

Report of the ENQA working group on the impact of quality assurance for higher education

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1. Introduction

In a world of limited resources, public and private organisations are requested to periodically undertake analyses about the impact of their activities. To respond to the interest and needs in many agencies to find ways to measure and evaluate the impact of quality assurance (QA) procedures, the ENQA Board decided to establish a related working group in Spring 2012. When the group was established, the main task was to reflect on the impact of quality assurance in higher education, particularly on the impact of external quality assurance procedures.

The working group set off with the aim of preparing a document to inspire possible strategies to measure the impact of quality assurance in higher education. Those strategies should take into account, among other elements, partners' involvement, methodologies, the use of indicators, priorities, areas for analysis, and possible obstacles. The preparation of the working group document would be based on current best practices on measuring impact. Debates and explorations of good practices made it soon clear, however, that these types of activities are relatively new and restricted to a limited number of QA agencies. In addition, the European Commission has been co-funding since 2013 the IMPALA project, which aims at understanding how the impact of quality assurance in higher education could be measured. The working group decided to leave this structured research to the European project and to recommend, at the same time, to all responsible bodies to invite specialists to conduct further research in this area. These considerations led the working group to reformulate its mandate.

It had become clear that there was a need to understand first of all what kind of impact QA agencies wish to have, and what kind of strategies they have in order to achieve those potential impacts. Indeed, it was clear that expectations regarding impact were often explicitly present in the missions and visions of European QA agencies, while the actual measurement of impact seemed much less comparable and less extended, and possibly less mature.

After an observation of the agencies' mission statements, the group worked on a matrix of potential areas of impact. The matrix shows not only the current aims, but possible new areas in which QA agencies could operate in the future looking for additional impacts.

The work done by the working group resulted also in a collection of references that can inspire the readers on what kind of tools can be developed to better understand what quality assurance looks for and how effective and efficient it is in a certain higher education system.

2. The ENQA working group on impact of quality assurance

In Spring 2012 ENQA launched, at the request of some of its member agencies, a working group on the impact of quality assurance. The main focus of the working group was initially to reflect on the impact of quality assurance in higher education, and in particular on the impact of external quality assurance procedures at different levels: on national policies; on institutional management; on the quality of the educational process; and the impact of feedback mechanisms on the work of the agencies themselves. Because of the topicality and relevance of the theme to several QA agencies within the ENQA membership, it attracted significant interest and involved, in some form or another, 20 QA agencies from 14 different countries (see Chapter 8). The group met seven times between April 2012 and July 2015.

The analysis of the impact of quality assurance in higher education is influenced by many factors and is therefore very complex and challenging. The challenge starts with the question “what is quality?”, and the different answers that can be given - and indeed are given - to that question. When discussing impact, being able to distinguish the role of quality assurance and eventual other influencing factors in promoting change in higher education or in improving quality becomes relevant but not easy to address. Quite naturally, while external quality assurance may well be a catalyst for change in higher education, there are other initiators of change that can be highly influential, too: new regulations, alternative funding rules and methods, or alterations in market incentives and needs. A further complication arises if not only short term consequences, but longer term impacts, are to be identified and analysed, as quality of higher education is a very dynamic concept.

Aware of the complexity of the topic, the group decided to work on four specific goals:

- A) Understanding impact and the relevance of demonstrating impact through the mission statements of QA agencies.
- B) Identifying and comparing the mechanisms implemented by QA agencies in order to measure the impact of their actions.
- C) Analysing current changes and adaptations of external quality assurance methodologies and the relationship of these changes to their expected impact.
- D) Initiating a reflection on the current and potential areas of impact for quality assurance mechanisms.

Although issues such as the amount of resources to be devoted to external quality assurance procedures according to different parameters; the concept of “value for money”; or the use of efficient and effective procedures are important elements when discussing impact, the working group decided not to address these areas specifically during its mandate, but suggests to incorporate them in future analyses.

To collect relevant information related to the second goal, the working group launched two surveys. The first survey – “Collection of practices on how to measure impact of External Quality Assurance Processes” - was addressed to the QA agencies represented in the working group, with the objective of identifying different ways in which the agencies measure the impact of their activities and procedures. The information was collected in June 2012, and a total of 18 agencies, from 12 countries, answered the questionnaire.

Another, addressed simultaneously to the same agencies, tried to look at the reasons that lead an agency to change its quality assurance methodologies. However, it became clear very soon that no specific correlation could be made from the data collected. In other words, the agencies

reported changes based more on political shifts or funding issues, for instance, rather than an identifiable link between an action, such as an external quality assurance procedure, and impact. However, some thoughts based on this second survey are presented in Chapter 3.

