to have shifted emphasis from improvement of student learning experience (as an upshot of enhancement of quality of curricula and teaching processes) to more or less sophisticated forms of delivering accountability. The accountability-improvement tensions have been investigated widely in quality assurance literature, suggesting that the rise of the accountability rationale had

repercussions for trust in academic forms of self-regulation. This trust has been eroded and increasingly replaced by management-by-objectives-led approaches to assurance of quality of teaching. In this respect, the IBAR enquiry aims at exploring and ascertaining the nature of work and work conditions that are pertinent to the quality of tuition done by front-line academic staff in the ‘post-trust’ era. At the same time, efforts were made to relate the findings to the ESG Part 1.4 implementation.

Major Findings:

Overall, our enquiry into quality assurance of academic staff revealed conceptual and factual differences in maturity of institutional quality cultures between West-European and Central/East-European higher education institutions, with the former showing generally more advanced quality culture mechanisms in place due to somewhat more well-suited policy histories (no totalitarian practises formerly in place). Despite the differences in the conceptual and factual maturity of institutional quality cultures, both Central and West-European institutions within the IBAR enquiry, in their teaching performance assessments, cater for student participation and feedback (though utilisation of pedagogic questionnaires as well as through the practice of student groups regularly divided into smaller ones (in particular during language lessons or practicals)). Furthermore, as far as sample HEIs are concerned, academic staff in teaching positions most often did not show awareness of the ESG 1, with implications this has for the ESG 1 as a quality driver. Further still, the teaching staff salaries were considered inadequate compared to the wages earned in the economics or business sector (especially PL, LV), thus resulting in an outflow of (young) gifted academic staff from higher education institutions. Related to this, comes the issue of a ‘research drift’ attesting to the academics’ preference for research projects and publications bringing in (much) more money in comparison with good quality teaching. Next, staff at sample HEIs, across the country of origin, was capable of growing provision of digital learning platforms (Moodle and similar e-applications) including the relevant equipment. Lastly, across the board, the problems associated with (young) academic staff retention were not found endangering the quality of tuition.

Overall, our enquiry into quality assurance of teaching staff at sample HEIs has identified the following types of barriers and effective practices:

Barriers at supranational level:

- The absence of pan-European recognized and comprehensible indicators of teaching excellence¹⁰ (UK).

Barriers at national level:

- Lack of national standards and benchmarks (higher than ‘minimum’) on performance and teacher professional development¹¹ (most IBAR countries).
- Financial factors: economic downturn, teachers' low salaries, difficulties with implementing an effective financial motivation system (PL, LV).

Barriers at institutional level:

- Lack of consistent institutional strategies aimed at raising qualifications and motivating staff to improve their performance, in many cases combined with excessive workload (PT, PO, SK, LV) (see ESG 1.1, 1.4).
- Privileged status of research over teaching with respect to evaluating and motivating staff (PT, PL, LV, SK) (see ESG 1.2, 1.4).
- Lack of effective acting of HEI’s management aimed at improving academic staff quality (some SK, LV HEIs) (see ESG 1.4).

Effective practices:

- New development of obligatory teaching qualifications for higher education staff, such as the University Teaching Qualification (UTQ) or the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching Practice (NL, UK) (see ESG 1.4).
- Institutionalization of course evaluation procedures with student feedback feeding into the performance reviews of teaching staff with the results taken seriously into consideration by the educational committees (NL) (see ESG 1.2).

¹⁰ Such as: to demonstrate knowledge and insights in developing a broad but balanced school-based curriculum account for the diverse needs of students, to demonstrate the mastery of differentiated teaching strategies in catering for students with different learning needs or to establish collaboration with various stakeholders (parents, community members, the related professionals) within and outside the schools who would serve students with special learning/social-emotional needs.

¹¹ Such as: to identify students’ starting point and set clear learning objectives for lessons, to demonstrate utilisation of different roles of a teacher, ranging from a transmitter of knowledge to a resource person (also incl. a facilitator, a consultant, a counsellor and an assessor); to design, use and evaluate the various assessment modes so as to gather more accurate and comprehensive information and to use these information effectively to diagnose students’ learning progress.

- Support to the quality of teaching staff performance through several instruments, such as: the ‘teaching/learning lab’; the peers initiative (*‘par em par’*); distance and e-learning methods (PT, PL) (see ESG 1.4).
- Some financial rewards and awards offered intra-institutionally to motivate the improvement of teaching (CZ, PL) (see ESG 1.4).

Policy Recommendations:

The IBAR consortium is in favour of developing/enhancing linkages between educational and research ‘qualities’, especially as far as pivotal characteristics (curricula, academic staff workloads, learning outcomes) of Master and Doctoral studies are concerned. Activities like this might further call for adaptation of teaching performance assessment to the specificities of disciplinary areas as well as to institutional mission where appropriate. In order to reduce the oft-noted tendency to the preference of research to teaching, the IBAR consortium is in favour of considering the implementation of (partially) revised funding models that reward excellence in teaching (including the development of sufficiently diversified indicators).

