

IBAR

Identifying barriers in promoting the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at institutional level and making recommendations as to how these might be addressed (IBAR)

Progress Report

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Project coordinator:	Helena Šebková
Project coordinator organisation:	Centre for Higher Education Studies, Prague, CZ
Project coordinator telephone number:	+420 257 011 312
Project coordinator email address:	sebkova@cvs.cz

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Executive Summary

In the last two decades, quality assurance of higher education has become one of the top policy priorities nationally as well as internationally. This agenda has gained momentum with the Bologna process and, more particularly, after the adoption of the European standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) by the European ministers of education in 2005. However, the impact of the ESG on higher education institutions (HEIs) is far from clearly documented.

The project, entitled 'Identifying barriers in promoting the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at institutional level' (IBAR), tries to bring some evidence about the real impact of ESG on HEIs. The IBAR project is undertaken by a seven-member consortium (Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, Latvia, Portugal, Poland, Slovakia, and The Netherlands) combining partners with a high level of expertise in higher education research and policy analysis in Western Europe and in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. The project is coordinated by the Centre for Higher Education Studies (Prague, Czech Republic).

The IBAR project aims to identify barriers and good practices in implementation of the ESG at institutional level (ESG Part 1) in 8 domains of the institutional activities: internal quality assurance systems, access, students, management/governance, cooperation with employers and other stakeholders, teaching staff, information systems, impact on secondary education. The research is carried out on the sample of 4 HIEs in each participating country, i.e. at 28 HEIs as a whole. The qualitative methodology, combining document reviews and semi-structured interviews based on pre-defined research questions is used.

Whilst institutional actors (managers, academic staff, students, institutions of secondary education) represent the large, short-term target group expected to benefit directly from the project outcomes, the IBAR project aspires to make a wider influence on national level impacting ministries of education and quality assurance agencies. The most important impact is supposed on international level (ENQA, E4 Group) with recommendations on ESG revision/improvements.

Until now, the research in 4 domains (internal QA systems, access, students and management/governance) has been finished. For a given domain, each partner has elaborated 4 institutional case studies about surveyed HEIs and one national case study. On the basis of these national case studies the partner responsible for the domain has drew up the cross-country comparative study.

Co-ordinating seminars, organised by individual partners, are the important tool for the cooperation between partners in both research and management areas. Until now, 6 seminars, mostly focused on one investigated domain, took place.

The already achieved results within the project seem to have pointed to two major barriers of the ESG Part 1 implementation: institutional unawareness of the ESG and a lack of alignment of higher education quality processes with secondary education. On the other hand, the examples of good practice concern well developed internal QA systems were found in most countries. In addition, the ESG principles were quite

frequently used although sometimes not explicitly expressed or even not officially taken into consideration.

During the following project workflow the next four domain will be investigated. These results will constitute the material for the final outputs: the book summarizing the project outcomes and the final synthesis report including also the recommendations on ESG Part 1 modification.

More about the IBAR project and its results can be found on the project website (<http://www.ibar-llp.eu/>).

Table of Contents

1. PROJECT OBJECTIVES.....	6
2. PROJECT APPROACH.....	7
3. PROJECT OUTCOMES & RESULTS.....	9
4. PARTNERSHIPS	11
5. PLANS FOR THE FUTURE	12
6. CONTRIBUTION TO EU POLICIES	13

1. Project Objectives

The IBAR project addresses the issue of implementation of the ESG with attention to standards and guidelines of quality assurance for higher education institutions (ESG Part 1). More particularly, the IBAR project holds an enquiry into the extent of implementation of the ESG Part 1 at 28 higher education institutions (HEIs) in seven Bologna signatory countries being the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, Latvia, Portugal, Poland, Slovakia and The Netherlands.

