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Cross-country comparative study

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IBAR WP7: Quality and Student Assessment

Comparative study

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Introduction: research context

Studies into quality assurance processes at institutional micro-level, i.e. at the level of teaching and learning practices and curriculum development, rarely figure among the quality assurance literature otherwise produced in large numbers since the late 1980s (Harvey and Newton 2007; D'Andrea 2007). This is 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 European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG), Part 1 (ENQA 2005) and their implementation on institutional level (Loukkola and Zhang 2010; Kristensen 2010).

To increase our understanding of how the ESG, Part 1 translate into quality assurance micro-processes, this study takes up the 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, therefore, qualify for any corresponding enquiry. However, in reflection of the ESG 1.3 Standard, the scope of our enquiry should be broader, reflecting on assessment procedures with other relevant aspects (organisational responsibilities, examination rules, marking, appeals) taken into consideration. At the same time, diversity of institutional contexts should be observed.

Hence, the study aims to analyse the student assessment procedures in place at 28 HEIs in seven European countries. More specifically, based on the descriptions of assessment procedures at individual HEIs, the study identifies inter-institutional similarities and differences in comparative perspective. These differences and similarities are in turn discussed in relation to the ESG 1.3 Standard and the corresponding guidelines. Following the comparative part, the major barriers in the ESG Part 1.3 implementation, as well as some examples of good practice, are identified. Based on the identification of barriers in the ESG 1.3 Standard implementation, the corresponding recommendations how to reduce the barriers are given in the concluding part of the study.

Methodology

The ESG 1.3 Standard on assessment of students refers to the assessment criteria, regulations and procedures that are published and applied consistently (ENQA 2005). The standard in question is framed by a set of guidelines, focusing predominantly on expectations that underlie design and application of the assessment procedures. To assurance consistency of analysis and comparability of results in different institutional as well as national contexts, the standard and the accompanying guidelines were operationalised through the set of nine research questions.

The answers to the research questions were obtained on the basis of a qualitative enquiry. The reasons for the choice of the qualitative enquiry were complexity and heterogeneity of approaches, procedures, and practices associated with the subject matter in question (student assessment procedures at micro-level). The enquiry was done at 28 HEIs of different size and profile across seven Bologna signatory countries (UK, PT, NL, PL, CZ, SK, LV; four institutions per country). More concretely, document analysis and semi-structured interviews were made use of. The interviews were structured along the nine questions and held with the representatives of actors directly involved in student assessment procedures, i.e. teaching staff, students, senior/top and mid-level quality managers. The information obtained through

the secondary and primary data analysis was collated and used for analysis of student assessment practices inter-institutionally in each of the seven countries. Next, evidence from the national studies was compared for identification of similarities and differences in reflection of the ESG Part 1.3 content referenced through the nine research questions. Finally, the identified differences and similarities constituted the basis for assessing the degree of convergence between the student assessment procedures at analysed HEIs and the ESG Part 1.3, which in turn allowed for identification of major barriers in the ESG Part 1.3 implementation as well as some examples of good practice.

Answering research questions

1.a What is the institutional policy on student assessment?

Policies on student asessment are in place at all 28 HEIs surveyed across the seven countries. In most cases, these policies are formally set down in institutional policy documents titled *study and examination rules*, *study regulations*, *procedures of course assessment*, or more broadly, *academic procedures*. These policy documents delineate basic rules of assessment procedures, typically referring to examination periods, attendance requirements, marking, and student rights. Existence of more specific faculty/school assessment polices has been identified at several HEIs (UK, PT, CZ, NL). These faculty/school policies bring an additional layer of detail to institution-wide regulations and tailor these to the specificity of the programmes/subject areas in question. Referencing to student assessment in strategic documents, such as development plans or strategies, is rare (SK), although student assessment policies at some HEIs are developed with a specific intention of international cooperation, visibility and recognition (PL, LV).

Except for the UK, institutional policies on student assessment follow the corresponding legal regulations at national level, stipulated mostly by the HE Act and its amendments. National legislation covers the most fundamental prerequisites for student assessment, i.e. the structure of examination bodies/boards, their composition and overall responsibilities, organisation of examination periods, rules for thesis defence, and appeals procedures. In addition, the Portuguese HE Act no. 42/2005 entails specific provisions for *special-regime students* (i.e. especially working students, students in the army) as far as course attendance and assessment procedures are concerned[1].

In some countries (NL, PL), recent changes in the legislative framework orient it towards a more explicit focus on student assessment procedures. To make an example, the 2010 Amendment to the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act changed the responsibilities of the Examination Board. Until recently, the Examination Boards (one or several ones per faculty) primarily had a supervisory role, including granting exemptions, dealing with fraud cases, and checking observation of criteria for course/study completion. Under the 2010 amendment, the Examination Boards have entered the process of strengthening their role as an assurer of quality assessment, both with respect to interim course exams and assessment of theses. More specifically, this means delegating the responsibility for ensuring that an assessment of a course, thesis etc. is valid, reliable and transparent to each of the board members. For this reason, assessment policies within HEI faculties/schools have been revised, with the changes incorporated into the institutions' student charter and study guides. Another example from Poland suggests a strong orientation of the 2011 HE Act on implementation of

[1] This is most likely a reflection of legislation that has acknowledged the status of working students since 1981 (Law 26/1981), with the latest regulations in Law 7/2009.

learning outcomes based curricula and assessment procedures to be institutionalised by the year 2012 (see also question no. 3).

