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for Quality Assurance at Institutional Level“**

IBAR

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

**National study: Quality and information (WP 11)
Czech Republic**

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Introduction and methodology

This study presents the results of the enquiry into the relationships between quality assurance processes and handling of information agendas (collection, analysis, use, publication of information) in institutional settings. To this end, four HEIs have been selected for analysis (for selection criteria and HEI profiles see Czech WP5 national study). In methodological terms, the analysis took the form of the review of official documents (laws, statutes, strategies, organisational rules, reports etc.) followed by the collection and study of primary data obtained from semi-structured interviews. The interviews, structured along the six research questions, were held with 28 respondents from whom were 5 managers, 12 academic staff members and 11 students. The respondents' viewpoints across their affiliation helped to obtain a deeper insight into the matter subject to empirical investigation in this workpackage (relations between quality processes and information provision).

Answering the research questions

Q. 1. Is there any policy, regulations or practice at national level referring to the provision of information about HEIs and by HEIs (to society at large, various institutions, HEIs' stakeholders...)?

In the Czech higher education policy context, information provision can be said to serve two major purposes. These are informing public authorities (especially Ministry of Education but also other actors concerned incl. general public in the widest sense) on several predefined issues and providing information on a range of institutional activities voluntarily for self-promotion. It follows that the former information is provided on a mandatory basis laid down in legal documents with a system-wide reach, i.e. the Higher Education Act no. 111/1998 Coll. (HE Act) including its amendments and other legally binding documents (the Ministry's decrees). Hence, according to the law, Czech higher education institutions (HEIs) are legally required to make publicly available the following types of information:

- the annual report on activities,
- the annual report on management,
- the long-term plan for education, science, research and development, artistic and other creative activities (long-term plan),
- results of internal quality assurance or enhancement activities.

Public provision of these kinds of information is mandatory both for public and private HEIs with the exception of the annual report on management which private HEIs are legally bound to elaborate only if they are the receivers of public finance from the state budget. These mandatory documents as rule provide "lay" and contextual information for general public as well as, to an extent, basic data valuable for statistical and analytical purposes. It is worth adding that, to assure basic data comparability and completeness, the Ministry issues the templates for the annual reports' structure (both on activities and management) that HEIs are supposed to follow. The same procedure applies to the structure of the long-term plan and its annual updates. As far as results of internal quality processes are concerned, no further legal requirements are made but their publication. However, as to external quality assurance, Czech

HEIs are legally required to provide information on their study programmes to *the Accreditation Commission* based on the Commission's notification to the (part) of institution. The same applies to queries of the Ministry and national statistics annually compiled by *the Czech Statistical Office*.

In addition, there are two more kinds of information that Czech HEIs are legally stipulated to follow, irrespective of their type. This is information on *nature of the admission procedure* (incl. entrance examination) and information on *qualification theses* including Bachelor, Master and doctoral ones. As these kinds of information are key to initiation and finalization of studies and are therefore quite often sought after publicly by students and their parents, the corresponding regulations will be dealt with in some detail below.

Information on the admission procedure, its nature and results

The HE Act stipulates the basic prerequisite for admission to HE studies, which is finalisation of secondary education, verified by passing the secondary school leaving examination (SSLE). To assure equal approach to all applicants, HEIs are legally obliged to publicise the terms of the admission procedure at least four months before it takes place. More specifically, the terms of the procedure entail the submission and administration of applications (electronic, paper form), admission requirements and ways of their verification as well as in most cases the type(s) and criteria of evaluation (§ 48-49). In case that a given faculty/HEI sets the maximal number of admissions for a given study programme, this information should be made public as well.

The legal requirement of publication also pertains to the results of the admission procedure (see the Ministry's decrees no. 343/2002 Coll. and its Amendment no. 276/2004 Coll.) In this respect, faculties/HEIs have to publicise the report on the results of the admission procedure and to make all applicants taking the examinations aware of the results within 15 days after its finalisation. More concretely, the decrees stipulate that three kinds of information and the corresponding statistical data should be made public in particular. First, this is *information on the content and wording of (all parts) of the entrance examination* including the correct solutions/answers and information on evaluation methods comprising the ways of calculation of the applicants' scores. Statistically, this requires publication of the final applicants' ranking in the procedure, the best possible score, the best score achieved, the average score calculated as the arithmetic mean, standard deviation¹ and results' decil boundaries². Second, there is the *information on administration of the results of the admission procedure*. This comprises specification of: the dates in which the examinations take place (start and finalisation), the date decisive for passing the decision on (non-)admittance, the date on which the (un)successful applicant can access his/her examination results in person and the conditions of initiating the review procedure following the applicants' appeal³ including the deadline for the final decision. Third, there are *results of the admission procedure* as such. Published, they contain the total number of applications, of applicants taking the exams, the numbers of the admitted and non-admitted sorted by study programme. All this information must be made publicly accessible on the institutional/faculty website and most of it is also part of the annual report on institutional activities.

