

# **Analysing Implementation of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at Institutional Level: Outcomes of the IBAR Project**

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### **Abstract**

The IBAR project studied barriers higher education institutions in seven countries experienced to implementing the ESG part 1. Our paper reports on IBAR's major findings. After sketching our conceptual approach, we conclude that the ESG Part 1 seem to be functioning as a *codification* of many policies and practices of quality assurance in higher education institutions in the seven countries studied, thus establishing common criteria and methodologies to some extent. They may need more time (together with further adaptation of national policies in many countries) to act as *modification* of some others closer to the 'inner life' of academe, esp. learning-outcome based curricula and assessment; recognition of teaching in academic careers; serious consideration of stakeholders in education quality work.

### **Introduction**

Adoption of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) (ENQA, 2005) has been considered one of the major achievements of the Bologna Process. The ESG were adopted at the ministerial Bergen meeting in 2005 with the aim of developing comparable criteria and methodologies for quality assurance applicable across all European Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries through a set of non-prescriptive standards and guidelines while maintaining room for institutional diversity and autonomy (Westerheijden et al., 2010). More particularly, three fundamental principles were observed during the process of ESG formulation: the interests of students, employers and society more generally in delivering higher education of sufficient quality; the central importance of institutional autonomy, tempered by recognition that autonomy implies accountability responsibilities; and the need for a 'fitness for purpose' approach to external quality assurance ensuring that the burden it places on institutions is no greater than necessary (Williams, 2007).

Since 2005, implementation of the ESG has centred on national quality assurance agencies (Hopbach, 2006; Langfeldt et al., 2010; Stensaker et al., 2010) rather than on the standards and guidelines related to quality within individual higher education institutions (ESG Part 1) (cf. Loukkola and Zhang, 2010). In view of the paucity of research into quality assurance at the institutional level (Pratasavitskaya and Stensaker, 2010), this paper presents an analysis of the implementation of the ESG, Part 1, in a sample of higher education institutions in selected Bologna signatory countries. More specifically, our paper identifies main barriers to the ESG Part 1 institutional implementation and discusses their implications for research and policy practice. Our paper is based on the multi-national, EU-funded project 'Identifying barriers in promoting European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at institutional level' (IBAR) ([www.ibar-llp.eu](http://www.ibar-llp.eu)). The IBAR project, running between 2011–2013, mapped the implementation of the ESG Part 1 in 28 higher education institutions and, consequently, identified major barriers in the implementation process. We selected four higher education institutions in each participating country; varying from small to large, and where possible including research universities and more applied institutions.). The countries

were: the Czech Republic (CZ), Latvia (LV), the Netherlands (NL), Poland (PL), Portugal (PT), Slovakia (SK) and the United Kingdom (UK).

However, before proceeding to the empirically-based identification of barriers, the presentation of conceptual and methodological premises underlying the enquiry into the ESG Part 1 is in order.

### **Making sense of the ESG Part 1 conceptually and methodologically**

The ESG Part 1 in the version of 2005 contained seven quality standards for assuring quality within higher education institutions<sup>1</sup>, each standard being accompanied by guidelines for implementation (ENQA, 2005). For the purpose of this paper, ESG Part 1 was operationalised into six thematic areas through sets of research questions. The thematic areas were:

- quality and access,
- quality and students,
- quality and management/governance,
- quality and stakeholders (with special attention to students, employers and secondary education),
- quality and teaching staff,
- quality and information (see Figure 1)<sup>2</sup>.

This research design made it possible to expand the scope of the enquiry beyond the ESG Part 1 content as such, thus putting investigations in a wider context, linking them to areas typical of higher education research (cf. Tight, 2003).

