



Involvement of stakeholders in internal quality assurance across Europe. East-west contrasts in a seven-country study

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Don F. Westerheijden¹

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Abstract

This paper reports on a cross-national comparative study into quality assurance in higher education, which was meant to uncover drivers and barriers to European harmonisation experienced by higher education institutions. The research on which this contribution is based was undertaken in the context of the project 'Identifying barriers in promoting the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at institutional level' (IBAR). The study starts from the instrument in the Bologna Process to increase compatibility of quality assurance in all, by now 47, countries in the EHEA. Our analysis focuses less on the formal quality assurance processes that happen once every five or more years, and more on the continuing internal arrangements that influence the quality of education on a daily basis. We can conclude that in three of the Central European countries involved in this study, state and regional public authorities were seen as important stakeholders, and this somewhat étatist approach contrasts with the more prominent and direct influence of private sector representatives in the Western European country cases.

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Introduction

Almost 25 years after the fall of communist regimes in Central Europe, have the differences between East and West been effaced, or does the institution of higher education have such strong path dependencies that the contrast still is visible? This contribution reports on a cross-national comparative study into quality assurance in higher education, which was meant to uncover drivers and barriers to European harmonisation experienced by higher education institutions. The findings prove relevant to the East–West question.

The research on which this contribution is based was undertaken in the context of the project 'Identifying barriers in promoting the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at institutional level' (IBAR). The study starts from the instrument in the Bologna Process to increase compatibility of quality assurance in all, by now 47, countries in the EHEA. It included four, diverse higher education institutions in each of seven countries: the Czech Republic, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia and the United Kingdom (UK). Hungary, alas, was not among the partners in the study. Whether the findings in more northerly Central European countries apply to Hungary as well, must remain a question for further study, although in the final section I will venture some speculations.

The *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) are the main source in the IBAR study. The ESG consist of three parts: Part 1 defines a checklist of issues that internal quality assurance in all higher education institutions ought to address; Part 2 applies to external quality assurance and basically says that quality assessment agencies must apply the Part 1 standards and guidelines; Part 3, finally, applies quality assurance to the quality assessment agencies themselves. While most of the seven elements in Part 1 ask of higher education institutions to pay attention to fairly self-evident aspects of quality of education, a few of the standards demand a focus that may go beyond academic traditions. One of the latter type is the demand to include stakeholders in internal quality assurance (emphasis added–DFW):

Standard 1.1: Policy and procedures for quality assurance: Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognises the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality. The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available. They should also include a role for students and other stakeholders.

Specifying expectations further, *students* and *employers* are mentioned in the guidelines belonging to ESG 1.2, which states that periodic reviews of programmes and awards should include external panel members, while feedback from *employers*, *labour market representatives* and *other relevant organizations* should be solicited. It is also underlined that the participation of *students* in quality assurance activities should be ensured.

In looking at the implementation of Standards 1.1 and 1.2, national and institutional policies and practices related to stakeholder involvement in internal quality processes have been analysed. Our analysis focuses less on the formal quality assurance processes that happen once every five or more years, and more on the continuing internal arrangements that influence the quality of education on a daily basis. The article aims to highlight on the one hand drivers and barriers and on the other hand examples of good practice observed in the involving stakeholders in assuring quality across the higher education institutions studied in the IBAR project.

1.1 Research design and methods

We used a comparative case study design of four higher education institutions in each of the seven countries included in the IBAR project. Case findings on selected themes were consolidated into national reports, then comparative reports for the different themes were made based on the seven national reports.² Research methods included complementary application of documentary analysis and semi-structured expert interviews based on a common set of research questions. Emphasis was on the institutional level, with additional data gathering through documents and if necessary interviews to paint the national frameworks and conditions.

1.2 Stakeholders

Stakeholders are 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives' (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). We distinguished internal (with a formal, major position in the higher education institution) from external stakeholders. Moreover, we see academic staff (teachers/researchers) as 'producers' of higher education; technically they are crucial internal stakeholders but in the ESG the term 'stakeholder' is used for 'customers' – a term resented, and therefore little used, in higher education. In particular students (internal stakeholders) and employers (external stakeholders) were mentioned in the ESG, as we saw above.