At the same time, there is a need to develop a broader perspective on motivation mechanisms institution-wide, including also non-financial rewards, and to enhance teaching quality through the institutionalisation of (mandatory) staff training systems. The institutionalisation of more intensive forms of supporting teaching excellence, may, however, not do without undertaking strategic reviews of educational development/staff development provision with particular consideration for the needs of part-time, temporary and assistant teaching staff and for staff in leadership of teaching roles. With regard to the pan-European level, ENQA might wish to consider whether a Europe-wide set of standards and/or indicators for individuals wishing to engage in university teaching should be supported and whether such a set would also integrate criteria for continuing professional development of academic staff (reflecting gains in educational quality across the EHEA). At the same time, ENQA may wish to consider whether a revised ESG might contain additional guidelines to enhance student participation in teaching performance assessment and to support development of the effective management of teaching.

Work led by: Team from the Warsaw School of Economics (PL)

7. QUALITY AND INFORMATION

Policy context

Over the last decades, higher education institutions have encountered ever-increasing interest and demands from students, a variety of stakeholders and the public for access to reliable and transparent information. Typically, students ask for information about qualification levels and profiles of study programmes, learning conditions and range of academic and social activities. Employers need reliable information about programmes and qualifications in order to better understand the skills and competencies gained by the graduates, their potential employees. To find appropriate partners for co-operation, they also look for information about the research reputation of individual HEIs. Differences in the information available and offered relate to the purpose for which it has been requested.

Provision of information to students has become one of the key aspects influencing strategic behaviour of HEIs. The reason lies in the fact that these institutions increasingly compete for funds, students and reputation. For this reason, e.g. to be competitive in attracting the (most) talented applicants, HEIs have to demonstrate the strength of their own institutional performance including quality of their achievements. Another key aspect related to the issue of information provision is diversification of targeting. It is caused by diversified stakeholders' needs and expectations. To give an example, students' have their informational expectations diversified by their educational, social, cultural or linguistic backgrounds. The other stakeholders, e.g. employers are diversified their requirements of information relating to qualifications, competencies and skills of higher education graduates. Public expectations have changed, too. HEIs started to be asked to address the various challenges concerning the whole society, not only to play their role in the fields of education and research. Lastly but not less importantly, HEIs currently seem to have more autonomy and responsibilities in terms of the management of their resources, personnel, and of academic decisions in teaching and in research. Their independence brings with it the necessity to account for quality of these activities by reporting and providing other means of information.

Major Findings:

Our investigation of the issues related to quality and information revealed several results worthy of notice. First of all, the national policy of all countries participating in the project on the collection, use, analysis and disclosure of information in all surveyed countries is quite strictly formulated in the scope of two basic documents - the Law on Higher Education

Institutions (except the UK) and the relevant Decrees of the national quality assurance agency. In the majority of IBAR countries participating in the project, the implementation process works on a top-down principle, i.e. HEIs typically collect, analyse and use information following requirements set in the national policy documents. The corresponding processes are governed by the appropriate Ministry or other national governmental body (quality assurance agency). As far as collection and analysis of information is concerned, most national legislation documents also formulate obligations and responsibilities of national bodies.

Based on national legislation, all institutions surveyed are required to contribute with information to the nation-wide registers. They vary in regard of their extent, content, complexity, outputs and accessibility. Majority of registers works under governance of responsible ministries (CZ, SK, PL, LV, PT, NL) or external agencies (UK). Complexity and effectiveness in the area of collection, use, analysis and disclosure of information registered in the systems have been identified as one of the biggest challenges in several surveyed countries (CZ, SK, PL). One of the most complex register operates in UK. The UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) administrates four main datasets covering the students, staff and financial aspects of higher education institutions, and also the activities of graduates after they have gained a higher education qualification.

The institutional policy on collection, analysis and use of information is better developed at institutions that have a longer tradition of internal quality assurance and enhancement processes and are therefore more familiar with their implementation (UK, NL). All institutions surveyed are obligated to collect, analyse and use information on student numbers, progression and success rates, student satisfaction with their study programmes, profiles of the student population, number of students per a teacher and key performance indicators on institutional level with differing complexity. However, our data point to a limited space for the establishment and implementation of *distinct* institutional policies on quality-of-information provision (incl. especially: kind of information/data for public disclosure, specification of the content and access to it by organisational level or user type, means of information verification). In particular, the range and kind of information available for public disclosure is, as the sample HEIs show, limited by the national legislation on personal data protection (incl. sensitive data on ethnicity etc).