*Insert Figure 1 around here*

The empirical enquiry proceeded from a set of theoretical assumptions on implementation of quality assurance processes in learning environments. First, quality is a complex, multifaceted concept prone to contestation (political, empirical), which leads to the argument that there are (at least) as many definitions of quality in higher education as there are categories of stakeholders present (Brennan et al., 1992). Second, the chain of events between the adoption of the ESG as the Bologna policy programme and quality practices of higher education institutions is considered as a policy implementation process. Third, policy implementation takes place in a multi-level, multi-actor environment; actors have positions and interests that affect how they view, use and implement the ESG. Fourth, higher education institutions are complex organisations in themselves, with decentralised structures and action principles, influenced by the professional autonomy and discretion of front-line academic staff. Fifth, the Bologna Process stands for an international policy-making process in which a policy axiom is that diversity is one of the strengths of European higher education, implying that some degree of flexibility is intended in the implementation of the ESG. From this it follows, sixth, that implementation of the Bologna programmatic goals is a decision-making process in its own right, meaning that shifts, slippage, sub-goal optimisation and other distortions of the original goals must be expected during the process, especially when implementation depends on actors' interactions in decentralised settings (Pülzl and Treib, 2007; Scharpf, 1997; Winter, 2003). For this reason, one should speak of *translation* of programmatic goals into institutional shop-floor level realities rather than of top-down oriented *implementation* (cf. Westerheijden et al., 2007). The same ideas are expressed in the metaphor of the 'implementation staircase' (Trowler, 2002).

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<sup>1</sup> These are: policy and procedures for quality assurance; approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards; assessment of students; quality assurance of teaching staff; learning resources and

<sup>2</sup> In addition, IBAR contained work packages on internal quality assurance systems and on the links between secondary and higher education.

Our empirical enquiry should lead to identification of types of barriers (external, internal) that hinder translation of the ESG Part 1 standards and guidelines in institutional settings. Our dependent variables are the practices in higher education institutions, i.e. actually existing processes and structures, rather than only on written policies. The relevant practices are: teaching and its associated processes ranging from making resources available for teaching (staff, lecture halls, equipment, etc.) to student assessment practices and awarding of diplomas or degrees, to quality assurance and enhancement of the teaching and learning process.

Methodologically, the enquiry is based on a qualitative approach combining in-depth study of relevant policy documents (laws, by-laws, regulations, rules, reports, codes of practice and the like) with semi-structured interviews. Around 500 interviews, complemented on occasion by other means of qualitative information enquiry (e.g. focus groups), have been conducted across the sample of 28 higher education institutions, with several categories of actors (i.e. teaching staff, managers, students, administrators, policy advisors) for each thematic area. The interviews were structured by the research questions. On average, we interviewed 15–20 respondents per institution for each thematic area. Repeated interviews of the same person(s) occurred in a number of cases for different research themes; national-level interviews were added as necessary.

### **Implementing the ESG Part 1: Major empirical findings**

Starting with access to higher education, for most of higher education institutions participating in the enquiry, this area has continued to be ‘state-owned’ with governments retaining steer over the expanding size and composition of student enrolments as well as the costs of the access system. In this respect, some higher education institutions surveyed (in UK, NL, PT) mentioned systemic constraints on their autonomy in terms of developing distinct, access-oriented strategic decision-making and policy profiles. For example, Portuguese higher education institutions were steered away from focusing on quantity to more diversified offer of programmes and more diverse student participation, which seemed to curtail higher education institutions’ ability to select students in particular subject areas. For some higher education institutions in Central and Eastern Europe (CZ, SK) equity of access for students from ethnic minorities and lower socio-economic backgrounds was an issue. Current statutory measures were deemed insufficient; the more so in the absence of any targeted financial provision to redress the imbalance (PL higher education institutions). Lastly, effects of the financial crisis factor significantly impacted capacities of UK and LV higher education institutions to admit new entrants, leading to cases of institutional instability owing to staff cuts and re-organisation.

Unlike access issues, procedures of *student assessment* were governed by higher education institutions themselves, devolved to within-institutional levels, leading to variety within the national framework regulations in place. However, tendencies to formalise and centralise assessment designs were noticed at UK higher education institutions and some NL higher education institutions under analysis. This was due to rising pressures for transparency and accountability, e.g. due to the UK’s National Student Survey. Portuguese higher education institutions reported formalised provisions for assessment of special-regime students, i.e. working students (class attendance, exemptions from some tasks subject to assessment). Regarding application of formative and summative assessment, the enquiry results seemed to be split between higher education institutions placing greater weight on formative approaches (some PT, LV, SK higher education institutions) and those reporting preference for summative assessment mainly due to massification pressures (some UK, NL and CZ higher education institutions). Significant differences among sampled higher education institutions were found in institutionalisation of *learning outcomes* based curricula and assessment methods, with UK higher education institutions most advanced, NL and PL higher education institutions in transition stages and CZ, SK and LV higher education institutions having started on the process. Portuguese higher education institutions reported

that institutionalisation of learning outcomes oriented assessment designs was complicated by linguistic issues.