Stakeholders, from their different positions regarding the higher education system, are expected to hold different opinions of what educational quality in higher education means for them. As we phrased it a long time ago: 'there are (at least) as many definitions of quality in higher education as there are categories of stakeholders (such as students, teaching staff, scientific communities, government and employers), *times* the number of purposes, or dimensions, these stakeholders distinguish' (Brennan, Goedegebuure, Shah, Westerheijden & Weusthof, 1992, p. 13). Stakeholders could, therefore, bring their own perspectives, expectations and requirements to bear, which may differ from the teachers' and researchers' views. In that way, stakeholders might enrich the debate on quality in the institution. If they focus on a single dimension, however, their contribution would be less enriching; think of the caricature of

² Reports are publicly available in the 'Results' section of the project website: www.ibar-llp.eu.

employers focusing only on immediately usable skills, or the caricature of students focusing only on gaining a degree at minimum effort.

In terms of Clark's triangle of coordination (Clark, 1983), the question is if involvement of stakeholders in decision-making bodies influences the way in which decisions in higher education institutions are made: do they bring a new, more socially-oriented outlook to higher education institutions or are they mainly co-opted into a system dominated by the academic oligarchy and the state? The state usually is the main funder of higher education and thus has the power of the purse (Hood, 1983). The academic oligarchy (teachers, researchers and academic institutional leaders) has the power of expertise and they in fact control and implement the primary processes in higher education institutions. The policy assumption behind the ESG is that including stakeholder representatives from outside academia will lead to a more market-oriented coordination of higher education and that an enriched conception of quality will be used in what Massy called educational quality work (Massy, 2003).

2. Students' and employers' representation in education quality work

The study's first research question concerned the national rules that govern higher education institutions' inclusion or exclusion of stakeholders in/from decision-making or advisory bodies that have a say about quality-relevant issues. The way this research question was phrased presupposed that taking account of a stakeholders' category's viewpoints necessitates their physical presence in decision-making bodies through formal representation. This assumption applied to most countries but not to the UK, where the *QAA Code of practice* was phrased in terms of stakeholders' *requirements*, not necessarily by way of representation. How stakeholders' viewpoints are accommodated in higher education institutions' quality assurance, the QAA left to institutions' autonomous decisions – though the QAA would check it during its institutional audits.

Latvian regulations mentioned that the composition of the Councillors' Convent, an advisory body that all public higher education institutions must have, is to be regulated by the higher education institution. Similarly in Portugal, institutional rules about stakeholder representation must be made but the national legislation does not set further requirements. Such regulation puts as much autonomy in the hands of the higher education institution as the British regulations do. In the other four cases the national authorities are more prescriptive (the latter statement includes the composition of the university senate in Latvia; the freedom only applies to the Councillors' Convent).

In all countries (except the UK, as we said), one category of stakeholders was included in the national regulations on quality assurance decision-making frameworks of higher education institutions: the students. In Poland and Slovakia every other stakeholder representation was explicitly excluded; there, academic freedom and institutional autonomy were strictly protected from all kinds of external influence. In all other countries, external stakeholders were given a position in institutional decision-making regarding quality assurance as well.

Who those other, external stakeholders should be, was not always specified; for instance, in Portugal the general council of public higher education institutions must have at least 30% of external members: 'and they should be persons of recognizable merit, external to the institutions but with knowledge and experience relevant for it. These members are co-opted'. Sometimes employers were mentioned, academics from other higher education institutions, alumni, or the profession. Thus, teaching staff from other higher education institutions, according to some other countries' reports with the role of external examiners (UK, the Netherlands),³ were represented in faculties' scientific councils or in programme committees (Czech Republic, the Netherlands, UK). In the Czech Republic, a non-limitative list gave examples of stakeholders expected in boards of trustees: 'in particular coming from public life, municipal and regional authorities and the state administration' – it is remarkable that public sector representatives are given so much emphasis. Mostly, stakeholders were invited or co-opted individually. In some cases, though, employers' *organisations* played a role in examination boards (Czech Republic).

Representation of stakeholders in all cases was organised at the level of the university as a whole. Rules applying to units within, such as faculties, were also quite generally laid down. In most countries, proportions of stakeholders were specified in faculty councils, etc. Sometimes, a majority of votes for academics from within the institution was guaranteed in this way; in other cases, it was specified that students and external stakeholders together form the majority (e.g. programme committees in universities of applied science in the Netherlands).

In all countries, stakeholder representation concerned the general, supreme democratic body, i.e. the senate or equivalent. In more task-oriented forums, e.g. education and quality committees of the senate, programme management or examination boards, academics made up the majority and only students or fellow-academics were mentioned as stakeholders in them. Research-oriented boards, e.g. the Scientific Boards of faculties in the Czech Republic, also contained fellow-academics from other higher education and research institutions as external stakeholders. In Latvia national regulations stated that higher education institutions must have internal regulations for stakeholder representation on other decision-making bodies.