With four HEIs per country selected for the enquiry, objectives of the IBAR project are fourfold. First, the project aims at identifying barriers to the ESG Part 1 implementation. Given the complexities of implementation of supra-national policy initiatives, such as the ESG, that typically involve the interplay of several levels, links to (inter-) national policy contexts are taken into account. Whilst there can be considerable difficulties in translating the ESG Part 1 into institutional settings, the corresponding investigation may also yield some examples worth highlighting as well as emulating in other contexts. Identification of such examples of good practice stands up for the second project objective. To identify strategies helping some higher education institutions in developing their ESG-inspired policies as well as true causes of implementation deficit in other contexts, a range of higher education stakeholders located at analysed institutions or within the respective national bodies (Ministries of Education, quality assurance agencies) is consulted through semi-structured interviews. These stakeholders may all benefit directly from identification of obstacles and good practices in the ESG Part 1 implementation produced in the form of institutional and national studies.

Third, taking account of the identified barriers and examples of good practice, the aim is to synthesise the relevant findings. This is done with the purpose of arriving at formulation of recommendations for potential modification of the ESG content, as otherwise indicated by the European ministers of education in their Bucharest Communiqué. To this end, the project makes use of eight cross-country comparative analytical studies constituting the major research outputs.

Fourth, outputs of the IBAR project are not limited to higher education stakeholders, be they institutional actors (especially managers, academics and students), national or supra-national policy-makers, quality assurance analysts or experts. The IBAR project should also specifically address the relationship between higher and secondary education, thus being of interest also to some secondary education actors (principals, headmasters, counsellors for study choice).

Overall, the IBAR project aspires to provide an authoritative review of the ESG Part 1 standards and guidelines with recommendations how to possibly modify them, thus contributing to the shaping up of the European Higher Education Area in the years to come.

2. Project Approach

The enquiry into implementation of the ESG Part 1 standards and guidelines is led by qualitative methodology. Qualitative methodology has been chosen in view of organisational complexities of implementation, known from the implementation literature, in order to obtain an in-depth insight into the processes of the ESG Part 1 implementation from actors variously positioned within the implementation structure(s) of HEIs concerned. Altogether, there are 28 HEIs from seven Bologna signatories (CZ, UK, LV, PT, PL, SK, NL) involved, with four HEIs per country participating in the enquiry. The institutions were chosen to obtain a balanced sample countrywide with respect to institutional size (typically small vs. large) and profile (typically comprehensive vs. specialised).

The methodological approach of the IBAR project thus combines a document review and semi-structured interviews, complemented by some other qualitative methods such as focus groups, actor analysis or snowball sampling. In this respect, the aim is to obtain response from all major categories of stakeholders involved in the ESG Part 1 institutional implementation. These categories contain academic staff, members of institutional management including quality advisors, administrators, students, employers, secondary education teachers/leading persons and possibly also students. The interviews with these actors are semi-structured by research questions encapsulating the ESG Part 1 standards and guidelines, broken down into eight thematic domains which are:

- Internal quality assurance systems
- Quality and access
- Quality and student assessment
- Quality and management/governance
- Quality and employers incl. private sector
- Quality and teaching staff
- Quality and information
- Quality and secondary education

The development workpackages (WP5 - WP12) constitute the research part of the project and form the framework for the research activities within the thematic domains. Information obtained from the primary and secondary data analysis is collated, compared for similarities and differences and synthesised to arrive at identification of barriers and examples of good practice in the ESG Part 1 institutional implementation. These methodological aspects further relate the enquiry to the conceptual framework accounting for complexity of levels in ESG Part 1 implementation (supra-national, national, institutional, faculty and departmental). The methodological aspects of the project including precise formulation of research questions are subject to discussions during seminars held regularly in the beginning of each workpackage. The seminar discussions, providing also space for informal discussions, evaluation and networking, can thus be seen as added value of the project.

Dissemination of project results is done primarily through the project work itself including active participation of the surveyed pilot 28 HEIs within and beyond their institutional settings and secondarily by the project website (<http://www.ibar-llp.eu/>) obtaining all up to date information about the project. Thirdly, the active involvement of project participants in a variety of national or international events, including those held by the EUA, CHER or EAIR contribute the dissemination about the project and his results significantly.

