

**REFLEXIVITY IN EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION**  
**GOVERNANCE: STUDIES ON PRACTICE**

By  
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### **Author's declaration**

I, the undersigned, **Adrienn Nyírcsák**, candidate for the PhD degree in Political Science, declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Budapest, 7 July 2022

## Abstract

This dissertation explores the concept of reflexivity in European higher education governance, through the case of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Reflexivity is understood as the transformation of policy instruments in and through practice. The dissertation consists of three self-standing, but interconnected papers and a methodological chapter on epistemic reflexivity. All three papers apply praxiographic methods to understand how transnational and sub-national actors – European stakeholder groups and higher education institutions – incorporate and interpret the ESG in their organisational activities, generating feedback loops in policy-making.

The first paper investigates reflexivity in policy learning through a comparative analysis of three transnational peer learning settings, relying on multiple streams of qualitative data. The paper addresses an important gap in the literature regarding the role of non-state actors in policy learning. It argues that reflective practice is a specific learning technology designed to support higher education institutions in organisational capacity-building as well as political “agency-building”. For stakeholder organisations, transnational peer learning provides opportunities to sustain an ongoing dialogue around the ESG at the European level, and cement their role as standard-setters.

The second paper presents the results of ethnographic research at two radically different higher education institutions in Hungary and Sweden. Building on a Bourdieusian understanding of reflexivity as practice that is mediated by the habitus, it analyses how the two institutions negotiated internal quality reforms in the shadow of external evaluation, contrasting “habitual” and “crisis” reflexivity. In both cases, the crisis led to increased codification of institutional responsibilities and practices, but did not erode the resilience of the academic habitus in the context of everyday reflexivity.

The third paper interrogates the notion of “practice” as a perspective of transnational organisation in contemporary higher education within the framework of reflexive governance. Relying on a combination of theory-driven and inductive qualitative methodology, the analysis traces the emergence of communities of practice in higher education. The findings indicate that communities of practice engage in an ongoing negotiation of meaning based on a shared European framework for quality assurance, through the production of secondary interpretations. This permits stakeholder groups to actively build their roles simultaneously as experts and advocates in formal cooperation structures involving national authorities.

Based on the findings of the three papers, reflexivity is conceptualised as an empirically distinct logic of policy instrumentation, which hinges on the development of local theories of practice. As such, it gives impetus to “instrumentation within the instrument”, or the further elaboration of interpretations, guidelines, standards and frameworks for specific thematic, sectoral and institutional usage. This is supported by evidence concerning the emergence of a specific form of policy subsystems – transnational instrument constituencies. The research also contributes to the understanding of the practice of reflexivity, raising questions about the viability of reflexivity as an instrument of public policy. Ultimately, the dissertation can be interpreted as an act of holding up a mirror to the practice of knowledge production in the field of higher education.

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## Table of contents

Author's declaration	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Table of contents	vii
List of figures and tables	x
List of abbreviations	xiii
<b>I. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1. The multi-level dimension of European higher education governance	5
2. Instruments and instrumentation in higher education: policy learning as an analytical gap	8
3. The European standards and guidelines for quality assurance: policy, instrument and practice	13
3.1. Policy developments in quality assurance	13
3.2. Brief history of the ESG and its 2015 revision	17
3.3. The ESG as a principled governance model? An overview of implementation literature	23
3.3.1. The ESG as a policy instrument and a governance model	23
3.3.2. The ESG "implementation paradox"	27
4. Practice: a common unit of analysis	34
5. Reflexivity: a review of selected literature	39
5.1. Reflexivity in sociology	41
5.2. Reflexivity in learning theory	45
5.3. Reflexivity in policy and governance studies	47
6. Introducing the three papers: notes on methodology	51
<b>II. Paper 1. Policy learning and reflective practice: European universities as epistemic actors in multi-level transnational peer learning</b>	<b>57</b>
1. Introduction	57
2. Policy learning in the governance of European higher education – the case of the ESG	60
3. Cases and methods	66
4. Findings: from challenges of implementation to embedding quality culture	69
4.1. Nested problematisations	69
4.2. Universities as case studies, experts and learners	72
4.3. Internal ambiguities: good practice and reflective practice	75
5. Discussion: Epistemic capacity-building or enhancing reflexivity?	78
<b>III. Paper 2: Reflexivity or routine? Quality practices and narratives in radically different higher education institutions</b>	<b>82</b>
1. Introduction	82
2. Reflexivity and routine: the practical nexus of quality work	85
2.1. Conceptualising reflective practice in quality management	85
2.2. Reflexivity, habitus and narrative identity	87
3. Situating extreme cases in changing policy contexts: Sweden and Hungary	91
3.1. Hungary	92
3.2. Sweden	93

4.	Methods and positionality _____	94
5.	Apor Vilmos Catholic College _____	96
5.1.	From compartmentalised to fragmented reflexivity: externalisation of the crisis response ____	98
5.2.	Codifying “Catholic habitus”: deflection and narrative lacunae _____	101
6.	Uppsala University _____	103
6.1.	Crisis reflexivity: narrativization, anticipation, codification _____	105
6.2.	Embracing third space, resisting third mission: a hybridisation of habitus? _____	110
7.	Conclusions _____	112

<b>IV.</b>	<b>Paper 3: Towards reflexive governance in European higher education? The role of transnational communities of practice _____</b>	<b>115</b>
1.	Introduction _____	115
2.	Reflexive governance: elements of a pragmatic framework for higher education _____	118
2.1.	What is reflexive governance? _____	118
2.2.	Transnational communities of practice in higher education: a theory of collective learning _	122
3.	Methods and data _____	127
4.	Mapping structural reflexivity in higher education governance: zooming in on communities of practice _____	130
4.1.	Transnational communities of practice in quality assurance – a case of collective learning? 131	
4.2.	A closer look at the evolution of EQAF as a community of practice _____	136
4.3.	Reflexive capacity-building: participation and reification via secondary guidance _____	141
5.	Discussion: does the institutionalisation of CoP in higher education indicate a move towards reflexive governance? _____	145

<b>V.</b>	<b>Liminality, positionality, reflexivity – an introspective account of the researcher-researched relationship _____</b>	<b>148</b>
1.	Liminality _____	150
2.	Positionality _____	161
2.1.	Participant observation at European quality assurance events and follow-up interviews (Papers 1 and 3) _____	162
2.2.	Participant observation and organisational ethnography in Sweden and Hungary (Paper 2) _	165
2.2.1.	Apor Vilmos Catholic College, Hungary _____	166
2.2.2.	Uppsala University, Sweden _____	171
2.2.3.	Negotiating access to the fieldsite _____	173
2.2.4.	Trust, taboo and trustworthiness _____	176
3.	Reflexivity _____	178
3.1.	Insider position _____	179
3.2.	Liminal position _____	186
3.3.	Outsider position _____	191

<b>VI.</b>	<b>Conclusions: Towards a meso-level theory of instrumentation in higher education governance? Instrument reflexivity and the ESG _____</b>	<b>193</b>
1.	Understanding reflexivity as instrument and practice _____	193



1.1.	Ideas and discourse	194
1.2.	Rational-deliberative models	195
1.3.	Experimentalism and reflexive governance	196
1.4.	Epistemic communities and instrument constituencies	199
2.	The geography of good practice production: further insights from transnational peer learning	201
3.	The ESG as narrative and heuristic device for institutional reflexivity: ethnographic experiences from Sweden and Hungary	206
4.	Conceptualising instrument reflexivity: the ESG as a boundary object	213
5.	Reflexivity as practice and its “blind spots”	223
6.	Limitations and directions for further research	229
<b>Appendix I – Paper 1</b>		232
<b>Appendix II – Paper 2</b>		237
<b>Appendix III – Paper 3</b>		246
<b>Appendix IV – Forms and questionnaires</b>		263
1.	Sample consent form – focus group interview	263
2.	Sample interview guide	264
3.	European Commission – consent form	268
4.	Survey on reconciling liminal identities	271
<b>Bibliography</b>		274

## List of figures and tables

### Figures

<b>Figure 1.</b> Structure of the ESG 2015 and key changes compared to the 2005 version, based on (EQUIP project, 2016). _____	<b>22</b>
<b>Figure 2.</b> A modified staircase of ESG implementation (Part 1), indicating multi-level feedback loops, based on (Westerheijden & Kohoutek, 2014). _____	<b>31</b>
<b>Figure 3.</b> Three discourses on quality and dominant directions of frame reflection, based on the coded references of learning inputs. _____	<b>70</b>
<b>Figure 4.</b> Excerpt from “Teaching and Learning at Uppsala University”, page 10. _____	<b>109</b>
<b>Figure 5.</b> Distribution of EQAF paper formats (2006-2021). _____	<b>139</b>
<b>Figure 6.</b> Visual depiction of my memberships in multiple communities of practice. _____	<b>151</b>
<b>Figure 7.</b> Parallel timelines of research and professional activities 2015-2022. _____	<b>153</b>
<b>Figure 8:</b> Excerpt from AVCC fieldwork notes, original layout. _____	<b>180</b>