In countries where higher education institutions are not part of the state apparatus, boards of trustees or similar councils play a role in setting or guarding the strategy of higher education institutions. It is common for such boards to be lay-dominated (the Netherlands, Slovakia).

In most countries, all higher education institutions are treated similarly. The Netherlands, with its binary system, has separate expectations on universities of applied sciences: employers, the profession and alumni (sometimes people have double roles: alumni are profession members at the same time) are to be represented on programme

³ In parentheses, we refer to the national research teams' reports that mentioned this aspect particularly.

committees. In the Czech Republic report, it is mentioned that e.g. technical universities may include representatives of key industries in the scientific boards, next to external faculty.

The national regulations concerning stakeholders in quality-related decision-making are usually part of higher education laws (except in the UK). In some countries, the quality assurance agency's bylaws also play a major role in this respect. Besides, the importance of professional and chartered bodies in the UK in this respect ought to be mentioned, as well as the sectorial committees in the Netherlands that operate on the national level and that play a major role in defining programme requirements nationally, as well as competence profiles for each individual programme in the universities of applied science. Institutions have some flexibility to bring in their (local) specificities, but only within the overall framework. Also in other countries a similar structure can be found regarding professional fields.

Recent changes in the national rules about representation of stakeholders in higher education institutions were not noted in any of the countries involved. In that sense, we could not detect any direct influence of the ESG on higher education institutions.

Beyond applying national rules, our national reports mentioned good practices, where higher education institutions thoughtfully considered which external stakeholders are most relevant to them, and in some cases are given representation in decision-making bodies or councils. Thus, in the Czech Republic, examination boards in faculties of both public and private higher education institutions mostly host some stakeholders, especially beyond first cycle degree (bachelor) levels.

Our research in the Czech Republic and Latvia emphasised that the selection of stakeholders reflects the strategy and character of the higher education institution: the more it is professionally-oriented, the more representatives of the profession or business life are involved in councils and boards (also the Netherlands and the UK). Or the more the higher education institution is in a regional location (i.e. not one of the main cities of the country), the more regional public authorities have seats on boards (Latvia).

In Latvia it was also customary that academics from other higher education institutions are involved in committees that oversee professorial appointments. Similar arrangements of academic self-regulation apply in higher education institutions in other countries as well as safeguards against 'inbreeding' and other forms of nepotism. An additional mechanism against nepotism and other forms of corruption in Latvia is also that there are students on boards involved in academic ethics.

At the level of institutional regulations and practices, often more clarity is gained about criteria for external stakeholders to become eligible: social partners must be 'significant' (Slovakia) or 'qualified professionals' (Latvia), have 'recognizable merit' or 'knowledge and experience relevant for the higher education institution' (Portugal). Similarly, external academics should be 'senior' (Czech Republic) or have 'recognizable scientific

competencies' (Portugal). In the Slovak report, the usefulness of alumni clubs for gaining feedback on curricula was emphasised.

One of the Latvian higher education institutions showed a good practice of reaching out to gain better feeling of regional labour market needs, by engaging actively in the regional employers' union. This practice started because the institution was one of the main employers in the region, but the central management appreciated the chance to establish strong links with other employers for the benefit of practical placements, for graduate employment and for getting direct feedback on enhancement of quality of curricula and graduates.

Another good practice case was shown in Poland, where under the condition of no stakeholders being allowed on official boards, a business school had wide-ranging engagement with its working field for graduates: 'The cooperation takes place at three levels: general school level, field of research level and chair level – at the general school level there are 9 organisational units entirely or partly focused on cooperation or stakeholder relations. A significant growth in the activities of these units has been observed over the last 2–3 years.'

3. Stakeholders' influence

To find out if stakeholders were allowed more than 'token' presence we asked to what extent stakeholders' views were taken into account in issues of educational quality.

Requirements of accreditation organisations play a major role in this respect. Regularly, quality assurance agencies' rules demanded that higher education institutions take stakeholders' points of view into account in regular quality assurance processes (all countries), or during curriculum design or revisions (the Netherlands, Poland, UK) even if they do not specify that stakeholders should hold positions on councils or decision-making bodies. Clearly then, quality assurance and curriculum review are major occasions for stakeholder influence.

