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for Quality Assurance at Institutional Level“**

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National study: Quality and student assessment (WP7)

Czech Republic

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Introduction: policy context

As far as Czech higher education policy is concerned, student assessment procedures are, in broad terms, dealt with in the Higher Education Act (sections “Study programme”, “Higher Education Studies”, “Students”). The Act obligates HEIs to include assessment of study results into study plans as prerequisites for every study programme delivery. Conditions under which the programme can be finalised in a given study cycle (BA/MA/PhD) are also given. The final state examination entails taking the exam and defending the thesis before the board. Only professors, associate professors and, in special cases, specialists in the field approved by the faculty scientific council have the right to sit on the examination board. Also, the Ministry of Education may nominate some outstanding specialists into the board. The final state examinations can be attended by public, which, however, rarely happens. The Act further specifies documentation and identification materials (student card) that have to be created upon the student entry to higher education studies¹ as well assessment proofs during studies (student record book) and upon graduating from a programme (diploma, diploma supplement). In “Students” section, the Act stipulates the rights of students on taking exams and their assessment. In this respect, students are entitled to being examined and assessed under conditions set in the study and examination rules and to propose topics for their Bachelor/Master/doctoral theses. These rights also allow for an additional/exceptional exam resit before the appeals committee-if deemed possible in the corresponding study and examination rules-the results of which must be given in writing, include the verdict plus its justification and be delivered to the student in person.

Unlike the Higher Education Act, higher education policy strategic documents produced on national level touch on procedures of student assessment only implicitly if at all – see e.g. the Long-term Plan of the Ministry for 2011-2015. This strategic policy document only refers to the need of keeping the high level of quality and graduates under sectoral massification, promoting the idea of institutional diversification that should help to address this issue.

Methodology

The enquiry into student assessment procedures at four selected HEIs was based on qualitative methodology, combining document review with semi-structured interviews. More specifically, the document review focused particularly on analysing institutional and faculty study examination rules. The interviews were structured along the nine questions (plus sub-questions) to obtain a further insight into individual aspects of student assessment (esp. measurement of learning outcomes and other programme objectives, clarity and publication of assessment criteria, fairness). For this reason, 34 persons were interviewed, including 12 students; the remaining interviewees were academic staff at shop floor level (16), senior academic staff in decision-making positions (3) and members of administrative staff (3).

¹ Recorded for every student in the nationwide student register.

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

Basically, all four HEIs analysed translate the legal obligations on student assessment, set in the Higher Education Act and sketched out in the introduction, through the study and examination rules. This mandatory document at four HEIs surveyed delineates all major policy facets concerning student assessment procedures. In terms of validity, the study and examination rules can either be made to be binding for the whole institutions (HEI A, C, D) or open to additional interpretation at faculty level (HEI B). The latter case means that there are university-level study and examination rules to fulfil the legal requirements (updated in 2011) plus a more specific version of these developed and applied by one of the faculties.

In the main, the study and examination rules list accredited study programmes (or, for availability of the list, refer to the official institutional information board) and specify types as well as terms of examination. Next, study and examination rules clarify rules under which examinations are undertaken, methods of verification of study results, marking system incl. assessment of theses and dissertations, conditions of study abroad, termination of study and the like. More specifically, the updated version of the study and examination rules of HEI B newly deals with “borderline cases” associated with decisions whether or not, due to failing exams repeatedly, the student will be allowed to continue his/her studies. Hence the specifications on the composition of special examination committees dealing with such cases as well as external members of the examination boards assessing student finals and thesis defence. Still, the maximal time to degree at HEI B is set rather generously as the standard period of study plus three years (this may have some impact on studies and assessment in doctoral programmes, especially if the corresponding standard study period is three years).

Following the respondents’ viewpoints, it is worth making a rejoinder to the breath of the study and examination rules. In the respect, the interviewees suggested that, in practice, this institutional-level document gets modified by the rector’/dean’s decrees rather than being passed through the corresponding collective decision-making body (university/faculty academic senate) as an amended regulation. This is done to broaden the decision-making powers of the rector/deans as well as to allow for greater flexibility. However, at HEIs surveyed, this practice is not shared unanimously, as in case of Institution C, students in academic senates may exercise their influence over the content of the university/faculty study and examination rules (leading towards pushing through two mandatory possibilities for re-sitting the exams institution-wide – a possibility somewhat disfavoured by some academic staff members).