### Tables

<b>Table 1.</b> Overview of selected English-language articles and studies on ESG use and implementation. _	<b>33</b>
<b>Table 2.</b> Overview of practice approaches and definitions featured in the dissertation. _____	<b>36</b>
<b>Table 3.</b> Operationalisation of reflective practice in quality assurance and enhancement, with corresponding empirical examples (Paper 2). _____	<b>53</b>
<b>Table 4.</b> Overview of the three papers featured in the dissertation. _____	<b>56</b>
<b>Table 5.</b> Overview of epistemic roles across the three sites, based on (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013). _____	<b>72</b>
<b>Table 6.</b> Distribution of good practices by country presented at the observed TPL venues. _____	<b>203</b>
<b>Table 7.</b> QA related transnational projects with (potential) policy impact. _____	<b>221</b>
<b>Table 8.</b> Overview of key data of the peer learning sites. _____	<b>233</b>
<b>Table 9.</b> Overview of key results of the analysis. _____	<b>235</b>
<b>Table 10.</b> List of interviews. _____	<b>236</b>
<b>Table 11.</b> Summary of fieldwork activities at Apor Vilmos Catholic College and Uppsala University. _____	<b>237</b>
<b>Table 12.</b> List of observed meetings. _____	<b>243</b>
<b>Table 13.</b> Types of reflective practice corresponding to habitual and crisis reflexivity at Uppsala University. _____	<b>244</b>
<b>Table 14.</b> Types of reflective practice corresponding to habitual and crisis reflexivity at AVCC. _____	<b>245</b>
<b>Table 15.</b> Overview of source documents. _____	<b>249</b>
<b>Table 16.</b> Thematic analysis of country challenges in Action Plan of Bologna TPG C (2021-2024). _	<b>252</b>
<b>Table 17.</b> Overview of EQAF topics in the light of Bologna commitments in QA (2006-2021). _____	<b>256</b>
<b>Table 18.</b> List of organisations with highest number of paper submissions at EQAF. _____	<b>257</b>

<b>Table 19.</b> Distribution of country affiliation per publication.	<b>260</b>
<b>Table 20:</b> Distribution of themes in coded references.	<b>262</b>

Assez ! Tiens devant moi ce miroir.  
Ô miroir !  
Eau froide par l'ennui dans ton cadre gelée  
Que de fois et pendant les heures, désolée  
Des songes et cherchant mes souvenirs qui sont  
Comme des feuilles sous ta glace au trou profond,

Je m'apparus en toi comme une ombre lointaine,  
Mais, horreur ! des soirs, dans ta sévère fontaine,  
J'ai de mon rêve épars connu la nudité !

Nourrice, suis-je belle ?

(Extract from Stéphane Mallarmé: Hérodiade, 1864-67)

Enough! Hold the mirror up to me.  
Oh mirror!  
Cold water frozen by boredom in your frame  
How many times for hours, desolate  
From dreams and searching my memories which are  
Like leaves in the deep hole under your ice,

I have appeared in you like a distant shadow,  
But horror! evenings, in your severe fountain,  
I have known the nudity of my sparse dream.

Nurse, am I beautiful?

(Translation by David Lanson, 1989)

**List of abbreviations**

AVCC	Apor Vilmos Catholic College
BFUG	Bologna Follow-up Group
CoP	Community of practice
E4	E4 group (ENQA, ESU, EUA, EURASHE)
EC	European Commission
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQA	external quality assurance
EQAF	European Quality Assurance Forum
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register
EQUIP	Enhancing quality: from policy to practice (project title)
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
ESU	European Student Union
EUA	European University Association
EURASHE	European Association of Institutions in Higher Education
DEQAR	Database of External Quality Assurance Results
HAC	Hungarian Accreditation Committee
HEI	higher education institution
IQA	internal quality assurance
IQM	internal quality management
LPP	legitimate peripheral participation
OMC	open method of coordination
PLA	peer learning activity

QA	quality assurance
QAA	quality assurance agency
SCL	student-centred learning
SUHF	Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions (Sveriges universitets- och högskoleförbund)
TPG	Thematic Peer Group
TPL	transnational peer learning
UKÄ	Swedish Higher Education Authority (Universitetskanslersämbetet)
UU	Uppsala University

## I. Introduction

Higher education governance in Europe is vertically and horizontally organised via self-governing networks of governments, experts and stakeholders in the context of the intergovernmental Bologna Process and the open method of coordination<sup>1</sup> (OMC) of the European Union (Elken & Vukasovic, 2014; Vukasovic et al., 2018). In this dissertation, *European higher education governance* encompasses both the education, training and research policies and programmes of the European Union, and intergovernmental cooperation among the 48 Bologna signatory countries<sup>2</sup>, which form the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). These processes are fundamentally intertwined in institutional realities and practices; not least due to the influential role of the European Commission in the Bologna Process (Gornitzka, 2009; Keeling, 2006; Ravinet, 2008; Sin et al., 2016c). Governance is understood in its broadest sense, as “theory, practice and dilemma” of social coordination, referring to phenomena “that are hybrid and multijurisdictional with plural stakeholders who come together in networks” (Bevir, 2011, p. 2).

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<sup>1</sup> The open method of coordination is considered as a “new mode of governance” in the EU (de la Porte & Pochet, 2012; Héritier & Rhodes, 2011). The OMC in the field of education and training is organised via 10-year strategic frameworks. The current framework underpins the achievement of the ‘European Education Area’ as an overarching strategic goal. It relies on common strategic objectives, common reference tools and approaches, the exchange of good practices and peer learning, and the setting of EU-wide quantitative targets (Council of the European Union, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Full members: Albania, Armenia, Andorra, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium (Flemish and French Community), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, European Commission, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Holy See, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lichtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia Federation, San Marino, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United Kingdom (Scotland). In April 2022, the BFUG decided to suspend the rights of representation and participation of Russia and Belarus in all EHEA institutions and activities (BFUG, 2022).

Historically, although education has remained a domain of national sensitivity and competence<sup>3</sup>, administrative capacity-building and intensification of networking between national and supranational layers of administration (Gornitzka, 2009) over the past decades has resulted in an intricate and dynamic governance architecture. In higher education, transnational actors – stakeholder organisations, university alliances or expert networks – play an important role in building and sustaining these networks, representing a wide range of stakeholders: from national authorities and employers to academics and students. They contribute to the institutionalisation of the “Europe of Knowledge<sup>4</sup>” as a political ideal (Chou & Gornitzka, 2014a); through “structures, routines, standards, shared meanings and allocation of resources” (Sin et al., 2016b).

Sub-national actors are equally gaining visibility in the context of transnational knowledge policies. Amidst pressures of internationalisation, it is possible to observe a surge in the regulated responsibilities of higher education institutions (HEIs) across the whole spectrum of their activities: teaching, research and service to society. This trend of “responsibilisation” involves the “extension of the scope of institutional self-government” (Neave, 2009, p. 565), holding HEIs accountable to various layers of society (state, industry and students or customers). While the turn towards self-governance in the higher education sector is a global phenomenon (van Vught & de Boer, 2015), at the same time it is also a leitmotiv of European policy coordination, making the empowerment of universities to manage themselves a “technique of government” (King, 2015, p. 496), a

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<sup>3</sup> Art. 165-166 TFEU enshrine education and training as an area of national competence, and confers a role on the European Union to encourage cooperation between Member States, and support and supplement their actions. The Treaty explicitly excludes legal harmonisation.

<sup>4</sup> Knowledge policies and the “Europe of Knowledge” refer to the political, discursive and spatial construction of a common European “knowledge area” (Chou & Gornitzka, 2014b; Grek & Lawn, 2009); which can be traced back to multiple sources: such as the Sorbonne Declaration (1999), preceding the launch of the Bologna Process; the Commission’s Communication *Towards a Europe of knowledge* (1997) and the knowledge economy paradigm set out in the Lisbon Strategy (for a recent genealogy, cf. Cino Pagliarello, 2022).



way of exercising control without direct intervention, which is a hallmark of the evaluative state (Neave, 2009).

The idea of institutional responsibility is central to quality assurance policy, one of the core domains of cooperation in European higher education. Since its conception in the late 1990s, the quality field has seen an increased institutionalisation of soft policy processes and instruments. EU-sponsored quality assurance networks, registries, private auditing bodies and expert groups have been active in the development of guidelines, standards and other procedural norms for national quality assurance agencies and universities. The most binding document is the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG), first published in 2005 and revised in 2015. The ESG holds a quasi-legal status, as it was adopted by the education ministers of the Bologna Process countries and have been since transposed into legislation on institutional accreditation and quality assurance frameworks in most signatory countries, albeit to a varying degree (EACEA/Eurydice, 2020; European Commission, 2018).