In the UK institutional policies on student assessment are often very substantially influenced by the codes of practice created and circulated by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA and QAA Scotland). The codes describe the general principles of assessment[2] and management of assessment including definition of the membership and responsibility of examining boards as well as the appointment and duties of external examiners. They further set out institutional expectations for the management of assessment at departmental or faculty/school level, guidance on procedures for setting and marking assignments and examinations, for determining deadlines, for defining progression requirements, for provision of feedback and for the management of exceptional circumstances and appeals. Overall, these codes of practice testify to a considerable focus on the purposes and design of student assessment in UK higher education institutions in recent decades. In Scotland, the QAA has also sponsored considerable developmental work on assessment undertaken as part of the Scottish Enhancement Themes and there is an expectation that the assessment activities in Scottish institutions will demonstrate an alignment with the ideas explored with these themes.

1.b How is the relevant information communicated to students?

Two means of communicating the assessment-relevant information are common to all HEIs reviewed, i.e. *online publication* at institutional/faculty/school/department websites and *first-lecture information* presented in oral form. In addition, a variety of other means how to convey the relevant information are used, depending on institutional needs and traditions. These include: study guides (NL, SK), the dean's class at the beginning of undergraduate studies (LV), course syllabi (CZ), the module/programme handbooks (UK), or individual/group mailing (PL). Some of the ways of communicating the procedures in question are specifically set in law. This can be demonstrated on the newly introduced obligation of Dutch HEIs to provide every student with a free copy of the student charter upon his/her registration for the course. Similarly, Czech HEIs are legally obliged to provide the examination regulations in written form on the official information board of an institution.

Apart from these dissemination approaches, some less frequent but information-more-intensive forms have been identified. These include induction activities (tutorials) at start of the academic year (UK HEIs) and, somewhat similarly, optional course "Introduction to studies" (one CZ HEI). The workshop-type of information delivery has also been utilised (one UK HEI).

2. *How are student assessment procedures made appropriate for their purpose (diagnostic, formative, summative)?*

[2] Including principles such as: reliability and validity of assessment; explicitness and accessibility of information; inclusiveness and equity of assessment; reflection of course/programme specific as well as generic knowledge, skills, and abilities; inclusion of variety of assessment types (formative, summative); manageability of the amount of assessed work; feedback as an integral part of assessment; minimisation of opportunities for plagiarism.

The choice and application of student assessment procedures is unanimously considered a primary responsibility of front-line academic staff, regardless of the HEI and country studied. Still, some variations across institutional and national contexts have been identified. Starting with diagnostic assessment, it is commonly applied by HEIs in CEE[3] countries (LV, SK, CZ, PL) for two purposes. These are *pre-testing student knowledge at entrance examinations* to decide on admission numbers[4] and/or *course pre-testing* to identify the level of student aptitude to pass the course successfully. Course pre-testing seems to be most intensively made use of by some Polish and Latvian HEIs, however, a representative sample would be needed to verify this finding. In Dutch context, the qualitative enquiry at selected HEIs seems to show that diagnostic assessments take place primarily at universities of applied sciences (Hogeschoolen) when monitoring the level of skill acquisition in practical courses, organised as part of on-the-job training (work placements, internships). In comparison, diagnostic testing is a marginal assessment activity within institutional practices in the UK and Portugal.

Due to the highly devolved responsibilities for assessment designs and variable course characteristics, there is no distinctive pattern of organisation of formative and summative assessments beyond the fact that the latter category, by its nature, applies to finalisation of the course/module/programme of study. Also, at 28 HEIs studied, summative approaches to assessment seem to prevail over formative ones, which can be explained by their codification in legislation, higher transparency, reliability and comparability. Nonetheless, along with the progressing implementation of HE qualifications frameworks (see question no. 3), efforts are made at national level across the countries studied to orientate HEIs towards the idea of assessment as a tool to facilitate student-centred learning, i.e. towards institutionalisation of formative assessment designs. In this respect, a difference has been noticed in the scope of utilisation of formative and summative approaches at social science and hard science oriented faculties/schools (NL, PT). More concretely, the Dutch and Portuguese evidence seems to show that social science (NL), respectively, artistically oriented (PT) institutional units have already been using a variety of assessment forms, while the units with hard science orientation are only now putting new policies in place to introduce more interim progress testing (NL, PT). Furthermore, in the Netherlands, the enquiry into HEI assessment practices have shown that studied universities of applied sciences tend to have more pronounced guidance on student assessment than traditional universities under study.

Despite the highly individualised approaches to designing student assessment procedures, in the UK, these designs commonly reflect the subject benchmarks for the corresponding areas as developed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). Moreover, attention is increasingly being given to the results of the National Student Survey (NSS), conducted annually since 2005. This survey, whilst not uncontroversial, has focused attention on widespread student dissatisfaction with aspects of assessment, and in particular with the timeliness and content of feedback. All of the UK institutions surveyed have made revisions to their assessment policies in an attempt to improve their performance in the NSS. Measures taken typically include setting standardised timescales for delivering feedback.

3. How are student assessment procedures designed to measure the intended learning outcomes and other programme objectives?

[3] Central and East-European countries.
[4] Especially applicable to admissions to attractive field of study such as humanities, languages, economics, law.