Finally, all IBAR HEIs, irrespective of their geographical location, are aware of the importance of information disclosed to public. As suggested above, the main reason is institutional competition for students. By this logic, IBAR HEIs (are bound to) disclose

information concerning study programmes, learning outcomes and qualifications awarded. However, within our sample, significant differences were identified with regard to the disclosure of information concerning employment destinations of the past students. On the other hand, information on the teaching, learning and assessment procedures as well as profiles of the students' population is predominantly disclosed internally, not passed on externally to public. Some IBAR institutions also publish selected aspects concerning the student population externally (NL). Still, tendency of some other institutions (UK) to publish information based on the consumer's perspective was observed. This approach represents a shift from publication of information to communication. Last but not least, although much attention was paid in all surveyed countries to identifying the scale of information disclosed to public, the relatively little regard was dedicated to mechanisms of securing information objectivity and impartiality (incl. elaboration of effective feedback loops).

Overall, our enquiry into quality of information provision at sample HEIs has identified the following types of barriers and effective practices:

Barriers at supranational level:

- Insufficient understanding of how the information is being perceived. In this respect, it might be worthwhile to move from a mere disclosure of information to a proactive communication of information.
- Lack of international fora enabling to share experiences in the area of information on quality assurance and benchmarking in individual (EHEA) countries.

Barriers at national level:

- Nation-wide registry systems with limited effectiveness and insufficient generation of some type of information, mainly concerning the employability of graduates (SK, LV) (see ESG 1.6, 1.7).
- Ethical and legal issues concerning public disclosure of some kinds of information (esp. information on ethnicity) (SK, CZ) (see ESG 1.7).

Barriers at institutional level:

- Low participation of external stakeholders from outside of the higher education institutions in the processes relating to the use, analyzing and disclosure of information (most IBAR HEIs) (see ESG 1.6, 1.7).
- Low awareness of the use of feedback in the processes of information verification (most IBAR HEIs) (see ESG 1.6).
- Lack of standards providing objective and impartial information preventing their marketing potential (UK, PT) (see ESG 1.6, 1.7).
- Lack of specialized professional units within HEIs staffed by well qualified individuals who have responsibility for collecting, analyzing and publishing information (SK) (see ESG 1.6).

Effective Practices:

- Long-term analyses of complex data on study population (HE student retention, discontinuation, drop-out, employment rates) through the use of the national registers (UK, NL, CZ) (see ESG 1.7).
- Some sophisticated approaches to collection and analysis of data on alumni (post-graduation study views, employment destinations, career tracking, club formation and activities) (UK, NL) (see ESG 1.6).

Policy Recommendations:

Following our enquiry into the relations between institutional quality and information provision, we uphold the implementation of self-standing institutional policies of this kind. These information-based policies would pay, in most cases, a particular attention to the development of data collection and analytical methods regarding graduate tracking. Furthermore, whilst assuring compatibility with (supra)national policies of this kind, institutional policies on quality of information provision would, to a greater extent, benefit from creating and applying feedback loops incl. analysis of data obtained in such a manner. Finally, as far as design of institutional policies on quality of information is concerned, we argue for devising effective strategies for verification of veracity of all the data and information collected so that these would constitute a reliable and solid source for strategic policy-making be it at the institutional, state or pan-European level.

Work led by: Team from Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra (SK)

8. QUALITY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

Policy context:

Achievements of students enrolled in higher education programmes are generally dependent on a number of conditions which are created by higher education institutions but also by learners' previous educational background and experiences. Secondary schools play a significant part in the creation of study commitment and expectations and in students' capacity to become *involved* learners accessing higher education. Involvement in classroom learning, especially with other students, leads to greater quality of effort, enhanced learning, and in turn heightened student success. National qualifications frameworks and national secondary curricula may give us some sense of the knowledge base to which new student intakes have been exposed and the skills they have developed, but they are very unlikely to offer any insight into the actual preparedness of secondary school students for higher education studies.

For reasons like these, it is only natural that secondary schools and tertiary education providers should cultivate links in order to foster transition for learners from secondary to higher education. However, evidence at both national and supra-national level suggests relatively limited systematic support for formalized links between the two sectors to support learner progression. Correspondingly, there is limited scholarly literature describing secondary school/university relationships, except for that on specific issues of access and widening participation. Despite considerable efforts by some higher education institutions to connect with students at secondary level, opportunities for systemic collaboration between the two sectors, particularly in the domain of quality assurance, remain somewhat underdeveloped and poorly documented. Therefore, in many European countries academics and secondary teachers admit that they still know very little about each other's work.