The translation of the ESG in diverse national and institutional contexts has been studied to some extent (see 3.3.), however, most of these analyses focus on top-down implementation and adhere to methodological individualism, often ignoring feedback loops and structural factors connecting the subnational and transnational levels to the national and European spheres of decision-making. Yet, the ESG as a policy instrument is not a temporally or spatially stable product, it is constantly reinterpreted in its everyday use by governments, agencies, and HEIs themselves.

This dissertation aims to conceptualise instrument reflexivity in European higher education, through the case of the ESG. Reflexivity in the context of this study refers to the *transformation of policy instruments in and through practice*. The primary goal of the

thesis is to mobilise a variety of analytical strategies to explore this understudied phenomenon in an innovative, yet analytically rigorous manner. The thesis contributes to literature on policy instrumentation, policy learning and practice theory with three self-standing, yet interconnected papers. [Paper 1](#) presents a comparative analysis of reflexivity as a situated form of policy learning across three venues of transnational peer learning. [Paper 2](#) dives into to the subnational level to explore the institutionalisation of reflexivity at two HEIs in Hungary and Sweden. [Paper 3](#) introduces a practice perspective to understand the role of transnational communities in reflexive higher education governance. The three papers are interlinked through their thematic focus on quality assurance and the ESG; their methodological orientation towards practice; and their respective contributions to the analysis of reflexivity. The overarching research questions are the following:

- (1) How are policy instruments transformed in and through practice in multi-level settings?
- (2) What are the possible implications of instrument reflexivity for the governance of European higher education?

This introductory chapter provides a general framing for the papers. It is structured as follows. [Section 1](#) addresses the multi-level dimension of European higher education governance. [Section 2](#) reviews literature on policy instrumentation. [Section 3](#) provides an overview of existing scholarship on the ESG as a policy instrument and governance model. [Section 4](#) introduces the concept of practice as a unit of analysis. [Section 5](#) summarises influential conceptualisations of reflexivity across the disciplines. [Section 6](#) introduces the three papers and discusses common methodological issues.

The dissertation is composed of the present introductory chapter, three papers, a self-standing chapter on liminality, positionality and reflexivity, and a concluding chapter. In terms of format, the papers are written to be published individually, thus, they are each accompanied by an abstract. The bibliography for the entire dissertation is merged for better readability, and the numbering of tables and figures are aligned.

## **1. The multi-level dimension of European higher education governance**

Literature on Europeanisation and higher education governance has highlighted the ever-evolving geometry of actors, networks and instruments that bring a common European knowledge space into discursive and material existence. Earlier studies focused on the role of overarching political paradigms, the Bologna Process (1999) and the EU's Lisbon Strategy (2000) and successive strategies for cooperation in education and training<sup>5</sup>, in creating administrative and regulatory structures for voluntary coordination (Ertl, 2006; Gornitzka, 2005; Ravinet, 2008). Other notable perspectives include regulatory regionalism (Dale & Robertson, 2009; Robertson, 2010) and governance through data and expertise (Lawn & Grek, 2012). These works investigated how it became possible to advance Europeanisation in an area of national sensitivity via new modes of governance which rely predominantly on non-legislative mechanisms; including market style regulation, ideational and discursive convergence, standards and data, and the social effects of monitoring. An important body of scholarship on EHEA implementation has also been co-produced by scholars and practitioners on the margin of the Bologna Process Researchers' Conferences (Curaj et al., 2015, 2018, 2020).

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<sup>5</sup> These include Education and Training 2010, Education and Training 2020, and the current European Education Area strategic framework (2021-2030).

Much of the implementation literature espouses an architectural view, that is, they seek to explain contemporary governance of higher education in terms of the systemic coherence of hierarchically ordered territorial units, consisting of an intergovernmental/supranational layer, national and sub-national levels. Rational choice and historical institutionalist studies are among the most common approaches, which operationalise policy change as a temporal sequence of individual and institutional choices. Accordingly, developments at the national and sub-national level are evaluated in terms of their “end result”, convergence or divergence from the political goals and values set by the vertical governance axis. For instance, Veiga and Neave analyse how different academic constituencies appropriate Bologna goals in institutional practice (Veiga & Neave, 2015), stressing the role of the institutional layer in interpreting what is considered rule-following behaviour. Other studies consider the pragmatic application of Bologna tools in context as modification of normative objectives in the process of implementation or “goal displacement” whereby procedural divergence persists over value-driven integration (Veiga et al., 2019; Veiga & Magalhães, 2019). These studies consider the characteristics of soft instruments, such as interpretive flexibility and vague articulation of goals, as an inherent weakness, which undermines the “ultimate goal” of socio-economic convergence (Sin et al., 2016a).

However, as Schmidt and Radaelli (2004) point out, in the context of Europeanisation research, focusing on convergence alone may carry analytical bias. First, comparing geographically dispersed outcomes with unspecified intended effects can prove methodologically challenging in the case of soft law. A top-down approach to implementation analysis can result in inflating the importance of European policy-making for domestic policy change (Schmidt & Radaelli, 2004). Second, the transnational goal-setting process itself is inherently dynamic, therefore European higher education policies

cannot be treated as a static set of values and objectives which are formulated independently from domestic preferences. Instead, in light of developments which foreground HEIs both in domestic and transnational policy-making, it can be helpful to turn to the suggestion of Schmidt and Radaelli (2004) to reverse the process of tracing European objectives down to domestic effects, and to zoom in on the sequential (past-future) and discursive drivers of decision-making at each level. Such a strategy involves analysing policies and instrument choices locally, and accounting for ideational factors which influence actors' choices within specific contexts.

In response to these methodological challenges, in recent years, higher education scholars have been shifting the focus from vertical processes of goal-setting and implementation towards the horizontal dynamics of governance, which cast reverberating effects on the institutionalisation of policies and instruments at the European level. These perspectives highlight the role of sectoral politics and transnational actors and networks in the integration of higher education and research policies (Chou & Gornitzka, 2014b). In particular, a new research agenda has emerged, which conceptualises European higher education as a multi-level, multi-actor, and multi-issue policy arena (Fumasoli et al., 2018; Vukasovic et al., 2018). These authors contend that certain governance developments cannot be sufficiently explained in terms of variation linked to vertical tensions, but need to be complemented with perspectives on the horizontal diffusion of authority and its interference with vertical processes. As transnational structures of coordination expand and become more specialised (for instance, via expert groups, networks and coordination mechanisms) they exert increasing influence both on policy-making and implementation. As a result, horizontally, tensions may surface and objectives may fuse across institutional boundaries or issue areas (e.g. between the

European Education and Research Area, or between stakeholder groups representing different types of HEIs).

Moreover, literature on multi-level governance emphasises subsidiarity, flexibility, dynamism and differentiated integration (cf. Veiga et al., 2015), which by design exclude harmonisation across jurisdictions as a politically desired scenario. Studying how European tools, standards and frameworks are interpreted, transformed and recursively altered in their use can offer insights on how actors move between multiple governance arenas (Ravinet, 2011; Saurugger & Radaelli, 2008) and thus disrupt the conventional linear logic of policy implementation.

## **2. Instruments and instrumentation in higher education: policy learning as an analytical gap**

To grasp multi-level feedback loops analytically, it is essential to introduce a framework which enables moving from an actor-centred perspective towards understanding the complex contexts in which policy instruments are developed and transformed. Instrument analysis originates in public administration research (Hood, 1990; Howlett, 2019; Le Galès, 2011; Salamon, 2000), and had subsequently gained momentum in studies on policy-making and politics in the European Union (Bruno et al., 2006; Halpern, 2010; Kassim & Le Galès, 2010) and education policy (Alexiadou, 2014; Brøgger & Madsen, 2021; Ravinet, 2011).

The analysis of instrument design and choice have for long offered public policy scholars globally a perspective to understand linkages between policy-making and implementation (Howlett, 1991, 2019). The concept of instrumentation, however, delineates a specific school of thought, developed primarily by French public policy scholars in the early years of the millennium, connecting to a broader scholarly community of a “French touch” in public policy analysis (Boussaguet et al., 2015).

Instrumentation as a research agenda is centred on two important conceptual tenets: (1) public policy as *a socio-political space* is constructed via instruments, techniques and tools; and (2) instruments encapsulate *theories of social control* (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007). The main implication of these core assumptions is that the choice of public policy instruments is a political act, orienting the focus on power dimensions which underlie the choice and subsequent application of instruments (Le Galès, 2011).