Generally, the extent of measurement of course/programme objectives along with learning outcomes (encompassing knowledge, skills, and competences acquired) relates to the stage of development of the HE qualifications framework at national level[5]. Once the national qualifications framework has been created and approved, the extent of institutional utilisation of the corresponding qualification level descriptors becomes the decisive factor. The countries under study show different progression in implementation of the qualifications frameworks. The UK and the Netherlands completed the implementation process by self-certification of the respective frameworks[6] in 2009. The other countries surveyed find themselves in stages between the creation of the HE qualifications framework (SK) and the reflection of qualification descriptors in institutional programme/course designs (PT, LV, PL), including the pilot stage (CZ), with the national frameworks awaiting self-certification. It is worth pointing out that, in the Bologna signatories, self-certification processes against the QF-EHEA are expected to be finalised by 2012 (Westerheijden et al. 2010).

The foregoing suggests that HEIs under study register different progress in incorporation of learning outcomes into the curricula along with the relevant modifications of assessment procedures. Implementation of HE qualifications framework is in its initial stage in Slovakia, with Slovak HEIs relying more on graduate profiles as specified in accreditation documentation. On the other hand, given the UK's considerably longer tradition in developing the frameworks of qualifications (especially in Scotland), the incorporation of learning outcomes is now almost universal in the design of modules and programmes in UK universities. However, the multiplicity of reference points in assessment design creates considerable challenges for module and programme tutors and for those involved in validation and other assessment activities. Some UK interviewees noted the tendency for academic staff members to react to this perceived complexity by being conservative in their choice of assessment method. *Hence, it is suggested that rather than a tool promoting student-centred education, learning outcomes in the UK can be recognised as a risk minimisation strategy that protects the institution as much as the student and as a mechanism for providing a standardised and predictable learning experience rather than one that might be more open-ended, flexible or emergent.*

In the Netherlands, the HEIs reviewed have strategies for implementation of learning outcomes, stating that each course has to have its own learning outcomes and that the testing has to be adequately related to the outcomes. The strategies further specify how and when a learning outcome is assessed, who is involved in assessing students and how the final mark is determined. At the same time, assessment is linked to student learning. To make an example, in one Dutch HEI studied, several approaches to assess acquisition of intended learning outcomes are applied, including assignments, essays, multiple choice questions, and open questions. Moreover, the HEI provides guidelines to its lecturers on how to describe learning outcomes, as teaching staff have to formulate five to eight intended learning outcomes per programme.

[5] There are 10 distinct stages in developing a national qualifications framework, ranging from the decision to start the process of creating the framework (stage 1), via the framework approval by the respective national authority (mostly the Ministry of Education, stage 6) and implementation at institutional/programme level (stage 8) to self-certification of the framework against the QF-EHEA (stage 10)
(see http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/qf/national.asp#D).

[6] In case of the UK, two qualifications frameworks are in operation, i.e. the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland (FHEQ). The SCOF was successfully self-certified against the QF-EHEA as early as 2006.

To facilitate learning outcomes based assessment designs, the test matrix has been developed for Dutch HEIs and incorporated into in the new accreditation framework made by the national QA agency (NVAO). The matrix has already been put into institutional practices, although the spread of these practices differs per faculty/school and the type of institution. This leads to a situation where the HEIs are still in transition towards the new scheme of designing student assessments that would reflect on systematic implementation of learning outcomes. As observed by one interviewee, "There is a form newly introduced where lecturers have to describe for each course specifically the learning objectives and in what way these are assessed. This is not implemented everywhere yet."

In Poland, studied HEIs are in the process of aligning their curricula with the qualification descriptors outlined in the National Qualifications Framework, with the whole process to be finalised in 2013. One of the studied HEIs began implementing learning-outcomes oriented curricula in 2008. The learning outcomes are set down in course syllabi and the academic staff are obliged to verify them when planning and pursuing assessment procedures (including final examinations). The other HEIs have caught up on the implementation in recent months, with the core tasks yet to be done. These tasks commonly involve:

- examination of the achievement-level of the learning outcomes under current practices, with the individual approach (based on the student assessment criteria) as well as the course-specific approach (verifying whether the learning outcomes were achieved in a particular course);
- development of learning outcomes;
- evaluation of the design of learning outcomes verification (assessment) procedures;
- introduction of a new syllabus pattern specifying assessment procedures linked with learning outcomes.

Similarly, the enquiry into institutional practices suggests that Latvian HEIs currently find themselves under legal obligations to tune their curricula designs, and more specifically programme objectives, to the National Qualifications Framework. For now, there is satisfactory convergence with the cycle descriptors of the framework, especially as far as regulated professions are concerned. Nonetheless, the tuning procedure at one studied HEI revealed that creating a map of detailed sub-learning outcomes to the individual courses could help provoke discussion among lecturers in three respects. First, on the cluster of skills and competences attained at an unsatisfactory level, second on the cluster of skills and competences of the average graduate from the programme, and third, on the conformity of the stated and intended learning outcomes of the programme.

> In Portugal, in all the analysed HEIs, student assessment or academic regulations make reference to competences, learning outcomes, or objectives. However, the dichotomy between the official policy discourse and the actual learning outcomes practices at shop floor level was noticed. The existence of such dichotomy was verified empirically, as majority of front-line teaching staff interviewed did not seem to have grasped the concept. Partly, the dichotomy can be explained by the lack of a consistent terminology for learning outcomes[7], thus hindering implementation of the Portuguese Framework for HE Qualifications as such. However, when in place, the ongoing focus on implementation of learning outcomes-based approaches seems to promote attention to pedagogic practices aimed at quality enhancement of student learning, including the corresponding assessment techniques. This finding was

[7] Several terms which appear to refer to learning outcomes are used interchangeably: competences (*competências*), learning outcomes (*resultados de aprendizagem*), and objectives (*objectivos*).

corroborated at two HEI studied though the obligation of academic staff to write a report at the end of each course reflecting on the fulfilment of course objectives and making recommendations how it can be improved.

