

On the Causality of External Quality Assurance in Higher Education Institutions

Prof. Dr. Dr. Theodor Leiber

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Introductory Remarks

- **Methodology to improve empirical knowledge about effects of EQA on HEIs, four pillars:**
 - Comparative analysis of **methodological perspectives** on the problem
 - Contemporary hypotheses about **HEI** in the tension field **between institution, organisation and agency**
 - Pragmatic **social mechanism** approach to causation
 - Conception of **simultaneous impact analysis + complete surveys of HEI members and EQA ‘participants’**

Practically **impossible** for impact analysis of (E)QA of HEIs

- True **experimental design** (e.g., repeatable ceteris-paribus interventions)
 - **Comparison with control groups** (e.g., with-without comparison; regression discontinuity design) – practically, no control systems for HEIs available (e.g., high complexity; very specific, individual profiles)
- **No** (explicit systematic) **counterfactual** available

Appropriate / to be used

- **Before-after comparison**

Methods of impact analysis repeatedly applied after certain developmental steps (**a.c.d.s.**), incl. **baseline** study

Before-after comparison

Qualitative process tracing

Quantitative process tracing – **Unfeasible in the case at hand**

Assessment of EQA effects by experts

Before-after comparison

Assessment of EQA effects by participants ('shadow control')

- **Standardised** (online) **surveys** with target groups (e.g., individuals involved, staff, students etc.) – **complete acquisition** (c.a.)
- (**Intensive** in-depth) **Interviews** with target groups (e.g., representatives of the management, faculty etc.) – **c.a.**
- **Participant observation** (e.g., in status seminars, final presentations)
- **Observations** (in the broad sense) (e.g., informal background knowledge and conversations with involved individuals and groups)

Main **difficulty** of before-after comparison

- **Seperate** those **effects**, which are caused by intervention measures, from other effects
 - Some systematic **cause-effect analysis** required
 - **Baseline studies** (basis of comparison) required
 - Careful **observation of 'secondary' causes** required

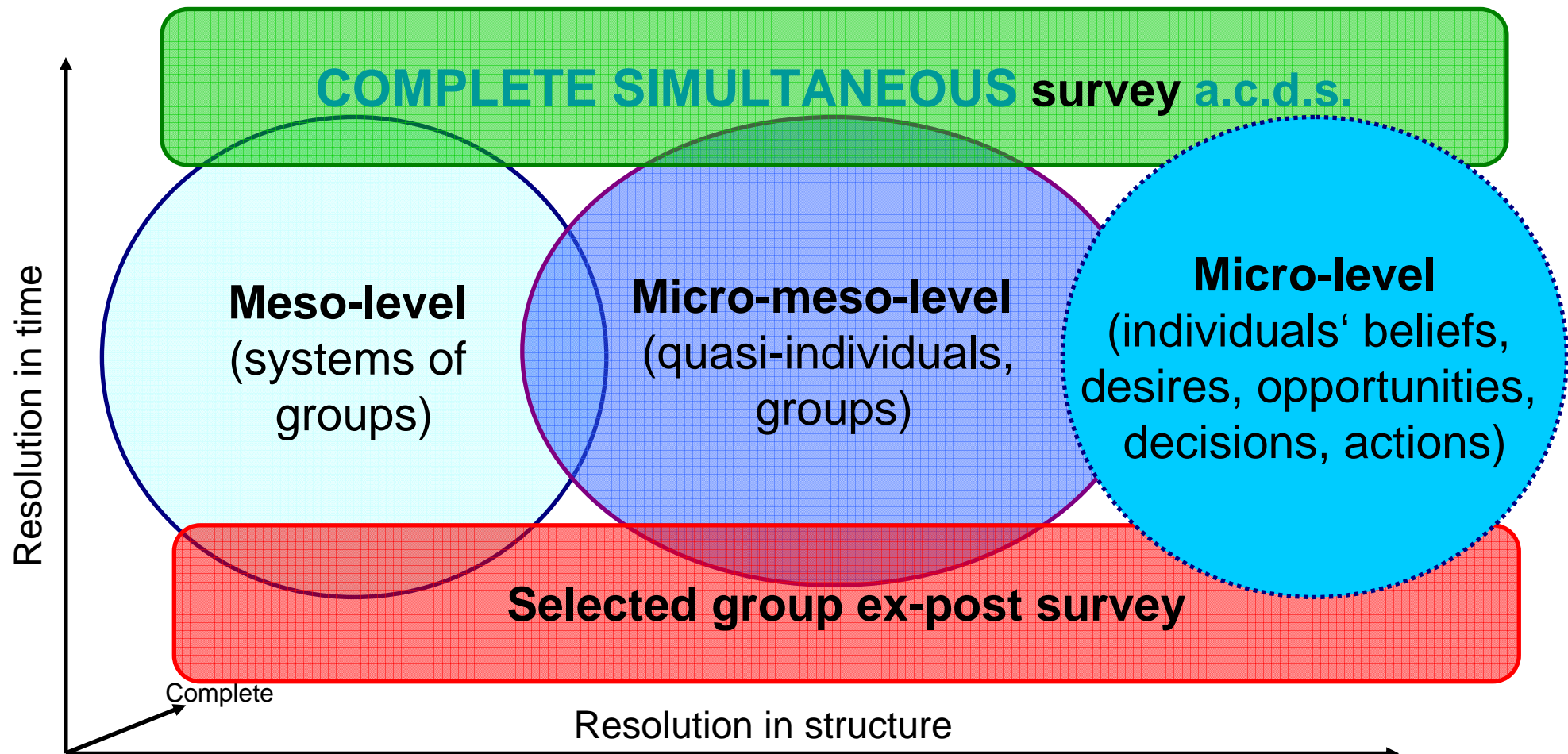
Why and how has a measure generated effects (or not)?