The group developed also a matrix to map areas of possible impact and how those impacts could be linked to different stakeholder groups. The matrix was then used to identify the position of the agencies concerning the different areas of impact in the present, as well as concerning future expectations. It became clear, however, that the matrix was too complex to use in a situation where many of the agencies are only starting to measure or define their impact.

The relevance of impact for the mission statements of the agencies was investigated through desk research of the mission statements of all ENQA member agencies in 2013. The analysis of the mission statements was considered relevant, as it gave an indication of how agencies focus their work and highlight their expectations.

3. Findings

3.1 Understanding impact according to QA agencies' mission statements

When the words *Quality Assurance for Higher Education* appear in the name of a body officially recognised for that purpose, the public tends to expect that the services provided to institutions will have significant impact. In general, stakeholders and society as a whole identify QA agencies as key organisations in the process of quality improvement, acting as an important promoter of change. Although one of the principles for quality assurance in the EHEA, as stated in the ESG, is the primary responsibility of higher education institutions for the quality of their provision and its assurance, it is possible to find expectations linking the work of agencies with immediate results, if possible like a just-in-time service for quality enhancement.

Whereas the link between quality assurance and automatic improvement in the sector seems to be an optimistic position, a thoughtful view considers the provision of information on quality and quality assurance as a relevant tool to generate impact in the mid and long term. In fact, quality assurance promotes a progressive change in the managerial culture of higher education institutions, fostering a culture of quality.

What kind of impact are QA agencies promoting? An observation of the mission statements of QA agencies is required to shed light on this question. And why is the mission so important? Because it is an authentic way of saying what is important about an institution: a statement about what you do and why you do it. An institution's mission is the blueprint which provides the basic conceptual framework for the entire organisation. A mission which provides appropriate direction and linkages can serve as the basis for subsequent measures of institutional effectiveness. Having a detailed view of the mission statements is therefore essential for detecting alignments and discrepancies between internal aims and external expectations.

In September 2013, mission statements of 32 QA agencies from 20 countries were analysed. In different cases different kinds of documents (strategic plans, self-evaluation documents, and external evaluation reports) were used depending on what was found on the agencies' websites. The mission statements were analysed in order to understand what purposes the QA agencies had brought forward.

At first sight, European QA agencies' mission statements are normally composed of five core elements:

- A self-identification, "who we are";
- What kind of services are provided;
- What sort of values and principles are adopted by the agency;
- In which areas (disciplines, type of education, territory) the agency works;
- And, in many cases, an identification of the possible impact of those activities.

With regard to the five major components, there is a need to clarify that they do not necessarily appear in all QA agencies' mission statements or, if so, the intensity in which they are formulated is diverse. In any case, what is observed in all mission statements is a synthetic explanation of what the agencies do. The emphasis on the "doing" reflects the ESG guidelines, namely that "the statements should make clear that the external quality assurance process is a major activity of the agency and that there exists a systematic approach to achieving its goals and objectives" (ENQA, 2009: 25).

Following the expectations of the stakeholders, agencies clearly address the purpose of

improvement of quality of higher education in their mission statements as becomes evident from the following examples:

*“The QA agency is to **contribute** to the maintenance and **enhancement** of the quality of national higher education”.*

or

*“The QA agency mission is to **promote quality** in the field of education”.*

Both statements are clear about the way in which the agency exists to enhance the quality in higher education, but they do not escape from a certain degree of ambiguity, because contribution is an action that can be shared with other bodies, and promotion can be seen as an action to increase the position of anybody or anything - but it can be also understood as a dissemination exercise.

The promotion of quality improvement is further detailed in the nature of actions contributing to this purpose of quality assessment. The following examples highlight this idea:

*“The QA agency’s mission is to **help ensure and enhance educational quality through controlling and stimulating the enhancement of educational quality in the universities**”.*

From this perspective, the quality improvement of teaching and learning, monitoring and control brings forward an interesting dilemma - how do the purposes of improvement, compliance, and control interact? In turn, this problem brings forward the discussion about different dimensions of the concept of quality, namely accountability and improvement, which are not necessarily clashing. It may be argued that they are not “two-ends of a continuum”.

Another statement put on the table the issue of introduction of best practices as a tool for improvement. The introduction of the concept of best practices advances ideas such as benchmarking, efficiency, and standards, in confrontation with the assumption that best practices can provide solutions for all problems.

