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Broadening the scope of QA

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Proposal

Title: Mapping new territories – HEIs’ societal objectives in external quality assurance

Abstract (150 words max):

The external quality audit in Austria encompasses a broad range of HEIs’ activities – alongside the basic duties, they include societal objectives which are supposed to be integrated into the internal quality management system of a higher education institution. This paper looks into the relevance of societal objectives in external quality assurance (QA) practice. The findings are based on an analysis of (1) QA agencies’ procedure regulations and (2) audit reports on Austrian HEIs. In the first stage, we identify aspects of societal objectives found in the procedure regulations. Further analysis shows that *equal opportunities and diversity* and *transfer of knowledge* as examples of societal objectives receive little attention and that a genuine QA perspective on these topics is lacking. This is in contrast to the importance given to societal issues in higher education policy discourse and marks new territories to be explored.

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? No.

Mapping new territories – HEIs’ societal objectives in external quality assurance

1 Broadening the role of HEIs, broadening the scope of external QA?

Societal objectives of HEIs have become more relevant in European and national higher education policy discourse over the past decade.¹ Third mission activities, the issue of equal opportunities and diversity of students and staff are just a few of those. While the focus of external quality assurance procedures has traditionally been more on the basic duties of teaching and learning, the external quality audit in Austria encompasses a broader range of HEIs’ activities including societal objectives which are supposed to be integrated into the internal quality management system of HEIs. In this paper, we want to take a closer look into the relevance of societal objectives in external QA practice: Which role do societal objectives play in external reviews of HEIs’ quality management systems? Which issues within the broad concept of societal objectives are seen as relevant by QA agencies and by reviewers? Do the findings from external QA procedures reflect the importance given to societal issues in higher education policy discourse? This paper presents our main findings and conclusions drawn from an empirical analysis using the example of external quality audit procedures in Austria. Here, we chose a two-stage approach: First, we analysed the QA agencies’ procedure regulations for external quality audits of public universities and universities of applied sciences to gain insight into how societal objectives are operationalised. In a second step, we analysed the audit reports from procedures conducted on the basis of these regulations. Before presenting our findings from each stage of analysis and our conclusions, the legal framework of the Austrian quality audit and the role of societal objectives in national higher education policy are briefly introduced.

2 The Austrian case: societal objectives in external quality audits

For our empirical analysis, we considered only the two of the four higher education sectors in Austria that are subject to a periodical audit of their internal quality management system according to the Federal Act on the External Quality Assurance in Higher Education (HS-QSG), i.e. public universities and

¹ For an overview of the debate and latest developments in the field of s in Austrian and German HEIs see Himpsl (2017). Different national cases of institutionalising the “third mission” are presented in a special issue of the *European Journal of Higher Education* (Issue 3, 2015). The European Commission also put the topic of HEIs’ contribution to societal development on the agenda in its *Renewed EU agenda for higher education* (2017).



universities of applied sciences. Both are legally obliged to set up a quality management system.² The HS-QSG stipulates the assessment areas that have to be covered in the audit. Amongst others, these comprise the “integration of internationalisation and societal objectives into the quality management system”. In terms of legislation the “societal objectives” are treated at the same level as “quality-assurance structures and procedures in the areas of degree programmes and teaching, research [...]”³.

The assessment area “societal objectives” shall be understood in the light of the general objectives of the higher education institutions as described in the relevant laws. These encompass gender equality, promotion of women, improvement of permeability of educational sectors, knowledge and technology transfer. The comprehensive development plan 2016-2021 for Austrian public universities names the “advancement of knowledge transfer, transfer of innovation and locational advantage” and “promotion of a cultural change in favour of social inclusion, gender equality and diversity” as two of eight system-wide goals for the university sector, where specific foci shall be addressed in the upcoming years. In the case of universities of applied sciences, the last relevant development plan (valid until 2017/18) lists a number of targeted goals of the Austrian government for science and research. Among these is the aim that the student body shall reflect the diversity of the population.⁴ Others are the awareness for the relevance of science and research in a general public and a balanced gender ratio in leading positions and with junior academics.