¹ Only if there are at least five applicant taking the exam.

² Only if there are at least 100 applicant taking the written exam.

³ Applicants have the legal right to appeal against the results of the admission procedure within 30 days after its finalisation.

The aim of making all this information publicly available on a mandatory basis is to give each applicant a chance to verify his/her results and the reasons for (non-)admission. However, the effects of mandatory information provision on frequency of appeals against non-admission are empirically unknown. The major means of publication are institutional web pages and the institutional information board. Besides, HEIs also provide information via institutional /faculty bulletins (electronic/paper form) or, as far potential applicants are concerned, also through hand-outs and leaflets distributed during the information days or special events such as the trade-fair on education opportunities (Gaudeamus). Correspondingly, in a system-wide context, information on study possibilities at all Czech HEIs is annually collected and publicised by the Centre for Equivalents of Documents about Education, which is the organisational part of the Centre for Higher Education Studies (CHES). The information is comprehensive, summarising the facts on the types of study programmes and the nature of admission procedures with costs per application, and is published annually in a special issue of the weekly Teachers' Papers and subsequently electronically on the CHES website.

Information on qualification theses

Written qualification theses are a compulsory part of the final state examination in study programmes offered by HEIs. Depending on the programme type, the qualification theses are Bachelor theses, Master theses and doctoral theses. According to the Amendment to the HE Act no. 261/2007 Coll., HEIs are obliged to make publicly available the content of theses that were subject to the defence procedure including the standpoints of the reviewers (opponents) and the results of the procedure. The ways of publication should be specified in the internal regulations of HEI. Based on these legal stipulations, since 2007 HEIs have started to make the qualification theses available to the public in a paper form stored in the institutional library and electronically through a special database. The full text entry to the database, however, requires user identification (login and password). The practical experience shows that in most cases only the texts of the theses, not reviewers' standpoints and overall results of the defence procedure, are made available.

Aside from information on the admission procedure and qualification theses, HEIs regularly provide detailed information on their students for the nation-wide *Student Registry* operational since 1999. The registry contains detailed data on every HE student (46 information items) grouped into three major areas, i.e. student personal data, study-related data and aggregate data on student history of studies. The basic identification code is the student's birth number. As this entry number, unique for every Czech citizen, is considered strictly confidential, it follows that all the registry data are kept confidential and available only in selected format (typically aggregated by a given parameter) to authorised persons at HEIs, of the Ministry's statistical unit or other legal persons for research and/or statistical purposes based on the Ministry's prior approval in writing. As far as senior academic staff is concerned, following the stipulations of the Amendment to the HE Act no. 159/2010 Coll., the Ministry has started running the nation-wide *Register of Professors and Associate Professors*. This register contains two kinds of information, i.e. (associate) professors' personal data and his/her workload per institution – the information that every HEI is obliged to provide to the Ministry. It is argued that, coupled with the maximal allowable workload of (associate) professor acting as a guarantor of study programme quality set by the Accreditation Commission, this statistics is instrumental in assuring the minimal verifiable programme quality standards and combating (associate) professors' low, multiple workloads at several HEIs ("the flying professor phenomenon"). The entry to the Register of Professors and Associate Professors follows the same rules as in case of the Student Registry.

Q2: Is there any institutional policy and practice considering *collection* and *analysis* of information connected to aspects a) – g)⁴?

