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A winding stair: implementing and establishing a common framework for QA in European higher education.

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Introduction

The shift from regional or national higher education sectors to international HE blocs such as the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has resulted in increasing calls for the centralisation or standardisation of higher education policies designed to facilitate greater global engagement with an area beyond that of a student’s home country. In order to facilitate the implementation of these policy initiatives at a managerial level we have seen a move away from the “‘republic of academics’ ideal to the ‘stakeholder university’ ideal” ((Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007; p. 478). Arguably such a move reflects a view of institutional change that is best brought about by means of a more managerial approach to organizational change.

The process of enacting policy change at any level brings with it a number of important challenges and potential pitfalls to be negotiated as policies are translated and implemented at different organisational and contextual levels (Caldwell, 2003; Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008).

the current paper takes as a theoretical framework the idea of the implementation staircase as suggested by (Reynolds and saunders 1985, and explores two of the seven barriers identified by (Westerheijden & Kohoutek, in press) and the data from Project IBAR One national and one institutional in relation to the introduction of pan-european standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education.

the Implementation Staircase

Research demonstrates that even at an institutional level effecting policy change is by no means a simple or straightforward process. At each stage of the implementation process the various actors
and communities responsible for the delivery, maintenance and operationalisation of the specific policy are required to be able not just to follow a set of guidelines in relation to the policy change but to understand the thinking behind the change if implementation is to be successful (Reynolds & Saunders, 1985).

according to this model as policies are implemented they are transformed as different groups of stakeholders interpret and influence the policy as it is being put in place.

so as the policy comes down the stair it is changed or altered

whilst this model is a useful one we must be a little cautious as it does imply a more uni-directional approach to policy implementation than is likely to be the case.

so in our model of policy implementation we augment the Stair with Livsky’s notion of “street level beuaurocracy” where the people at the bottom of the stair have responsibility for carrying out the policy - they may get lots of autonomy in how it is implemented but also take responsibility for the failure of the policy - policy makers can often be less concerned with how something is implemented as they are with the outcomes of the implementation.

as you will see from the viidgetes we are presenting these tensions and complexities associated with policy implementation are potentially magnified when the policy shifts that are required emanate not from institutional or even national priorities but instead are driven by pan-European policy initiatives.

project IBAR

Project IBAR is a three-year large-scale collaborative research initiative funded by the European Commission to identify barriers to the implementation of the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education area (ESG part 1: see
This study is primarily focused on the implementation of ESG policy at the institutional level. Seven countries are collaborating (Czech Republic, United Kingdom, Latvia, Portugal, Poland, Slovakia and the Netherlands) and are undertaking comparative analyses of current practice in twenty-eight European universities. In the light of its findings, the project aims to provide relevant recommendations for the future modification of ESG Part 1 and, distinctively, to identify the extent to which ESG Part 1 implementation impacts upon the inter-relationship between secondary and higher education.

Specific dimensions of institutional quality that the project is addressing include; access, assessment, students, management and governance, employment (including the private sector) and professional development of staff. Through the production of institutional case-studies, comparative analyses, a final integrative synopsis and subsequent book, the project seeks to inform policy making in the quality assurance domain, and should be of interest to a range of stakeholders including; ENQA partners, higher

Vignettes

vignette 1 Assessment

initially it might be considered that implementing common standards and guidelines in relation to assurance of quality in assessment should be relatively simple to achieve however,

1. institutional memory and historical knowledge limit change at the street level
2. 2. need to differentiate HE from secondary education limits change - street level
3. 3. relationship between curricula and learning outcomes also problematic - the extent to the link between the two and subsequent influence on assessment design results in potential top-down approaches that have limited success in relation to transformation of assessment processes.
4.
5. thus in relation to assessment we see tension as notions of institutional approaches to assessment filter down from the top to the bottom of the stair micro - miso level.

6.

7. despite issues at the micro and miso levels assessment viewed to be fair and increasing evidence of meta level or institutional approaches to curricula and methods of assessment - driven by such things as the UK PSF.

8.

9. vignette 2

10.

11. access

12.

13.

14. whilst assessment might be viewed of as an institutional issue with a range of barriers and challenges that need to be addressed before a paneuropean approach might be universally adopted. the issue of fair access might be considered to operate not simply at an institutional level but at a national level feeding down to the street or institutional level.

15.

16. national policies regarding marginalised groups for example might result in negative social mobility

17.

18. cz are prohibited from gathering data about ethnicity of students - limiting development of monitoring of fair access standards and guidelines

19.

20. in the uk the tension between league tables and wp is pronounced

21.
22. Institutions lack full autonomy when it comes to access being driven (at a distance) by the national policies that are linked to economic and political agendas making it difficult for them to implement ESG at an institutional level because of national legislative agenda.

23.

24. Conclusions

25.

26. Whilst we have suggested that vignettes 1 and 2 operate at different levels of the staircase - they are by no means meant to appear as polarised examples - issues move up and down the staircase and whilst it is possible to view assessment as acting at an institutional level - national qualifications frameworks mean this is not entirely the case whilst individual institutions have control over the level of engagement they have with national fair access policies and can do the minimum required or engage in a wide range of access and outreach activities aimed at the marginalised or unrepresented groups in a particular country.

27.

28. One issue that these vignettes and others like them highlight is the potential difficulties of implementing ESG and suggest a need to think more flexibly about what we mean by shared guidelines - is it about a one-size fits all approach or is it about an agreed set of principles or ideals which are then contextualised within a national and even institutional location?

29.

30.