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ABSTRACT

The vast majority of studies concerning the implementation of quality assurance in higher education institutions have been conducted from a national perspective, with few cross-national studies. This study aimed to explore the implementation of quality assurance standards in Europe from a comparative perspective. A questionnaire based on *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* was developed to compare countries. The results indicate that higher education institutions mainly formulate their quality assurance systems according to national standards or based on their own needs. The main emphasis in quality assurance is on teaching and learning activities and curriculum development. The major contribution of the study lies in showing how different country settings affect the implementation of quality assurance standards through presenting the strengths and weaknesses for quality assurance implementation among several European countries.

Introduction

From the early 2000s, there has been an increasing focus on quality assurance in European higher education institutions. Recognition of the need for quality in education is by no means a new feature of the European education agenda. Nevertheless, the implementation of quality assurance in higher education institutions did not significantly increase until the middle of the last decade. Efforts in this direction were strongly linked to the Bologna Process in which one of the aims is to assure the quality of teaching and learning in European higher education (Gvaramadze, 2008).

In general, the purposes of quality assurance vary from one institution to another. Some institutions focus on institutional performance assessments or on institutional learning, whereas others pay attention to improving their academic and management activities. Yet others concentrate on the equal

allocation of resources, on compliance with external quality or on accountability to society and government (Martin & Parikh, 2017).

The European Union has established several projects, initiatives and organisations supporting quality assurance that seek to enhance higher education. For example, *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) (ENQA, 2015) have been established to support the European educational system. The ESG aims to set a framework for a quality assurance system applying to teaching and learning activities. The intention is that it will advance quality improvement and assurance in higher education in Europe, support mutual trust in order to facilitate mobility and recognition across borders, and offer information on quality assurance in European higher education.

Although quality assurance seems to be becoming more transnational in nature (Ewell, 2010), only few studies on quality assurance have been conducted from a cross-national perspective. Kohoutek *et al*. (2018), for example, studied how ESG were taken up by higher education institutions in Portugal and the Czech Republic and noticed that the differences between the styles of the two countries point to the complexity in EU policy implementation. They demonstrated that country and university organisational characteristics matter by creating a variety of institutional responses reflecting political or policy choices on the ESG initiative.

The aim of the present study is thus to examine the implementation of quality assurance in several European countries in the frame of ESG. This is expected to provide new knowledge on quality assurance across European countries; the analysis includes especially a comparative perspective that has not gained much prominence in the literature on higher education quality assurance. Therefore, this research will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main characteristics of quality assurance in European higher education institutions?
2. How well have higher education institutions implemented quality assurance standards from their own perspective?
3. How well have countries implemented quality assurance standards and what kinds of differences exist between countries in their implementation of the standards?

Quality assurance in higher education

A considerable number of articles have been published on quality assurance in higher education. Thus far, several studies have addressed quality assurance as a concept (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Lomas & Ursin, 2009), dealing with its dimensions (Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996; Lagrosen *et al*., 2004) and

the approaches to it (Woodhouse, 1999). Furthermore, several studies discussed the progress in processes and practices of national quality assurance standards (Harvey & Williams, 2010). The overall aim has been to understand the nature of quality assurance in education and how it can be achieved.

A range of understandings and definitions of quality assurance have been introduced in the literature. Some of them have described it as a way to ensure confidence in educational institutions, following the successful fulfilment of the quality standards and requirements applied in evaluation. In line with this notion, Petersen (1999, p. 15) viewed quality assurance in higher education as 'the means by which an institution can guarantee with confidence and certainty, that the standards and quality of its educational provision are being maintained and enhanced'.

Along similar lines, Borahan and Ziarati (2002) saw quality assurance in education as a set of necessary planned actions that provide confidence in any educational service or product to assure that its quality requirements will be satisfied. In the same vein, Martin and Stella (2007) regarded quality assurance as a set of mechanisms aiming to satisfy higher education purposes, in addition to meeting general or specific quality standards at a programme or institutional level.

