Impact Analysis of Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Methodology, Design and Preliminary Results

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• **Why** impact analysis of (external) quality assurance?
• Methodological options and **methodology** of (E)QA impact analysis in higher education institutions
• The **IMPALA project**
  – Partners
  – Research design
  – Objectives
  – The case studies
  – Project status and preliminary results
• **Conclusions**
Impact of (External) Quality Assurance

- More than two decades of external quality assurance (EQA)
- EQA is expected to have an impact on study programmes and institutions
- HEIs complain about high evaluation workload and need effective and efficient QA procedures (e.g., massification; economy measures in HE; national and global competition)
- Governments complain about evaluation costs

BUT

- Only **few (ex-post) impact analyses of EQA**
- **No simultaneous impact analyses** (accompanying EQA)
- **Students, teachers, QA staff are not considered** [focus on institutional leadership (and peer assessments)]
- **Need for know-how** about impact analysis in **QAAAs and HEIs**

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Why do we need impact analyses?

- Assessment which part of EQA achieves its intended effects in HEIs
- Assessment which part of EQA has which non-intended effects
- Assessment in which ways EQA impacts HEIs (“causal social mechanisms”)

→ Get empirically (more) reliable knowledge about conjectured effects of EQA
→ Further professionalisation of QA staff in QAAs and HEIs
→ Insights for the strategic and systematic improvement of EQA procedures
→ Improving on efficiency and quality development in HEIs

However: new methods and instruments for QA agencies seem not to be in sight (exception, probably(?): CSS and “big data” approaches)
Typical EQA events of expected causal influence *(coarse-grained)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Before</th>
<th>During</th>
<th>After</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criteria</td>
<td>Reflection (ideas for change); adjustment</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reflection; (obvious, direct changes; adjustment)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange with peers</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessment report</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reflection; (obvious, direct changes)</td>
<td>Reflection; recommendations for follow-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal decision</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Accreditation requirements (conditional accr.); follow-up with fulfillment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No formal decision</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Free” follow-up</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Methodological options for impact analysis

• Experimental design – repeatability
  – Unfeasible for impact analysis of QA in HEIs
• Control group design – define control system (with intervention vs. without intervention)
  – Unfeasible for impact analysis of QA in HEIs
• Before-after comparison design – compare system after intervention with system before intervention
• *Ex-post* analysis design – gather information and assess system after QA procedure has ended
Institutional programme change (processes & structures)

Causal social mechanisms model
with reference to Coleman’s boat (Coleman 1994, p. 8)

(E)QA

Preferences

Actions

e.g., other QA processes; any HEI-internal & HEI-external influences (e.g., HEI policy)

1: situational mechanism
2: action-formation m.
3: transformational m.
4: statistical correlation only

Institution
Macro level

Institution
Meso level

Actor
Micro level

1
2
3
4

$S_t$

$E_t$

$E_{t+\Delta t}$

$S_{t+\Delta t}$
Methodological elements of impact analysis

• **Before-after comparison** design
  Allows to analyse **if** and **when** and **how** an effect has been achieved
  - **Causal mechanism hypotheses**  
    Allow to analyse how effects are achieved
  - **Standardised surveys** with different target groups (academic staff, students, QA staff, leadership etc.)  
    Allow to analyse goals, processes, structures, preferences, actions and institutional & programme change
  - **Structured interviews** with key actors  
    Allow to analyse causal mechanisms
  - **Document analysis/observations**  
    Allow to analyse goals, processes, structures, actions and institutional & programme change
IMPALA Project

- “Impact Analysis of EQA Processes in HEIs”  [http://www.evalag.de/impala](http://www.evalag.de/impala)
- Funded by European Commission (LLP)
- Eight main project partners: four QAAs and four HEIs in four countries
  - **Finland**: FINEEC & Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences
  - **Germany**: evalag & University of Stuttgart
  - **Romania**: ARACIS & Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest
  - **Spain**: AQU Catalunya & Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
- Further partners
  - ENQA (Brussels)
  - ESU (Brussels)
  - Prof. Dr. Bjørn Stensaker (Univ. of Oslo)
IMPALA project partners

- JAMK University of Applied Sciences
- FINEEC
- University of Stuttgart
- Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest
- Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
- AQU Catalunya
IMPALA research design

EQA procedure

Baseline study
Before procedure
- Online questionnaires
- Structured interviews
- Document analysis/observations

Midline studies
During procedure
- Online questionnaires
- Structured interviews
- Document analysis/observations

Endline study
After procedure
- Online questionnaires
- Structured interviews
- Document analysis/observations

Comparison of base-, mid- and endline study

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IMPALA research design

EQA criteria

EQA procedure

Interventions, e.g. self-assessment, site-visit, report

causal
process
for change

Change in processes, structures, preferences, actions and institutional change

Baseline study
Midline study
Endline study

Status quo before EQA
Status after EQA

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IMPALA objectives

• Design of a **generic methodology** for impact analysis, that can be applied by QAAs