An audit of the quality management system may be conducted either by AQ Austria or by “a quality assurance agency registered with the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) or by another internationally recognised and independent quality assurance agency”⁵, and the higher education institution may itself select one of the agencies and mandate it. The specification of the legally stipulated assessment areas is to be realised by each agency separately. The evident consequences thereof are described in the first section of chapter 3.

3 HEIs’ societal objectives seen through the lens of external quality audits

Stage 1: Societal objectives in the procedure regulations of QA agencies

First, we analysed the QA agencies’ procedure regulations for external quality audits in Austria in order to gain insight into how the rather open concept of societal objectives laid down in the HS-QSG is operationalised by agencies. Here, we focussed on the assessment criteria they defined and analysed how societal objectives in general or single aspects of it are addressed.⁶

The agencies operating in Austria have chosen different models for integrating the statutory assessment areas into their procedure regulations. The resulting criteria not only differ as regards their content due to the points of focus they set, but also due to the chosen degree of openness or detail. This is also reflected in the way the societal objectives are incorporated by agencies. Basically, the following three different approaches could be identified, each agency choosing its own way by picking or combining elements out of these categories:

² § 2 (3) Federal Act on Universities of Applied Sciences Degree Programmes (FHStG), § 14 (1) Federal Act on the Organisation of Universities and their Studies (UG)

³ § 22 (2) Federal Act on the External Quality Assurance in Higher Education (HS-QSG)

⁴ The “National Strategy on the Social Dimension of Higher Education” which was issued by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy in 2017 reflects the London Communiqué 2007: “We share the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations.”

⁵ § 19 (1) Federal Act on the External Quality Assurance in Higher Education (HS-QSG)

⁶ We took into account the procedure regulations of agencies which conducted at least two external quality audits in Austria between 2012 and march 2018, namely those of AAQ, AQ Austria, evalag, FIBAA and ZEvA. We considered only explicitly named (aspects of) societal objectives or measures.



Within the context of the HEIs' strategic goals

One way of incorporating the societal objectives is to identify and name them as components of the HEIs' strategic goals or the system of targets. The strategic goals in general are seen in the procedure regulations as prerequisites for developing and implementing a quality management system or as the framework, within which the quality management system shall be embedded. In this case, "general education" or "diversity and gender", that is specific aspects of societal objectives, can for instance be defined as HEIs' goals.

Within the context of HEIs' performance areas

Besides, agencies consider certain aspects of or societal objectives as such by treating them as issues to be covered by the quality management system, alongside topics related to teaching and research. Most agencies name in this context specific aspects linked to societal objectives, only one agency considers societal objectives as a whole explicitly. Examples of aspects agencies address are:

- knowledge and technology transfer as well as the dissemination of knowledge, typically placed under the field of research
- gender and diversity as a cross-cutting task of the higher education institution
- continuing higher education
- the promotion of the advancement of junior academics, which is seen here as a societal objective insofar as it cannot be clearly interpreted as a staff-related measure.

Societal objectives as a quality criterion

Finally, the agencies also take account of the societal objectives by specifying that their consideration is regarded as a quality criterion and thus as part of their system of criteria. Examples are:

- the promotion of the advancement of junior academics, defined as a single criterion,
- "active citizenship as well as social responsibility" as characteristics to be incorporated in the degree programmes' qualification goals,
- the promotion and evaluation of gender equality or equal opportunities/diversity within the HEI (in the context of personnel measures),
- the involvement of stakeholder groups in due consideration of the social responsibility of higher education institutions.

Contrasting with both previous categories, one can notice that such criteria have a normative character since they require specific measures to be taken by HEIs.

The analysis of the QA agencies' procedural regulations has shown that there is a broad variety of approaches used by agencies to operationalise the rather open concept of "societal objectives" in their procedural rules. In general, the HEIs' societal objectives are not among the agencies' main focal points of their procedure descriptions. Often, these objectives are subordinated to other subject areas like strategic governance of the HEI, research or staff.