However, some authors have focused more on the quality aspect of quality assurance. Thus, Vlasceanu and colleagues (2007) defined quality assurance as an ongoing process of evaluation that includes monitoring, assessing, maintaining and improving the quality of higher education programmes, institutions or systems. Quality assurance can also be seen as a tool for accountability and/or improvement. Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002) considered quality assurance to consist of policies and processes to maintain quality, with a focus on accountability to stakeholders. This view was supported by Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2004), who explained that the focus should be on improvement in the first place with accountability then as a consequence.

In regard to quality assurance models, many different models have been introduced into the domain of quality in higher education (Matei & Iwinska, 2016). These models differ from each other according to the perspectives and strategies applied. Cheng and Cheung (1997), for example, summarised seven different models for quality in the educational sector, namely, goals for specification model, a resource input model, a process model, a satisfaction model, a legitimacy model, an absence of problem model and an organisational learning model. These models are said to differ from each other in their conceptualisation, usefulness and areas for evaluation. In further explication, the authors emphasised that the existence of several quality models is both important and valuable, providing possibilities to establish a comprehensive understanding of educational quality in higher education institutions.

Along similar lines, a study by Prisăcariu (2014) distinguished between several main models of quality assurance in European higher education systems.

Prisăcariu outlined four models for quality assurance in education. The first model relies on a 'review of the comprehensiveness, functioning and effectiveness of the quality assurance systems themselves'. The major focus here is on the quality of institutional procedures, methods, processes and instruments that are used for organisational operations. The second model depends on a 'review of the quality itself, against fixed external quality assurance standards'. The purpose here is to provide a guarantee to external and internal stakeholders that the accredited institution meets the minimum quality standards requirements. The third model involves 'assessment of the quality of the "Results"'. This stresses the performance of the educational system and the intended learning outcomes. The final model involves 'the quality of the "governance" of the education system'. In contrast with the previous model, this model concentrates on the entire institution rather than on a particular study programme. Furthermore, it revolves around the mission and objectives of the institution, and not around external evaluation standards or criteria.

In sum, it seems that quality assurance in higher education involves a wide range of understandings, approaches, models, challenges and definitions. This, coupled with both a complex higher education environment (Kauko, 2014; Nascimbeni, 2015) and a complex research field (Alzafari, 2017; Alzafari & Perner, 2018), makes the implementation of quality assurance in higher education institutions a challenging endeavour. Undoubtedly, the complexity of the matter has implications for researchers attempting to assess quality assurance and to conduct related comparisons.

An initial challenge will be that of designing an appropriate research instrument to compare different kinds of quality assurance across a wide range of European higher education institutions, bearing in mind the variety of quality criteria, quality assurance standards and guidelines applicable. Differences may need to be addressed on: (1) the national level (with countries like Germany and Spain having more than one national agency); (2) the European level (involving differences among the European Union (EU) countries); (3) the educational systems; (4) the scope of the quality evaluation (at national, institutional and programme level). Therefore, in order to assess the quality assurance implemented in the different types of higher education institution, and to embark on a comparison between countries, the present study utilised the ESG criteria. The criteria (referred to as 'quality assurance standards') are set out in the next section (Table 1).

Methodology

The methodology of this paper is based on quantitative data analysis for several European countries as this paper attempts to reveal the main characteristics of quality assurance implementation at European higher education institutions. The data are collected through a survey based on section one of

Table 1. Quality assurance standards and sub-standards addressed in the questionnaire.

No.	Standard	Sub-standards
1	A policy for quality	• Quality assurance strategies • Internal stakeholder involvement • External stakeholder involvement
2	Design and approval of programmes	• Curriculum development • Stakeholders' involvement in designing curricula
3	Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	• Students' learning • Student assessment
4	Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	
5	Quality of the teaching staff	• Teaching competence • Academic assessment
6	Learning resources and support for students	
7	Information management	
8	Public information	
9	Ongoing monitoring and review of programmes	

the ESG titled 'internal quality assurance standards'. The questionnaire was circulated using an online survey service and subjected to later analysis through statistical analysis software.

The participants and sample size

The sample comprised higher education institutions' respondents ($n = 297$) from more than 20 European countries. The first step of the analysis included the responses from all the participants as this study investigates quality assurance implementation in the European higher education institutions. However, the second part (comparison of countries) included only countries that have enough responses to be considered a representative sample size to the total number of higher education institutions in a country (at least 10%). Altogether 13 countries ($n = 250$) fulfilled this condition: Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland.