Coming to *governance* issues, all analysed higher education institutions had distinct policies on quality assurance. Somewhat predictably, bottom-up quality approaches did not prevail within our sample. Rather, most higher education institutions surveyed showed a combination of top-down and hybrid quality approaches (CZ, NL, PL, LV). Only in the UK, the prevailing approach appeared to be top-down whilst PT institutions prevalently seemed to apply hybrid quality principles. In SK, a combination seemed to emerge of bottom-up and hybrid quality cultures. Our research findings on quality assurance governance structures thus pointed to problematic alignment, arising from tensions between central administration and the shop-floor level. For instance, at some Czech higher education institutions, there has been an increase of the role played by top management in quality issues with the decision making culture promoting top-down arrangements, which somewhat hindered shop-floor level quality initiatives. With regard to *learning resources and infrastructure*, all higher education institutions surveyed systematically improved their material and technological base by equipping teaching facilities, laboratories, libraries, etc. On this matter, Central and East-European higher education institutions (LV, SK, CZ, PL) particularly stressed the importance of EU structural funds.

Throughout all 28 higher education institutions, *stakeholders* were involved in quality activities. National regulations seemed to form the most important 'filter' for stakeholder category representation; in this regard, higher education institutions reviewed complied with national regulations and did not often develop internal regulations going much beyond national regulatory frameworks. In internal as well as external quality assurance, students appeared as the most prominent group of stakeholders in all higher education institutions surveyed. However, a 'health warning' came from the UK studies: overseas students, mature and part-time students remained widely under-represented. Also, student representation was sometimes 'tokenistic', not giving real influence (UK, NL); in PT similar remarks were made about employers' representatives. In fact, academic self-regulation remained strong, even if it included 'stakeholder' colleagues (typically SK higher education institutions with more than 50% of external stakeholders coming from other higher education institutions). Yet, evidence from most higher education institutions pointed strongly to increasing involvement of non-academic external stakeholders, so likely, in Clark's (1983) terms, the coordination mechanism has inched towards the market. Importantly, most analysed higher education institutions reported low or absence of awareness of the ESG Part 1 among internal stakeholders (teaching staff, administrators, students) except for a quite limited number of top-level managerial staff (most clearly: CZ case).

Relations with *secondary education* got limited attention in national regulation, beyond information provision (e.g. national programme rankings and websites), though examples were found of cooperation on national curricula, qualifications frameworks and on widening participation. National qualification frameworks (NQFs) have focused attention on curricula and national examinations but have not to date fostered greater alignment between tertiary and secondary sectors. Nevertheless, the transition to the first year of higher education was given special attention in a number of countries. Moreover, we found rather more local collaboration between tertiary institutions and feeder secondary schools. Typical examples included collaborative teaching, summer schools, information provision, open days, teacher education links with school networks, etc.

Closer investigation into the status of *academic staff* showed diversity in recruitment patterns, with higher education institutions in Central and Eastern European countries (LV, PL, SK, CZ) tending to follow national legislation and accreditation criteria primarily related to scientific degrees, whereas in Western higher education institutions studied (UK, PT, NL) recruitment seemed to be more closely related to institutional, faculty, or departmental strategic needs. The same division was observed concerning strategies of staff motivation.

Here, West-European higher education institutions (UK, PT, NL) stressed increasing internal motivation, based on the presumption that teachers are intrinsically motivated. In contrast, Central and Eastern European higher education institutions indicated the effectiveness of external, mainly financial, incentives. Regarding staff training, institutional attitudes varied from conducting obligatory systematic policy aimed at raising staff qualifications (UK, NL, PT, LV), via occasional activities determined by funding for this purpose (PL) to rather ad-hoc measures (CZ, SK). The issue of research drift was a reality at all analysed higher education institutions, but especially stressed by staff of Central and Eastern European higher education institutions.

