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Changing education – QA and the shift from teaching to learning

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Short bio:

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Proposal

Title: *Quality audits* – fit for purpose?

Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment and external reviews of higher education institutions' internal quality management

Abstract:

In 2015 the ESG shall be revised to improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness. It is to be expected that the development of the Bologna Process and in particular the shift from teaching to learning will also be taken into account. A new standard on student-centred learning has already been proposed to the BFUG. Pronounced as a "major addition", it could be challenging to implement this standard or a comparable one into internal and external quality assurance. This challenge might be particularly present for those external quality assurance approaches whose focus is on higher education institutions' quality management systems, because the reviews tend to address quality aspects of teaching and learning rather indirectly. In the light of the estimated "student-centeredness" this paper shall analyse and compare *quality audits* in a number of European countries on whether they currently refer to student-centred learning and what future measures might be taken.

Text of paper:

I .Student-centred learning - upcoming challenge for quality assurance

If one is retracing the discussion on learning outcomes it seems obvious that focusing on students has become a decisive factor of higher education quality.[1] Meanwhile the student-focus has culminated in "student-centredness" and ministers responsible for higher education in the countries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) lately reiterated their commitment to promote student-centred learning.[2] While there is yet no uniform answer on what student-centred learning is about, broad consensus exists that the shift from teaching to learning is one of its premises.[3] Striving for a deep, lasting and ongoing qualification of students, learning is therefore to be understood as a dynamic, participative process, within which students, in cooperation with teachers, are actively shaping the learning success. With its constructivist paradigm student-centred learning i.a. emphasizes the need to take into account the backgrounds and learning styles of students, forming the basis for didactic concepts, pedagogical methods and student support. This goes beyond unidirectional transmission of knowledge and information in the class room and promotes learning and teaching formats that allow for the reflectivity of students and encourage their capability to also manage the learning progress rather self-responsible.[4]

New impetus – revision of the ESG

While the benefits and challenges of "student-centred-learning" have been on the agenda of the Bologna Process since at least 2009[5], this debate will probably become even more present in the upcoming years with regard to the revision of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG). In order to improve its applicability and usefulness, the new ESG-version will also take into account recent developments in higher education. As it has already become apparent, the abovementioned "student-centeredness" is one of the forthcoming major changes.[6] Even

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[1] e.g. Adam, Stephen: An introduction to learning outcomes: A consideration of the nature, function and position of learning outcomes in the creation of the European Higher Education Area, article B.2.3-1 in Froment, Eric; Kohler, Jürgen et. al. (eds.): EUA Bologna Handbook – Making Bologna Work. Berlin 2006.
[2] Bucharest Communiqué: Making the Most of Our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area, Bucharest, 26-17 April 2012, p. 2.
[3] Sursock, Andrée; Smidt, Hanne: Trends 2010. A decade of change in European Higher Education. Brussels, p. 31f.; EI, ESU: Student centered learning. An insight into theory and practice, Brussels 2010, p. 9f.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué: The Bologna Process 2020. The European Higher Education Area in the new decade, Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve 28-29 April 2009.
[6] E4 in cooperation with Education International, BUSINESSEUROPE and EQAR: Revision of the ESG. Draft proposal submitted to the BFUG October 2013. Explanatory Note, p.3

a whole new standard on student-centred learning, teaching and assessment has recently been proposed to the BFUG that is likely to be adopted in 2015.

The standard suggested for Part I of the ESG on internal quality assurance within higher education institutions clearly takes up the rearrangement of responsibilities: Institutions should ensure that *"programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach."*[7] The respective guidelines' focus is on the learning progression of students and promotes a more flexible learning setting. While the diversity of the students is respected, different delivery modes and pedagogical methods as well as deriving quality assurance mechanisms shall therefore not be taken for granted but (re-)considered carefully. On an individual level, the learner-teacher relationship is requested as well: the proposal encourages a supportive and guiding role of the teacher towards a learner who is (or at least should become) autonomous to a certain extend. Since the focus is still on learning outcomes one can conclude that the autonomy of the learner shall become a qualification objective of programmes. Withal, the ESG-proposal refers to the student-centred learning not as a single quality aspect but rather as a multi-factor approach: Learning resources and student support as well as staff development are therefore also taken into account. Especially the latter is linked with rather high expectations, since institutions shall encourage innovation in teaching methods and the use of new technologies.