Beyond the politics of instrument choice, Lascoumes and Le Galès (2004) also contend that instrumentation as a political act produces its own effects, which are not necessarily deterministic for policy outcomes. Therefore, instruments are institutions which carry and create meaning and are not solely determined by their functionality or effectiveness in achieving policy goals. In other words, policy instruments also play part in the institutionalisation of specific ideas and paradigms of governance.

Higher education scholars have adopted instrumentation as an analytical framework in diverse ways. In her seminal work, Ravinet analyses the role of monitoring mechanisms in the context of the Bologna Process in the creation of a “sense of obligation” among signatory countries (Ravinet, 2008). Veiga and Amaral conceptualise instrumentation within a discursive institutionalist framework, and argue that instrumental-cognitive ideas at the domestic level undercut the normative goal formation of the European dimension of quality assurance (Veiga & Magalhães, 2019). Kohoutek (2016) adopts a taxonomical perspective and studies the effects of instrument mixes in the implementation of European guidelines for internal quality assurance in Czech universities. Brøgger and Madsen (2021) introduce an agential realist approach to trace the discursive-material effects of accreditation as a policy instrument in Denmark.

An important contribution to the instrumentation literature in education policy is the research conducted by Lange and Alexiadou on *policy learning* as an innovative and

differentiated governance mechanism within the education and training OMC (Alexiadou & Lange, 2015; Lange & Alexiadou, 2010). Over the years, the European Commission has developed specific tools and methods to accompany “mutual learning” between Member States<sup>6</sup>. While some of the techniques are familiar from other policy fields (employment, social policy), the “mutual learning toolbox” in education and training has evolved in its practice to acquire unique forms. This invites questions related to variation across mechanisms and outcomes, and requires moving beyond a monolithic treatment of different forms of mutual learning as equifinal processes of policy learning.

In this regard, policy learning can be unpacked beyond its functional use to make policy learning possible and desirable; as a political strategy geared towards altering relations between various levels of decision-making (Alexiadou 2014). Lange and Alexiadou (2010) differentiate between four different learning styles or strategies adopted by Member States which participate in these working configurations: mutual, competitive, imperialistic and surface learning. This work sheds a critical light on the tacit assumptions surrounding policy learning, as an open information exchange with the aim of policy transfer; and shows that in facilitated settings, participants develop specific counter-strategies to engage with the learning process, some of which may be interpreted as a form of resistance to soft law (Saurugger & Terpan, 2016). Furthermore, instruments configuring policy learning can also serve to reinforce or alter existing power structures in a given policy field, and generate unintended consequences in their practical application (Kassim & Le Galès, 2010). These aspects have so far received little attention in higher education research.

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<sup>6</sup> Under the current strategic framework for European cooperation, these include thematic working groups, peer learning activities and peer counselling. (Council of the European Union, 2021)



Somewhat surprisingly, policy learning as a cross-cutting logic of instrumentation in European *higher education* has not been studied systematically from a political sociology perspective, despite its salient role in other widely researched phenomena, such as multi-level governance, social learning, governance by expertise, and policy diffusion. Due to the informal character of these processes, the role of transnational and non-state actors within guided policy learning configurations, such as stakeholder organisations or university alliances, has also remained largely underexplored.

Yet, from the outset, both the OMC and the Bologna Process explicitly embraced policy learning (Veiga & Amaral, 2009) as a “programme ontology” (Dale, 2009). This means that learning presents a particular way of thinking about problem-solving, which posits that there is no one one-size-fits-all solution to specific policy problems. Rather, there is a multitude of possible solutions, which can be harnessed via nodality (cf. Hood & Margetts, 2007), i.e. through strategic information management within networked policy communities, which develop shared understandings of core policy values that guide decision-making (Scott, 2009). Nodality opens up multiple channels and directions of learning, resulting more often in epistemic community-building (Scott, 2009) at the level of networks, rather than convergence at the level of policies and systems, as Europeanisation literature suggests (Radaelli, 2003, 2008).

Consequently, instrumentation offers a framework that helps to address the bias of focusing exclusively on “hard” outcomes of Europeanisation as evidence of impact. In this framework, policy learning can be analysed both as an instrument on its own right, and in relation to broader categories of instruments relying on information and communication (Howlett, 2019; Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007), on the one hand, and “de jure and de facto standards” (Borraz, 2007; Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007), which build on mixed socio-technical legitimacy, on the other. This conceptualisation of policy

learning also permits to analyse how policy instruments which combine standard-setting, policy learning and policy guidance are applied and transformed by various actors.

Newest insights also indicate that there is room for further research regarding the use of policy instruments in multi-level settings and their calibrations, i.e. their adjustments to particular contexts (Capano & Howlett, 2020). Some authors have suggested to explore these adjustments through the concept of “instrument constituencies”, which “consist of entangled practices that cultivate an instrument” (Voß & Simons, 2014, p. 735), involving a range of actors, from policy-makers to academics and ordinary citizens. This approach conceives instruments as “as constituted by social practices, collectively pursued activities that give rise to and are embedded in specific socio-material configurations” (Simons & Voß, 2018, p. 17). Béland & Howlett (2016) consider instrument constituencies as a third type of policy subsystem next to advocacy coalitions and epistemic communities. In the context of European higher education, these groups of actors remain to be identified.

Against the backdrop of instrumentation literature, the dissertation introduces reflexivity as a critical concept in the context of tools and techniques which facilitate policy learning between different levels of governance. In this respect, [Paper 1](#) addresses transnational peer learning as a specific governing technique across three different venues, while [Paper 3](#) offers further insights on the institutionalisation of peer learning and other practice-based activities in European higher education. In addition to contributing to the political sociology of policy learning, the dissertation focuses on an influential policy instrument in higher education: the ESG. [Paper 2](#) offers a micro-level perspective on the institutionalisation of reflexivity at the level of individuals and organisations, mediated via national and European instruments in quality assurance.

### 3. The European standards and guidelines for quality assurance: policy, instrument and practice

#### 3.1. *Policy developments in quality assurance*

Cooperation in quality assurance (QA) is one of the earliest objectives of the Bologna Process, which has acquired institutionalised forms at the European level. Looking at the numbers, it is also the most implemented Bologna commitment. Regarding external QA, by 2020, 36 higher education systems (out of 48) had a functioning external QA system in place aligned with the European framework (EACEA/Eurydice, 2020); and the number of quality assurance agencies registered in the common European registry of trustworthy agencies (EQAR) has been steadily growing<sup>7</sup>. In 2015, 84% of HEIs surveyed by the European University Association (EUA) reported to have an institutional QA policy (Sursock & EUA, 2015); and by 2020, 46.4% of the 2 948 HEIs registered in the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER) had undergone external review based on the ESG (EQAR, 2020a).

While the intention to promote European cooperation in quality assurance was already present in the Bologna Declaration (1999), it was the Berlin Communiqué (2003) which gave impetus to the development of a common European policy framework, by declaring the principle of institutional autonomy, according to which “the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself”, giving a basis for “real” accountability (2003, p. 3). In 2000, the European Commission established a network for quality assurance agencies, which in 2004 became the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). Following a request

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<sup>7</sup> As of 2022, 50 agencies are registered in EQAR (<https://www.eqar.eu/register/agencies/>) and 54 agencies hold full membership in ENQA. The membership of the Russian agency was suspended in 2022, due to the suspension of the Russian Federation activities in the EHEA.

from ministers to ENQA and other stakeholder organisations to develop “an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines” and “explore ways of an adequate peer review system”(Berlin Communiqué, 2003, p. 3); the European standards and guidelines were adopted at the Bergen Ministerial Conference (2005). Within the EU, the commitment to the implementation of the ESG was reinforced by a 2006 Council Recommendation<sup>8</sup>. In 2008, a European registry for QA agencies (EQAR) was established, so far the only legal entity resulting from the Bologna Process. EQAR enjoys wide political and social legitimacy (Bergan, 2019), and its decisions on agencies’ compliance with the ESG exert regulatory effects on the European quasi-market of accreditation (Cone & Brøgger, 2020).

In 2015, the ESG was revised (see 3.2.), and the ministers also endorsed a European approach for the quality assurance of joint programmes (Yerevan Communiqué, 2015). Many countries implemented legislative changes to conform to the European framework, although HEIs’ autonomy to choose a foreign EQAR-registered agency is only available in about one third of the countries (EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). In 2018, a European database of quality assurance results (DEQAR)<sup>9</sup> was set up, which offers a standardised access to evaluation reports of programmes and institutions. The most recent ministerial Communiqué (Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2020) promotes an enhancement-oriented use of the ESG to accommodate innovations in higher education, such as flexible learning paths and credentials. The turn towards enhancement and innovation has been accompanied by intensified discussions within the policy-making and stakeholder community about another possible revision of the ESG in the near future (ENQA, 2022).