As suggested, effectiveness of IBAR research activities as well as its administrative and financial management is evaluated internally by members of the project consortium at project seminars. The viewpoints obtained then feed into evaluation reports that are produced regularly every third month of the project lifetime. Furthermore, to assure rigour and impartiality, the IBAR project is subject to two external mid-term evaluations by the team of internationally recognised experts (external evaluation organised by the project consortium in accordance with the project proposal) and by the respective agency (EACEA) administering the project activities and results through the Progress Report. The final external evaluation of the project results and added value with respect to the total costs spent will again be done by the EACEA and another team of international evaluators once the IBAR project reaches its final stage.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

The findings obtained during the first half of the project lifetime relate to implementation of institutional quality assurance policies, access measures, student assessment procedures and institutional governance (WP5-WP8). The activities of these WPs were completed in accordance with the planned time schedule. The research work in the framework of WP9 (domain focused on quality and employers) started with the co-ordinating seminar in May and the field work at 28 HEIs has been carried out.

The coordinating seminars were organized by the project partners responsible for particular WPs. They were focused firstly (and primarily) on the research issues in corresponding domains (methodology, research questions, comments and suggestions to the drafts of research results, planning research activities, dissemination of project results etc.) and secondly on financial and administrative matters presented by the project coordinator. Thus, the seminars were the important tool of both research and financial/administrative project management. Besides that they were welcome opportunity for the mutual informal debates of all project partners and for the experience exchange. The detailed minutes from of each seminar available at the project website served as a kind of guidelines during the time between the seminars.

The leading partner of the particular WP worked out the cross-country comparative study on the ESG, Part 1 implementation in the corresponding domain. The comparative study was based on 7 national case studies (from each partner country) derived from 28 institutional case studies (4 elaborated by each partner, either separately or as the annexes of the national case studies). All research results achieved in the framework of four WPs (4 cross-country comparative studies, 28 national case studies and 112 institutional case studies) were completed in accordance with the project workplan.

This report is about the results appropriate to the first half of the project lifetime and so it is too early to go into outcomes and results in detail. The current research results may change in the light of our more mature reports at the end of the project. In spite of that some preliminary findings would be presented here.

The already achieved research results show that most HEIs surveyed have no specific approach for implementing the ESG in their internal quality assurance policies. This may be especially due to limited awareness of the ESG existence, including ESG Part 1, among stakeholders involved in making and implementing institutional quality assurance policies. Nonetheless, some institutions have started work on translating the ESG explicitly into their quality management systems. In doing so, institutional leadership, however, seems to get little support from some front-line academic staff as well as from national higher education policy-makers. On the other hand, some prospective (student) initiatives aiming at enhancing institutional quality culture bottom-up seem to meet with resistance from the top institutional decision-making level. Achieving the right mix of accountability and trust thus still remains the key factor in developing institutional quality assurance policies. As to the national policy support, the Dutch or Czech approach, where the national higher education policy, to some extent, orients HEIs towards adoption of the

principles of the ESG, also through the use of financial incentives, seem to present examples of good practice internationally.

Still, the policies of all HEIs under study are, in general, consistent with the ESG, having most of the content of ESG Part 1 standards and guidelines implicitly addressed in them. This concerns implemented mechanisms for admission to studies or procedures of student assessment with the findings pointing to 'robustness in variety' of approaches due to institutional policy histories and path-dependencies. To give two examples of such variety, Slovak HEIs operate under specific legal provisions to encourage wider intake of under-represented groups such as Hungarian and Roma populations. On the other hand, UK HEIs face some difficulties in that national performance measures seem to assume a monolithic view of a 'successful' student experience, thus limiting institutional efforts to improve access through language classes for non-native speakers, flexible timetables or counselling services. Despite the variety of approaches, concerns for keeping educational quality when facing quantitative increases in student population due to massification pressures are common to access policies of most HEIs studied (especially LV, PT, UK).

As far as student assessment procedures are concerned, some cases of their alignment with learning outcomes have been identified (PL, NL, UK), thus pointing to examples of good practice, although the possibility of such alignment turning into a 'risk minimization strategy' should be observed as well, especially in the UK case. The Portuguese case seems to attest to inter-disciplinary differences in application of summative and formative assessment strategies.