A concern for external quality assurance and agencies

Within the ESG revision process, their overall framework had been clearly confirmed. It will therefore remain a major principle that higher education institutions are primarily responsible for the quality of their provision. According to this, the intended focus on student-centred learning will be first and foremost a considerable issue for the institutions. But since external quality assurance should address the effectiveness of inner-institutional mechanisms, agencies are likewise concerned. They shall prospectively assess whether and how internal quality assurance processes of higher education institutions correspond with the student-centred learning approach.

Already in retrospective, the ESG have proven their impact on the developments within the European Higher Education Area[8] and external quality assurance has also found to be an influencing factor[9]. The results of the revision process will therefore probably not be without effect for higher education and its quality management.

Hence, twelve European quality assurance agencies, whose approaches have a special focus on higher education institutions' quality management systems and who gather in the informal Quality Audit Network (QAN), decided to analyse and compare their existing procedures in the light of the upcoming "student-centeredness". All the agencies are members of ENQA and thus adhere to the ESG. While the analysis is mainly based upon descriptions the agencies prepared within a QAN project[10], their guidelines, rules of procedures and some review reports have also been taken into account.

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[7] E4 in cooperation with Education International, BUSINESSEUROPE and EQAR: Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area. Proposal for the revised version, February 2014, standard 1.3.

[8] ENQA: Mapping the implementation and application of the EG. Final report of the project Steering Group, 2011, p. 20f.

[9] Loukkola, Tia: A Snapshot on the Internal Quality Assurance in EHEA. In: Curaj, A., Scott, P. et al (Eds.): European Higher Education at the Crossroads: Between the Bologna Process and National Reforms vol. 1, Dordrecht 2012, p. 309; EACEA: The European Higher Education Area in 2012: Bologna Process Implementation Report, Brussels 2012, p. 68.

[10] see AQ Austria (Ed.): Quality Audit in the European Higher Education Area. A comparison of approaches. Vienna 2014.

II. Different foci – common purpose: enhancement of learning and teaching

In recent years, *quality audits*[11] were implemented in a number of various European countries as an approach of external quality assurance in higher education. The reasons for this included an attempt to strengthen the autonomy of higher education institutions as well as the enhancement opportunities of quality assurance.

From an overall perspective, the audits conducted by the agencies within the QAN are explicitly directed towards measures and/or processes set by higher education institutions with the purpose of assuring and enhancing quality in teaching and learning (and beyond). But on a closer look, two main approaches become apparent, which refer to an institution's quality management differently:

The first addresses quality management systems more comprehensively. Models usually have a broad focus on the quality management of different areas at higher education institutions and are based upon quite generic standards. This approach is represented mainly in Austria, Finland, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

The second approach more specifically focuses on the design and provision of study programmes, and a given kind of a programme's quality serves as the basis for institutional quality management. The German "system accreditation" is an example for taking this approach, but this becomes also visible in Spain and Romania.

As will be seen, aspects of student-centred learning are covered in these two approaches differently. But it is however worth noting that transition between the two foci is fluent. A clear-cut classification between the different audit models is neither feasible nor intended. One should rather consider the two categories as extremes, in the middle of which also hybrid approaches are set up each within the individual higher education system, aligned to national needs and also surrounded by other external quality assurance measures.[12] The reviews in Great Britain represent good examples for the context-relation as well as "hybridity": Those emphasise the "students' experience" - a quality parameter for both programmes as well as institutions. Higher education institutions in this audit model are particularly required to provide conditions allowing for student-centred learning. With regard to estimated student-centredness of the upcoming ESG these audit models seem to be of particular significance and are therefore delineated in more detail in the following separately.

Focus on quality management systems more comprehensively

In the guidelines, agencies reviewing quality management systems of higher education institutions rather in general, do not explicitly ask for a special student-centeredness. Learning and teaching are covered alike as other areas of a higher education institution, for example staff development or research. But can one conclude that these models are hence not suitable to comply with the new standard of the ESG?

One common denominator in all models is the consideration of strategies, objectives or visions of an institution. The institution needs to determine intended aims in terms of quality in the areas of education, in some countries also research, management and related services. Thereby no difference is made with regard to particular teaching or

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[11] The term (quality) audit shall refer to external quality assurance procedures, focusing on the development of internal quality management systems. A similar definition is given in Westerheijden, Don F.: The changing concepts of quality in the assessment of study programmes, teaching and learning. In: Cavelli, Alessandro (Ed.): Quality Assessment for Higher Education in Europe. London 2007, p. 8.
Although audits are not necessarily related to quality assurance in higher education and the term is only employed in a few countries, agencies within the Quality Audit Network however have agreed to use it as a common working term. It is therefore written in italic letters throughout the paper.