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<sup>8</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 February 2006 on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education. OJ L 64, 4.3.2006, p. 60–62.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.eqar.eu/qa-results/search/by-institution/>

Although the concept of quality itself remains purposefully undefined in the policy framework, there are few key elements that indicate convergence in the practice of QA based on the ESG, as a result of various EU-funded projects and the networking of agencies and national authorities. Quality culture is one of the defining concepts of a distinctively European approach, a common understanding of which has been developed through various EUA projects (EUA, 2006; Loukkola & Zhang, 2010; Sursock, 2011; Vettori, 2012), involving networks of universities.

[...] quality culture refers to an organisational culture that intends to enhance quality permanently and is characterised by two distinct elements: on the one hand, a cultural/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality and, on the other hand, a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts. (EUA, 2006, p. 10)

In addition to quality culture, another distinctive feature of the framework is that it focuses primarily on learning and teaching as the core mission of HEIs, which is further articulated in the paradigm of student-centred learning (SCL), introduced in the 2015 ESG. EUA has reported learning and teaching an increased institutional priority in 303 surveyed HEIs, resulting in the establishment of dedicated strategies and structures (Gaebel & Zhang, 2018). A third point of convergence is that although external quality assurance approaches and procedures vary considerably across the countries, a recent study prepared for the European Commission has noted an increased tendency in national reforms to move towards institutional-level evaluations, which focus on assessing the functioning of the institution's internal QA system (European Commission, 2018). At the same time, programme-level external QA has remained the norm in many countries (EQAR, 2020c).

Within the European community of practitioners, quality assurance is widely considered as a “Bologna success story” (Smidt, 2015): a prerequisite for effective mutual recognition of qualifications, a guarantee of cross-institutional comparability and trust, and a token of political cohesion within the EHEA as an “open education space” (Magalhães et al., 2013, p. 100). Scholars investigating the domestic implementation of QA however remain largely sceptical about its effects on the ground in terms of ensuring coherent implementation at the institutional level through national policies (Cardoso et al., 2015; Kohoutek et al., 2018). At the level of the policy instruments, QA as a management ideal in higher education has been critically examined in the literature, revealing methodological issues with achieving and measuring impact (Stensaker, 2008; Stensaker et al., 2011); challenges related to acceptance and resistance among HEI staff (Newton, 2002; Rosa & Amaral, 2007) and the perils of audit society (Power, 1999; Shore, 2008; Strathern, 2000a), which weaves universities in an “ever thicker and denser web of internal mechanisms of self-control” (Salles-Djelic, 2012, p. 105).

Although QA is one of the most widely studied areas of European higher education policy, studies on the impact of the revision of the ESG are scarce, as are those which account for the post-2015 developments in the field. Yet, the ESG 2015 has brought about incremental, but substantial changes. Enhanced institutional responsibility, a new policy focus on student-centred learning and the institutionalisation of peer review as *modus operandi* of external assessment have cast new demarcations between the various levels of standard-setting, accountability and implementation. When implementing the ESG, HEIs often find themselves compelled to negotiate between top-down pressures of compliance and exercising institutional autonomy in designing their own internal quality processes, using quality culture as a “tool for reflection” (Vettori, 2012).

European-level discussions surrounding the development of internal quality assurance systems and questions related to the mission, identity and capacities of HEIs have intensified, both across transnational expert communities and high-level fora, including the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) and its working formations. This may challenge the previously dominant view that QA agencies hold political significance over developments in internal quality assurance (Vukasovic, 2013), and invites questions related to potential conflicts concerning simultaneous translation and calibration of internal QA standards at various levels of governance. The following sections introduce the ESG within the instrumentation framework to explore the potential implications of this shift.

### ***3.2. Brief history of the ESG and its 2015 revision***

It was the belief of the authors of the ESG that what they had produced was not a book of rules governing the way universities and quality assurance agencies must behave, but a text intended to provide the starting point for an **exploration of the common values and practices relating to quality assurance** that could be found across the (then) 40 signatory states. [...]

But this, much to my regret, is not what has happened. From the start, the ESG have been treated as **tablets of stone, Mosaic commandments** exemplified by their listing in the executive summary. They quickly became a **tick box checklist**. I sometimes wonder how many people ever read beyond the summary.

(Williams, 2011, p. 10, author's emphases in bold)

The ESG is a set of guiding principles that describe minimum common rules of conduct and blueprints for good practice for quality assurance systems in higher education, applicable, albeit (legally) non-binding, in the 48 Bologna Process signatory countries. The ESG was developed by a group of stakeholder organisations called the “E4 Group”, an exercise initially led by ENQA, first in 2005, and it was revised by the same

group of organisations in 2015. Education ministers adopted the document in the Bergen (2005) and Yerevan (2015) communiqués. The E4 group<sup>10</sup> is a community of policy actors in the field of higher education at the European level, representing key stakeholder groups, such as higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies and students. Besides their role in drafting the ESG, they regularly carry out joint projects and organise conferences, workshops and peer learning events on quality assurance. While they are independent membership organisations, a large proportion of their activities are supported by the European Commission<sup>11</sup>.

The ESG can be historically characterised as a case of bottom-up policy-making within a transnational community of QA practitioners across Europe, which makes it particularly interesting to study from an instrumentation perspective. The document addresses three types of audience: 1. national authorities 2. quality assurance agencies and 3. higher education institutions. It is divided into three parts: *Part 1* on internal quality assurance, *Part 2* on external quality assurance and *Part 3* on quality assurance agencies (Figure 1). The ESG is applicable to all types of higher education in the EHEA, including transnational, cross-border or online provision.

The four purposes of the ESG are defined as follows (ESG, 2015, p. 7):

- They set a common framework for quality assurance systems for learning and teaching at European, national and institutional level;
- They enable the assurance and improvement of quality of higher education in the European higher education area;

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<sup>10</sup> European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), European University Association (EUA), European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and European Student Union (ESU).

<sup>11</sup> Before 2014, funding was provided under the EU's Lifelong Learning Programme (2007-2013), and since 2014, under the Erasmus+ Programme, Key Action 2 (mainly strategic partnerships and knowledge alliances) and Key Action 3 (support for policy reform, including the implementation of EHEA reforms).



- They support mutual trust, thus facilitating recognition and mobility within and across national borders;
- They provide information on quality assurance in the EHEA.

The ESG also sets four principles for quality assurance (ESG, 2015, p. 8):

- Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance;
- Quality assurance responds to the diversity of higher education systems, institutions, programmes and students;
- Quality assurance supports the development of a quality culture;
- Quality assurance takes into account the needs and expectations of students, all other stakeholders and society.

Scholars have identified the emergence of external regulatory regimes and the prominent role of specialised agencies and private audit bodies (Gornitzka & Stensaker, 2014; Vukasovic, 2013), also referred to as “soft privatisation” (Cone & Brøgger, 2020); as the main drivers of Europeanisation in quality assurance. Membership reviews conducted by ENQA and EQAR based on the ESG are seen as the key regulatory mechanisms, which although soft in character, generate hard effects, challenging national prerogatives in favour of a multi-level regulatory order (Gornitzka & Stensaker, 2014). While external QA remains under state control, agencies are gaining independence expanding their activities towards new tasks, such as consultancy (Elken & Stensaker, 2020). The literature points out that the fact that the ESG have been largely depoliticised and its governance delegated to stakeholders weakens the role of domestic veto players and opens the possibility for the transnational level to regulate a quasi-market of external QA through the imposition of authoritative interpretations of the ESG (Cone & Brøgger, 2020; Gornitzka & Stensaker, 2014; Vukasovic, 2013). Therefore, the ESG as an instrument which supports transnational agentification and competition, while retaining

interpretive flexibility at the national and sub-national levels of implementation, suffers from several internal tensions in its application (see [3.3.2](#)).

The first version of the ESG has already carried in itself the possibility of future revisions, as it was regarded as an open-ended document subject to ongoing interpretation (Smidt, 2015). The revision of the ESG was launched at the Bologna Ministerial Meeting in Bucharest in April 2012, based on the findings of the project “Mapping the implementation and application of the ESG” (ENQA, 2011), which pointed to the uneven impact and lack of “user-friendliness” of the document. The ministers mandated the E4, in cooperation with BUSINESSEUROPE, Education International (EI) and EQAR to steer the revision of the ESG in order to improve their “clarity, applicability and usefulness, including their scope” (Bucharest Communiqué 2012, p. 2).

During the revision of the ESG in 2013-2014, certain discussions in the BFUG revolved around the purpose of the document, i.e. instrument choice. Some contended that since the ESG is endorsed at the ministerial level, it is essentially political of nature (BFUG, 2014), while others insisted that it is one of the many Bologna reference tools (Crozier et al., 2016). This tension played out in discussions surrounding the two competing goals of quality assurance and enhancement. In this regard, the dangers of a tick-box mentality have been raised, “with institutions becoming slaves to the ESG instead of being creative in their development of quality assurance” (Harvey, 2008, p. 82).