No *explicit* institutional policy concerning collection and analysis of different kinds of information (aspects a-g) is formulated at HEIs A-D. However, despite the non-existence of formal policy, the kinds of information in question are collected at regular intervals at all four analysed HEIs. Collection of information is done by means of the information system(s) such as STAG and others storing inputs from different information sources. To begin, these systems include student data on entry and student results during studies from which student progression and success rates can be calculated and profile of the student population constructed with the corresponding data also sent to the *National Student Register*. Data regarding student satisfaction and employability of graduates are regularly collected through the respective questionnaire surveys (student evaluation of tuition, alumni surveys) taking mostly the electronic and sometimes the paper form (HEI C, D). To identify the graduate employability, HEI A and B tend to rely on data from public employment agencies (employment bureaus). Moreover, to obtain more complex feedback on graduate employability, HEI D annually holds workshops and meetings with human resource managers, major employers (often members of bank management) and representatives of public administration (state, regional).

The information systems at four analysed HEIs are run by the ICT centres such as the Centre for Computing and Information Technologies at HEI C often in cooperation with the institutional library service centre (see also question no. 4). The institutional library service centre is mostly responsible for collection of information on learning resources and their costs. To continue with the example at HEI C, the most sophisticated and complex system is in operation at the Faculty of Information Technologies (FIT). The system provides in-depth information (classification history) on students' study results for every course taught and further includes the questionnaire of student evaluation of quality of tuition. The results are mined and analysed by the faculty senior management and in turn openly presented and discussed with students at a special meeting. The outcomes of the meeting are made known to all faculty teaching staff and further reflected in the making of strategic policy documents of the faculty as well as dean's regulations.

At all four HEIs, the collected information is in turn retrieved from databases and analysed by the authorised staff, which is mostly the vice-rector for information provision (ICT), vice-deans for information provision (ICT) and other authorised (faculty) personnel including ICT staff. This means that personal information on individual (student, staff member) is *not* freely available for general public (viewers of internet web pages). The vice-rector and top-faculty management are further responsible for defining and analysing the institutional performance indicators that at all four analysed HEIs also include research and development performance (publication outputs in individual categories (articles, books, patents etc.)). At four HEIs under analysis, the effectiveness of teaching staff is measured as the student/staff ratio, oscillating between 22.3 (HEI C) and 8.9 (HEI A), which is due to different institutional profiles and specialisation.

⁴ These are: a) student progression and success rates, b) employability of graduates, c) students' satisfaction with programmes, d) effectiveness of teaching staff, e) profile of the student population, f) learning resources and their costs, g) institution's own key performance indicators.

Q3: Is there any institutional policy and practice considering *use* of information connected to aspects a) – g)? If yes, for what *purpose* is it used (decision-making, corrective action, improvement, innovation)?

Again, no *explicit* policy on the use of information listed under aspects a-g can be found at HEIs A-D. Nonetheless, utilisation of these kinds of information is an inseparable part of policy *practice* at all four HEIs under discussion. First, the data retrieved from the internal information systems are commonly institutionalised for *decision-making purposes and subsequent innovation*. This is evidenced by data and information inclusion and reflection in *institutional/faculty long-term plans and their annual updates* which are strategic policy documents written up and made publicly available across the analysed HEIs. To give an example, based on student and graduate population data, the Long-term plan of HEI A for 2011-2015 analyses options for implementation of new study programmes and restructuring of current ones as well as for monitoring effectiveness of tuition with respect to somewhat high drop-out rates in the first cycle of studies. The drop-out rates are also the explicit concern of strategic policy documents of HEI B stating that the average drop-out rate has gone down from 10.9 % to 8.9 % in the last three years. This reduction has taken effect due to the combination of the following measures: extension of staff office hours, extension of individual counselling services, special tutorials in maths, extended creation of multimedia study supports or specialised web pages.

The corresponding analytical findings are turned into strategic policy development goals of the institution and its parts. More specifically, for example, the update of the Long-term plan of HEI A for 2013 sets the following development goals in the area of information and information provision:

- extension and updating of information materials on student involvement in research teams,
- extension of information materials on student mobility opportunities,
- securing services of qualified external specialists,
- promotion of the activities of the university counselling centre,
- activation of the university alumni club,
- optimisation of the Study Information System (SIS), its extension by several modules and its more effective connection with the Financial Information System (FIS),
- tuning and optimisation of the of the Financial Information System (FIS), Managerial Information System (MIS) and Personnel Information System (Odyssey) including electronisation of some vital administration agendas,
- securing more effective access to electronic information sources (EIZ) for students and academic staff, including harmonisation and integration of major university library services with the National Technical Library and its technical infrastructure,
- general reconstruction/reorganization of the university webpages,
- finalisation of preparations for applying for the ECTS Label.