As to institutionalisation of learning outcome-oriented curricula at Czech HEIs, the situation is, to some extent, similar to the Portuguese case. The implementation of the National Qualification Framework of Tertiary Education, however, also entails development of qualification descriptors for each of the three cycles (including the short one) in ten major areas of study and piloting alignment of these descriptors with curricular content at several HEIs. One HEI under study takes part in this pilot stage by testing implementation of learning outcomes in economics and electrotechnology oriented programmes. Overall, however, awareness of learning outcome based approaches among the staff at Czech HEIs surveyed is low and the reflection of learning outcomes in assessments problematic, much depending on self initiatives of individual staff. Links to external quality assurance procedures (programme accreditation) are tenuous due to the Accreditation Commission's role as a consultative body only. As a result, at the present time, learning outcomes factor little into curricula designs at Czech HEIs except for graduate profiles that have been, in some cases, modified accordingly. Thus, fulfilment of course/programme objectives is to a large extent verified through traditional means, i.e. taking credits or examinations, based on meeting formal prerequisites (such as submission of a seminar paper, oral presentation on a given topic, etc.)

4. a) Are student assessment procedures undertaken in accordance to the officially stated examination rules/regulations by qualified personnel?

Despite the devolution of responsibilities for assessment to front-line teaching staff, across 28 HEIs analysed, assessment practices at the micro level have not been found to deviate from the binding institutional regulations (study and examination rules and the like). Only some concerns were reported on the absence of clear criteria to inform marking (PT) or missing student awareness of the assessment regulations (LV). On the other hand, student familiarity with examination rules has been found instrumental in improving fairness of assessment (one Czech HEI). *Generally, it is ascertained that the official assessment regulations are pertinent and flexible enough to allow for disciplinary and programme/course specificity. There is no evidence, including student accounts, on staff qualifications not being up to the institutionalised standards.*

More specifically, in the UK case, the enquiry shows high levels of confidence in the management of assessment, including the design of assessments, validation of modules and programmes, arrangements for submission, marking, provision of feedback and use of external examiners. The rigour of assessment is facilitated by courses that are on offer as part of continuing professional development for all university staff. *Furthermore, all new academic staff in UK universities are required to undertake probationary training, which includes courses on aspects of teaching and learning practices*[8]. However, the enquiry also shows that pressure on academic staff and their departments to perform well in the Research Excellence Framework works against the development of enhanced teaching expertise.

Also, the rigour of managing assessment procedures has been found to vary according to the type of institution (NL). At all Dutch HEIs surveyed, the practices of

[8] In this respect, all of the UK institutions surveyed offer staff involved in teaching the opportunity to study for a Masters level Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice.

assessments are checked against the official rules – with special emphasis on timings for publishing examination results and providing feedback to students, thus following the requirements laid down in the new accreditation framework. Still, universities of applied sciences seem to have the corresponding monitoring and controls more institutionalised compared to university institutions that seem more to rely on routine practices.

4.b To what extent are the procedures dependent on the judgment of a single examiner?

On this issue, practices of HEIs under study vary internationally and with respect to the type of institution or unit assessed (course) in national systemic contexts. For UK universities, it is *increasingly uncommon* to accept the judgment of a single examiner in any assessment. In this respect, one of the UK universities surveyed has specific rules for moderation which must be applied across the whole institution, i.e. second marking by two examiners[9], while the other three UK HEIs do not stipulate a single approach, but take measures to enhance the information available to second markers, external examiners and members of examination boards to clarify their role(s) and to provide academic staff designing and assessing modules with clear guidance on differing forms of moderation or scrutiny. To a large extent, the reverse is true for HEIs' practices in three CEE countries (PL, CZ, SK), with the assessment procedures based on the judgement of a single examiner except for the final examinations. However, two points should be made here. First, if the appeal is lodged, student has a right to take examination before the board. Second, feedback from the interviewees including student representatives indicated no malfunctioning of the single examiner-based assessment system.

In the Netherlands, the objectivity of assessment has become an institutional concern due to the new requirements of the accreditation framework. Therefore, it is required that oral examinations as well as final theses have to be assessed by two examiners at every HEI[10], with the thesis assessment protocols having the same format intra-institutionally (can differ among individual HEIs). Other assessment procedures show somewhat different approaches to examiners' involvement, depending on the type of institution. In two universities inspected, the institutional regulations specify that participation of a single examiner is sufficient on condition that the course is given by one lecturer. However, the primary data collected show that, as a rule, university courses are taught by a couple of lecturers, with the grade depending on their collective judgment. Still, universities of applied sciences under study make further modifications of examining practices in terms of applying the "4-eyes policy" (involvement of two assessors) or separating teaching and assessment procedures (lecturer not assessor). In practical terms, however, the latter modification (lecturer not assessor) turned to be highly demanding for the staff, and it is about to be abolished.

In Portugal, approaches to the examiners' involvement have also been found to differ according to the type of HEIs surveyed. Nonetheless, compared to Dutch HEIs, institutional requirements of a minimum of two assessors apply to universities. Two Portuguese polytechnics analysed make use of such measures only exceptionally. Finally, in case of Latvian HEIs, the participation of single/multiple examiner seems

[9] There are some variations both across and within universities in the definitions used for different forms of checking or scrutiny of marking. The terms "moderation", "double-marking" and "second marking" are not always used interchangeably.