There was also a palpable difference between the respective approaches of the European Commission and the E4 group to the revision. The latter took a conservative stance, trying to balance the expectations of diverse set of stakeholders, and proposed an initial draft under the assumption that the ESG is first and foremost “a guide for practical work in quality assurance” (BFUG, 2014). Consequently, they stressed the generic and

“guiding” character of the document, ultimately leaving the definition of quality and detailed provisions of QA with the national systems. Meanwhile the Commission sought to use the opportunity to solidify a common understanding around quality, moving away from a purely procedural approach towards quality enhancement, and proposed to include references to broader policy priorities, such as employability or mobility (BFUG, 2014, Interview with expert at European Commission, 2021). After several rounds of discussions, the final compromise reflected policy priorities, but retained a fairly broad scope for interpretation, formulated within the framework of the four purposes of higher education as defined by the Council of Europe<sup>12</sup> (Crozier et al., 2016). For instance employability was referenced in the context of the “changing needs of society” (ESG, 2015, p. 15) and in terms of an emphasis on transferable knowledge and skills for future careers.

As Figure 1 shows, almost all standards of the ESG were altered, and new standards were introduced. A key novelty is the introduction of the concept of student-centred learning in internal quality assurance (standard 1.3.), which also bears implications for other standards (such as 1.4. on student admission and progression or 1.5. on the development of teaching staff). Compared to the 2005 version, the balance is tilting toward internal quality assurance and an ever strengthened emphasis on institutional responsibility. The scope of several standards was extended, and more detailed guidelines with specific interpretations were added, especially to procedural and agency-related issues (such as detailed definition of the agencies’ independence). Thus, standards concerning the operation of QA agencies, which provide the ultimate basis for ENQA and EQAR agency reviews, have become overall more prescriptive. At the same

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<sup>12</sup> These are: preparing students for active citizenship (1), for their future careers (2), supporting their personal development (3), creating a broad advanced knowledge base and stimulating research and innovation (4) (ESG, 2015, p. 7).

time, provisions for internal QA remained rather generic: emphasis is placed on fitness for purpose and linking the cycle of continuous improvement (which is defined as a cycle of quality assurance and enhancement) to the strategic management of HEIs. Hence, discussions concerning the implementation of Part 1 of the ESG did not cease with the adoption of the document.

Standards		Key changes compared to 2005 version
Part 1 - Internal Quality Assurance	1.1. <i>Policy for quality assurance</i>	Part of strategic management, developed by internal stakeholders Focus on design, reference to national and European qualifications framework
	1.2. <i>Design and approval of programmes</i>	
	<b>1.3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment</b>	Extension over the whole student lifecycle Fair and transparent processes of recruitment, continuous professional development Reference to support for student mobility
	1.4. <i>Student admission, progression, recognition and certification</i>	
	1.5. <i>Teaching staff</i>	
	1.6. <i>Learning resources and student support</i>	
	1.7. <i>Information management</i>	Emphasis on follow-up on monitoring and continuous development Emphasis on institutional responsibility for periodic review
	1.8. <i>Public information</i>	
	1.9. <i>On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes</i>	
	1.10. <i>Cyclical external quality assurance</i>	
Part 2 - External Quality Assurance	2.1. <i>Consideration of internal quality assurance</i>	Description of fit-for-purpose procedures and stakeholder involvement More flexibility in follow-up procedure
	2.2. <i>Designing methodologies fit for purpose</i>	
	2.3. <i>Implementing processes</i>	Emphasis on peer-review principle, details on experts Extended scope beyond formal decisions
	<b>2.4. Peer-review experts</b>	
	2.5. <i>Criteria for outcomes</i>	Requirement to publish full reports, detailed list of issues covered Extended scope beyond formal decisions
	2.6. <i>Reporting</i>	
	<b>2.7. Complaints and appeals</b>	
Part 3 - Quality Assurance Agencies	3.1. <i>Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance</i>	Linking activities to policy, clarification of possible activities Extension of geographical scope beyond EHEA
	3.2. <i>Official status</i>	
	3.3. <i>Independence</i>	Detailed criteria for independence, only expert-based decisions Increased frequency of analysis
	3.4. <i>Thematic analysis</i>	
	3.5. <i>Resources</i>	Extension to all activities Guidelines for cross-jurisdictional activities
	3.6. <i>Internal quality assurance and professional conduct</i>	
	<b>3.7. Cyclical external review of agencies</b>	Moved from guideline to standard (agreed and accepted practice)

Figure 1. Structure of the ESG 2015 and key changes compared to the 2005 version, based on (EQUIP project, 2016). Standards written in bold are new or are presented as a standalone standard for the first time. Standards written in italics have been modified compared to the 2005 ESG. Author's own work.

### 3.3. *The ESG as a principled governance model? An overview of implementation literature*

#### 3.3.1. *The ESG as a policy instrument and a governance model*

As the previous section has shown, historically, the ESG has been developed simultaneously as a compliance tool and as a set of guidelines for developing institutional practices. It has contributed to a gradual alignment in national QA systems and legislation with the Bologna QA approach. At the same time, the years following the publication of the 2015 ESG witnessed the emergence of a supranational (European) community of practice around the application of the ESG at the institutional level, with an emphasis on the diversity of QA approaches and tools corresponding to local contexts. To map the evolving logics of instrumentation, including reflexive transformation, it is important to first provide a brief account of the key characteristics of the ESG itself as a multi-level and learning-based instrument.

In terms of instrumentation, the ESG can be further unpacked based on the typology of levels of observation developed by Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007, p. 4):

- *instrument* as a social institution, which structures social relations according to a particular concept of rule (i.e. regulatory, fiscal, information-based, etc.);
- *technique*, as a concrete device through which the instrument gains its material form;
- *tool*, which is a discreet operational part (micro-device) of a technique.

In addition, instrument is understood as a broad category of tools and techniques which structure public action (Salamon, 2000).

The ESG is multi-level by design: its designated users are institutions, including any actors within the institutions, external stakeholders (such as employers), quality assurance agencies, and ultimately, national authorities, as the standards prescribe

system-level parameters. The 2015 edition strives to connect the different levels explicitly, by stressing that the three parts of the ESG are “intrinsically linked and together they form the basis for a European quality assurance framework” (ESG, 2015, p. 9).

As a consequence, its calibration as a policy *tool*, ranges from principle-based use (Crozier et al., 2016), through practical guidance to prescriptive or compliance-oriented use (often referred to as box-ticking). Furthermore, it combines two different *techniques*, standard-setting and policy guidance. Standards are defined as “agreed and accepted practice for quality assurance in higher education in the EHEA” and guidelines as “good practice in the relevant area for consideration” (ESG 2015, 9). While both standards and guidelines are internationally referenced practices, they differ in their level of interpretive authority, as standards are generally considered more binding. Yet, guidelines may influence the interpretation of standards, as well as the evidence required by QA agencies to show compliance with the ESG (Manatos & Huisman, 2021). An analysis of the translation of the ESG 2015 by programme accreditation panels found that guidelines are referenced selectively in programme review reports (Manatos & Huisman, 2021). Moreover, certain guidelines may be promoted from “de facto” to “de jure” standard over time, as was the case with standard 3.7 (cyclical review of QA agencies) in the 2015 revision (EQUIP project, 2016).

Finally, at the highest level of abstraction, as a policy *instrument*, the ESG is built on mixed legitimacy, and thus fits the category of “de facto and de jure standards” (Borraz, 2007; Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007). Standards involve the delegation of rule-making to private organisations “for preparing and monitoring implementation of documents that sometimes have almost the force of law” (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007, p. 5). As such, the ESG relies on scientific and technical rationality, as far as it is presented as a politically neutral, and fundamentally processual instrument, which has led to its

apparent depoliticisation (Gornitzka & Stensaker, 2014). This is combined with an expectation of democratic legitimacy, which stems from the collaborative and stakeholder-driven process of its genesis.

Standards function as meta-regulatory tools by encouraging competition, coercion and (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007, p. 14) and self-regulation (Borraz, 2007). Here, a contrast can be drawn between a principle-based and a practice-based understanding of the ESG by scholars and practitioners. The principle-based view promotes a holistic and normative reading of the ESG, centred on quality culture; which often puts it at odds with its incentive-based presentation that stresses the technical-procedural authority of the standards, leading to a compliance-based approach to implementation. A third, intervening factor is that standards and guidelines encourage learning between various actors and opening new avenues for interpretation by stakeholder groups, an aspect which has been scarcely explored in existing implementation analysis. In fact, the ESG encapsulates a cascading process of learning – from decision-makers to specialised organisations and HEIs, and among individuals within organisations, within the overall paradigm of continuous improvement (assurance and enhancement). This is consistent with observations concerning the evolution of contemporary quality assurance systems, in which learning becomes the main source of internal dynamics, as each actor acquires an understanding of quality assurance roles and practices (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2002). In addition, reflexive learning is essential part of quality enhancement in organisations, as HEIs are expected not only to detect errors and correct them (single-loop learning, see 5.2), but also to maintain a sustained commitment to continuous improvement, integrated within strategic management (double-loop learning, see 5.2). However, the added value of the learning process may diminish over time, due to the repetitive nature of the evaluation cycle (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2002). It is thus

important to further explore how this third, learning-based perspective influences the implementation of the ESG at various levels, especially regarding Part 1 on internal QA.