Major Findings:

Our exploration of interactions between higher education institutions and secondary schools and the ways both sectors use for mutual cooperation led us towards fifth major findings. First, across the IBAR countries, there was very limited national policy or legislation governing the relationship between secondary and tertiary education. National policies thus

almost exclusively tend to focus on the provision of information about tertiary education to secondary school level applicants or potential applicants to the detriment of strategic policy cooperation, coordination and application of relevant instruments for strategic goal realisation. This finding also applies to quality assurance arrangements that, for both sectors, are institutionalised separately via different bodies with no sharing of information, results or effective practice (for an exception, see UK Higher Education Academy). For this reason, second, examples of system-level collaboration between the two sectors are rather limited but include work on national curricula and qualifications frameworks and on widening participation. Third, most of liaison activities involving cooperation of higher education institutions with secondary schools are concentrated on institutional micro and meso-levels and often based on individual's initiatives rather than pre-defined strategic policy goals. The liaison activities typically concern: collaborative teaching, summer schools, in-class demonstrations, competitions, information provision, open days etc. The cooperation is particularly developed and productive between universities and their feeder secondary schools providing most of successful applicants for higher education study. Fourth, the extent of concern about transition issues varies across IBAR countries and in some (local) cases there has been significant emphasis on improvements for the first year of higher education (UK-Scotland). Finally, in some contexts (UK and Netherlands), professionalism of key linking roles (e.g. admissions and careers) is creating opportunities for national innovation and enhancement in these areas.

Our research into quality of IBAR higher education institutions and the secondary education sector including selected schools has been conducive to identifying the following types of barriers and effective practices:

Barriers at supranational level:

- European-level quality arrangements for both sectors remain very largely separate and diverse with little commonality of emphasis or procedure.
- European funding models tend to perpetuate the division between secondary and tertiary sectors and offer only limited opportunities for cross-sectoral collaboration.

Barriers at national level:

- Formal or informal opportunities for national dialogue and shared policy development are under-developed in many national contexts (most IBAR countries).

- National quality arrangements for both sectors remain very largely separate and diverse with little commonality of emphasis or procedure (e.g. design of measures enhancing secondary school leavers' aptitude and preparedness for higher education study, particularly in STEM¹² subjects) (most IBAR countries).
- National consensus on the purpose and format of first year study in higher education and related issues of transition remains under-developed (most IBAR countries).

Barriers at institutional level:

- Information sharing between higher education institutions and secondary schools remains under-developed in many contexts (e.g. format of counselling of secondary school students on their study choice, format of the first year of higher education study and study requirements beyond those needed for successful higher education entry) (most IBAR HEIs).
- Many staff from HEIs and secondary schools involved in this study reported that they had very little knowledge of practice in the other sector (most IBAR HEIs).

Effective Practices:

- Systematic national school-university collaboration in development of NQFs and national curricula (e.g. in the UK: university involvement in designing the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence).
- Multiple Europe-wide evidence of local collaborations: e.g. open days, summer schools, co-teaching, subject-competitions, promotional on-site demonstrations, schools visits and outreach (most IBAR HEIs).
- Close links and contacts maintained via teacher education programmes at universities (UK).
- Increased professionalisation of key linking roles (e.g. Careers Officers, Admissions Officers) in some IBAR HEIs (notably UK, NL) via national professional bodies, thematic conferences or workshops.

Policy Recommendations:

Our exploration of relationships between IBAR higher education institutions and secondary education providers has led us to formulate three important policy recommendations. Firstly,

¹² Standing for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

it is advisable to put further work into consideration of the implementation of national qualification frameworks (for secondary and tertiary education) across EHEA countries and their relationship to curriculum delivery models. Secondly, enhanced national discussions about strategic policy coordination, means of inter-sectoral quality assurance, approaches to first year curriculum design and learner support may be of great benefit to both sectors. Thirdly, higher education institutions and secondary schools would benefit from considering what specific kinds of collaboration and information could help to effectively enhance activities relating to student transition (benchmarking, informal inter-institutional discussion, bespoke first year programmes).

Work led by: Team from Durham University (UK) and the Centre for Higher Education Studies (CZ)

SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS

The IBAR project findings point to several outstanding issues impacting on the ESG part 1 implementation in institutional settings across the EHEA. In the main, the sample HEIs show the absence of *self-standing* institutional quality assurance policies, with the corresponding policy facets and goals set in major legal (or possibly strategic) documents such as the statute. Despite such a way of integration of quality assurance policies with the other institutional policy areas, inspected institutional statutory policies on quality assurance, in most cases, bear no reference to the ESG (part 1) standards and guidelines. The upshot is practically no awareness of the ESG by front-line, departmental staff. Although the ESG awareness is somewhat higher in case of institutional managerial staff, as far as the ESG implementation is concerned, the HEIs surveyed seem to be reliant on localised projects or other, such as national, means of translation of the ESG to institutional realities via the activities of a designated national quality assurance agency. *Regardless these limitations in policy design and delivery, the inspected quality assurance policies at 28 selected HEIs show a significant convergence with the ESG Part 1.* This is due to generic nature of the current version of the ESG that makes the standards and guidelines wide enough in their basic prerequisites and thus applicable across a range of institutional and organisational contexts. Furthermore, in its current version, the ESG also takes account of effective quality assurance practices, codifying them through the standards and the corresponding guidelines.