[10] The first examiner is usually the lecturer, while the second one is usually a member of the Examination Board.

to be dependent on course credits. The less credits the student gets for the course, the greater the chance that the procedures will be dependent on the judgement of a single examiner.

5. Do student assessment procedures have clear and published criteria for marking; student absence/illness; type, method, and criteria of assessment; student class participation; and exam enrolment?

Again, highly diverse approaches to institutionalising this set of criteria apply among HEIs surveyed. Although the diversity of institutional approaches makes synthesis rather difficult, it is possible to state that 28 HEIs under analysis have clear criteria for marking set in the corresponding institutional documentation (study and examination rules, etc.). The same applies to the types, methods, and assessment criteria. The only exception to this finding seems to arise at Portuguese HEIs at which the absence of qualitative criteria corresponding to the different tiers of the 0-20 marking scale has been identified. As far as marking scales are concerned, diversity in their designs exists. As suggested, the 0-20 marking scale is in use by Portuguese HEIs, while Dutch HEIs make use of the 0-10 scale. ECTS-based grades (A-F) with numerical equivalents (1.0; 1.5; 2.0; 2.5; 3.0; 4.0) are utilised by Czech and Slovak HEIs. In the UK, there is no single marking system across universities. Some UK universities are starting to develop single *grading* systems, but this is not a universal activity. The general expectation is that universities including *sub-units are able to defend their practices and there are regular opportunities to check that protocols are being applied effectively***.** In particular, all of the universities surveyed now stipulate the maximum period allowed for marking and provision of feedback to students, which has been identified as an area of concern in a large number of UK HEIs[11]. It is normal practice for UK university sub-units to make annual reports on teaching and learning activities, including assessment.

As to cases of student absence and illness, the corresponding criteria may be self-standing or part of class participation rules. One way or another, the explicit criteria are applied by HEIs in three countries (NL, UK, LV), with the responsibility for their formulation and application devolved to micro-level units (faculties in Latvian case). However, in the UK case, there is a suspicion that some university departments do not always apply procedures for managing absences or illness of students consistently. No distinct pattern of dealing with student absence and illness can be identified at Portuguese, Polish, Czech, and Slovak HEIs, with the practices ranging from justification only on the basis of a medical certificate/proof to discretionary authority exercised by an academic/administrative staff member.

Similarly, a wide range of practices apply to regulating student class participation. Such participation is, as a rule, not obligatory (NL), although the lecturers encourage and do include class participation as an important constituent for the final grade. Somewhat similarly, at Polish and Czech HEIs, participation in lectures is not mandatory but it is required for seminars/practicals/laboratories (with some absence possible). Slovak HEIs tend to obligate students to participate in both elements of tuition (lectures, seminars), while Portuguese HEIs make it compulsory for students to participate in a number of classes set as a percentage from the total (usually between 60-80%). No distinct pattern of class participation has been found at UK HEIs surveyed. Similarly, highly devolved measures also apply to exam enrolment; in

[11] Allowable timescales differ, but typically institutions require that feedback is provided to students within 3-5 weeks.

this respect a generalisable pattern has been identified at HEIs in two countries (NL, CZ), allowing for two or three possibilities to re-take the exam.

6.a Are student assessment procedures subject to administrative verification checks?

6.b If so, how are these checks made?

Verifications checks on outputs of student assessments are done across 28 HEIs studied. However the extent of these checks varies, depending on internal organisational structures along with roles and responsibilities of the bodies involved. At UK universities, the basic verification comes through application of the moderation (second marking) approach. Further verification checks are performed by examination boards which also include external examiner(s) as full member(s). Examination boards are responsible especially for finalising the marks gained by students, determining progression and awards, considering mitigating circumstances and ensuring that academic standards are maintained. Moreover, all UK HEIs are required to submit data to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), including data on assessment and teaching for new programmes as part of the Key Information Set (KIS) for that programme.

In case of Dutch HEIs, the first check is carried out by co-teachers and course coordinators. Next, different university bodies and officers are responsible for assessment verification. These range from the education directors, via examination boards and the examination appeals board, to QA administrative units and faculty management responsible for education. In addition, due to external accreditation procedures, the internal verification checks are formalized in the form of self-evaluation reports. The self-evaluation of study programmes is carried out once in six years, where the learning objectives of the study programmes are checked and *from 2012 – also the examination procedures and their link with the learning objectives will be studied*. However, by formal rules, it is the main responsibility of the examination boards to make sure that the examination rules are properly applied. In practice however, interviews noted that this did not happen very often.

No consistent pattern of verification mechanisms has been identified at Portuguese HEIs inspected. Hence, these mechanisms differ inter-institutionally, comprising: the validation of course specifications by programme directors and their checking of assessment results, course evaluation reports, and institutional information system as a monitoring tool, where all the information related to the different phases of assessment is published. Some complaints on the verification mechanisms not functioning properly have been registered (one PT HEI).

As to the handling of administrative verification checks by analysed HEIs in CEE countries (PL, CZ, SK, LV), the basic tool seems to be the institutional information systems where the assessment results are stored for possible re-inspection. Moreover, in some cases, staff (head) of the respective administrative department or subject coordinators (PL) perform the verification checks. However, it has been established that the checks into assessment results may not be done on a regular basis at some HEIs which tend to limit these checks to cases when the results are disputed by the student(s) (LV).