Stakeholders from the business world also have some influence on thesis foci and course content, especially through their involvement in teaching activities – as intended, of course, by appointing professionals as part-time teaching staff to make student learning more immediately relevant. Similar types and levels of modest influence on student learning were mentioned in all countries; channels of influence included the traditional ones (e.g. guest lectures by persons from the professional field, excursions and field trips), internships and projects or final theses in the field, etc. This type of influence often involved informal contacts between external parties and teaching staff, who reflect on the points of view of external stakeholders, and use the ideas in their academic decisions regarding course content, teaching methods (including involvement of external teachers or internships), etc. As a consequence, this type of influence is hard to trace except through time-intensive research methods such as participant observation, which were beyond the means of our study.

On a system-wide level, organisations of professions (e.g. medical association, bar association, but also trade unions) played a role in external quality assurance (mentioned for e.g. the UK and the Netherlands, above), but also through contacts with ministries which in their turn influence arrangements in 'their' higher education institutions – the latter practice was reported from the Czech Republic, Latvia and Slovakia.

Nevertheless, in Portugal's report there were clear signs that respondents in the higher education institutions were not all in agreement. Some said that external stakeholders had no influence; their lack of knowledge was given as a reason to deny them authority: 'External stakeholders may not have sufficient knowledge about the specificities of a higher education institution'. This view was mirrored in the UK report, where it said that in the case higher education institutions some data were perceived as "unhelpful" because of "lack of understanding" amongst some stakeholders.

The UK report also pointed to another reason for external stakeholders not always being seen as influential: 'consultations can feel "tokenistic".' This suggests, in other words, that in some cases stakeholder consultation rules are complied with, but that they do not affect the 'inner life' of higher education institutions; this phenomenon has been called an (unhealthy) 'culture of compliance' (van Vught, 1994). A similar (internationally present) attitude trying to limit the influence of stakeholders was exemplified in Portugal, where reference was made to academics who wanted to limit students' involvement to pedagogic matters.

Other respondents in the Portuguese cases asserted that if external stakeholders had influence, it was on strategy and finance rather than on the primary process. Besides focusing on the subjective experience that is behind many of the responses that we received (that is why we used case studies), this passage also gives a healthy reminder of the fact that institutional design matters: fellow academics or professionals from the field, engaged in feedback for curriculum review will influence higher education institutions differently than businessmen on a board of trustees or a general, university-wide advisory council – and both types of feedback may influence quality of education in one way or another.

4. Discussion

4.1 Barriers and drivers throughout Europe

In summary of the comparative analysis, we may say that throughout all countries and higher education institutions studied, stakeholders were included in education quality work. National regulations seemed to form the most important driver in this regard: higher education institutions complied with the national regulations and did not often develop internal regulations going much beyond the national frameworks. To a certain degree, then, governments and quality assurance agencies have been successful in establishing ESG-conform practices regarding the involvement of stakeholders in higher education institutions' processes around quality of education. This could be counted as

success for the Bologna Process. Yet it has to be noted that we found very few changes in regulations in recent years. In that sense then, there seems to be little influence of ESG on higher education institutions – or perhaps the ESG only codified what had already become practice through earlier quality assurance schemes (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004). However it is also possible that the main effects of the ESG with regard to stakeholders have been on external quality assurance, making a common practice out of representation of students and international (external, that is!) peers on quality assurance agencies' boards, evaluation committees, etc. A general caveat is of course that changes are always driven by a number of coinciding factors, and it is difficult to point out which changes exactly have been caused by the implementation and translation of the ESG.

Notwithstanding the relative stability of *regulations*, actual *practices* of involving stakeholders in education quality work in higher education institutions have changed in recent years: the *translations* of regulations into organisational practices have changed.

In internal as well as external quality assurance, students appeared in all countries and higher education institutions as the most prominent group of stakeholders. A 'health warning' from the UK cases in this regard is worth stressing: overseas students and part-time students remained widely under-represented – in other countries the question did not even arise. Student representatives hailed mainly from the relatively privileged group of young, full-time students studying in their home country.

On the whole, the findings in the case studies are fairly positive regarding the lack of barriers encountered in implementing the ESG expectations with regard to stakeholders. Stakeholders were included in decision-making structures and processes relevant to education quality work in all countries. There were, however, different interpretations of which categories of stakeholders – beyond students – should be involved, at which levels (institution, faculty, study programme) and in which committees or procedures. Diversity of stakeholders seems to be low in some cases: there might be room for more input from alumni, profession, regional public partners, regional or national private sector partners (employers), etc. Similarly, diversity of levels and committees/procedures where stakeholder opinions are input into institutional decision-making seems to allow for further broadening in some cases as well.