• **Publications** on state of the art of methodology and impact analysis results

• Application and test of the methodology in four **case studies** in the four partner HEIs
  – Different EQA procedures
  – Different national settings

• **Practical guide/manual** for impact analysis
  – Inform about methodological options
  – Present and describe exemplary survey instruments
  – Discuss strengths, threats and practice problems of methodology and application
IMPALA case studies

- Finland: international EURACE programme accreditation
- Germany: internal programme review process (module evaluation)
- Romania: national institutional audit and programme accreditation
- Spain: national programme (pre-)accreditation
IMPALA project status

• Methodology developed
• European conference seminar held (May 2014)
• Baseline studies completed
• Midline studies currently running or planned for Summer 2015
• Two papers published
• Special issue of *Quality in Higher Education* in preparation (“Impact Evaluation of QA in HE. Exploring Stakeholder Perspectives between Methodology, Policy and Practice”)
IMPALA preliminary results (baseline study)

• Online questionnaire asks for
  – Preferences (attitudes), actions and institutional change (observations)
  – Observed change in the last year
  – Reasons for change

• Objective is to compare base-, mid-, and endline studies

• Stakeholders surveyed
  – Students
  – Academic staff (teachers)
  – QA staff
  – HEI leadership
IMPALA online questionnaire

• Questionnaire Items
  – Course type in study programme
  – QA instruments used in programme
  – Competence-oriented assessment
  – Discussions of study programme
  – Attitude towards internal QA
  – Attitude towards external QA
  – Perceived attitude of leadership towards QA
  – Observed impact and cost/benefit of QA
IMPALA sample results

How often do teachers of your study programme meet in order to discuss the further development of the study programme?

- Less than once a year
- At least once a year
- At least once every three months

Have you in the last year seen a change with respect to the frequency of teachers' meetings for further developing the study programme?

- Yes, the meetings became more frequent
- No, no changes
- Yes, the meetings became less frequent

Who or what initiated the change?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of responses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>RO</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- teaching staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- HEI management</td>
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<tr>
<td>External QA (e.g., accreditation)</td>
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<td>Internal QA (e.g., surveys)</td>
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<td>Legal requirements</td>
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In general, what is your attitude towards external quality assurance and quality development in learning and teaching?

Has your attitude towards external quality assurance and quality development in learning and teaching changed in the last year?

What has changed your attitude towards external quality assurance?

- Internal procedures of quality assurance
- External procedures of quality assurance
- Taking note of peer reports

Frequency of responses:

- RO:
  - Internal procedures of quality assurance: 10
  - External procedures of quality assurance: 8
  - Taking note of peer reports: 6

- ES:
  - Internal procedures of quality assurance: 2
  - External procedures of quality assurance: 2
  - Taking note of peer reports: 2
IMPALA sample results

Do the procedures of quality assurance and quality development in learning and teaching which are carried out in your HEI, have effects which are observable for you?

In your view, have these effects changed in the last year?

- Yes, in a positive direction (increasing effectivity)
- No, no change
- Yes, in a negative direction (decreasing effectivity)
Conclusions

- Impact analysis (of QA in HE) is complex
- IMPALA methodology seems to be promising
- Baseline data of case studies demonstrate that
  - General attitudes towards EQA reported by stakeholders seem to be markedly different in different countries (e.g., more positive in Finland and Romania as compared to Germany and Spain)
  - (E)QA effects observed by stakeholders recently are not at all classified as negative
- Further research and a more detailed look at the available data is necessary
- IMPALA project is continued (until Autumn 2016)
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<th>Activity</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Time &amp; place</th>
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<td><strong>Special Issue of Quality in Higher Education</strong></td>
<td>Seven papers on the state of the art of impact analysis in HE</td>
<td>2015</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>4th project meeting</strong></td>
<td>Stocktaking and discussion of previous results Inspection of impact data Project partners</td>
<td>06-07 Oct 2015 Barcelona (AQU Catalunya)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ENLINE STUDY</strong></td>
<td>Agencies + HEIs</td>
<td>Nov 2015 – February 2016</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>5th project meeting</strong></td>
<td>Stocktaking and discussion of previous results Inspection of impact data Planning of conference Project partners</td>
<td>Febr 2016 Bucharest (ARACIS)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE (in collaboration with ENQA)</strong></td>
<td>Public conference to present and discuss project results Project partners + keynote speakers + participants</td>
<td>April 2016 Barcelona (AQU Catalunya)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>PROJECT PUBLICATION</strong></td>
<td>Publication based on project and final conference Project partners + keynote speakers</td>
<td>(June –) Sept 2016</td>
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<td><strong>Euro-Region training workshops</strong></td>
<td>Four training workshops with QM managers, students, experts, and policy makers evalag AQU ARACIS FINEEC</td>
<td>Sept 2016 Germany Spain Romania Finland</td>
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References (choice)


Gerring, J. (2010) Causal mechanisms: yes, but …., Comparative Political Studies, 43(11), pp. 1499-1526


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