7. How do student assessment procedures reflect on students' knowledge and skills gained at the secondary education level?

Little evidence on reflection of secondary education outputs in assessment procedures has been found among 28 HEIs surveyed, *beyond the procedures on entry to HE studies*. In the majority of HEIs (PT, CZ, SK, PL) these procedures are associated with designs and application of *entrance examinations*, although results of nationwide secondary leaving examinations (maturita) function as a prerequisite for HE admission. At Latvian HEIs surveyed, results of SSLE[12] alone mostly guarantee HE admission. In other cases recorded, the SSLE results are accepted only by few HEIs (their units) (CZ). The CEE practice contrasts with the UK's University Central Administration Scheme (UCAS), providing application across a range of subject areas and modes of study for UK universities. Somewhat similarly, Dutch HEIs also make use of one online system for student applications and registrations (Studielink).

As suggested, after the point of entry to HE studies, modifications to tailor assessment procedures to the needs of secondary school graduates are rare. They mostly comprise exemption from certain courses based on student health status or compensatory classes. The enquiry suggests that the primary reason for keeping assessment practices not modified may be associated with attitudes of (front line) academic staff, perceiving the modifications as threatening to quality of studies and fairness of approach. As the UK report states:

> *The overwhelming perception among the interviewees is that assessment must be designed solely to reflect the specific learning outcomes of modules and programmes and should not be dependent on any prior learning or experiences, which may vary considerably from student to student and could be seen as a barrier to fairness. More generally, there is a perception that more recent school-leavers are not always well prepared for the requirements of university studies and assessment.*

8. What is the role of external actors, including QA agencies, in student assessment procedures?

With respect to the role of external actors in assessment procedures, two major patterns have been identified. The first one is *the indirect impact of national quality assurance bodies*, laying down the regulatory framework along with overseeing the internal quality assurance processes, including fairness of student assessment. This indirect regulatory role is especially pertinent to HEIs under institutional/programme accreditation (PL, SK, CZ, LV, NL, PT). However, the empirical enquiry shows the impact of national quality assurance agencies as marginal for institutional student assessment practices of Polish and Portuguese HEIs. At the same time, more noticeable impact of external quality assurance agencies has been identified at analysed HEIs in the Netherlands, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. In these cases, the impact comes through focusing the accreditation process on learning outcomes based programme designs (NVAO, NL) or checking up on assessments of theses during external evaluations (SK, CZ). *Another indirect impact comes through the national qualifications frameworks* which are important in guiding the institutional study and examination

[12] Secondary school leaving examination.

regulations as well as assessment plans towards the reflection of learning outcomes (see also question no. 3).

Second, *some actors or bodies impact directly on institutional student assessment procedures*. However, the pattern of direct impact varies. It includes involvement of professional bodies[13] in accreditation of certain vocational courses leading to regulated qualifications (UK) as well as regular participation of external examiners in final examinations and thesis defence (LV, SK, CZ). Moreover, recent years, increased focus on graduate employability has led to enhanced relationships with non-accrediting employers who may be asked to contribute to validation of new modules and programmes or to provide placements or other assessed activities for students (UK).

9.a Have there recently been significant changes made in student assessment procedures to improve their effectiveness?

At a number of HEIs under study, change processes bearing on student assessments have taken place recently in connection to (inter)national developments. These developments entail funding issues (student fees increase, UK), implementation of the three-cycle study structure (CZ), implementation of the national qualifications framework (NL, PL, LV, PT), or reputational concerns (national student survey results, UK). In reflection of developments like these, student assessment procedures have been modified in terms of:

- rationalising the whole assessment procedure intra-institutionally to create greater coherence in practice across schools/faculties and to streamline decision-making processes (UK);
- institutionalising learning outcomes based curricula and assessment methods (PL, NL, LV);
- placing greater weight on formative assessment approaches (PT[14], LV, SK)[15];
- placing greater weight on implementation of ICT solutions in assessment organisation and administration, including electronic registration systems (SK, NL);
- adopting new internal regulations (SK);
- monitoring the Bologna Process agenda of qualifications frameworks more intensively (CZ, PT);
- strengthening the verification of student assessment by peer-reviewing assessment results (NL) and writing staff self-evaluation reports (PT);
- *planning* to increase the quality of examiners by certifying them (NL);
- strengthening the aspect of student experience of assessment, including enhancement of student feedback (UK, NL);
- institutionalising and tuning student evaluation of tuition (questionnaires surveys) to more intensively reflect on assessment procedures (CZ).

These modifications have been put forward in order to enhance the overall design and application of assessment processes. For this reason, they are likely to show positive spill-over effects as far as effectiveness of student assessment procedures is concerned.

[13] Such as the Law Society, the British Medical Association, the Nursing and Midwifery Council, etc.
[14] Particularly in engineering programmes.
[15] Somewhat in contrast, there is also limited evidence pointing towards the shift to multiple choice testing in areas with increased numbers of students such as in social sciences (one Duch HEI).

9.b Can you identify any aspect of student assessment procedures you especially approve of?