The sample contained different types of higher education institutions, namely multidisciplinary universities (50.8%), universities of applied sciences (16.8%), specialised universities (11.8%), technical universities (7.1%), colleges or schools (5.7%) and also other types of higher education institutions that did not fit into the previous categories (7.7%). The sample was distributed among public institutions (77.1%), private institutions (20.2%) and neither public nor private institutions (2.7%).

Questionnaire design

The questionnaire was designed to include only criteria that are associated with the internal quality assurance of higher education institutions. Thus, the survey contained the nine ESG standards previously mentioned (see Table 1 and the Results section, in which the standards are dealt with one by one). The survey

started with the collection of general information on the higher education institutions, and on the quality system applied. This was followed by questionnaire items related to the quality assurance standards.

To obtain complete and accurate responses, each standard had its own section in the questionnaire. The sections contained definitions and explanations that were intended to assist the participants in understanding the survey components.

To check the content validity of the questionnaire, feedback was obtained from three researchers in the field of quality in higher education. This step was valuable in checking whether the survey components covered the full domain of the content, with adequate representation in the questionnaire items, and also in checking whether the items measured what they were supposed to measure (Cooper & Schindler, 2011). Furthermore, the readability, layout and style, feasibility and clarity of wording of the questionnaire were evaluated to reduce any ambiguity.

A pre-test was carried out with a sample of the target group (persons responsible for quality affairs in higher education institutions) before the data collection phase was started. A web-based questionnaire was the most viable way of collecting data, since the respondents were located in many different European countries. Emails including the questionnaire link were sent to quality representatives in higher education institutions. In these, the detailed aims of the survey, plus the confidentiality of the responses were explained.

Cronbach alphas were calculated to test the reliability of the instrument. Cronbach alpha is a method to assess the internal consistency (homogeneity) of questionnaire items (Cronbach, 1951). It is commonly used in quantitative research to measure the 'fit of purpose' (Taber, 2017), as well as to evaluate the precision of a measurement instrument (Cooper & Schindler, 2011, p. 280). The results showed that all of the quality assurance components had at least acceptable alpha coefficients, with α range from 0.64 to 0.92.

Main quality assurance characteristics in European higher education institutions

The participating higher education institutions did not primarily focus on systems based on standardised quality initiatives (such as Total Quality Management) in conducting quality assurance in their institutions (Figure 1). Most of the institutions implemented a quality system based on national standards (35.7%), or a model developed for their own needs (26.6%). More than 11% of the institutions applied a quality system that was not based on any specific model.

The participants were asked whether their quality management system structure is centralised (that is, with a quality unit established at the
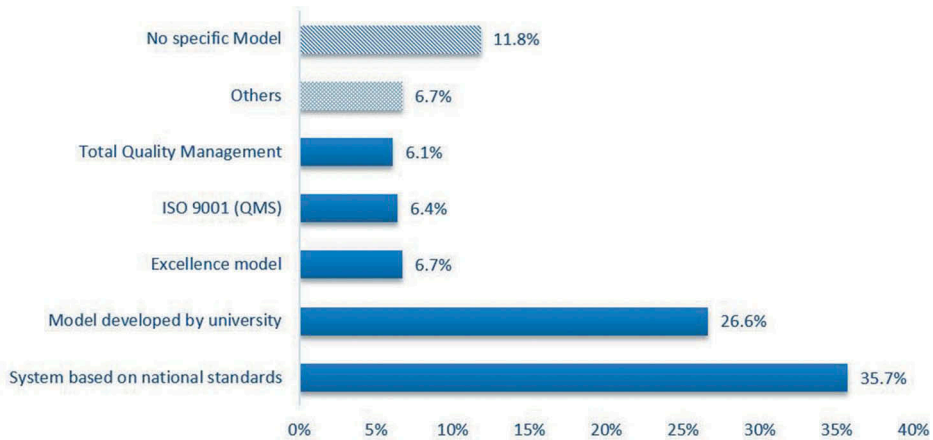
Figure 1. Quality systems applied in higher education institutions.

institutional level), decentralised (with a quality representative in each individual department) or exhibiting a mix of the two. The analysis indicated that more than half of the institutions (52.9%) had a mixed system. In other words, the institutions had a unit responsible for quality issues at the institutional level and, at the same time, a unit or a programme addressing quality issues at the departmental level. Around 40% of the institutions had only a central unit for quality management responsible for the entire quality system. Fewer than 5% of the participating institutions had a totally decentralised quality system.