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

In case of four HEIs under study, the relevant information is presented in electronic and paper form. Electronically, the information is delivered through the university web pages and, more particularly through the information system (STAG), whilst the paper form comprises the institutional information board (displaying the respective study and examination rules), course syllabi and first-lecture information. The persons responsible for assuring communication flows are mostly vice-deans for study affairs or heads of faculty departments, assisted by administrative staff. Some faculties of HEI B also distribute hard copies of the study and examination rules upon student registration for study on an every-year basis. Finally, HEI A holds an optional course “Introduction to Studies” open to all first-year students. The course comprises 5-6 lectures giving those enrolled an overview in all major study issues (three-cycle

study concept, study requirements, possibilities of study abroad including Erasmus). Part from raising awareness of students as such this course may also, to an extent, be instrumental in combating drop-out rates at HEI A.

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

Differentiating the types of assessment by purpose, diagnostic assessment is utilised for pre-testing of student aptitude for study (HEI D) or entrance examinations (HEI B, C). Formative and summative types are used for mid-term and end-term/final assessment. At none of HEIs analysed, the respective study and examination rules do not specify the conditions conducive to applying a formative or summative approach, leaving it to the discretion of front-line academic staff. The approaches to application of formative and summative identified at HEIs surveyed are described in some detail below.

At HEI A, many departments make use of the combination of mid-term and final assessment during each semester. As a rule, the mid-term assessment comprises 3-4 tests with results of different weight and with the semester course ended by a final assessment. The final assessment typically combines summative (written test with high weighting) and formative (oral examination) forms of assessment. Below-average results in mid-term testing can be amended either by the final semester course exam or, in some cases, a special, corrective examination. The oral examinations mostly reflect back on the results of the main summative test, giving the student an opportunity to demonstrate his knowledge, skills and competences of the subject matter in question. The interviewed academic staff members and students confirm that the results of the oral examinations tend to improve/worsen the overall student course assessment by one grade. For dealing with borderline cases, i.e. assessment results that disable the student from continuing in his/her studies, after receiving a written appeal (from an academic or a student) the dean may set up a special examination committee whose composition and remit are specified in the institutional study and examination rules. However, up to the present time, such special examination committees have been set up only exceptionally on the academic staff request.

The finding on special examination committees applies also in case of HEI B, whose study and examination rules require such committees to have at least three members. The heterogeneity of study programmes and specialisation at this comprehensive university precludes identifying any distinct pattern of application of summative and formative assessment forms. Summative assessment seems to prevail at HEI C with its use spreading through the institution also due to the characteristics of mass higher education and rising student participation. However, the respondents tend to opine that even the excellently designed test has somewhat limited value (and necessary to be modified periodically to prevent student frauds), concentrating primarily on testing knowledge not creative thinking so oral examinations are still vital to be included among assessment procedures. The interviewees also put forward the view that plausibility of written/oral testing is contingent on the type of subject tested (with mathematic tasks amenable to be tested in written, summative form). The situation seems to be more nuanced at HEI D at which students may engage in formative assessment processes, having the right to ask the respective academic staff member responsible for assessment of their works to explain and justify the grade given.

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

At all four HEIs surveyed, student assessment procedures make use of the ECTS scale (A-F; A-excellent, F-fail) with numerical (1,0; 1,5; 2,0, 2,5; 3,0 a 4,0) as well as point (100-90; 89-80; 79-70; 69-60; 59-50; < 50) equivalents. The individual courses are awarded credit points the numbers of which are used for checking up on progression to the next semester/year/cycle of study (minimal credit numbers for each period of study are given in the study and examination rules). The major characteristics, requirements and objectives of the course are, in most cases, set in the course syllabi. Apart from the course syllabi, HEI B and D also provide the corresponding course information online, via the student information system.

As far as intended learning outcomes are concerned, they are an obligatory part of the student profile. The student profile, including description of his/her skills, abilities and competences upon graduation, is included in documentation submitted for the programme (re-) accreditation. The interviews conducted at four HEIs under analysis have revealed that, aside from meeting these legislative requirements, learning outcomes hardly factor into programme design and components (course content and structure). This is despite the running of the national EU-funded project (Q-Ram) aimed at making and implementation of the qualifications framework for Czech higher education. Somewhat exceptional in this respect is the situation at HEI C where analysis of course content in the first (BA) cycle was made to reduce drop-out rates. This analysis, leading towards some modifications of course content and graduate profile, was part of the pilot testing of the national qualifications framework (Q-Ram). However, the interviewees at HEI C have noted that despite the institutional participation in the framework pilot testing – as also stated in the updates to the institutional long-term plan – outcomes of the testing² tend to be used for improving on graduate profiles in accreditation documentation, or as tacit knowledge, thus not making a direct impact on the formulation of learning outcomes attributed to the (BA) courses and on course design in general.

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

At all four HEIs studied, probing into official documentation and respondents' viewpoints (incl. students) have not revealed any noteworthy discrepancies and deviations from the officially stated examination rules. The student-filed complaints on violation of these rules are down to minimum or non-existent.