These major findings, pointing to barriers and effective practices in the ESG Part 1 implementation, are result of synthesis from up to now achieved research results which are available on the project website (<http://www.ibar-llp.eu/>).

4. Partnerships

The consortium undertaking the IBAR project is composed of expert researchers from seven established institutions. These are: the Prague-based Centre for Higher Education Studies, the University Strathclyde (replaced by the University of Durham in 2012), the University of Latvia, the Warsaw School of Economics, the Centre for Research in Higher Education Policies associated to the University of Porto and the University of Aveiro, the University of Nitra and the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies located at the University of Twente. Most of the institutions have been involved in several supra-national projects on higher or tertiary education and some of them, such as the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies or the Centre for Research in Higher Education Policies, have been considered among the best research institutes worldwide.

Such composition of the IBAR consortium allows for a combination and sharing of expertise located primarily within Western or Central and Eastern Europe. This enhances added value of the project for European higher education policy-making by providing balanced findings on and recommendations for the ESG institutional implementation with a variety of actors' perspectives and institutional contexts accounted for. Such findings, recommendations and the examples of good practice with Europe-wide implications will be delivered through eight cross-country comparative studies, final synthesis report and the book.

Due to high expertise of the researchers involved in the IBAR project, the links to major international organisations active in the field of higher education policy and research have been established. These organisations, including the European University Association (EUA), the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER) or the European Higher Education Society (EAIR), have been notified of the project and are likely to provide a platform for disseminating the IBAR results to the Bologna process actors as well as broad international audience. However, the IBAR impact does not stop there, reaching down to the level of national policy-makers and quality assurance agencies, benefiting from the synthesised perspectives on the ESG Part 1 implementation, and, importantly, managers, academics and students of HEIs who may access detailed institutional cases of the ESG Part 1 implementation.

5. Plans for the Future

Although the IBAR project has already yielded some major results, several objectives remain to be fulfilled in the second half of the project lifetime (July 2012-December 2013). These objectives concern the provision of insights into the implementation of those ESG standards and guidelines related to external stakeholders (especially employers), teaching staff and quality information systems. Special attention will be paid to the investigation of the (lack of) interplay between tertiary and secondary systems of education and the reflection of quality of secondary education graduates in the mechanisms of assuring quality of higher education. With the evidence produced already within the IBAR project on the sample of 28 HEIs and pointing to the unsatisfactory alignment between higher and secondary education as far as their quality assurance is concerned, the aim will be more particularly to address bottom-up interactions and dynamics to identify the causes of such misalignment, particularly with respect to tracking communications patterns as well as forms of assistance to first-year university students. Finally and importantly, the overall outputs of the IBAR project will be synthesised into the final report containing recommendations on the ESG (Part 1) modification with the aim to contribute to the ESG revision/improvement suggested at the Bologna ministerial meeting in Bucharest. In the extended version, the results will be made available in the book form, brought out by the Sense Publishers in early 2014.

6. Contribution to EU policies

Focusing on unravelling the complexities of implementation of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance within higher education institutions (ESG Part 1), the IBAR project aims to make an important contribution to the European higher education policy-making, particularly within the Bologna process, in three respects. First, taking account of some already documentable limitations in impact of Bologna policy agendas on institutional level, the project aims at identifying barriers in implementation of the ESG Part 1 in institutional settings of 28 HEIS located in seven Bologna signatory countries (CZ, UK, LV, PT, PL, SK, NL). Second, following the assumption that some HEIs including their organisational parts (faculties, schools, departments) are likely to exhibit some effective approaches in translating the ESG Part 1 into their institutional realities, the project seeks to locate such good practices and highlight their potential application internationally. Finally, third, the project aims at synthesis of the findings leading up to the formulation of recommendations for possible reformulation of the ESG (Part 1), as envisaged in the latest Bologna ministerial communiqué (Bucharest communiqué), as well as, more widely, to recommendations for future research into implementation of the Bologna priority lines. Through accomplishment of these three goals, the IBAR project has a great potential to contribute to the shaping of the European Higher Education Area in the years to come. the years to come.