*“The QA agency mission is to **promote, in collaboration with all higher education institutions, the introduction of best practices, allowing for enhancement in the quality of teaching in each institution**”.*

or

*“The agency mission is **to ensure that the study programmes organised by institutions are subject to regular evaluations, highlighting best practice and any inadequacies or problems needing to be resolved**”*

This idea of quality enhancement or improvement appears in many (15 out of 32) mission statements and can be thus considered an *appropriate* purpose for QA agencies’ mission statements. There are some current alternative proposals in which improvement of higher education is not explicitly mentioned. A less normative phrasing can be found in the following case:

*“The agency’s primary goal is to **provide an expert and objective judgement of the quality of higher education**”.*

The idea of providing tools to the stakeholders can be complemented by mentioning the principle of transparency and the idea of binding expectations associated with the role of QA agencies and stability:

“The agency is open, clear, and transparent towards society and all concerned, especially the institutions and the students”.

The next example indicates an approach that seems to facilitate impact analysis of the work of QA agencies. In this case the agency does not proclaim to enhance the quality of higher education, as such, but the quality assurance *systems* in higher education institutions:

*“The agency **supports higher education institutions in developing their quality assurance** system and thus contributes to the development of quality culture in the national academic community”.*

Although there is a need to demonstrate the impact of external quality assurance, the previous reflections about the agencies’ mission statements suggest having a careful look at the quality of quality assurance services. It is interesting to note that although QA agencies use different tools of evaluation (such as institutional review, programme evaluation, internal quality assurance system audit, etc.) and have an impact on different levels of higher education institutions (administration, faculty and staff), this is not reflected in their missions.

Some agencies focus their activities on certain fields (engineering, health sciences, etc.), although their missions are much wider with only one agency limiting its mission to a specific field:

*“Agencies’ legal missions are respectively: the evaluation and assessment of higher education institutions **in the field of engineering, computer science, applied mathematics, project management, etc.**, the development of quality in engineering education...”*

In this case it may also be easier to analyse the impact, as the agency’s field of activities is limited.

Conclusion

A good understanding of a QA agency’s activities, as listed in the mission statement, becomes the starting point for the analysis of the impact of external quality assurance; or of activities that can be effectively implemented; or just considered as a potential area to be developed in the future or under particular request. The analysis of mission statements provides the pattern of actions developed by QA agencies.

In a very schematic presentation the work of QA agencies is about processing information. In agencies’ mission statements, five interesting components can be found to promote the quality in gathering and processing information:

- a) Collaboration with higher education institutions, facilitating the institutions’ primary responsibility for quality assurance;
- b) Consideration of diversity and complexity in the provision of higher education;
- c) Permanent development of expertise, including an updated concept of what quality is;
- d) Internationalisation of QA agencies’ core activities; and
- e) Orientation to stakeholders’ needs.

It is clear that the first direct impact of quality assurance should be on how education - teaching and learning - is provided. However, there are expected impacts in other areas as well. Indeed, external quality assurance may have an impact at the management level, too. In this case, some approaches seem to propose that a good management and governance scheme is a strong condition for quality in higher education. On the other hand, the introduction of new standards at the national level can also produce systemic impact. A clear example of this can be observed in the reformulation and modernisation of national legislation.

The interest in the observation of impact of quality assurance seems not to have been sufficiently considered when agencies’ mission statements were formulated. With great ambition and expectations, QA agencies often mention the generic goal of improving the quality of higher education, in line with the objectives of the European Higher Education Area. The reality shows that such ambitious missions need to be translated into more detailed targets in order to measure their effectiveness. The question is whether policymakers and stakeholders

are looking for such concrete impact of QA agencies when designing and implementing external quality assurance.

3.2 QA agencies measuring the impact of their procedures

For some QA agencies, quality in quality assurance schemes means impact, and impact can be considered synonymous with quality enhancement in higher education. This can be a rational deduction in a simplified scheme. The reality is a bit more complicated if we consider the context in which QA agencies work. The presence of intermediate agents and/or conditions between the output of the agencies and the implementation of improvement measures presumably introduces complexity in the previous assumption.

Furthermore, the temptation to conceive quality assurance procedures for higher education in similar terms as the ones existing in the industry is a limitation when they do not take into account the social dimension of education and the difficulties to define quality in this field. Many causes contribute to the complexity of higher education and higher education services. One example is the dual nature of higher education as a public and private good, and the need to combine international competition with the need to consider national policies for the promotion of public goals such as social equity. In short, quality assurance for higher education - although inspired by methodologies used in the industry - has to be conceived differently because of the related complex political implications.

In very simplified terms, the role of QA agencies is to ensure that higher education institutions meet government requirements and expectations and the needs of the stakeholders and the society at large. This is done by processing different types of information in order to generate new knowledge (on the quality of education, on improvement opportunities, etc.) and about channelling that knowledge to appropriate audiences.