This study also investigated the extent to which institutions implemented quality assurance to cover their basic missions. The results showed that teaching and learning activities, curriculum development and student services have the highest value in this regard, followed by organisational management and research (Figure 2).
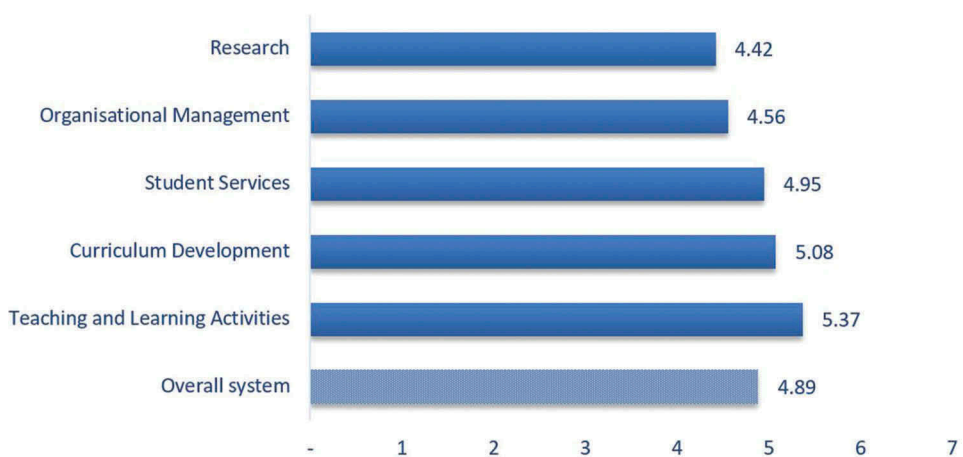
Figure 2. Quality assurance implementation in different activities conducted by higher education institutions.

The responses also reveal that the vast majority of higher education institutions have quality assurance systems as well as policies for managing and assuring the quality of educational activities. However, around 85% of the respondents indicated that they have such systems and policies on the institutional level, whereas only 9% reported having quality assurance on the faculty level. On the other hand, only a few higher education institutions (around 5%) had not yet started building a quality assurance system and policies within their organisations.

Implementation of quality assurance standards at the institutional level

In this section, the study reports how the participating institutions perceived their implementation of the nine quality assurance standards (Table 2). It seems that European higher education institutions have successfully adopted many standards, such as those concerning learning resources and support for students, information management and design and approval of programmes. However, a couple of standards are still considered challenging matters to be implemented, for instance, student assessment, teaching competency, and ongoing monitoring and reviewing of study programmes. This might indicate that although quality assurance implementation is progressing well across the European countries, higher education institutions are still struggling with several challenges.

The first standard, a policy for quality, includes topics related to embedding quality to the strategic management plans of higher education institutions, the involvement of internal stakeholders in implementing and developing quality policies and the participation of external stakeholders.

Table 2. Quality assurance in European higher education. (The scale applied is standardised from 1 to 7 for all items.)

Category		Sub-category	Mean
1	Policy of quality	Overall first standard	5.2
		Quality assurance strategy	5.6
		Internal stakeholders[a]	5.3
		External stakeholders[b]	4.6
2	Design and approval of programmes	Overall second standard	5.6
		Stakeholders' involvement in designing curricula[c]	5.2
		Curriculum development	6.2
3	Student-centred learning	Overall third standard	4.9
		Students' learning	5.7
		Student assessment	4.1
4	Student admission, progression, recognition and certification		5.9
5	Quality of the teaching staff	Overall fifth standard	5.1
		Teaching competence	4.2
		Academic assessment	5.9
6	Learning resources and support for students		6.0
7	Information management		6.0
8	Public information		6.3
9	Ongoing monitoring and review of programmes		3.9

[a]Including academics (5.7), administration staff (5.6) and students (4.7).
[b]Including quality assurance agency (5.5), graduates (4.6), labour market (4.5) and government (3.9).
[c]Including academics (6.4), students (5.2), labour market (4.9) and graduates (4.2).