The analysis of the three levels of instrumentation presented above permits to capture the multi-dimensional nature of the ESG, and consequently provide a nuanced understanding of how rival interpretations and uses may interact and produce unintended consequences in practice. Another aspect of instrumentation analysis is understanding how policy instruments structure and restructure relations between various types of actors. While the ESG are not legally enforceable, the spirit of the wording is that of obligation. The document explicitly notes that “the standards make use of the common English usage of ‘should’ which has the connotation of prescription and compliance” (ESG 2015, 9). The autonomy of subjects, especially universities, is assumed, since the document places “the primary responsibility for the quality of their provision” (ESG 2015, 8) with the institutions, irrespective of the national policy context.

In this regard, Veiga and Sarrico (2014) have posited that the ESG presents a model for network governance, which builds on the autonomy of institutions and academics and incorporates collegial practices. In the 2015 version of the ESG, the verbatim reference to the autonomy of institutions has been replaced by an increased emphasis of institutional responsibility and the autonomy of learners. This invites the re-examination of the network approach to meta-regulation, to account for the ESG as a model of institutional learning involving a wider range of stakeholders.

In practical experience, this underlying assumption of autonomy, has been challenged on numerous occasions, as many HEIs find it difficult to be compliant with the ESG against the backdrop of national regulations (Gover and Loukkola 2018, 14). In response to this challenge, the E4 group has advised that HEIs develop their own local interpretation of the ESG, in an “ongoing reflective process” (Gover & Loukkola, 2018,



p. 29), by assessing the aims of the QA system against the mission of the institution and the higher education system in question. In addition, the E4 recommends that public authorities “should design external quality assurance in a way that allows institutions to take into account their own specific context when developing their internal systems”(Gover & Loukkola, 2018, p. 21). This guidance indicates a call for *a reflexive and context-sensitive appropriation of the ESG*, which attempts to balance all three instrumental goals (normative, incentive and learning).

Based on the logics and strategies of instrumentation at play that are specific to the ESG, the first research question (How are instruments transformed in and through practice?) can be further concretised:

- How do the 2015 revision and the Europeanisation of internal QA impact the implementation of the ESG?
- How do meta-interpretations produced by European stakeholder groups impact the practical use of the ESG at multiple levels?

### 3.3.2. *The ESG “implementation paradox”*

As noted in the previous section, the particularity of the ESG as a policy instrument lies in its multi-stakeholder approach and universal, yet context-specific applicability, which requires reflexive appropriation from its users. As an unintended effect, these characteristics amount to an “implementation paradox” when examining the particular political, historical and geographical contexts in which the ESG is used by different actors for different purposes. Earlier studies have identified several obstacles to the implementation of the ESG, which can be summarised as follows:

- (1) *Non-linear implementation*: 1. the ESG can be translated differently at different (national, agency and institutional) levels at the same time (Westerheijden &

Kohoutek, 2014) 2. the national/institutional translation of the standards and guidelines may range from direct or linear transposition to a looser or creative translation (Manatos & Huisman, 2020);

- (2) Development of a “*common grammar*” while retaining heterogeneity in national vocabulary: there is no universally agreed terminology of external review procedures (which may be called reviews, evaluations, assessments, audits, certifications and accreditations); yet, there is a diffusion of both normative and cognitive ideas concerning a “culture of quality” (Crozier et al., 2006; Magalhães et al., 2013);
- (3) *Legislative obstacles*: existing legal frameworks may inhibit the agencies’ capacity to comply with the ESG (EACEA/Eurydice, 2020; Gover & Loukkola, 2018);
- (4) *Ubiquitous “good practices”*: instead of developing their own fit-for-purpose models of internal quality assurance, institutions have a tendency to replicate models of other well-established HEIs (EACEA/Eurydice, 2020, p. 66);
- (5) *Quality as an empty signifier*: there is a (deliberate) lack of consensual meaning behind “quality” as a normative policy idea (Veiga & Magalhães, 2019).

These factors not only impinge on successful implementation, but also make monitoring compliance across contexts and explaining variation in implementation styles and outcomes at the level of institutions, challenging. Yet, the “implementation paradox” is largely intrinsic to the ESG as a policy instrument, juxtaposing two different logics of intervention: external and internal quality assurance or control and enhancement, which creates tension between organisational learning goals and public accountability (Veiga & Sarrico, 2014).

Drawing on discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008), Veiga and Magalhães (2019) identify the source of the paradox as an “ends-means reversal”, i.e. that the normative ideals of the politics of quality formulated at the European level are diluted in the procedural-cognitive ideas and practices of quality assurance promoted by European actors. However, this argument is rooted the analytical separation of the European layer of policy making as the “political” and the domestic layer of implementation as the “technical” or “instrumental”; downplaying the inherently reflexive nature of the instrument inhabiting transnational spaces, as evidenced by the multitude of commentaries, analyses and guidance on the use of the ESG produced by the E4 organisations and the European Commission.

Taking a political sociology perspective on instrumentation helps to address the analytical insufficiency of implementation theory owing to the separation of “policy” and “implementation”, the latter conceptualised as a simple “execution” of an abstraction of rules, which ultimately only exists in the minds of the theorists (cf. Bourdieu, 1977). The issue that Bourdieu highlights in his theory of practice is that there is a risk of theoretical duplication of the abstract concept (policy) and its practical execution (implementation), as the latter is defined based on the former, without explicitly stating the rules from which this second abstraction is derived.

Westerheijden and Kohoutek (2014) find the concept of “translation” more appropriate than implementation to describe the process involving multiple steps of interpretation. However, their “staircase of translation”, derived from the work of (Trowler, 2002), also fails to account for the feedback loops between the different levels of instrumentation. The main focus of the critique here is that ESG should not be treated analytically as a static set of principles, but rather as an evolving set of practices, which require actors to continuously produce interpretations that ultimately feed back into the

recursive reformulation of the policy, as exemplified by the revision process. Due to interpretive flexibility, number of possible ESG compliant practices (and their combinations) is theoretically infinite, which makes it necessary for governments, QA agencies and transnational actors to produce secondary guidance both for external and internal quality assurance. Over time, these interpretations may become codified in higher education systems and national policies, which makes it even more challenging to isolate effects attributable to the ESG.

The ESG influence institutional quality practice primarily through HEIs engagement with external processes of accreditation and quality review. Quality assurance agencies play a crucial role in translating the ESG in national contexts (Manatos & Huisman, 2020, 2021; Stensaker et al., 2010) and often mediate interpretation, through their dual advisory-controlling function, between governance levels, via the production of guidelines, templates and reports.