Throughout the enquiry into institutional student assessment procedures at 28 HEIs, several strengths and good practices have come up. First, the very existence of explicit, written rules and regulations is seen as beneficial (PT, SK, CZ). Second, across HEIs surveyed, there is a high level of actors' confidence in the overall management of student assessment. Regardless the variety in assessment designs, the corresponding assessment procedures are perceived as robust, fair, and undertaken by committed staff members. The general commitment of staff members also shows through their willingness to explain the assessment procedures and/or results additionally/repeatedly when asked. Furthermore, with respect to the UK situation, the management of awards, including the process of gathering, collating and distributing marks, managing progression and ensuring that proper data storage, is perceived as strength. Third, the attempts in formulating/developing assessment trainings and key competences for examiners have been identified (NL). Fourth, the increasing orientation to the development of learning outcomes based curricula and assessment designs is perceived as supportive to initiatives intended to foster reflection and discussion around assessment (PT). Correspondingly, fifth, the implementation of learning outcomes is seen as having a potential to impact positively on and enhance the quality of student learning experience in general (PL, LV, PT). Sixth, staff training in assessment methods and procedures helps towards professionalisation and objectivity of assessment. Finally, the regular use of mixed assessment approaches, combining formative and summative forms, has been also considered inspiring inter-institutionally (NL).

Summary of major findings

The case-study based enquiry into institutional practices at 28 HEIs in seven Bologna signatory countries has generated several findings that seem to point to common trends in student assessment procedures across EHEA. The findings can be summarised as follows:

- procedures of student assessment and their application including verification checks are primarily within the responsibility of front-line academic and administrative staff. However, some evidence points to the increasing importance of the examination boards, with their role shifting from supervision to more direct and powerful involvement in verification of assessment processes (NL);
- despite the highly devolved responsibilities for student assessment (designs, procedures, application), the corresponding major rules are officially stated in institutional documentation as well as national legislation, thus forming a framework for development of assessment policies. Formalised provisions are in place at Portuguese HEIs for assessment of special-regime students (class attendance, assessment regimes);
- online publication and first lecture information are the two most widely used means of making assessment rules and procedures known to students. In addition, some other dissemination instruments are used (study guides, module/programme handbooks, course syllabi), also including "less traditional" ones, such as dean's class or the optional introductory course;

- as to types of assessment, summative assessment seems to prevail over formative one (except for specific cases such as arts programmes/courses). Diagnostic assessment is the least common assessment type, mostly limited to entrance examinations;
- shift to learning outcomes (LO) based curricula and assessment is taking place in most cases (most notably in Poland). In this respect, uneven progress has been identified, with UK on the end of the continuum (LO in place) and Czech and Slovak HEIs (LO implementation in the initial phase). Despite the general benefits for student centred learning, implementation of LO based curricula and assessment methods should avoid the danger of becoming merely a risk minimisation strategy (UK evidence);
- assessment practices follow officially set regulations (little signs of deviation from standardised rules). Regulations in place are pertinent and flexible enough to allow for disciplinary and programme/course specificity. Discretionary authority of front-line academics not abused – only minor complaints on unprofessional attitudes noticed (one PT HEI). On the other hand, student unawareness of the assessment rules and regulations has also been reported (LV). There is no evidence, including student accounts, on staff qualifications not being up to the institutionalised standards;
- country and institution (type) specific attitudes to involvement of single or multiple examiner exist. UK HEIs tend to institutionalise multiple examiner practice. The situation is to the contrary at HEIs in CEE countries. In case of Dutch and Portuguese HEIs, attitudes seem to differ depending on the type of institution and programmes offered. In the Dutch case, universities of applied sciences offering vocationally-oriented programmes seem to be more in control of assessment procedures, including involvement of two examiners,. The reverse is true for the Portuguese case. Note: the distinction is not clear-cut, especially in the Dutch case, showing recent initiatives to strengthen institutionalisation of assessment procedures at universities;
- given the existence of institutional documentation (study and examination rules, etc.), there are clear criteria for marking, types, and assessment methods. However, differences in international practices exist in sense of marking scales (0-10 NL, 0-20 PT, 2-5 PL) or grades (A-F SK, CZ) and also inter-institutionally (no single marking system across UK universities). There are highly differentiated approaches to student absence/illness, class participation, and examination enrolment mostly subject to discretion of academic staff;
- verifications checks on assessments are in place in all monitored cases. However, the extent of the control mechanisms is very different. Institutionalised rules apply for the UK and Dutch case (moderation schemes, examination boards). Discretionary authority of academic/administrative staff seems to characterise the CEE situation, with assessment results stored in databases and ready for re-inspection (only) in case of complaints. No consistent pattern is identifiable for Portuguese HEIs;
- little evidence on reflection of secondary education outputs in assessment procedures has been found *beyond the procedures on entry to HE studies*;
- as far as the impact of external actors is concerned, first, there is *the indirect impact of national quality assurance bodies along with the qualifications frameworks*. Second, some *actors/bodies impact directly through* the involvement of professional bodies in accreditation of certain vocational courses or participation of external examiners in final examinations and thesis defence;
- a wide scope of measures to improve effectiveness of student assessment apply, ranging from formalising and rationalising the assessment procedures via institutionalising learning outcomes based curricula and assessment methods to

strengthening the aspect of student experience, including feedback through evaluation of tuition.

