

National Quality Assurance Systems in Comparison

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Abstract

The “European Higher Education Area” is characterised by a great diversity also visible in terms of their different quality assurance systems. All countries are eager to establish a system compatible with their own cultural, economic and social background. This paper highlights examples of two European countries, Austria and the United Kingdom, and shows their efforts to develop a comprehensive quality assurance system. A systematic and historical approach of both countries will be based on literature research, expert interviews and personal experience. These two country reports provide a general perspective on their national quality assurance systems as well as their current political discussions. Together with feedback on the reports drawn from national experts as well as expert interviews concerning future developments of the prevailing quality assurance system the paper shall maintain a more objective review and assessment of these countries. Although there are diversified quality assurance systems all over Europe, there is a need and a will to cooperate between this diversity while still keeping the individuality of the own country.

1. Introduction

Quality assurance is on the main agendas of higher education policies and gains great importance in making judgements on higher education institutions and their programmes. In Europe the first formal national quality assurance policies date back to the mid 1980s with national initiatives in France (1984), the United Kingdom (1985) and The Netherlands (1985) mainly because of financial shortcomings [14]. These first quality assurance schemes influenced other European countries and abroad.

Throughout Europe national and internationally-operating quality assurance agencies have been developed but with different approaches (internal or external procedures, accreditation vs. evaluations, quality audits etc.) which will be exemplified by two European countries.

Diverse external dynamics determined the design of a next generation of quality assurance to gain more transparency and legitimacy in European higher education systems through increased internationalisation. Consequently a *European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies* (ENQA)

was established in 2000 to better European cooperation in terms of quality assurance. The claim for a *European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education* arose in the last years to highlight comparable criteria and methodologies. This process is currently on the way and the register already comprises seventeen European quality assurance agencies.

The aim of this research is to give a more overall picture of the situation of quality assurance in higher education and therefore all areas of quality assurance (research, teaching, management) will be covered in the entire higher education sector at national (two country cases) and international level.

2. Research Design

This paper focuses on a part of the author's doctoral thesis with the following leading research question is formulated [2]: *What are the further developments of a respective higher education system and how will quality assurance emerge successfully in an international higher education area?*

The future as well as the international perspective in the research question needs a comprehensive methodological approach to gain useful data and a profound outlook on this issue. The emphasis is laid on case studies to gain a comprehensive understanding of multiple national higher education systems in terms of their quality assurance procedures. The historical and present situation of two European countries – Austria and the United Kingdom – are in the centre of this article. The selection criteria for these two case-studies are the following: both countries are quite contrary in size as well as in their approach on quality assurance when looking at the historical development. Though, to some extent both are moving towards a more institutional/system-based approach.

The methodology of this study applies analytical research of higher education literature (desk research) and expert interviews based on written questionnaires (partly conducted via email or via telephone). In first line, country reports have been compiled relying on secondary analysis of the professional literature, review of national legislation and policy as well as content analysis of professional discourse in acknowledged journals and conferences in the field of higher education and quality assurance in particular. These reports should give an explorative but selectively systematic overview of

the reviewed countries by considering the scrutiny of terminology and usage of quality assurance. Existing literature on the use and extent of quality assurance in the selected countries have been the basis for the country reports. These reports have also been reviewed by several national experts and have been corrected and adapted according to their comments and remarks (five feedbacks of Austrian and six of British experts).

To go beyond the descriptive reports I gathered expert interviews to gain a more internal view of the prevailing object of investigation and to figure out additional information and hints of the situation in the observed countries. Furthermore, expert interviews have been conducted with international experts (different networks or researchers in higher education). The survey method is characterised by qualitative interviews, the performance method by written questionnaires with open questions and the evaluation method with a qualitative content analysis. In total the return rate comprised questionnaires from 14 national representatives (six of Austria and eight of the UK) and 17 from international experts in quality assurance in higher education.

Based on the country reports and the expert interviews a comparison is made at three different layers (descriptive, national and international) before discussing the findings and naming future challenges.

Thus, the methodological approach in this research is multi-layered: next to survey research (questionnaires, interviews) there is also used unobtrusive research (content analysis, analysis of statistics, comparative analysis) [1]. In sum, the different layers of the empirical research in this study are the following:

- (1) country reports (Austria and the United Kingdom).
- (2) feedback process of the first drafts of the country reports.
- (3) expert interviews with national and international stakeholders.
- (4) comparison of the two country reports: comparison along the country reports and the the expert interviews as well as along perspectives of international experts.

In the following I will highlight just a few important aspects of the observed countries and will take the emphasis on the comparative part.