Stage 2: Equal opportunities and diversity and transfer of knowledge and technologies in the light of quality audit reports

From the topics identified above as explicitly linked to societal objectives, *equal opportunities and diversity* and the *transfer of knowledge and technologies* to society were chosen as examples for the second stage of analysis. Here, quality audit reports⁷ on Austrian public universities and on universities of applied sciences were searched for terms linked to these two topics. This section of the paper presents the immediate findings from our analysis and provides some further insights on how these two specific societal objectives were reviewed in the light of the internal quality management system of the HEIs.

Due to the methodology used in our empirical analysis it should be stressed that the following findings reflect the relevance of *equal opportunities and diversity* and the *transfer of knowledge and technologies*

⁷ In total, 36 audit reports (15 on public universities, 21 on universities of applied sciences) were analysed, using topic-related search terms and a content analysis of the found paragraphs.



in peer reviews of HEIs' internal quality management systems. They do not allow to draw any further conclusions about actual activities and measures put in place by higher education institutions in these fields.

In general, the findings on both topics showed substantial similarities between public universities and universities of applied science, with some more significant differences between the two sectors becoming visible for the topic of transfer of knowledge and technologies.

Equal opportunities and diversity

Seen through the lens of external quality audit procedures, matters of *equal opportunity and diversity* and their integration into QA systems are addressed mainly through

- statements of the reviewers confirming that these matters were either reflected in the respective HEIs' strategic aims and documents (development plans, mission statements), that they are mentioned as guiding principles or that they had been defined as cross-sectional tasks that are supposed to be addressed in all performance areas of the HEIs;
- statements of the reviewers concerning the existence of organisational units in charge of the topic. These may include staff on management level, service units responsible for developing and implementing equal opportunities and diversity strategies and measures, or/and legally obligatory working groups or officers as well as specific research centres (found at universities of the arts);
- descriptions of certain measures related to issues of *equal opportunity and diversity*. Here, most measures that are dealt with in the reports relate to personnel matters, more precisely:
 - measures concerning personnel decisions: gender-sensitive recruiting, policies of positive discrimination of members of the underrepresented gender, inclusion of (gender) equality officers in recruitment procedures
 - monitoring measures: gender reporting, gender-pay-gap analysis
 - awareness-raising measures: specific staff trainings, guidelines for gender-sensitive teaching
 - support measures: consulting services for certain groups of staff members, measures for reconciling family and work
 - enhancement measures concerning the issue of female representation in the higher education institutions' governing bodies.

Based on these findings, further conclusions can be drawn. In our perspective, the following aspects are particularly striking:

- First, a rather one-dimensional approach to *equal opportunities and diversity* issues seems to prevail: this complex issue is almost exclusively perceived in terms of gender equality. Hence, all reports tend to focus on measures aimed at the promotion of women, increasing female participation in governing bodies, while the status of different underrepresented social groups and measures to overcome existing structural obstacles for them are neglected.
- Secondly, although seen as a key principle or cross-sectional topic, the links of *equal opportunities and diversity* to other spheres, namely teaching and learning, and research are hardly addressed, the activities of the respective research centres being an exception in this respect; furthermore, most measures focus on staff, whereas students receive little to no attention.
- Thirdly, a lack or, more precisely, the complete absence of any report contents that reflect a genuine QA perspective on issues of *equal opportunities and diversity*: We found no references to an overall quality cycle including regular evaluation of aims, strategies and measures, and subsequent enhancement activities. From reading the reports, one gets the impression that the topic is hardly integrated into the overall quality management system. It also remains unclear if quality cycles on the level of specific measures exist or if they have been implemented for all or at least some of the described measures. What can be found are quantitative analyses of data and their visualisation. However, how or if these data are used to further develop measures, is not put under further scrutiny within the external quality audit.

Transfer of knowledge and technology

Our findings on the topic of *knowledge and technology transfer* share similarities with the results from the above analysis, but also differ in some respects. In particular, there are several differences on sectoral level, i.e. some of our findings refer either to public universities or universities of applied sciences. However, our analysis has shown that there are nevertheless common tendencies in the way external quality audits look into the integration of knowledge and technology transfer into quality management systems.