Nevertheless, the work of the agencies should not be limited to this simplistic interpretation, as agencies offer other very interesting opportunities in addition to the processing of information, such as the promotion of stakeholders' participation at different stages or the training of relevant audiences on what quality assurance is.

As a multidimensional concept, "impact" appeared to be understood by the agencies surveyed as:

- an interaction between the development of external quality assurance approaches by the agencies and the feedback received (from higher education institutions and stakeholders) aiming at improving processes and methodologies associated with the review approaches used and
- processes/methodologies developed to measure the (short-term) impact of external quality assurance on higher education institutions.

A thorough analysis of the mission statements of QA agencies provided the working group with some interesting components, most of them included in the ESG, for interpreting what quality in external quality assurance activities is. In particular, this is useful to deal with the production of knowledge on the quality of higher education and its improvement and about the dissemination of this knowledge for appropriate audiences.

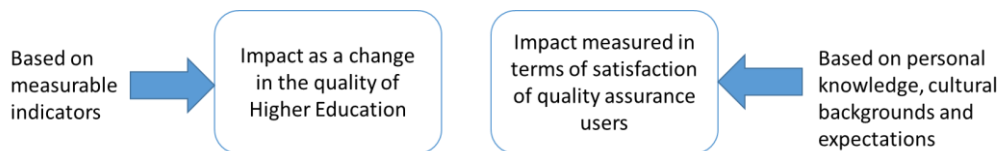
The process of channelling information among the audiences suggests that expert judgements on the quality of higher education should be addressed to/ tend to:

- Advise on quality improvement,
- Protect the users from inadequate provision,

- Formulate suggestions to policymakers,
- Promote autonomy of higher education institutions, and
- Generate trust for international stakeholders.

Based on the assumption of the importance of quality of quality assurance, the working group agreed on the importance of measuring the consistency of this idea. Thus a number of European QA agencies were consulted about the methodology to measure impacts of their activities.

The results of the survey of QA agencies makes clear the need to distinguish between the impact of the quality assurance mechanisms in terms of positive changes in higher education, from the impact that can be measured in terms of satisfaction expressed by the academic community, stakeholders, reviewers, and staff of the agencies, as users of the information and procedures provided by the QA agencies. Indeed, many agencies have tools to get information from the users about the quality of the service in terms of training, clarity of guidelines, communication between the actors, quality of the reports, and so on, but not about the impact in terms of accountability or enhancement of higher education institutions. Naturally, the impact of quality assurance measured in terms of change in higher education should be treated carefully because of the complexity of what constitutes quality in the field of higher education.



A preliminary analysis of the agency survey results does not allow for a clear identification of suitable and adequate practices to measure the impact of external quality assurance in terms of quality improvement, for example by taking into account certain indicators. These difficulties are obvious except for those indicators that refer to quality assurance practices. In other words, what can be measured is, for example, the evolution of indicators related to the quality of information about higher education study programmes (as a result of a quality assurance process) or about the participation of stakeholders in the management of higher education (as a consequence of quality assurance mechanisms). This is, to some extent, reasonable because the issue of conceiving quality in higher education as a list of indicators and their values is still under debate.

The environment in which higher education operates modulates the priorities and the weight of the used indicators. Some scholars have recalled, recently, the speech of John Stuart Mill in Saint Andrews University¹ in 1867 in which he explicitly mentioned that

Universities are not intended to teach the knowledge required to fit men for some special mode of gaining their livelihood. Their object is not to make skilful lawyers, or physicians or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings.

This is very different from what is presented today for universities' functions in which, for example, employability is a key indicator of quality. The current scenario propitiates more attention to what users and stakeholders think about quality assurance.

In many situations QA agencies put in place ad hoc surveys to evaluate the quality of teaching and/or research, the core missions of higher education institutions. In the main the surveys address the services of external quality assurance (in all its dimensions) as provided by the

¹ Inaugural address delivered to the University of St. Andrews by John Stuart Mill, rector of the University. 1 February 1867

agency, assessing the quality of services in terms of how processes are organised and experienced by the assessed units, the reviewers, and the rest of the stakeholders. Some QA agencies' surveys, nevertheless, include questions related to the perception of impact of external quality assurance (i.e. "to what extent do you think the accreditation report will help you to improve your programme?").