Which **causal chains, hubs, webs** were realised?

- Devising (more or less theory-based) **causal hypotheses**

Counterfactual can be approached indirectly, i.e., **approximated** by careful and quasi-complete **analysis of all alternative causal structural relationships** in place

Approaches to Impact Analysis – Overview



General Type of Causal Social Mechanism Hypotheses

– **Micro(-meso) level**

- “The EQA measure M contributed to the generation of the intended or non-intended effects E_i to the extent of $p_i\%$ after a time span of Δt_i via the **beliefs B_i , desires D_i of actors A_i** under the **structural conditions S_i** ($i = 1, \dots, n$).”
- Some effort still to be invested (e.g., collecting information from EQA participants and HEI members) – if at all – in order to generate such model causal hypotheses (**feasibility?!)**

Exemplary Survey Questions ... Excerpts

STRUCTURES, FUNCTIONS AND PROCESSES

What is your function/role in your HEI?

(member of HEI council, member of rectorate, member of senate, dean, dean of study, member of academic staff, member of administration, student, stakeholder, other)

What is your function/role in the quality audit?

((co-)preparation of self-report, explicit contribution to self-report, participation in 1st site visit, participation in 2nd site visit, participation in audit work shops, participation in follow-up process, other)

STRUCTURES, FUNCTIONS AND PROCESSES

What is your motivation for taking part in the quality audit?

- (solve specific problem(s), contribute to establishment of quality management, contribute to improvement of self-governance of HEI, contribute to development and improvement of quality culture in HEI, contribute to sustainability of HEI, other)

STRUCTURES, FUNCTIONS AND PROCESSES

How are decisions typically carried out in leadership/ faculty/ student/ administration/ stakeholder bodies of your HEI?

(autocratic process, consultative process, group process, other, cannot answer)

(collegial process, democratic p., corporate enterprise p., entrepreneurial p., other, cannot answer)

(top-down process, bottom-up p., collegial p., other, cannot answer)

STRATEGIC GOALS AND QM CONCEPT

**How do you value that your HEI has strategic goals/
a mission statement?**

(very positive, positive, neutral, negative, very negative,
 cannot answer)

When have they been declared/ published/ approved?

(three years ago, two and a half years ago, two years ago,
 18 months ago, 12 months ago, 6 months ago,
 3 months ago, recently, cannot answer)

QUALITY FEEDBACK LOOP(S)

Are the responsibilities/ authorities for QM transparently ascribed/ documented/ observed? (...)

Since when? (...)

UNINTENDED EFFECTS

Did you observe too much formalised and administrative-like activities/ a stagnation in quality development/ a weakening of the collegial bodies/ a decrease of the effectivity and efficiency of decisional processes/ etc.? (...)

When did you observe it? (...)

In which area of achievements?

(research, advancement of young researchers, teaching and learning, governance, administration, other, cannot answer)

COUNTERFACTUAL(S)

What would be the case if the quality audit had not taken place?

Strategic goals in place/
mission statement established/
responsibilities transparent/ etc.

(no, basic version, improvable version, well developed version)

CAUSAL ESTIMATES OF PARTICIPANTS

Did you observe [event E_i , chosen from non-/intended effects]? (...)

Which [C_i] [chosen from EQA measures] was main cause of [E_i]? (open answer)

To which extent (in %) has it led to [E_i]?

(10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100,
 cannot answer)

Concluding Remarks

- Proposed **methodology** must be **further developed** and **stand empirical test** in future applications
- **Improve** theoretical understanding (**know-why**) and deepen practical knowledge (**know-how**) about **EQA-induced changes** in HEIs
 - Contribute to produce more **reliable knowledge about causal mechanisms** at work when **EQA** measures **encounter HEI agency** (i.e., institutions, decisional process types, organisational structures, behaviour of individuals)
 - Enhance **QAAs' practical use of EQA** procedures
 - **Support institutional modelling** and **improving organisational effectivity** and governance of HEIs

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