Quality in higher education is usually embedded within the strategic plan of higher education institutions for a successful implementation. However, within this plan one would expect to see a description of the structures, processes and responsibilities designed to enhance the quality of higher education activities. Since quality is perceived as a major driver for national economic development and competitiveness, governments put considerable pressure on educational institutions to ensure the quality of education and the institutions respond by placing quality enhancement at the top of their strategic agenda, paying due attention to the competitiveness of the education market (Martin & Stella, 2007). As expected, the survey results reflected this, with most of the participants reporting having a quality assurance policy within their strategic plans (mean score = 5.6).

Several scholars have addressed the topic of stakeholders in higher education (Chapleo & Simms, 2010; Kettunen, 2015), along with their interests and their roles (Pinheiro, 2015), and including also their influence on curriculum and programme design (Leisyte *et al.*, 2013). Many parties have been identified as stakeholders, including alumni, parents, taxpayers, employers, students, accreditation agencies, governments and non-government organisations (Marshall, 2018). They have been categorised as either external or internal stakeholders (Burrows, 1999). Amaral and Magalhães (2002, p. 11) define internal stakeholders as those 'who participate in the daily life of the institutions', whereas external stakeholders are a 'group or individuals that have an interest in higher education even though they are not members of the higher education community'.

As noted by Ulewicz (2017), both internal and external stakeholders have a key influence on how effectively a higher education institution functions. Hence, in the present study (as in other studies), students, academics and administrators are considered to be internal stakeholders, while regarding graduates, the labour market, governments and accreditation agencies as external stakeholders.

The results indicate that with the involvement of internal stakeholders in the quality issues of higher education institutions is greater than that of external ones (mean scores of 5.3 and 4.6, respectively). Among internal stakeholders, it seems that students have less involvement than the other internal stakeholders despite the considerable focus on student involvement in the literature (Alzafari, 2017). Among the external stakeholders, on the other hand, graduates and the labour market have less involvement than quality assurance agencies. This latter observation is by no means unexpected, given that most European countries impose an accreditation process on higher education institutions on the grounds of accountability. Moreover, in some countries, a quality assurance agency is considered by higher education institutions to be a fundamental point of reference in these matters, due to the vast experience of the agency in quality implementation.

As regards the second quality assurance standard, related to the design and approval of programmes, the higher education institutions did well in this aspect (mean score = 5.6). In other words, they conducted many processes (such as, defining the learning outcomes and the expected student workload) with a view to enhancing their study programmes (mean score = 6.2). Additionally, they included stakeholders in the development of their study programmes (mean score = 5.2). The analysis shows that the participation of internal stakeholders (academics and students) was much higher than that of external stakeholders (graduates and the labour market).

The third quality assurance standard, which encompasses student-centred learning, is defined as circumstances where students select their own learning goals and means (Hannafin, 2012). In addressing this standard, the study first focused on the sub-category labelled student learning. This refers to the diversity of learning paths, the variety of learning delivery methods, the evaluation of the teaching methods and the autonomy of the learner. With regard to the second sub-category, namely student assessment (which includes assessment both of and by students), this study investigated whether the quality assurance processes took into account critical issues such as examination methods, appeal procedures, the methods of assessment and the learning feedback given to students. Of particular importance was the extent to which higher education institutions considered the students' own assessment of their progression and their future careers, since such a feature allows students to indicate how far the intended learning outcome is achieved in their own eyes. The results indicate that the higher education institutions considered the 'student learning' sub-category to be implemented better than the 'student assessment' sub-category (with respective mean scores of 5.7 and 4.1).

The fourth quality assurance standard (referring to student admission, progression, recognition and certification) is dealt with below, along with standards 6, 7 and 8. The fifth quality assurance standard, which concerns the quality of the academic staff, is an important component of quality assurance. In this study, it included two sub-categories: (1) processes of academic recruitment and development; (2) methods and tools for assessing the staff.