The IBAR consortium upholds the idea of a generic, non-prescriptive approach to the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education that are currently under the revision expected to be finalised in 2014. Whilst supportive of these ESG conceptual premises, *the IBAR enquiry into the extent of the ESG implementation at sample institutions generated a number of important findings that might be advisable to take into account in the process of the ESG revision.* In the first place, the IBAR case studies show almost no structural and content linkages between quality assurance of research and education. Although the ESG were designed with an explicit focus on educational quality, this finding might have significant implications for quality standards of teaching and learning activities undertaken especially in Master and Doctoral study programmes, and, in consequence, for quality of graduates. Thus, the missing link between education quality assurance and research quality, factoring mainly into Master and Doctoral programmes, is the issue that should be given due consideration, whilst respecting the diversity of institutional

profiles within the EHEA. On this issue, the ESG or another supra-national document for strategic policy-making may give important guidelines usable for institutional policy practices. In the second place, aside from the education-research quality linkages, *the IBAR enquiry further suggest that wider attention would be given to expanding the ESG scope by three other areas, i.e. quality and access measures, students' evaluation of tuition and cooperation with secondary education providers.*

For each of these areas, the IBAR enquiry within the analysed HEIs point to persistent problems. To help in searching for their effective solutions, *extension of the present-day ESG standards or guidelines, or even the introduction of new ones, may be useful.* Starting with access to higher education, IBAR sample HEIs show consistently low participation of underrepresented student groups (from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with disabilities etc.) in higher education studies. Here, more intensive policy commitment set in the ESG and integrated further into the European social dimension (cf. EURYDICE 2011), in combination with more distinct forms of supra-national assistance (including targeted financial support) might be conducive to the promotion of widening participation policies in institutional settings.

Next comes the issue of students' evaluation of tuition. Although tuition-oriented enquiries based on student participation and feedback are in many ways central to institutional quality assurance policies, the IBAR results give empirical support to the fact that the level of student participation in such enquiries is inadequately low in the long-term, the more so if they take the form of online surveys. In this respect, it seems reasonable to argue that the explicit reference to students' evaluation of tuition in the revised ESG might help to (re-) establish and promote stakeholders' awareness of this, perhaps too easily taken for granted, issue.

The third area deserving closer attention in the process of the ESG revision is, we argue, effective cooperation of higher education institutions with the secondary education sector. In this respect, the IBAR evidence strongly points to near absence of *comprehensive* national and institutional policy measures aiming at more intensive inter-sectoral cooperation. For now, as the IBAR project demonstrates, the cooperative activities remain significantly fragmented, often pursued solely on individual basis and lacking in organised support.

Finally, the results of IBAR enquiry give ground to conceptualising the present-day institutional quality cultures on a continuum with UK and Dutch institutions on the one end and HEIs located in Central and Eastern Europe on the other, with Portuguese institutions occupying in many respects the middle ground. The major differences can be generally found

in the extent of institutionalisation of: learning outcomes oriented curricula, second marking practices, mandatory teaching qualifications, alumni tracking or management-by-objectives competences and their execution. In all these aspects, UK and Dutch HEIs show to have somewhat more advanced practices, especially in comparison to the CEE HEIs. However, ‘all is not gold that glitters’, as the managerial orientation of UK and Dutch (quality) cultures may turn somewhat problematic, particularly in consideration of documentable accountability pressures, waning trust in street-level academic staff competences as well as perhaps too extensive marketisation of education due to the impact of the economic crisis (particularly UK case).

SYNTHESIS OF BARRIERS

The IBAR project resulted in identification of a number of barriers to implementing the ESG part 1 in relation to three levels of organisational settings (supranational, national and institutional). At the outset, it should be pointed out *that none of the barriers was found pivotal in preventing the translation of the ESG part 1 from the supranational level via national down to the level of individual higher education institutions. Nonetheless, it holds that the barriers identified are likely to hinder the implementation of the ESG part 1 to a different extent, contingent on the internal characteristics and contextual specifics of the level under analysis.* To pinpoint the most salient points limiting the ESG part 1 implementation, the synthesis of barriers for each of the organisational settings is made next.

Barriers at supranational level:

Starting with the supra-national level, the IBAR enquiry registers perhaps too uneven policy-makers' attention paid to distinct quality assurance related agendas. Whilst the implications of learning outcome-based curricula for institutional quality assurance, including relevant international terminology and wording, have been repeatedly promoted at pan-European level, not least due to the significance of the qualification frameworks, other issues seem to have been given less attention. In this respect, IBAR project results point to four more issues.