- As with *equal opportunities and diversity*, the reports focus on short descriptions of transfer activities put in place by HEIs (research cooperation with businesses, participation in technology transfer centres, support activities for start-ups, partnerships with cultural institutions, initiatives to disseminate knowledge to local businesses and broader, non-academic audiences). Again, a genuine QA perspective that would imply looking systematically into the defined aims and strategies, derived measures and implemented evaluation procedures is either lacking or cannot be found at all.
- Unlike the topic of *equal opportunities and diversity*, *knowledge and technology transfer* and its role on a strategic level is hardly addressed by the audit reports. At best, statements concerning single QA measures can be found.

Other findings are more sector-specific:

- *Knowledge and technology transfer* are typically addressed in the context of research. Within public universities, the transfer issue is typically linked to various aspects of research support (acquisition of funding, transfer of research results to the non-academic sphere, IPR management). Hence, the respective units which deal with these issues do receive a certain amount of attention.
- However, within the sector of universities of applied sciences, matters of *knowledge and technology transfer* are also directly linked to the sphere of teaching and learning (study programmes). This reflects the specific role of this type of HEI in the Austrian system of higher education: For universities of applied sciences, “societal objectives” are understood above all in terms of securing a high level of employability of graduates and serving the (economic) needs of regional communities and, subsequently, of regional business. This implies a strong focus on providing businesses not only with scientific input, but also with a workforce whose qualifications fit the needs of the regional labour market.

4 Societal objectives as a blind spot in QA?

Our analysis has shown that the current practice of external QA of HEIs’ activities in the field of societal objectives, especially considering the topics of *equal opportunities and diversity* and the *transfer of knowledge and technologies*, has significant shortcomings. Although, at least in legal terms, ranked on an equal level with the traditional core objects of external QA (teaching and learning, research), external QA practice has partly failed to address these issues systematically. Reasons for this can be found on both levels of our analysis.

The different ways of QA agencies to translate the assessment areas laid down in the HS-QSG into criteria play an important role here. Typically, QA agencies do not put an emphasis on these matters, which often remain subordinated to other areas of assessment. More importantly, the widespread practice of treating certain aspects related to societal objectives results in the exclusion of others and at the same time narrows the perspective on these matters within external quality audits. However, a detailed operationalisation of societal objectives that mentions certain aspects in the agencies’ criteria provides guidance to reviewers since in that case they have a clear and binding indication on the aspects they have to deal with, especially when these aspects are treated as distinct quality criteria. This can be seen as a feature which fosters the consideration of societal objectives in external QA, while addressing societal objectives as a whole can implicate their neglect, as the specific way of dealing with them is at the discretion of the reviewers. Here, of course much of the problem comes from the initial vagueness of the notion of “societal objectives”. Also, the concepts of *equal opportunity and diversity* and *transfer of knowledge and technology* themselves are subject to different interpretations.



On the level of the conducted external QA procedures, it is striking that a genuine QA perspective on the topics discussed is not very well developed. Since this is a constant pattern found in all reports, the respective reviewing teams and their subjective perspectives and preferences cannot fully explain this. Here, if no guidance is provided by the QA agencies, the relative novelty of the overall topic and a general strategic deficit⁸ may serve as an explanation. It seems that (Austrian) HEIs are only beginning to integrate “societal objectives”, and, in this context, the topics of *equal opportunities and diversity* and *transfer of knowledge and technology* systematically into their overall strategies and internal quality management systems. Hence, audit reviewers can find little QA practices to analyse.

Generally, there may also be a general acceptance deficit: Nobody doubts that activities related to service to society and societal objectives are important and do contribute to the broader legitimacy of HEIs. However, there seems to be resistance coming from within academia, where their significance compared to the core activities of teaching and research is still being challenged. Overcoming both deficits is necessary, before structured internal QA instruments can be developed. Only then, external QA will be able to assess the progress made in a field whose importance for higher education will be growing in the future.

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Questions for Discussion

1. What needs to be done to foster the integration of the topics *equal opportunities and diversity* and *transfer of knowledge and technologies* into internal/external QA procedures?
2. In which way do our findings reflect your experience with the topics *equal opportunities and diversity* and *transfer of knowledge and technologies* in internal/external QA procedures?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 24 July 2018 to QAForum@eua.eu. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.