As noted by Martin and Parikh (2017), many higher education institutions endeavour to enhance the teaching capacity of academic staff, especially during the early phase of their career. This is based on the observation that effective teaching does not necessarily come naturally to everyone. The current study shows that higher education institutions do emphasise academic assessment (mean score = 5.9). Nonetheless, it seems that the teaching competence of the staff remains an area for development (mean score = 4.2). Previous studies have indicated that educational institutions focus more on research output than on teaching activities in their academic staff assessments (Ramsden, 1991). Despite this, the reported study results

indicate that both teaching and research performance are taken into consideration alike.

Quality assurance standards 4, 6, 7 and 8 are associated with ensuring the quality of information and resources related to students' learning. The analysis indicated that higher education institutions have done well in implementing these standards, with means ranging from 5.9 to 6.3. This means that the higher education institutions have successfully developed and enhanced several aspects, such as student life cycle, learning and teaching resources, provision of support for students, information management, as well as public information on the study programmes.

The results indicate that institutions need improvement in monitoring and evaluating their study programmes (standard 9). This had the lowest mean score of all the quality assurance standards (mean = 3.9).

Measuring the quality assurance differences among the countries

Overall, the participating higher education institutions felt that they had achieved the quality assurance standards well (Table 3). Nonetheless, the implementation ratings differed between countries.

Regarding the first standard (policy for quality), the respondents considered that they had assurance procedures in place as part of their strategic management (Table 4). In the sub-categories covering stakeholder engagement with quality assurance practices, the institutions estimated that they had more engagement with internal than with external stakeholders (Table 4). There were some variations between countries: the institutions from the Baltic region seemed to achieve the policy for quality standard better than their counterparts in Germany, Italy and Switzerland.

The participating institutions felt that they had achieved the second standard (design and approval of the programme) even better than the first one (Table 3). The tendency in this standard was similar to that in the quality policy, in the sense

Table 3. Implementation of standards for internal quality assurance by country. (The numbers 1–9 refer to the quality assurance standards set out in Table 1.)

Country	N	All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Austria	13	5.4	5.2	6.1	4.8	5.8	5.2	5.9	5.9	6.2	3.2
Czech Republic	16	5.3	5.3	5.5	4.4	5.7	4.9	6.1	5.8	6.3	3.5
Denmark	11	5.8	5.4	5.8	5.9	5.3	6.0	6.3	6.3	6.2	5.3
Estonia	9	5.9	5.6	6.2	5.4	6.4	5.7	6.1	6.5	6.6	4.4
Finland	21	5.4	5.3	5.8	5.0	5.9	4.7	6.4	6.3	6.3	3.0
Germany	42	5.3	5.1	5.7	4.3	6.0	4.9	6.0	6.0	6.3	3.3
Italy	38	5.1	4.8	5.2	4.2	5.7	4.4	5.6	5.8	5.9	4.0
Kosovo	15	5.2	5.1	5.4	4.9	6.3	4.6	5.4	5.9	6.2	3.4
Latvia	15	5.7	5.6	6.0	5.3	6.1	5.2	5.9	6.2	6.6	4.7
Lithuania	13	5.9	6.0	6.0	5.6	6.5	5.6	6.5	6.2	6.6	4.6
Netherlands	14	6.0	5.4	6.0	6.2	6.0	5.9	6.1	6.0	6.3	5.8
Spain	24	5.4	5.2	5.8	4.9	5.9	4.9	6.0	6.0	6.2	3.6
Switzerland	19	5.4	4.6	4.9	5.4	6.0	5.7	6.0	5.8	6.2	4.1
All participants	297	5.4	5.2	5.7	4.9	5.9	5.1	6.0	6.0	6.3	3.9

Table 4. Perceptions on quality policy: strategic management and the engagement of stakeholders.

Country	N	Quality policy (overall mean)	Strategic management	Internal stakeholders	External stakeholders
Austria	13	5.2	5.8	5.4	4.3
Czech Republic	16	5.3	5.9	5.2	4.7
Denmark	11	5.4	5.8	5.2	5.1
Estonia	9	5.6	5.7	5.9	5.2
Finland	21	5.3	5.9	5.7	4.3
Germany	42	5.1	5.4	5.1	4.7
Italy	38	4.8	5.6	4.8	4.1
Kosovo	15	5.1	5.7	5.6	4.1
Latvia	15	5.6	5.6	5.9	5.2
Lithuania	13	6.0	6.3	6.2	5.5
Netherlands	14	5.4	6.0	5.4	4.9
Spain	24	5.2	5.5	5.2	4.9
Switzerland	19	4.6	5.2	4.7	3.8
All participants	297	5.2	5.6	5.3	4.6

that internal stakeholders were seen as more active than external stakeholders in helping to design programmes. The participating institutions also viewed their programmes as effective in meeting the objectives set for them. Institutional strategies were sufficiently taken into account. However, there seemed to be differences between countries, in that the higher education institutions in Switzerland and Italy gave themselves lower scores than institutions from any other participating country (Table 5).