First, there is a missing concern for perception and handling of information on quality assurance with the need to move from a mere information disclosure to a proactive communication of information. The lack of international discussion fora on pro-active promotion of information including the handling of sensitivity (ethical) risks only seem to reinforce the importance of the issue. Second, there is the need for achieving international clarification of and agreement on the principles guiding data gathering on ethnical minorities and other disadvantaged student groups (socio-economically, physically) that apply for higher education studies. Achieving a united, pan-European approach to data collection on underrepresented student groups may be conducive towards overcoming the existing legal issues in this area found across the Bologna signatories. The third area necessitating a more intensive pan-European dialogue is the formulation of joint indicators of teaching excellence (see footnotes 10, 11, p. 26). Once formulated, these indicators might be instrumental in institutionalising rewards systems for excellent teaching performance. Finally, the IBAR results clearly suggest the absence of European education policy-making of a cross-cutting character encompassing the secondary and higher education sectors. The initiation and

evolution of such a transversal policy-making is expected to have a substantial benefit on design optimisation and carrying out of reform proposals, including synergies generated by cross-sectoral cooperation.

Barriers at national level:

Several limitations of national higher education policy-making that bear on the ESG part 1 implementation were identified in the course of the IBAR enquiry. These limitations broadly fall into three categories. These are: *existing measures with sub-optimal effectiveness, non-existing measures that should be adopted and legal and organisational issues.*

Starting with legal issues, as suggested, there seem to be rather strict legislative rules on collection of data referring to student nationality, socio-economic situation, physical and other disabilities. Although the IBAR consortium agrees to the principle of personal data protection, at the same time, it sees little reason for legal prohibition of collection of selected personal data in the aggregated (anonymised) form. The continuation of current widespread practice of forbidding the collection and processing of data on underrepresented student groups may well limit the effectiveness of the relevant policy measures (in place). Another legal matter that was disputed during the IBAR enquiry concerns the extent of state regulation of higher education admissions. The corresponding admission rules, set in national legislation, are to an extent seen as not supportive to initiation of widening access policies by higher education institutions. Next, as far as organisational issues are concerned, the IBAR results clearly point to minimal organisational linkages between the Ministry units coordinating secondary education and higher education, which leads to near absence of strategic policy-making cutting across these two sectors. This finding directly relates to another barrier of the organisational kind, that is the absence of operational connection and cooperation between state agencies responsible for assuring quality of secondary and higher education. The minimal organisational connections between secondary and higher education sectors further call for new policy measures. As suggested, these might be cross-cutting measures leading to the formulation and implementation of strategic policies aiming at resolving problematic issues, common to secondary and higher education, along with enhancing cross-sectoral cooperation. The formation of an inter-sectoral consensus on the format (incl. admission criteria, curricular composition, assistance measures) of the first year of higher education studies stands for the example of such an issue.

Aside from cross-sectoral strategic policy-making, the IBAR enquiry identified some other missing measures which are: nation-wide standards for rewarding teaching excellence;

missing strategies for collecting, analysis and disclosing information on alumni long-term employment tracks; and, importantly, lack of systemic (financial) incentives for ESG part 1 implementation. Finally, the IBAR enquiry revealed some inconsistencies in the policy measures currently in place. Among these are limitations in funding of educational activities due to the impact of the economic crisis, varied interpretations of learning outcomes and the relevant terminology or the lack of guidelines on which stakeholder categories (except students) should be involved at which level of higher education institution of a particular type (comprehensive, specialised). All the inconsistencies mentioned above should be properly addressed whilst respecting diversity of HEIs (institutional type, size, mission, location) within the EHEA.

Barriers at institutional level:

Low front-line staff awareness of the ESG existence and content constitutes perhaps the most significant barrier identified within the IBAR project. In this respect, the question is to what extent such institutional staff can be realistically expected to demonstrate the very familiarity with the ESG (Part 1), especially under cases of recorded incoherence and ill-synchronisation between top-down and bottom-up quality approaches which further factor into reluctance of institutional leadership and management to invest resources into ESG translation to shop-floor level. On this issue, the IBAR consortium argues for taking a soft approach based on demonstrating the ESG alignment through in-class practice rather than through factual knowledge. This soft approach might further be instrumental in augmenting cooperation between often distinct academic and managerial staff positions as far as implementation of institutional quality culture is concerned.