Second, all four HEIs collect and utilise several kinds of information (especially aspects a, d, e, f) for *statistical purposes* in the annual reports on activities. This also holds for key institutional performance indicators that are set by the Ministry along with the overall annual report template which HEIs are recommended to follow. As already suggested, the information thus collected is utilised for statistics on the Czech HE system and individual HEIs by the Ministry, the National Statistical Office, the National Student Register and the nation-wide Register on Research Results.

Q4) How effective is collection, analysis and use of information within the institution⁵? (ESG 1.6)

Four HEIs surveyed show reasonably effective collection, analysis and utilisation of the kinds of information described above. Organisationally, at the institutional level, the responsibility for handling and coordinating of the information agenda is vested in the vice-rector for information services/ICT, for strategic development or for external relations. Their cooperation is sometimes explicitly required (HEI A). The respective vice-rectors are in most cases, assisted by the university council for information systems (HEI B) or for ICT (HEI A, C) to bring in the elements of institution-wide strategic planning in information-related areas. These councils are composed of the representatives of the top university and faculty management, the university academic senate and the director(s) of the ICT centre(s). At the faculty level, the responsibility is handed down to vice-deans for information services/ICT.

In operational terms, the execution of information processing and ICT-related tasks is delegated to the ICT and computing centres. These specialised units are run by directors and operational from the rectorate level down to the departmental level through the respective sub-units. Their activities, as well as the remit of responsibility are covered in the official organisational rules of the institution. At HEIs under analysis, the ICT and computing centres run, maintain, service and update the information systems, computer networks including library systems and web applications within the given (part) of HEI. At the same time, the centres perform some additional important tasks, such as e.g. connectivity to institutional publishing houses (HEI A-D) or running and maintenance of the CESNET2 high-speed network for national users (HEI C).

Continuing with the handling of internal quality assurance processes, represented chiefly by student evaluations of tuition, all four HEIs surveyed make publicly available their results in the form of aggregated data down to the level of individual courses. This means that personalised information on individuals is not publicly available, not least due to the national legal protection. Personalised information on e.g. individual staff member course evaluation is thus stored under special protection (ID and password protected) and accessible only to the authorised personnel (typically heads of departments, (vice-)deans, (vice-)rectors).

As far as recent important changes and plans for them are concerned, two examples deserve mentioning. HEI B is currently in process of implementing the so called CourseWare. This system is a web-based advanced add-on to the STAG information system, making it possible to store, integrate and orderly display on-line all study-related materials and information for all courses taught at the university. At the same time, HEI A is taking steps towards finalising preparations for obtaining the ECTS Label. Along with it goes the necessity to optimise design of all courses taught as well as to elaborate and implement average study workloads calculated in credit transfer points, up-to-date learning outcomes and up-to-date information packages on study programmes on offer (Czech, English). In this respect, it is necessary to point out that HEI C was capable of implementing all these requirements and was in turn awarded the ECTS Label in 2009.

⁵ Good to address especially to: organisational structures; levels of responsibility; extent of formalisation in internal quality assurance processes; plans, reasons for changes and expected benefits (if relevant).

Q5: What is the institutional policy and practice regarding *publication* of information connected to aspects h) – n)⁶? What do you publish on internal level? What do you publish externally? How do the HEI verify if the expectations concerning impartiality and objectiveness of published information are fulfilled?

At HEIs reviewed, the kinds of information listed as h)-k) are *publicly* available on institutional web pages either in a self-standing format or within institutional documentation (annual reports, statute, study and examination rules, organisational rules, long-term plans and their updates). To give an example, the catalogue of courses of HEI B freely accessible online contains the following kinds of information for each course: course guarantor, teacher(s) /lecturer(s), prerequisites (if applicable), timetable (also for seminar groups if applicable), course goals, study requirements, syllabus, basic literature, ways of assessment and assessment methods, other relevant courses and other commentaries (e.g. hypertext links to study materials if applicable). The information on intended learning outcomes (aspect i) is commonly available in the form of a graduate profile. This measure is considered sufficient for the needs of most of external stakeholders (e.g. applicants for study), though it must be admitted that full (i.e. institution-wide) implementation of learning-outcomes oriented curricula have yet not taken place at any of HEIs reviewed. As already stated, all information publicly available is presented in aggregated form, not including any personal data. The personalised type of such information can be accessed and retrieved only by authorised personnel of the institution (computer network maintenance staff, programmers, heads of departments, (vice-)deans, (vice-)rectors).