The higher education institutions' scores on the third standard (student-centred learning, teaching and assessment) provided the second lowest mean score for all the standards, even if there were differences between countries (Table 6). Italy, Germany and Czech Republic gave lower scores for this standard than higher education institutions from any of the other countries. In addition, the institutions estimated their teaching and learning methods as more student-centred than their ways of assessing their students (Table 6).

Table 5. Perception on curriculum design and engagement of stakeholders.

Country	N	Design and approval of programmes (overall)	Curriculum design	Internal stakeholders	External stakeholders
Austria	13	6.1	6.5	6.6	4.7
Czech Republic	16	5.5	6.1	5.8	4.2
Denmark	11	5.8	6.6	5.4	4.9
Estonia	9	6.2	6.0	6.6	6.1
Finland	21	5.8	6.1	6.4	4.8
Germany	42	5.7	6.2	5.9	4.8
Italy	38	5.2	5.7	5.5	4.1
Kosovo	15	5.4	6.2	5.5	4.0
Latvia	15	6.0	6.4	6.0	5.0
Lithuania	13	6.0	6.7	5.8	5.0
Netherlands	14	6.0	6.5	6.1	4.7
Spain	24	5.8	6.5	5.5	4.9
Switzerland	19	4.9	5.8	4.9	3.1
All participants	297	5.8	6.2	5.7	4.5

Table 6. Perception on student-centred learning and assessment.

Country	N	Student-centred learning (Overall mean)	Student learning	Student assessment
Austria	13	4.8	5.8	3.7
Czech Republic	16	4.4	5.0	3.8
Denmark	11	5.9	6.2	5.6
Estonia	9	5.4	6.1	4.8
Finland	21	5.0	5.9	4.1
Germany	42	4.3	5.7	3.0
Italy	38	4.2	5.3	3.1
Kosovo	15	4.9	5.9	3.9
Latvia	15	5.3	5.9	4.8
Lithuania	13	5.6	6.2	4.9
Netherlands	14	6.2	5.9	6.6
Spain	24	4.9	5.7	4.1
Switzerland	19	5.4	5.8	4.9
All participants	297	4.1	5.7	4.1

The fourth standard was ranked at the mid-point of all the standards (Table 3). There was hardly any variation between the countries, with the exception of Danish higher education institutions, which had a considerably lower rating than the others for the implementation of this standard.

According to the participating higher education institutions, the fifth standard, on assuring competent teaching staff, ranked as one of the lowest of the standards achieved (Table 3). However, the countries seemed to be divided into those who had strong procedures to assure the teaching competence of the staff (Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Switzerland) and those who did not score this aspect so highly (Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Italy, Kosovo and Spain).

The sixth standard concerned whether institutions have provided sufficient resources for learning and teaching activities and for student support. This standard achieved some of the highest scores. This was especially the case with countries in Northern Europe. The seventh standard concerned the extent to which institutions collect, analyse and use relevant information for the management of their programmes and other activities. The respondents perceived that this was well taken care of. Indeed, there were hardly any differences among the countries (Table 3).

The eighth standard, on publishing clear and up-to-date information on programmes, was assessed to be at a very high level. This standard was highly ranked in the Baltic countries. However, the ninth standard (on monitoring and periodically reviewing the institution's programmes to ensure that they achieved the objectives set for them) scored only 3.9; the lowest of all the nine standards (Table 3). Here also there was clear variation between countries: the institutions from the Netherlands and Denmark felt that they had good monitoring activities in place, whereas in Finnish and Austrian institutions, surprisingly, these activities seemed to be still under development.