Analysing the examples provided by the agencies, it appears that the review processes are expected to generate effects on the quality of higher education within higher education institutions, as well as on the work of the agency, by providing better information to support enhancement. Additionally, accreditation (i.e. the maintenance of agreed standards) appears to be associated with an impact on reputational risk. From a different angle, there are a number of issues that the sampled agencies identified in relation to the impact of external quality assurance exercises. Those issues associate changes in practices with regard to the improvement of review processes, underlining the interconnection between agencies and higher education institutions. In turn, this interconnection emphasises the influence of higher education institutions, including of its stakeholders, on changes in practices developed by agencies.

Despite the perceived interconnection between agencies and higher education institutions, the impact of quality assurance is difficult to ascribe to the exclusive influence of external reviews (Harvey, 2006). While accreditation (maintenance of suitable standards) and enhancement (improvement) might be among the formal aims of the quality assurance exercise, the establishment of the causal relationships is complicated.

The overview of the impact of external quality assurance exercises shows that:

- The impact analysis of external quality assurance processes deals with a wide range of expectations emerging from higher education institutions and stakeholders, including QA agencies, contributing thus to an overlap of the concept of impact of external quality processes for higher education institutions and for QA agencies;
- External quality assurance processes developed by the agencies surveyed do not seem to directly feed into the assessment of the impact of those processes. For example, at the levels identified in the survey, it is difficult to envisage any processes with a direct impact on national policies. Rather, the impact on institutional management; the quality of the educational process; and the prevention of risk might be seen as examples of different types of actual impact;
- Existing processes and methodologies aiming to measure impact of quality assurance
 - o involve higher education institutions' policy actors and external stakeholders, such as graduates;
 - o use indicators focusing on the accreditation criteria and in some cases research output;
 - o are associated with multiple patterns, for instance, feedback, follow-up, enhancement, accreditation, comparison, perceptions, etc.;
 - o use qualitative (interviews, perceptions, research results, ex-ante evaluation, meta-evaluation) and quantitative (survey) methods.

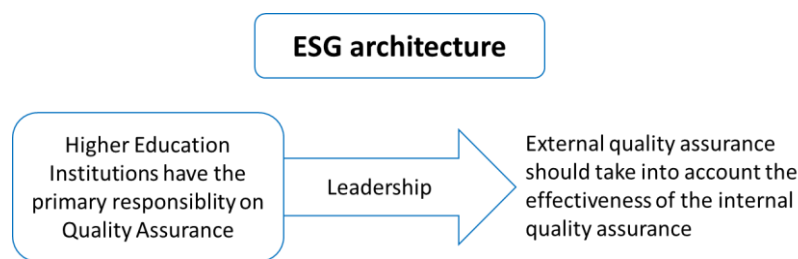
Concerning this type of analysis, the working group underlines that impact measures of quality assurance might need to be developed on an independent basis (even if promoted by the QA agencies themselves) in order to avoid biased reactions by higher education institutions and stakeholders on the one hand and the difficulties associated with the interconnection that feeds the output of quality assessment (visible in higher education institutions) to the input of a system (visible in the agencies) on the other hand.

3.3 Methodological changes and adaptations in quality assurance procedures and expected impacts

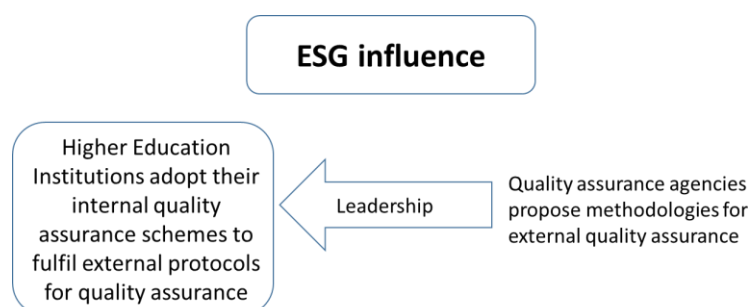
The analysis of the reasons behind methodological changes in external quality assurance should provide indications on how far QA agencies wish to take one or another methodology as engines of impact. The exploration conducted by the working group offers some interesting insight into the importance of leadership in the implementation of methodological changes in quality assurance. Obviously, there is a preoccupation to offer better methodologies, but the importance of external mandates is the most powerful reason to introduce new approaches.

The interest of agencies to comply with the ESG (and thus the ENQA membership requirements) appears clearly stated in the working group's survey on agencies' methodological changes. In that respect, methodological changes measure the will to be aligned with the ESG and, from a different point of view, the value of membership organisations such as ENQA.