The information on learning opportunities (aspect l) is also freely accessible online on webpages of all four analysed HEIs. The information regarding alumni (aspect m) is publicly available to some extent. This is not because of the perceived need for keeping this information from public eye but because the methods of alumni information collection through graduate surveys and/or (other) promotional activities of the alumni clubs are presently being developed and enhanced at inspected HEIs, not least through special project activities. The basic information on student population (aspect n) is covered in the annual reports of the institutions (data in aggregated form), with the structure predefined by the Ministry. Still, all four HEIs do make further analyses and statistics (e.g. long-term trends of student demand; entry, drop-out and graduation rates by student cohort; course marking histories, student presence in in-class or laboratory tuition etc.) for internal purposes and accessibility of these data is again limited to authorised personnel (mostly faculty and institutional top management).

Finally, the HEIs inspected seem to show no formal policies on verification of impartiality and objectivity of information. However, again, there is policy practice in place consisting of checking on the veracity and completeness of information through the official meetings of the departmental members, faculty academic senates, deans' or rector's collegiums or, importantly, through sessions of the institutional council for ICT as the top advisory body for information provision.

Q6: What *barriers* and *effective practices* are identified as regards collection, use and publication of information in the institution? What can be done to enhance the current policy and practice in this area?

⁶ h) offered study programs; i) intended learning outcomes of the offered study programmes; j) awarded qualification; k) teaching, learning and assessment procedures; l) learning opportunities available to students; m) views and employment destinations of past students; n) profile of the student population.

The foregoing analysis of implementation of information-related agendas into institutional settings of four selected HEIs makes it possible to identify some points of general nature also with respect to identification of the corresponding barriers and examples of effective practices. The analysis thus suggests that despite the non-existence of formal (i.e. written) information policies, all four HEIs surveyed have developed and implemented sufficient practical measures for handling different aspects of information agendas (collection, use, publication). The range of information provided by four HEIs studied seem to fit well with the content of both the ESG 1.6 and 1.7. However, two comments apply. First, the data on graduate employability have been in some cases utilised mainly from the databases of public employment agencies with limited internal collection within the institution (HEI A, B). Second, the learning outcomes-oriented curricula have not been fully implemented at any of HEIs analysed, with the basic information on graduate abilities, skills and competences covered in graduates' profiles. Possibly more efforts might be invested into information provision as far as these two areas are concerned.

Expectably, there is the organisational chain of responsibility for the handling of information agendas including their practical day-to-day administration along with the servicing of the information networks and infrastructure done by the ICT centres. Equally expectably, not all information is publicly available, not least due to the protection of personal data by national legislation. Still, the multitude of information presented in institutional documentation of different kinds, i.e. statutes, long-term plans, their annual updates, annual reports, study and organisational rules to name the major ones, is, by respondents' viewpoints quite sufficient across the analysed HEIs, sometimes even capable of inducing the information overload. In this respect, some more attention might be paid to arrangement of individual information sources as far their content and location on the websites are concerned. Some more efforts can also be invested into mechanisms of assuring the impartiality of information presented, though the extent of formalisation, possibly conducive to bureaucracy, should be taken into account. The last barrier preventing the implementation of the ESG 1.6 and 1.7 to the maximal extent concerns the missing systemic support aimed at storing the relevant pieces of information supplied by individual HEIs for public retrieval. Such nation-wide, web-based application might e.g. help ease comparison of study programmes in the similar/same fields of study for applicants for higher education studies as well as for other stakeholders concerned. For now, the corresponding data remain dispersed through different mostly publicly available sources (especially institutional and Ministry web pages, statistics of the Accreditation Commission, the Czech Statistical Office or the National Student Register), which makes it difficult for their comparison and further analysis.

On the other hand, some effective practices in handling the information agendas have also been identified. They concern the integration of basic library services within HEI A with the up-to-date technical infrastructure and range of resources of the National Technical Library, implementation of the advanced CourseWare system (HEI B) or obtaining the ECTS Label conditioned by the elaboration and implementation of structured information on a range of study-related areas (HEI C). In this respect, it is finally worth noting that preparation for the ECTS Label award seems to entails delivery of most of information as recommended by the ESG 1.6 and 1.7. For this reason, the ECTS Label award may be considered a guarantee that a given HEI has reasonably developed its mechanisms of information provision in line with the ESG complex requirements.