[12] See AQ Austria (Ed.): Quality Audit in the European Higher Education Area, op. cit., p. 16.

learning methods, i.e. whether an institution takes up the student-centred approach. According to an institution's autonomy, the exact elaboration of the strategy lies in the responsibility of the individual higher education institution. Regardless of its aims, assessment is on whether an institution has processes in place that support the achievement of aims in the above mentioned areas and that these processes are facilitated by an adequate quality management system. For example, the focus of AQ Austria is on how "the quality management system supports the higher education institution in achieving its objectives."[13] Based on an institution's vision of the quality of its education provided, NVAO confirms that the institution "has implemented an effective quality assurance system, which enables it to guarantee the quality of the programmes offered."[14] And OAQ assesses whether an institution's "quality assurance strategy […] includes the guidelines to a quality assurance system whose objective is to ensure and continually improve the quality of university activities, as well as to promote the development of a quality culture"[15], while management, teaching and research are likewise addressed.

Although student-centred learning, teaching and assessing is not mentioned explicitly, it will however be of special interest, when this is set a priority for the higher education institution.[16] Within this context one should give notice to the fact that some agencies by particular procedural elements explicitly encourage higher education institutions to make those priorities part of the review. The "development areas" in the audit model of AQ Austria and the "optional audit targets" in the FINHEEC-approach stick out, which allow for a thematically focused review of special features without effecting the overall assessment of the quality management system.

Focus on the provision of study programmes on an institutional level

Audit models with a stronger focus on the quality of degree education, as opposed to all areas of a higher education institution, go beyond the general requirement that an institution's quality management system is in line with and supports its strategy. Standards rather refer to a certain quality of the design and delivery of higher education and to this end stress the institution's responsibility for relevant qualification objectives, learning outcomes and necessary framework conditions. Do the concentration on study programmes and their organisation imply that the external quality assurance procedures serve as facilitator for student centred-learning?

In assessing how higher education institutions orient their programmes towards students, Spanish agencies even make use of a standard saying "The higher education institution must have procedures in place to check that the fundamental purpose of its actions is to encourage students' learning".[17] In its details the standard substantially deals with certain aspects of the student "life cycle". Besides, the design and review of degree programmes, skills and qualifications of academic staff, material resources and services, as well as public information are also under review. Additionally, the quality management system as a whole will be taken into account. This also includes the (academic) qualification of teaching staff as well as supportive facilities and resources. Also the

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[13] AQ Austria: Guideline for the Audit of Higher Education Institutions' Quality Management Systems as adopted on 14 June 2013; available online https://www.aq.ac.at/..., accessed July 22, 2014.

[14] NVAO: Assessment frameworks for the higher education accreditation system. Institutional quality assurance assessment. 22 November 2011, p. 8; available online: http://www.nvao.net/..., accessed July 14, 2014.

[15] OAQ: 2013/14 Quality Audit. Guide dated 7th November 2012, p. 16, available online: http://www.oaq.ch/..., accessed July 24, 2014.

[16] e.g. NVAO advisory report. Maastricht University. Institutional quality assurance assessment as of 10 April 2013, available online www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/..., accessed July 14, 2014.

[17] ANECA; AQU; ACSUG: Audit Programme. Guidelines, definition and documentation for internal quality assurance systems in higher education. Document 02 as of 21.06.2007, p. 7; available online: http://www.aneca.es/..., accessed July 24, 2014.

System Accreditation in Germany requires higher education institutions to use "a management system in the field of teaching and learning", which "ensures [the] determination of concrete and plausible qualification objectives of study programmes"[18], taking into consideration standards relevant for the quality of a programme's design, implementation and further development also with regard to different student needs. In one way or another, the Spanish, Dutch and German review model do reflect and refer to different delivery modes.

While the different aspects highlighted here allow cross-links to the new standard on student centred learning, teaching and assessment it shall be stressed that the audits do not assess the quality of programmes. Reviews focus on internal quality mechanisms that shall provide for quality on a regular basis. The gap between an institution's quality management system and the expected quality of programmes is mostly bridged by samples, intended to demonstrate the systems performance in more detail. Those samples or audit tracks are flexible with regard to content and method. And while the system's mode of action is under review, the twofold approaches seem suitable to simultaneously address both internal mechanisms and their effects with regard to teaching and learning on a programme's level.