Identification of barriers and examples of good practice

Whilst the ESG 1.3 standard with the corresponding guidelines seem to provide a structured approach to a largely diversified area of student assessment procedure, their implementation, as our enquiry shows, is hindered by several barriers cutting across the variety of institutional situations and contexts. First, given the (long-lasting) tradition of devolution of assessment responsibilities to front-line academic staff, the respective innovations and modifications of the assessment procedures to keep them up to date may prove challenging to implement. This is especially pertinent to achieving greater transparency in marking including verification checks within and/or across institutional (sub-)units. Similarly, the effective tuning of staff assessment practices to the designs of learning-outcomes oriented curricula requires inter/intra-departmental cooperation. In all these cases, institutional policy histories and path dependencies may easily become limiting factors. Second, our enquiry shows that path-dependency effects also factor into "the gap" between assessment practices of secondary schools and those of HEIs. In this respect, university staff seem to be keeping to their prerogatives in assessment designs "in order to distinguish higher education from skills training". Third, turning to learning outcomes, two barriers, i.e. diverse interpretations and top-down imposition, can be identified. While the former barrier originates from broad differences in personal interpretations of what learning outcomes signify, the latter refers to the extent to which the learning outcomes and the corresponding assessment methods should be institutionalised. In this sense, the top-down implementation approach runs the risk of inducing the compliance culture or fostering outright rejection. Somewhat correspondingly, fourth, teaching staff disinterest in learning outcomes oriented curricula and methods of assessment may link up to their missing awareness of (supra) national policy developments, including the ESG. Although the corresponding reflection may come indirectly through the effects of operational practices and requirements of national quality assurance agencies, still, further work should be done to raise awareness and ownership of the ESG, particularly amongst faculty staff directly involved in student learning and teaching processes (cf. ENQA 2011). Finally, given the embeddedness of assessment practices at institutional micro-level, there has been much variation noticed among HEIs under study, especially in terms of their dealing with single/multiple examiner(s), student absence, class participation, exam enrolment, or marking schemes.

With respect to three different organisational levels and their interplay, the barriers to implementation of the ESG 1.3 standard can be identified as follows:

- "Old habits die hard": policy histories and path dependencies (institutional level).
- "We want to do it our way": much variation in some aspects of assessment practices (single/multiple examiners, student absence, class participation, exam enrolment, marking) (institutional level).
- "There is only assessment of higher education students": limited reflection on assessment practices within the secondary education sector (especially pertinent in case of secondary supply schools) (institutional level).
- "Learning outcomes as a fashion": top-down imposition of learning outcome oriented strategies for curricular modification limiting individual initiatives and fostering compliance culture (institutional, national).
- "The ESG are what?": limited awareness of the ESG (institutional, (inter-)national);

- "Learning outcomes are what?": different understandings and interpretations of learning outcomes (institutional, national, international).

Despite the existence of these barriers, the IBAR enquiry has also been instrumental in documenting some examples of good practice. The good practices that follow can be clustered into three areas with a decreasing scope of applicability. Hence, first, regardless the different designs, *assessment procedures and outputs are regarded as robust, valid, fair, and undertaken by committed staff which reinforces stakeholders' trust in them*. These positive aspects of student assessment procedures are, in some cases, further institutionalised through the examination boards, with their role changing, to some extent, from supervisory towards more arbitrary. Second, there is *a clearly identifiable trend towards implementation of learning outcomes based curricula and assessment methods modified accordingly*. This trend is seen as facilitating staff reflections and discussions on assessment. Third, *staff training in assessment methods and procedures* (UK, NL) helps towards their professionalisation and objectivity which, along with learning outcomes oriented curricula, tend to enrich the overall student learning experience.

Recommendations

The IBAR enquiry has identified six barriers that hinder implementation of student assessment practices (the ESG Part 1.3). In respect of these barriers (see above), the corresponding recommendations can be formulated as follows:

- Continuously monitor assessment practices and allow for their modification when necessary (e.g. to combat plagiarism with the use of special software).
- Develop and implement institution-wide tools and feedback loops to assure greater transparency and comparability of assessment practices and outcomes.
- Reflect on secondary education sector assessment practices, especially if your institution has supply school(s) providing core input as far as admission is concerned.
- Initiate/keep on (nation-wide) discussions on the optimal level of institutionalisation of learning outcomes, *including follow-up measures*.
- Promote the ESG Part 1 more actively and widely (e.g. through follow-ups to EUA Quality Culture project series).
- Modify the ESG 1.3 Standard and the corresponding guidelines by incorporating the student perspective in terms of evaluation of academic staff teaching practices[16].

In light of preceding argumentation, most of the recommendations are self-explanatory. However, the last recommendation on expanding the ESG 1.3 standard deserves an additional commentary. The present stance of the E-4 Group towards the issue of broadening the ESG is somewhat ambiguous, with student representatives (ESU) as prime advocates of the expansion (ENQA 2011). Linking up to the outcomes of pioneering work on international approaches to HE student assessment (de Vries, Crozier 2008), the IBAR research consortium suggests the expansion of the ESG 1.3 Standard and the corresponding guidelines. The primary reason for the expansion is the fact that, in its current wording, the ESG 1.3 Standard with the guidelines account only for the perspective of teaching and administrative staff, totally missing up on "the other side of the hill", i.e. student evaluation of teaching. Given the key role of student evaluations in internal quality enhancement processes, the missing

[16] Alternatively, the modification along the lines suggested can be applied to the ESG 1.4 Standard (quality assurance of teaching staff) or 1.6 Standard (information systems).

reflection of such evaluations in the ESG Part 1 can be seen as sub-optimal. Hence, in this respect, incorporation of the student evaluation perspective into the ESG 1.3 may help to balance the sense of the standard ownership as well as to enhance the overall relevance of the ESG Part 1 when being applied in (European) institutional settings.

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