Aside from staff unawareness and misalignment of organisational approaches, the IBAR enquiry identified some other limitations at institutional settings. First, widening access strategies targeting applicants with under-average SSLE results were found to have been limited by challenges of evidence-based approach and demonstrating quality on entry often imposed externally by policy authorities. Furthermore, as already stated, there is the existence of legislation-based limitations in collection, analysis and use of data on underrepresented groups that could be gainfully employed for informing institutional strategies. Dealing with information provision, the IBAR enquiry led towards the identification of the lack of verification strategies on veracity, use and disclosure of data and information on various aspects of institutional activities. This deficiency also concerns limitations in organisational measures for operating specialised, data-analytical unit(s). In addition, specific, actor-centered

barriers were also identified at sample institutions in the course of the IBAR project. These were: persistently low student participation in web-based/electronic quality surveys, lack of long-term, consistent institutional strategies on teaching excellence and missing incentives (legal, financial) for *regular* participation of some groups of external stakeholders (namely private businesses) in institutional decision-making bodies. Finally, two more barriers were found in relation to secondary education. Generally, these concerned the lack of institutionalised, comprehensive strategies for inter-sectoral cooperation (often in the form of individual or short-term/one-off initiatives) and minimal sharing of information on activities and practices between higher and secondary education sectors.

CONCLUSIONS

The ESG, as is widely recognised, are intended to provide unifying general guidelines to the forty-seven participating sectors of higher education and to operate, in effect, as an instrument to support and steer the development and formation of the EHEA. Issues, barriers and effective practices have been identified at European, national and institutional levels in the eight thematic areas discussed earlier in the report. When analysed as a totality, these factors present an important, and interesting, stage of development in the operation of the European Standards and Guidelines.

Tensions

Project IBAR has identified forty-six barriers and twenty-five effective practices in relation to the translation of the ESG into quality practices across the seven project partner states. What inferences may we draw from these findings? Should the ESG initiative be expanded, or should it be complemented with other processes and mechanisms? The EHEA is complex enough as it stands and it does not seem possible to ever achieve full diversity across the sectors. Given these considerations, as the ESG is inevitably likely to act as a common denominator, what might be a feasible and acceptable degree of commonality? It is inconclusive from the IBAR study to what extent of totality the quality assurance activities at HEIs surveyed followed the ESG guidelines. There are clear indications that the ESG will need to engage teachers and students more actively. How might this be affected? Issues of trust remain in relation to the role of politicians, governments and agencies. At institutional level we encountered tensions between the development of a quality culture and centralised control management. From a broader perspective are tensions such as these a good or bad thing?

The importance of context

What becomes apparent from our analysis is that the links between supra-national and national levels have been handled via a range of agencies – government ministries and national or regional bodies responsible for quality assurance. Greater complexity is to be expected, however, when the *institutional* level becomes the focus, and indeed this has emerged strongly from our research. As one commentator has somewhat ruefully observed, ‘most policies are ramshackle, compromise, hit and miss affairs, that are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced, and inflected through complex processes of influence, text production,

dissemination and, ultimately, re-creation in contexts of practice' (Ball 1990). The findings of the IBAR project corroborate that context, institutional logics and the particular dynamics of an organisation emerge as key forces. ESG is primarily process-led but many of the findings outlined earlier highlight the significance of *context*. Moreover national structures and processes of governance are probably better understood when more clearly aligned with these institutional concerns and priorities.

Institutional perspectives and aspirations

The implementation of quality at institutional level is dependent upon a host of interrelated factors which can serve as barrier or driver. These include attitude, leadership, adequate resourcing, clear policy signalling, effective communication, historical tradition, planning and managerial commitment, stakeholder resistance or non-engagement, staff training and development, as well as effective measurement and feedback loops. It is worth noting also that, as emerged in our study in relation to the factors just mentioned, the balance between what constitutes a good practice, and what can easily turn into a barrier, is very fine indeed.

Institutional context may be perceived as an issue which serves to undermine intended quality processes, but is probably better recognised as a significant issue of meanings, preferred uses of language and different presumptions about priorities. These are critical determinant factors that should not be overlooked. The role of tradition, history and memory has been found to influence all three levels of implementation and has been found to be important in considering, for example, differences between East/West partners in approaching the translation and implementation of standards.

Cultural traffic

Policy, furthermore, has always to be filtered, in its institutional translation, through organisational (and disciplinary) cultures, contingencies and path dependencies, with their relative degrees of dynamism, flexibility or rigidity. Alvesson (2002) in discussing the notion of 'cultural traffic' within organisations points up the 'complexity, variation and tolerance for incoherence of cultural values, ideas and meanings' (2002 p.192). What we have observed in the contexts of practice surveyed in IBAR are examples of what he terms 'multiple cultural configurations' (pp.34-35). Organisational cultures, Alvesson argues, may serve positively as a *compass* to signal direction, or *social glue*, yet also function in a more inhibitive fashion as *sacred cow* or psychological *blinkers*. They can create an effect he terms '*world-closure*' when 'culture makes [social reality] appear given, natural and, when it comes to basic

premises, impossible (or at least very difficult) to question' (p.35). They can create *disorder*, by giving rise to institutional situations of ambiguity, uncertainty, multi facetedness, fragmentation, confusion, risk or dissensus. Culture as disorder, Alvesson observes, marks 'the non-systematic, fluid and contradictory character' of organisations (p.34). This adds further emphasis to the need to consider the institutional level of policy implementation, or, perhaps more accurately, policy translation as a crucial interpretive nexus.