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

² I.e. the degree of (mis)match between national descriptors for a given cluster of thematically related programmes (i.e. engineering) and the course content of these programmes at shop-floor level.

Apart from final state examinations conducted before the multiple examiner board³, notable dependence of student assessment on single examiner judgement has been identified at analysed HEIs. Still, there are some additional factors meriting further explanation. In case of some parts (faculties, departments) of HEI A, the lecturer of a given course also acts as its assessor, which may give benefits to students in terms of having been somewhat pre-familiar with assessors' approaches as well as expectations. This practice is, however, not institutionally widespread, as other departments seem to prefer several (not multiple) assessors for a given course. Students interviewed at HEI B have noticed the presence of some subjective judgement due to single examiner practice in place. As to HEI C, objectivity of student assessment seems to be increased by the fact that it, as a rule, concerns assessment of several cumulative works/tests with weighted results, not only one (oral) examination as a "make or break" undertaking. This approach is conducive to making use of several examiners for a course (with occasional problems with setting weight ratios among individual tests constructed by different assessors).

Despite the prevalence of a single examiner approach at HEIs under analysis, the interviewees across the analysed sample, students included, have not voiced any complaints against the prevailing practice. They have only quite minor (HEI A) or no reservations as far as the application of a single examiner approach is concerned. As suggested, the only exception to the identified single examiner pattern is final state examinations. In case of HEI D, the activity of the examination board during the final state examinations entails the filling in of a questionnaire for feedback which is analysed at a special workshop and followed by (organisational) measures to address the issues identified, e.g. the level of exam difficulty for different modes of study (on-site, combined).

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?

The approaches towards publication and implementation of these five groups of criteria vary in some respects across HEIs under study. It holds that all four HEIs have institutionalised criteria for marking and student absence/illness. Marking rules issues are dealt with in the study and examination rules, in the course syllabi that are available on-line (standard at HEI B), and the in decree on the academic year (HEI A). These documents, to a different extent, also include regulations of how student absence/illness factor into student assessment. To make an example, the study and examination rules of HEI C stipulate that under special circumstances, following the written request, the student may be exempted from the assessment in courses that are part of his/her study plan. The extent of such exemption is to be specified in the dean's decision and should be based especially on student health status.

The HEIs surveyed also have clear and published criteria for exam enrolment. At all four HEIs, students are entitled to one regular and two make-up examinations. On-line registration for exams is becoming more common (standard at HEI B). More specifically, the study and examination rules stipulate that students have a right to cancel his/her examination registration two days (HEI B) or 24 hours (HEI C) before the start of the exam at the latest. The study and examination rules of HEI C further refer to a possibility of exempting the student from the exam ex-post, based on the written medical statement of student incapacity to take the exam sent to the authorised faculty personnel. In some cases, less formalised arrangements

³ Comprising, as a rule, from three to five examiners.

(oral in-advance notification) for cancellation of student participation in examinations are also possible (HEI A). Authorisation of student identity (citizen identity card or another) may be requested upon exam registration at HEI D.

Unlike the three groups of criteria dealt with above (marking, student absence, exam enrolment), responsibilities for specifying assessment methods and terms of student class participation at HEIs inspected are highly devolved and subject to discretionary authority of front-line academic staff. This finding, corroborated by the interviews held, thus prohibiting any generalisations beyond the observation that some parts of HEI C, based on the corresponding stipulations of the institutional study and examination rules, produce documentation on the first-year student participation in lectures, studios and seminars.

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

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

The approach of analysed HEIs towards making administrative verification checks is rather equivocal. Generally, the results of student assessments (exam results) are kept in the student record of study and in the institutional information system (generally called study documentation). In some cases, academic staff also produce their own registry of student assessment results (especially HEI A). However, once recorded into the system, the results are not, as a rule, validated by the third person. The records are retrieved only for the sake of verifying student aptitude by meeting officially stated requirements prior to the final state examination or in case of a student-filed official appeal, questioning fairness of his/her assessment. In such a case, the faculty appeals committee (with usually two to three members) is formed by the dean's decision, with the results of the examination again recoded and sent to the appellant in writing.

Hence, this common approach points to the verification checks of student assessment results to be produced only ex-post, especially in case of a student-lodged appeal. Although such prevailing practice may leave something to be desired, the primary data obtained from the interviews strongly suggest that both academic staff and students consider the current practice as not needing any amendments.