It is therefore clear that ENQA reviews of QA agencies have an impact on how external quality assurance bodies act and work in the sector. This finding suggests that a similar interrelation may be observed between QA agencies and the reviewed institutions and programmes. At the same time, the ESG underline that the primary responsibility for quality assurance lies with higher education institutions, therefore, leadership on quality assurance under the ESG architecture includes, to some extent, a bottom-up approach, i.e. from internal quality assurance towards external quality assurance.



However, leadership also flows in the opposite direction. In that respect, there is a relevant influence of external references in the development of internal quality assurance.



As a result of the discussions within the working group, some members considered a possible link between methodological changes and the expectation to develop less expensive mechanisms in a time of financial restrictions. The working group suggested to conduct internal surveys among agencies' officers and project managers in order to discover more about their personal perceptions. It was however not possible to carry out this investigation given the current workplan of the working group.

3.4 Impact areas for quality assurance procedures

Quality assurance for higher education offers a wide range of possible areas of impact. The working group has considered areas that are currently targeted in mission statements of QA agencies but also other alternative areas that could be promoted in the future with new policies and strategies. In that respect, a matrix (shown below) was prepared to collect the current perceptions of QA agencies on the distribution of impacts for different areas - and consequently in relation to different stakeholders.

One of the goals of the matrix is to confront QA agencies with their current mission and vision and to have a holistic view of their strategies for impact. With the matrix, agencies can view and consider in different cells “who the agencies want to influence” or “what is the proposed direction of impact” or “which types of quality assurance activities or outcomes are expected to have (which kind of) impacts”. The agencies may therefore find the matrix a useful tool in shaping a road-map for impact analysis and would allow QA agencies to design their own strategy and to view what impact strategies other agencies might have.

The matrix drafted by the working group combines possible areas of impact with different stakeholders. Each cell represents the position of the agency regarding the impact of quality assurance described in two components:

1. the level of interest of the combination between impact and the stakeholder; and
2. activities to measure the impact, including those already implemented as well as those planned or to be considered in the future.

		Stakeholders		
		1	2	3...
Areas of impact				
A		Cell		
B...				

The working group identified seven main areas of impact:

- Teaching and learning processes
- Research
- Institutional management (internal quality assurance, institutional structure, institutional strategy, etc.)
- National higher education and quality assurance system
- Public confidence
- Internationalisation of higher education (cross-border higher education, international quality assurance of higher education, etc.)
- Satisfaction on quality assurance processes

The working group also proposed a list of possible beneficiaries/stakeholders to be linked with the impact of quality assurance:

- Students
- Staff of higher education institutions
- Reviewers
- Employers
- QA agencies
- Review managers
- Managers of higher education institutions
- Governments
- Society at large

- The international community

The information collected in the matrix shows some common tracks on how agencies consider the measurement of impact of their external quality assurance processes. At the moment QA agencies seem to concentrate in investigating impact on teaching and learning processes and institutional management. There seems to be, however, a trend to consider also new areas of impact, such as public confidence and internationalisation of higher education.

In the main, the analysis shows similitudes in linking the impact areas with certain stakeholders across agencies. Students, academic staff, and review managers, together with reviewers, have been selected by the QA agencies as the key players in supporting impact of quality assurance. On the other hand, managers of higher education institutions have, according to the views of the agencies surveyed, a secondary role in terms of impact. In a future perspective, students seem to keep firmly their place among the key stakeholders, but QA agencies expect a more relevant role for institutional managers and more attention to the views of the employers in the future. It is important to keep in mind for future considerations and research that stakeholders are considered overall to play an important role in generating and enhancing impact of quality assurance activities.

The progressive implementation and development of external quality assurance in higher education makes it necessary to reflect on the need for QA agencies to offer something more than simply mechanisms for accountability and enhancement. More and more, QA agencies are requested to play the role of a “moderator of interests”. If the satisfaction of stakeholders is an incorporated element of the impact of quality assurance then the moderation of the stakeholders’ interests becomes more relevant.

The identification of the stakeholders’ expectations and their empowerment in external quality assurance is a crucial factor. Expectations from stakeholders are not always formulated as a single block, and they are rarely static. Sometimes there is an invisible trade-off in quality assurance matters, an example of which might be the number of graduates and their quality. There is another relevant trade-off between the quality of a programme and the equal distribution of resources among the rest of the programmes provided by the same institution.

With the empowerment of stakeholders, the weight of the public funders in quality and quality assurance components is balanced and new priorities in quality assurance schemes emerge. Clearly, the teaching and learning experience, as well as exposure to practical situations, seem highly important from the student perspective. Other stakeholders, on the other hand, may expect that external quality assurance procedures support the growing recognition of study programmes worldwide.