In sum, the European higher education institutions estimated the implementation of quality assurance in their organisation as highly successful in most of the ESG standards except the one associated with monitoring and

reviewing their programmes. This is in line with the previous findings of this study. It indicates that the vast majority of higher education institutions across the European countries (85%) have adopted quality assurance systems and policies on institutional level rather than on programme level.

It seems that standards 4, 6, 7 and 8 are well implemented in comparison with the others (Table 3). Taking a closer look at the nature of these specific standards, it seems that higher education institutions showed better implementation for such managerial aspects that are relatively easy to administer and also for less challenging quality assurance measures, such as student services, learning resources, information management and public information. However, higher education institutions still struggle with a couple of challenging aspects related to building quality assurance systems and policies, developing curriculum and enhancing teaching activities. Unsurprisingly, this is consistent with many previous research findings dealing with challenges and difficulties higher education institutions face in their quality efforts (Cardoso *et al.*, 2016; Matei & Iwinska, 2016; De Vincenzi *et al.*, 2018).

Considering the overall average of quality assurance implementation, it seems that there is variation between the European countries. Some countries (Netherlands, Lithuania, Estonia, Denmark and Latvia) have advanced further in implementing the quality assurance standards in their higher education institutions, while some countries (Italy, Kosovo and the Czech Republic) have still more room for improvement in this respect.

Conclusions

The participating higher education institutions have composed their quality assurance systems mainly according to national standards and traditions or based on the needs of the institution. Typically, the participating institutions have a specific unit for quality assurance but each basic unit is responsible for improving the quality of their own processes and procedures. The results also show that the higher education institutions normally cover all their basic missions in the quality assurance system but that the emphasis is on teaching and learning activities and on curriculum development.

As for stakeholders' involvement, it seems that external stakeholders play a lesser role than internal stakeholders with regard both to quality assurance policies and in the design of programmes. Furthermore, among the internal stakeholders, student involvement scores are the lowest, even though student involvement has received considerable attention in the research field.

The quality assurance implementation by participating institutions reveals good management practices, publication of relevant information and good resources plus support services for students. Most room for improvement is in how the institutions monitor and evaluate their programmes and in how well

they have implemented the principles of student-centred learning within their programmes.

The results suggest a variety of ways of understanding the goals of quality assurance (Martin & Stella, 2007; Lomas & Ursin, 2009; Prisăcariu, 2014) and carrying out quality assurance in various institutional and country settings (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Ursin, 2007; Prisăcariu, 2014). The study demonstrates that different country settings do affect the implementation of quality assurance standards. The study thus corroborates Kauko's (2014) and Nascimbeni's (2015) observations on the crucial role of the environment in which quality assurance is implemented in different countries.

Regarding the comparison between the participating countries, the results further showed that northern European countries are at the forefront in quality assurance implementation. Various factors might contribute to this effect; for example, number of students, number of higher education institutions, economic prosperity, higher education system and political setting. None of these can be confirmed or refuted within the limited scope of our study. However, one possible explanation to differences between the countries is the level of compliance to the EU rules and regulations. Falkner and Treib (2008) grouped European countries into four groups based on their variation in respecting, pick-and-choice, or neglecting rules and regulations enacted by the EU. The major difference between the groups is related to their degree of adherence to the original EU goals and policies (Kohoutek *et al.*, 2018). To some extent, the results of the current study are in line with those of Falkner and Treib (2008) as Denmark, for example, was ranked highest for implementation in the current study and also in the first group of compliance to EU rules in the Faulkner and Treib study. Correspondingly, Italy and the Czech Republic are located at the opposite end of the spectrum, while Germany, Spain and Austria are somewhere in the middle.

Bearing in mind that this study was limited to a descriptive analysis, further insights might be obtained via an exploratory qualitative analysis.

The scope of this study was also limited by the number of countries included and the relatively small sample size due to the low response rate, as could be expected. However, the study brings forth significant aspects for further exploration. Various kinds of comparative analysis could be conducted; for example, comparisons based on the type, profile or size of higher education institutions in order to check what other factors might affect quality assurance implementation. Furthermore, given the increased interest in quality matters internationally and the lack of cross-national studies in this field, there is a great need to investigate the challenges and other aspects associated with quality implementation on the European level.

Disclosure statement

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