Focus on the learning experience of students

Quality assurance in the EHEA is neither uniform nor static. Framework conditions change and so do the objectives and designs of external quality assurance procedures. There have been shifts from more accountability-related procedures towards more enhancement-led approaches and vice versa and different issues of higher education have been in the focus, too.[19] In this regard, QAA and QAA Scotland have made students at the heart of their review methods over the past few years.

Still, the reviews focus on an institution's arrangements for setting and maintaining academic standards. But in England, Wales and Northern Ireland review teams explicitly make judgements with regard to the development and enhancement of the *learning opportunities*, including appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment, and learning resources.[20] Student-centeredness seems even more accentuated in the Scottish Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) directed towards an institution's policies and practices for enhancing the quality of the student *learning experience*. Reviewers in this model do not only take note of an institution's strategy but also consider key features and trends of the student population, including typical routes into and through the institution. On that basis assessment is on the effectiveness of an institution's approach to engage and support students in their learning, to promote the development of graduate attributes and to manage the learning environment.[21]

In terms of content, both agencies refer to the UK Quality Code setting out expectations that all higher education providers are required to meet. According to this national framework of reference institutions are i.a. expected to "articulate and systematically review and enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices, so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner, study their chosen subject(s) in depth and enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative

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[18] German Accreditation Council: Rules for the Accreditation of Study Programmes and for System Accreditation. Resolution of the Accreditation Council of 08.12.2009, last amended on 20.02.2013, p. 25; available online: http://www.akkreditierungsrat.de/..., accessed July 24, 2014.

[19] Westerheijden, Don F.: The changing concepts of quality in the assessment of study programmes, teaching and learning, op. cit. p. 9f.

[20] QAA: Higher Education Review. A handbook for QAA subscribers and providers with access to funding from HEFCE undergoing review in 2014-15. June 2014, p. 3, available online: http://www.qaa.ac.uk/..., accessed July 24, 2014.

[21] QAA Scotland: Enhancement-led Institutional Review. Handbook. May 2012. Third edition, available online: http://www.qaa.ac.uk/..., accessed July 24, 2014.

thinking"[22]. Institutions shall also "have in place, monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential."[23]

While it turns out that the British reviews seem to be student-centred models to the core, one should give notice to the fact that responsibilities have been (re-)defined with regard to any academic quality: Institutions "should be capable of guaranteeing the quality of the opportunities it provides, but it cannot guarantee how any particular student will experience those opportunities."[24]

It is also worth mentioning that aside from any expectation towards higher education institutions, QAA and QAA Scotland supplemented their approaches by a special kind of thematic flexibility: thematic elements are part of the QAA-reviews without any prejudgement of the outcome, while Scottish higher education institutions under review are expected to engage with the national enhancement themes.

III. Some concluding comments

By taking a comparative snapshot on the different audit models it becomes evident that introducing the student-centred learning approach into a revised version of the ESG does not turn out to be a paradigm-shift. Rather, developments are being taken up, which have in one way or the other already been subject to the *quality audits*. Hence, agencies as well as higher education institutions should within their existing approaches not stop short to frankly address this quality aspect, commonly agreed by the ministers responsible for higher education. For both of them, the new ESG-standard and especially its guideline can as a common framework of reference provide helpful impulses to transfer a hitherto vague and sometimes normatively loaded idea further into practice.

All told, the different audit models appear to be suitable for dealing with the student-centred learning approach and its further implementation: Irrespective of whether the reviews address various performance areas of higher education institutions or merely refer to teaching and learning, their institutional alignment allows for taking into account the learning and teaching process including its framework conditions, like for instance staff development or supporting services for learners and teachers. Agencies within the QAN could therefore stimulate this debate by discussing the estimated revision of the ESG and its student-centeredness with higher education institutions currently under review. Serving as multipliers or facilitators they could transmit relevant information, useful practices and specific experiences within and across national borders.

From a procedural point of view, especially the different thematic elements, audit tracks or samples can be of use to take a nuanced view on student-centred learning. Those are variable in contents, methodology and do less focus on compliance, which all might facilitate a beneficial dialogue with regard to the multi-faceted student-centeredness of the upcoming ESG. It might however be an upcoming challenge for all the reviews, to factor in relationship aspects between students, teachers and institutions that go beyond both declarations of intent as well as "simple" customer care. And while comprehensive approaches due to their generic standards might want to discuss how to systematically stimulate this debate, approaches focusing on a given kind of a study programme's might want to question, whether their programme-related standards refer to student-centred learning, teaching and assessment sufficiently.