It is also important to consider that the impact of quality assurance may be direct or indirect. While the direct impact can simply be understood in terms of quality assurance contributing to the improvement of quality of higher education, it is less easy to define possible indirect impacts. Is, for example, the adaptation of personal expectations (“what is quality”) or individual behaviours (new ways to manage higher education, e.g. the need to consult stakeholders) evidence of an indirect impact of external quality assurance? If, for example, quality assurance processes transmit the view that student-centred learning is an important factor of quality in higher education, this may have an impact on what kind of support student-centred learning gets at the institutional level and may boost its implementation. Such a case would be a clear example of quality assurance promoting cultural change. Another example can be seen in the implementation of new technologies in higher education. Today the use of virtual reality may

not yet be a must, but if quality assurance will in the future set specific standards on the use of technology, this may change personal expectations on what is quality and how it can be assured.

4. IMPALA – a joint project of European QA agencies on impact evaluation of quality assurance

The idea and the core research goals

Since October 2013, the European Commission has been co-financing a multi-partner project on the impact of quality assurance. The core goal of the project is to develop a generic methodology of a simultaneous impact analysis of external quality assurance that can be applied by project partners in Europe. The project's full title is "Impact Analysis of External Quality Assurance Processes in Higher Education Institutions. Pluralistic Methodology and Application of a Formative Transdisciplinary Impact Evaluation" (acronym: IMPALA). The project will come to an end in late 2016.

The IMPALA project is carried out by eleven institutional project partners, among them four higher education institutions and four QA agencies from four European countries (Finland, Germany, Romania, and Spain), as well as European experts of quality assurance and higher education research and student representatives.

Impact studies of quality assurance are rather rare – compared to the large amount of ongoing quality assurance activity in the higher education system – and it is common knowledge that the field is still "under-theorised and under-researched" (Newton 2013, p. 8). In particular, the possible spectrum of methodologies is not exploited so far; that is, previous impact analyses are restricted to ex-post scenarios, i.e. they are mainly based on after-procedure judgements that are made by selected informants and participants of the quality assurance procedures (whose implementation often already dates back quite some time). Also, the experience of various stakeholders of higher education institutions, among them students, lecturers, and teachers, is not adequately captured in impact studies carried out so far (cf. Volkwein et al. 2007, p. 253; Westerheijden et al. 2007, pp. 305, 309).

Impact evaluation of quality assurance in higher education institutions is of European interest, because it checks the value of quality assurance which is "one of the pillars of the EHEA ever since the beginning of the Bologna Process in 1990" (Williams 2012, p. 2), and because the ESG includes "thematic analyses" in which agencies "regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities (ESG 2015, p. 27)".

Research design and basic methodology

The IMPALA project is founded by theory and practice: it presents a theory-driven approach to impact analysis of quality assurance in higher education institutions and, at the same time, attempts to take into account the needs and requirements of quality assurance practitioners in QA agencies and higher education institutions:

- The IMPALA methodology is based on four methodological core principles of theory-based impact evaluation: devising the causal network; counterfactual and factual causal analysis; contextualisation; and methodological pluralism.
- The IMPALA methodology follows a before-after comparison approach which became the method of preference because alternative options were seen as not appropriate for measuring the effects of interventions in complex, dynamic social systems, i.e. experimental design and control group design are not feasible, and ex-post analyses suffer from systematic deficits.

The chosen longitudinal research design of before-after comparison consists of comparing the process state of the system in question (e.g. a certain range of a performance area of higher education institutions like learning and teaching) after some intervention (i.e. a quality assurance measure like programme accreditation) and its consequences have taken place with the status quo before the intervention. The main difficulty of the before-after comparison is to sort out which effects are caused to which extent by the applied interventions, and not by other causes (attribution problem). Therefore, as one methodological element, baseline studies (for establishing a basis of comparison) are required – ideally they should be carried out distinctly before the very first interventional measure, because otherwise they have to be reconstructed ex-post including the corresponding error-proneness and precision deficiency. In addition to the baseline study, before-after comparison requires midline and endline studies as well as comprehensive knowledge of the context conditions and the field of competing causal relations.

In the IMPALA project, quantitative data from the online surveys are subjected to statistical interpretation (using LimeSurvey and standard statistics knowledge). Qualitative data from open questions in the online surveys, structured interviews, and documents are subjected to hermeneutical text analysis.

- The chosen before-after comparison approach is realised by survey questionnaires which are adjusted to the practical needs and criteria formulated by higher education institutions and QA agencies with respect to surveyed stakeholder groups and foci of quality assurance procedures.
- Within the IMPALA project, core elements of causal modeling and causal hypothesis formation are further analysed (e.g. stages of causal inquiry; causal network graphs; Bayes networks; cross-impact matrix; causal social mechanisms), and their usefulness and applicability in impact analyses is assessed.