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

Evidence on this issue obtained from four analysed HEIs implies that the scope of reflection of student secondary education knowledge relates almost exclusively to the point of entry to higher education studies. Hence, the reflection of student secondary education knowledge in assessment procedures hardly reaches beyond the entrance examinations. The exception to this rule are paid-for preparatory or compensatory courses, held by some parts of HEI A to bring applicants' or first-year students' knowledge in maths, physics or chemistry up to the required HE standards.

Analysing the linkages between secondary and tertiary education, it should be pointed out that private HEI D is part of the School Union. This union further comprises 8-year grammar school, secondary professional school and tertiary professional school. The institutional set-up like this is likely to make up optimal conditions for inter-institutional cooperation, including transfer of information on the level of knowledge needed for progressing to a higher level of

education. The set-up in question is also likely to reduce (eliminate) the need for organising other additional “corrective” measures at tertiary education level.

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

At four analysed HEIs, as well as other Czech HEIs, the role of external actors in student assessment procedures is indirect, boiling down to the inspection of documentation on programme (re-)accreditation⁴ by the Accreditation Commission staff and to the sitting of external assessors on the state examination boards. However, as to the latter finding, interviews conducted have revealed some differences in this general pattern at HEIs inspected. HEI A seems to have some difficulty in recruiting external assessors in chemistry-oriented fields due to their limited numbers nationwide. This issue, i.e. a limited pool of external assessors, has also been noticed at HEI B and C, though probably not in such an extent due to the comprehensive orientation of HEI B (with sufficient numbers of external assessors in humanities) and concerted efforts of technically-oriented HEI C to recruit external specialists for teaching some courses as well as consultancy, which pays dividends when it comes to assuring external participation in the state examination boards. The role of external assessors at private HEI D is somewhat more obscured compared to the other three HEIs. This is mainly due to the fact that a number of HEI D teaching staff also have workloads at some other public HEIs. Finally, although the participation of external examiners in final state examinations is generally commendable, the interviewees have also identified some minor limitations of such practice, consisting in occasional unclear formulation of questions voiced by the external assessor (HEI A, C).

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

The available evidence suggests the most significant, student assessment-related change having taken place at HEI B. It concerns institutionalisation of the new study and examination rules including stipulations on the marking scale (newly the ECTS-based A-F scale replacing the 1-4 marking system), the setting-up of appeals committees, and the implementation of an on-line system for recording and storing assessment results. Some other evidence noticed at HEIs under analysis relates to amendment of student assessment procedures as a consequence of the introduction of the Bologna study structure. Implementation of the Bologna BA/MA study template, replacing the traditional “long” 5-6 year Masters, has led to modifications done to programme designs. These included not only holding of final state examinations at the end of the first cycle but also, more importantly, introduction of more effective assessment approaches—such as multiple choice testing—to combat the upsurge in student numbers (massification effects). Despite the recent introduction and preference of summative forms of assessment like multiple-choice tests, the interviewees (academic staff + students) have not levelled criticism against this spreading practice. However, some discrepancy exists between the declared importance of assessing first-cycle students by criteria somewhat modified from those for the first three years of studies in long Masters and the actual approach

⁴ Including a graduate profile.

taken by assessors in practice (“it is clear that, under massification, not every student can finish his/her BA studies successfully”).

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

As far as student assessments at analysed HEIs are concerned, some examples of good practice can be identified. At HEI A, it concerns elaborated forms of informing first year students on assessment standards and expectations especially through the optional course “Introduction to studies”. Relatedly, it is a standard at HEI B to distribute hard copies of the study and examination rules to every student during the enrollment procedure, registering the student for each study year. The spreading approach of having external assessors seated on the state examination boards (HEI B, C) can also be commended. The goes for concerned efforts at combining summative approaches with formative ones under massification pressures (HEI A, C) or diagnostic pretesting of student knowledge before his/her enrollment into HE study (HEI D). The student right to ask for oral explanation of the grade given by the respective assessor is also worth mentioning (HEI D).

Conclusion: Identification of barriers to the ESG Part 1.3 Standard and guidelines

Finally, the analysis of student assessment procedures at selected HEIs allows for identification of barriers to the implementation of the corresponding ESG standard and guidelines. (For examples of good practice, see question 9.b). Hence, as the qualitative enquiry into student assessment at four selected HEIs shows, the barriers to implementation the ESG 1.3 standard and guidelines in Czech situation are likely to be as follows:

- Tenuous links between learning outcomes and assessment methods (tendency to hold on to implicit assumptions on adequacy of assessment approaches; their indistinct relation to the graduate profile as “the guarantor” of learning outcomes acquisition);
- Prevailing practice of a single examiner, which is instrumental to subjectivity of assessment (except most of final state examinations);
- Ex-post nature of verification checks on results of assessment procedures (facilitation of trust at the street-level vs. potential problems if something goes wrong – “firefighting instead of prevention”).