There were a few signs in the findings, though, of stakeholder involvement not always influencing decisions in higher education institutions, but being 'tokenistic', leading to superficial compliance. The barrier in such cases would seem to be the local academic culture, which is inward looking. The argument that external stakeholders lack knowledge and understanding about the higher education institution may be true, yet it may also be a way to deny legitimacy to outsiders' points of view. Somewhere in between true collegial exchange to disseminate developments throughout the higher education system as a benign interpretation, and academic collusion to block socially demanded reforms as a malign counter-interpretation, is the practice of seeing academic peers as external stakeholders. This was specially prominent in Slovakia: 'The higher

education institution research samples showed that more than 50% of external stakeholders come from other higher education institutions (Slovak as well as foreign ones)'. Yet in most countries, the evidence of increasing involvement of non-academic external stakeholders was so strong that it must be the case that, in Clark's (1983) terms, the coordination mechanism has moved a bit towards the market. Quality assurance agencies' requirements of stakeholders opinions being consulted in curriculum review processes may well be an important avenue for the actual movement towards market influence. Although the previously quoted remark that some stakeholder involvement may be mainly 'tokenistic' should warn against too great expectations of change.

4.2 East and West – Do the twain finally meet?

To a large extent, findings applied to higher education institutions and countries in East and West – with local and national variations, but there seemed to be a large common ground. Nevertheless, on a number of occasions three or four of the Central European countries in the study showed similar characteristics. Some may have had to do with the memories of communism, others may reflect longer-term Central European traditions of *étatism*.

A prime example of the reaction against communist external influence on higher education was found in the Poland and Slovakia, where representation of external stakeholders was forbidden in order to protect academic autonomy – and through that, academic freedom. Interestingly, the situation in the two other Central European countries, with similar communist histories, was different. The Czech Republic and especially Latvia were much more receptive to the idea to engage external stakeholders in higher education. If we take using the euro as a (very rough) indicator of economic reforms, Latvia since the beginning of 2014 is also in this respect in the vanguard of convergence to the West, but Slovakia has been in the euro-zone already since 2009. The governance of the higher education system clearly is separate from the general economy.

Yet in three of the Central European countries involved in this study, state and regional public authorities were seen as important stakeholders (the Czech Republic, Latvia, and Slovakia). In the Czech Republic and Latvia state or regional authorities took up positions alongside other external stakeholders, and in all three countries the ministry responsible for higher education had much influence on the behaviour of higher education institutions in the country. It was in some cases the route for professions and other employer organisations to exert influence on adaptation of curricula to changing social needs. This somewhat *étatist* approach contrasts with the more prominent and direct influence of private sector representatives in the Western European country cases. Whether this situation in Central Europe is to be interpreted as a smart step of higher education institutions to enlist public authority support in a regional strategy, or an attempt of public authorities to regain control relinquished in official higher education policies, cannot be decided on the basis of the current studies – in the former interpretation, Western universities might learn from this practice.

As I mentioned at the beginning, Hungary was not included in this study. It might have provided an interesting case to test some of the interpretations of findings in other Central European countries. Hungary's social development in at least the 1980s, with more distance to the standard social and economic model as exemplified in what then was Czechoslovakia or Russia (together encompassing three of our four countries: the Czech Republic, Latvia and Slovakia) would invite the hypothesis that its higher education system would have a more open attitude to private-sector external stakeholders. On the other hand, Hungary shares the same Central European age-old tradition of strong state involvement and strong reliance on the state that characterises the four countries in our sample. If that strand were the stronger element in the normative pillar of the institution of higher education in Hungarian society, less openness to private-sector involvement in higher education would be expected. Preliminary signals seem to show that external stakeholders are not well-represented in the external quality assurance (National report ... 2012; HAC International Advisory Board Meeting, 2012), which seems to indicate that étatism is strong in Hungary too – but the real test of the hypothesis would be a study inside higher education institutions, of course.

HE institutional autonomy is the key element of the discourses on quality assurance. The autonomy works as a sign of privilege against the strong state and also private sector and economic partners. Students and peer academic professors are included in institutional committees of quality work. The Huge regional disparities in HEI's mission cause.

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