3. Country Report: United Kingdom

The current British quality assurance system is rooted in the late 1980s and the early 1990s though the non-university sector already has had strict external control regulations in the 1960s [4]. Important for the British system is the implementation of four different Higher Education

Founding Bodies (HEFCs) in 1991 which established the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) in 1992 and created quality assessment committees (TQA) [8]. In 1997 this system changed towards a more comprehensive approach and the still operating Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was established. This agency conducted periodical institutional and programme evaluations at the beginning. Since 2001/2002 a shift towards institutional audits in England and Northern Ireland, enhancement-led institutional reviews in Scotland and institutional reviews in Wales has taken place [11].

The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) which is responsible for explicit and formalised assessment processes on the quality of research started in 1986 but will be succeeded by the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the future [12]. However, England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales show different approaches on their review processes though all four countries are using the same outcome judgements [13]. Though, the whole system changed towards quality improvement rather than the previous strong emphasis on accountability next to the quality assessment responsibilities of the funding bodies.

In summary, the UK has taken great initiatives to assure the quality in higher education: (1) the RAE to evaluate the quality of research succeeded by the REF and (2) the Academic Audit or Review process to assess quality assurance processes in all academic institutions. The different systems within the UK's system can be characterised by a strong focus on quality assurance in terms of higher education research (REF) done separately to QAA reviews and audits. Currently this highly elaborated system is in the process of reform and simplification. Moreover, the new approach of institutional audits and reviews shall determine whether the quality in higher education is of an appropriate level with the help of outcomes and recommendations [2].

4. Country Report: Austria

Austria started the first ex-ante accreditation procedures with the establishment of the *Fachhochschul*-sector (FH, universities of applied sciences) in 1993 [9] and the possibility to establish a private university in 1999 [7]. Since 2002 the public universities gained a high degree of autonomy which led to internal and external quality assurance mechanisms. But not until 2009 public universities are required to carry out an external audit procedure [6]. Till now there three different quality assurance agencies operation in Austria:

- FHR – Fachhochschulrat: responsible for quality assurance and re-/accreditation and evaluation of college degree programmes.

- ÖAR – Austrian Accreditation Council: responsible for re-/accreditation and supervision of the private higher education sector (institutional and programme)
- AQA – Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance: support and certification of quality management processes of all types of higher education institutions (quality audits); can conduct accreditation procedures in Germany.

However, Austria has a short history in terms of accreditation and evaluation in higher education. While public universities are still on their way to find their suitable quality assurance models, the FH-sector as well as private universities has already implemented internationally recognised forms of accreditation and evaluation schemes [10]. Since 2009 political discussions are ongoing to formulate a common law on external quality assurance for all higher education sectors (public and private universities as well as universities of applied sciences and other providers of higher education programmes) [5]. Furthermore, a consultation process for a re-organisation of external quality assurance in higher education [3] with the intention to create a common legal framework as well as one Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation (in short: AAQA) has taken place. The necessity to enhance quality and create a more comprehensive quality assurance system is evident but the road Austria is going to take is not decided yet [2].

5. Comparison and Future Challenges

The comparative analysis of these two European countries is built on two layers: (1) the descriptive and peer-reviewed country reports, and (2) the national experts' perspectives. The more macro perspective how the field of quality assurance in higher education is challenged worldwide is provided by interviews with international experts.

The country reports are highlighting the strong focus on research evaluation and accountability procedures in the UK since the 1980s while Austria is heading towards a more comprehensive and nation-wide approach of quality assurance only within the last two decades. Whereas Austria is shifting the governance of higher education towards increased autonomy the UK is shifting back towards increased state-control. Nonetheless, both countries are moving towards institutional audits and reviews of internal quality assurance procedures. In summary, both countries have shown vast transition processes to develop new mechanisms and procedures to assure quality in their higher education systems in an effective manner. Austria is on the way to put all three quality assurance agencies under one entity, whereas the UK already has developed a new audit system within the last years [2].

The expert interviews with stakeholders of the national case studies have provided a deeper insight to the future transformation processes and trends. Both countries are recognising the growing importance of internationalisation and the growing need of comparability, mobility, cooperation and transparency within and through quality assurance in higher education. Quality assurance is considered to be an essential asset to operate at international level because of the growing market-orientation and the entrepreneurial attitude of higher education institutions [2].

Thus, quality assurance schemes have to be developed as necessary instruments to adjust higher education institutions to the ongoing transformation processes. This has been the essence out of the expert perspectives at international level. The complexity of cross-border education, the shift towards institutional approach, the importance of stakeholder involvement (especially students), the increased labour market orientation and the growing need of cost effectiveness of a quality assurance system has been highlighted. These future trends are urging the need to go beyond bureaucracy to establish a vivid quality culture [2].

The example of only two countries has shown the diversified approach of quality assurance in the respective higher education system. Nonetheless, the high importance of quality assurance is visible in both countries as they are heading towards high quality standards to compete within the European higher education area. Of course, there is not one single approved solution suitable for all countries because one always has to consider the national peculiarities next the international developments.

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