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[22] QAA: UK Quality Code for higher education. Part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality. Chapter B3: Learning and teaching, Gloucester 2012, p. 6.
[23] QAA: UK Quality Code for higher education. Part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality. Chapter B4: Enabling student development and achievement, Gloucester 2013, p. 5.
[24] QAA: Higher Education Review, op. cit. p.31.

But from the viewpoint of all the agencies cooperating in the QAN the considerable overarching ambition is not to assess an institution's quality with regard to student-centred learning as such, but to stay with an institution's quality management system in order to strengthen self-governing competences and inner-institutional enhancement. It is this common interface of the different audit models that apprehends higher education institutions as learning organisations, continuously reflecting on actions, name improvement opportunities and - within their responsibilities - take the necessary development measures autonomously.

With regard to the estimated revision of the ESG this purposed self-reflecting capacity sounds promising for two different reasons:

1) Self-reflexivity must not be narrowed down on problem-solving. It can also be seen as a basis for innovations in teaching and learning that, according to the ESG-proposal, shall get along with the student-centred learning approach. These intended innovations will however further diversify delivery modes, pedagogical methods and might consequently also call for new monitoring and evaluation tools. On the one hand, one could raise the question, whether and how the different audit models would handle a greater variety of delivery modes, pedagogical methods and especially deriving quality assurance mechanisms within the internal quality management systems under review. But one could also give it a thought whether internal quality management systems in all consequence should encompass a certain self-referential component in itself. The relevance of monitoring approaches and appropriate development needs could then be checked out internally. As a consequence, *quality audits* could then focus on an adaptability of a higher education institution's internal quality management, instead of cyclically assessing whether measures are currently appropriate, effective and in place. This self-reflecting capacity and adaptability is undoubtedly an undisclosed premise of all the *quality audits* already, irrespective of whether internal quality management systems under review are well designed or still to be set up.[25] However, this demand could also be made explicit, all the more as this will become a standard for any external quality assurance.[26]

2) The systematic internal monitoring activities of higher education institutions may furthermore allow to identify development needs and limits with regard to student-centred learning that especially go beyond institutions' responsibilities. Aside from well-known resource constraints[27] a rather paradoxical result can also be to "re-balance" the responsibilities of higher education institutions that have been systematically promoted by some of the *quality audits*. In its concept of quality, QAA already imposed obligations on students with respect to their own share of responsibility for their learning process and refers to the student-centred learning approach in this respect, too. Clarifying the responsibilities can be one of the most important questions in focusing student-centred learning in external reviews of higher education institutions' internal quality management.

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[25] See AQ Austria (Ed.): Quality Audit in the European Higher Education Area, op. cit. and the agencies' reports on whether and how audits in some countries are - for the time being - designed to support higher education institutions in their endeavour conflating internal quality assurance mechanisms into comprehensive systems, while others were implemented years ago already.

26 While this is a guiding principle of agencies complying with the ESG already, a new standard had been proposed with regard to an agency's internal quality assurance according to which "agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities". See standard 3.6 of the ESG proposal, op. cit., p.22.

[27] Sursock, Andrée; Smidt, Hanne: Trends 2010. op. cit., p. 49.

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ANECA; AQU; ACSUG: AUDIT Programme. Guidelines, definition and documentation for internal quality assurance systems in higher education. Document 02 as of 21.06.2007, available online: http://www.aneca.es/..., accessed July 24, 2014

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QAA: UK Quality Code for higher education. Part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality. Chapter B3: Learning and teaching, Gloucester 2012

QAA: UK Quality Code for higher education. Part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality. Chapter B4: Enabling student development and achievement, Gloucester 2013.

QAA Scotland: Enhancement-led Institutional Review. Handbook. May 2012. Third edition, available online: http://www.qaa.ac.uk/..., accessed July 24, 2014.

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Questions for discussion:

Shall quality assurance agencies by their audits stimulate or even trigger the further implementation of student-centred learning or leave it to higher education institutions?

If so, what are the assets and drawbacks of the different approaches to address the estimated "student-centredness" of the upcoming ESG? Does it really need a "shift" of approaches?

Does the requirement for self-reflection in quality audits foster a higher education institution's capacity to further progress in the student-centred learning approach?