Finally, the sample showed differences in handling *information*. Whilst all higher education institutions surveyed had institutionalised some systems for data collection, analysis and disclosure, their degree of maturity differed. In comparison, UK and NL higher education institutions attained higher participation rates in internal (quality assurance) student surveys and exhibited more developed alumni tracking systems including employment destinations. Most other higher education institutions surveyed (PT, PL, SK, CZ, LV) struggled with low student participation rates and with reliable long-term monitoring of alumni. Interestingly, although all 28 higher education institutions paid attention to disclosing information to the public, they seemed to make relatively little effort to verify information objectiveness and impartiality.

### **Concluding remarks on barriers to the ESG**

All thematic areas showed that higher education institutions pay attention to issues covered by the ESG Part 1. Direct influence of the ESG was almost never visible, i.e. we did not come across quality assurance policies or practices in higher education institutions changed in recent years explicitly to 'implement' the ESG. National policy acted as a 'filter' in some areas, especially for access, governance of quality assurance (including position of stakeholders) and staff appointment and promotion rules.

Moreover national influence was not in full convergence, but went in different directions within the broad common framework.

Thus, staff promotion criteria and national salary policies in the Central and Eastern European countries did not give room to higher education institutions to focus much on teaching performance. In some Central and Eastern European countries, national policies on equitable access of minorities might be seen as pushing in directions intended by the Bologna Process and (implicitly) by the ESG, but could then be seen as a barrier by higher education institutions, especially if national regulations were not supported by other policy tools such as funding. Western higher education institutions sometimes also saw national policies as barriers, more precisely: barriers to institutional autonomy. But those national policies might further the ESG more than leaving higher education institutions freedom to comply—or not. This might apply to access, and such pressure also seems to play regarding efforts to gain and disseminate information on quality. Concerning the latter, the UK and NL seem to be leading, which fits their longstanding NPM approaches to public policy (stress on accountability and transparency) rather than a larger degree of implementation of the ESG.

Different national approaches also could explain the different degree of implementing learning outcome-based curricula, where UK higher education institutions still maintained a head start compared to those in other countries. Yet curriculum (its regular review) and assessment are more influenced by higher education institutions than by national policies.

While we tried to study practices rather than written policies, in particular in studying stakeholders we encountered signs that we tended to find official policies and statements indicating policies looking better than actual practice might be ('tokenism').

There was not a clear-cut East–West distinction in all cases, yet it was visible in several thematic areas. Central and Eastern European higher education institutions appeared to be characterised by a culture focusing on academic freedom and academic autonomy, while in Western countries these values were less important and managerial autonomy and NPM-values like accountability seemed stronger. This was especially the case in the UK and NL, implying a South–North sub-division with PT in a different position than the former two. It is not always a matter of NPM influence, though: concerning summative assessment the UK and NL are joined by CZ, implying that massification of higher education has an independent influence on academe.

Overall then, the ESG Part 1 seem to be functioning as a *codification* of many policies and practices of quality assurance in higher education institutions in the even countries studies, thus establishing common criteria and methodologies to some extent. They may need more time (together with further adaptation of national policies in many countries) to act as *modification* of some others closer to the 'inner life' of academe, esp. learning-outcome based curricula and assessment; recognition of teaching in academic careers; serious consideration of stakeholders in quality assurance and curriculum review.

Moreover, we still await a good answer to the question if the ESG could deliver both as cross-national instrument for capacity building, especially for higher education institutions in transition and post-transition countries, e.g. the Balkans, post-Soviet countries, also some higher education institutions in Central Europe, and for promotion of trust in higher education all over the EHEA.

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Figure 1: Correspondence between IBAR themes and ESG Part 1

Thematic area	ESG Part 1
Quality and Access	ESG 1.1 – <i>Policy and procedures for quality assurance</i> ESG 1.6 – <i>Information systems</i>
Quality and Student Assessment	ESG 1.3 – <i>Assessment of students</i>
Quality and Management/Governance	ESG 1.1 – <i>Policy and procedures for quality assurance</i> ESG 1.2 – <i>Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards</i> ESG 1.5– <i>Learning resources and student support</i>
Quality and Stakeholders	ESG 1.1 - <i>Policy and procedures for quality assurance</i> ESG 1.2 - <i>Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards</i>
Quality and Teaching Staff	ESG 1.4 – <i>Quality assurance of teaching staff</i>
Quality and Information	ESG 1.6 – <i>Information systems</i> ESG 1.7 – <i>Public information</i>

Adopted from: Rosa, M.J. & Amaral, A. (2013)