Preliminary conclusions

It is a background assumption of the IMPALA project that systematic impact evaluation of quality assurance should be a cornerstone of strategic governance in higher education institutions. Therefore, the project outlines the theoretical perspectives and general methodological elements of impact evaluation of quality assurance in higher education institutions, which should contribute to overcoming the rudimentary shape of our knowledge about the successes and failures of quality assurance. The suggested core methodology consists of a longitudinal survey design (before-after comparison) relying on multiple data sources. It is neither restricted to any particular quality assurance procedure nor to any particular quality impact area of higher education institutions. Because of the complexity of the field, it turns out, however, that a concrete impact evaluation instrument (e.g. questionnaires) must always be aligned with the focus of the particular quality assurance procedure.

So far, the main conclusions of the IMPALA study are:

- The before-after comparison approach of impact evaluation of quality assurance in higher education institutions is feasible, and it avoids the exclusive relegation to ex-post available data as well as error-proneness and memorisation problems of involved individuals.
- It seems that systematic and empirically reliable impact analysis
 - Facilitates the development of a deeper understanding of what can happen (with respect to institutional, organisational, and quality levels) when quality assurance comes to higher education institutions.

- Seems to be indispensable for systematic and strategic quality development in social organisations, e.g., higher education institutions.
- Can support evidence-based and research-informed higher education institution governance.

The results of the IMPALA project will primarily be used by the European project partner higher education institutions (their internal quality assurance and governance) and QA agencies and their European network, ENQA, to improve their understanding and implementation of quality assurance (preferably, but not exclusively, in learning and teaching). In a more indirect or mediate way, the results may also be of interest for higher education institution policy makers, employers, and the broader public.

It is expected that impact analyses of quality assurance in the area of learning and teaching, which are based on surveys of relevant (and informed) stakeholder groups (e.g. students; teaching staff; deans, and study deans; study commission members; academic libraries; employers; etc.), can well make their contribution to explore a higher education institution's internal quality management and also quality (e.g. module quality; learning outcomes and their assessment) in learning and teaching and will lead to recommendations for improvement.

5. Concluding comments

This first exploration of the impact of external quality assurance in higher education clearly brings out the complexity of the topic. What agencies undertake at the moment in terms of external quality assurance services and what they could do in the near future led the working group to open a debate on the importance of bearing in mind the national setting(s).

Having improvement in the description of the agencies' missions and their main goals could be relevant to clarify what can be measured and how, not only on the external quality assurance impact, but also concerning the impact of prospective roles of the QA agencies. The identification of possible impact areas opens the path to new roles in which QA agencies can be involved. Broadly speaking, QA agencies are providers of information on the current level of quality of higher education and on the fulfilment of certain quality standards; but agencies are increasingly acting also as advisors and consultants in the design of new approaches, for example on e-learning or lifelong learning. When adding new roles to the agencies, there should be also the question of their impact and how this could be measured.

The working group agrees that impact of external quality assurance is highly conditioned by the context. For example, the impact of QA agencies is highly influenced by the distribution of responsibilities between external and internal quality assurance. It is particularly important to consider this aspect if there is a political will to promote the concept of self-accrediting higher education institutions. What should be the impact of QA agencies in such a setting?

The context at the macro level, in terms of regulations or shared values, is also important because it has an important influence on what kind of tools and methods are selected (improvement orientation, ranking formulation, market regulation, etc.). For example, the promotion of equity in the sector is surely influencing the nature of the impact. If equity is considered a cornerstone of quality, then quality assurance will highlight the programmes that promote equity, and consequently their impact will take the same direction. The consequence is that others will consider selected examples as practices to be imitated.

Policy instruments for higher education and the set of social values and expectations of the stakeholders play a role in modulating the impact of quality assurance, but they compete with quality assurance in the generation of change and impact in the field of higher education. For example, if a new law states that additional public funds will support only the best universities, there may be a strong and immediate impact on the higher education sector, without any involvement of external quality assurance.

The working group underlines the need to reflect on the role of external quality assurance when quality culture in higher education institutions becomes mature. The configuration of the European quality assurance policy has been oriented under the principle of fitness-for-purpose. This has a very important consequence as fitness-for-purpose has been established to preserve diversity and autonomy of higher education institutions. The agencies will need to constantly rethink their position and role as promoters of change in the sector of higher education, aware of their potential to have a strong impact, in the overall development and trends, but also conscious of being only one among many drivers of improvement and enhancement.

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