The value of a compact

Of course the higher education institutions in our study and throughout the EHEA pay attention to national agendas but in a globalising world many are not restricted to these agendas alone. Whatever the chosen focus of these institutions, the emphasis on institutional governance, leadership, management and strategy implies that institutions should see themselves as active and responsible players.

Hence an important present and future challenge for the continuing operation of the ESG is to ensure that these observed tendencies and trends are accommodated in any evaluation and that European higher education institutions have opportunities for interpretive and developmental dialogue about both quality assurance and quality enhancement. A long-term goal for ESG might be to reach a compact that fully accommodates institutional perspectives and aspirations.

Increased focus on the 'middle territory' or interpretive nexus

In order to achieve that goal we believe more attention needs to be paid to interpretations of quality by institutions, leaders, governors and key stakeholders such as staff, students and employers. Moreover, consideration needs to be taken of how leadership and governance interpret ESG and can be shown as committing to its overarching philosophy. Further targeted research could helpfully pursue these dimensions, feasibly utilising fewer study nations, but explicitly focusing upon institutional logics and dynamics. There is at the same time a strong case for extending the sampling to question policy makers and managers at national, and possibly EU levels.

The goal of such enquiry would be both to gain deeper insights into institutional context and practice, but also to ascertain if it were possible to outline an interpretive nexus, or 'middle territory', where top down and bottom up perspectives and initiatives could fruitfully create action lines (See Fig.1). Follow up research could also profitably explore what sorts of actions would be helpful to European institutions.

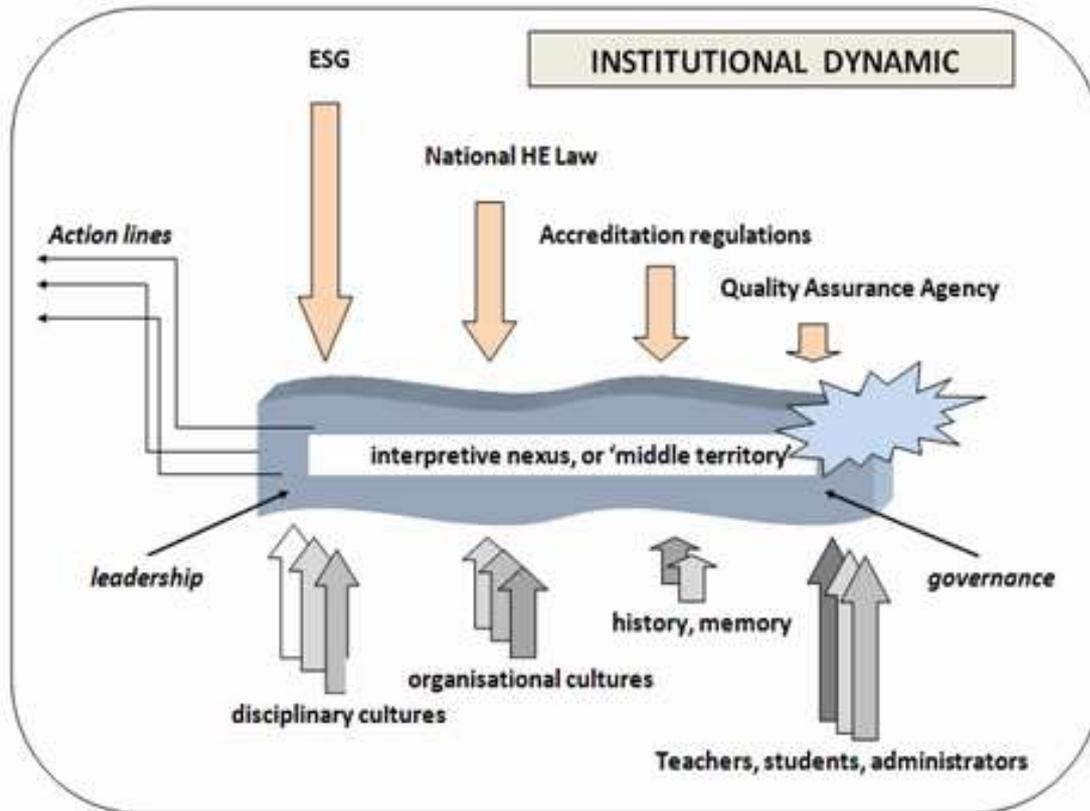


Fig.1 The 'middle territory' or interpretive nexus

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