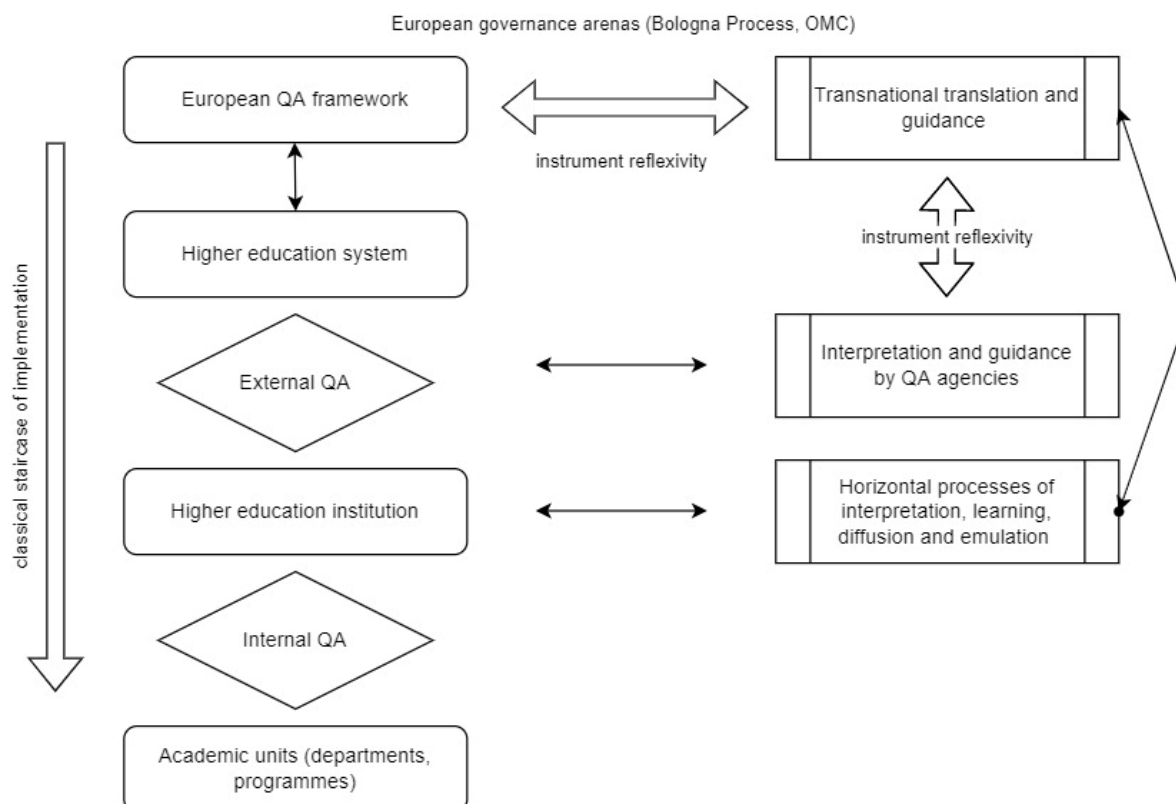


Figure 2. A modified staircase of ESG implementation (Part 1), indicating multi-level feedback loops, based on (Westerheijden & Kohoutek, 2014). Author's own work.

Extant literature (Table 1) on the implementation of the ESG<sup>13</sup> has focused on domestic environments and analysed the effects of instrument choice, instrument mixes, implementation styles, organisational culture and the perceptions of academics. These studies have highlighted the importance of cultural, organisational, disciplinary and regulatory contexts for the local interpretation of the ESG. At the same time, transnational settings producing guidance for instrument translation remain underexplored, despite their relevance for the evolving landscape of higher education governance.

<sup>13</sup> To construct the sample of studies included in this review, multiple searches were run with various keywords (ESG, standards and guidelines for quality assurance) in Google Scholar and the EBSCO "Academic search complete" database on repeated occasions to identify papers and studies which explicitly address the implementation of the ESG. Only English-language studies and articles are included, which are either peer-reviewed or were conducted by the E4 group and associated researchers.

Table 1 also shows an uneven representation of geographical areas in the literature: for instance, Portugal and the Czech Republic have been extensively studied, both at the system and at the institutional levels, while more than half of the EHEA countries are not covered by the sampled studies. These include, among others, Sweden and Hungary, which are featured as case studies in [Paper 2](#). Moreover, most studies to date have been based on the 2005 edition of the ESG, whereas the dissertation contributes to the study of post-2015 developments.

Study	Empirical focus	Methodology	Countries covered
(Stensaker et al., 2011)	ESG 2005, Part 3 External reviews of ENQA member agencies	qualitative	not specified
MAP-ESG project (ENQA, 2011)	ESG 2005 1. Purpose and scope 2. Clarity and usability 3. Implementation and impact	mixed methods	Data collected via E4 membership consultation: ESU: 27; EUA: 38; EURASHE 26 countries
(Motova & Pykkö, 2012)	ESG 2005 national QA system	qualitative	Russia
IBAR project (Eggins, 2014)	ESG 2005, Part 1 28 HEIs	qualitative	Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Latvia, Portugal, Poland, Slovak Republic, UK
(Kohoutek, 2014)	ESG 2005, standard 1.3. (student assessment) 12 universities	qualitative	UK, the Netherlands, Czech Republic
(Vukasovic, 2014)	ESG 2005, Part 1 2 faculties	qualitative	Croatia and Serbia
(Manatos et al., 2015)	ESG 2005, Part 1 ESG awareness among academic staff, survey	quantitative	Portugal
(Cardoso et al., 2015)	ESG 2005, Part 1 quality of academic staff 4 HEIs	qualitative	Portugal
(Tavares et al., 2016)	ESG 2005, Part 1 self-assessment and external reports of 12 HEIs	qualitative	Portugal
(Rosa et al., 2016)	ESG 2005, Part 1 factor analysis of academics' perceptions on implementation	quantitative	Portugal

(Kohoutek, 2016)	ESG 2005, Part 1 4 institutional case studies	qualitative	Czech Republic
(Alzafari & Ursin, 2019)	ESG 2015, Part 1 survey of higher education institutions and cross-country comparison	quantitative	Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland
DEQAR Study 1 (Manatos & Huisman, 2020)	ESG 2005 (1.2) and ESG 2015 (1.2 and 1.9) approval and periodic review of programmes review reports of 17 HEIs	qualitative	Croatia, Estonia, Finland and Portugal
DEQAR Study 2 (Manatos & Huisman, 2021)	ESG 2015 (1.3. and 1.4.) 15 programme reports at 9 HEIs – engineering (single QA agency)	qualitative	Cyprus, Kazakhstan, Slovenia, Spain, Indonesia

*Table 1. Overview of selected English-language articles and studies on ESG use and implementation.*

#### 4. Practice: a common unit of analysis

In order to analyse the reflexive appropriation of the ESG as an instrument, that is, its interpretation and transformation in *practice*; it is necessary to introduce practice as an epistemological category. All three papers featured in this dissertation consider practice as the basic unit of analysis, although they each adopt a slightly different understanding of the concept (see [section 6](#)) and reinterpret it in the light of the findings. Approaches to practice theory and praxiographic methods are diverse, thus it is impossible to provide a comprehensive review here. This section aims to give a succinct presentation of the authors and approaches which inspired conceptualisations of practice in the three studies.

Foregrounding practice as an elementary unit of social life is part of a broader movement in social and cultural theorising (Reckwitz, 2002), labelled as the *practice turn*, originating in social theory (Schatzki et al., 2001), and subsequently influencing praxiographic agendas in international relations (Adler & Pouliot, 2011), studies of the European Union (Adler-Nissen, 2016), organisational research (Nicolini, 2016) and education studies (Higgs et al., 2012). Among others, the works of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Giddens and Foucault have served as philosophical inspirations for the contemporary practice theories (Reckwitz, 2002). One of the most recognised practice theorists is Pierre Bourdieu, whose work has been particularly influential across various disciplines (Bourdieu, 1977, 2006). Bourdieu's notion of practice can be best reproduced in relation to his other emblematic concepts, *habitus*, *field* and *capital*; which together constitute a coherent theoretical system. Habitus is a set of unconscious “motivating” principles governing routine action, through a “system of lasting, transposable dispositions” which function as “a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions” (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 82–83). Individuals develop habitus through education and socialisation, and it enables them to tread seamlessly within a specific field, understood



as an “autonomous social microcosm” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 96). Fields exist as a network of social relations in which actors strive to accumulate capital, or different forms of power (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu further contends that researchers (in his reference group, primarily anthropologists) need to move from merely describing practices that they observe towards reconstructing the theory of practice in the given community, i.e. the underlying principles and values that govern how people act habitually (Bourdieu, 1977).

Practice theory is thus not simply a research agenda, but a theory of social organisation. At the level of social ontology, practice theorists contend that meaning in the social world is not carried primarily by individuals, but via practices (Nicolini, 2017; Schatzki et al., 2001). This implies that everyday human action is not defined on the basis of individual cognitive rationality, but rather follows a collective know-how, part of the tacit or pragmatic knowledge of individuals. More concretely, people do not analyse each step they take in terms of its origins and its consequences, but tend to rely on culturally and historically specific mental shortcuts to guide their actions.

Authors	Disciplinary field	Approach/ definition of practice
Bourdieu	Sociology/ Anthropology	In relation to habitus:  Practices are produced “in dialectical conversation between the habitus and the situation” (Bourdieu, 2015, p. 261)  Habitus is both perpetuated and transformed in practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 27)
Schatzki	Sociology	“materially mediated arrays of activity centrally organized around shared practical understandings” (2001, p. 2)  “open-ended, spatially-temporally dispersed nexus of doings and sayings” (2012, p. 14)
Reckwitz	Sociology	“routinized ways of understanding, knowing how and desiring” (2002, p. 250)
Adler and Pouliot	International relations	“socially meaningful patterns of action”  “competent performances”  (2011)
Nicolini	Organisational studies	“regimes of a mediated object-oriented performance of organised set of sayings and doings” (2017, p. 21)  organisations as systems of practices (2016)
Wenger	Educational theory	“shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action” (2002, p. 5)  “doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do” (2002, p. 47)

*Table 2. Overview of practice approaches and definitions featured in the dissertation.*

Building on this literature, the common definitional elements of practice can be assembled along the following qualifiers:

- (1) *social*: practice is by definition a social category; it refers to a category of actions that are recognised as competent and normative in a specific social context (Adler & Pouliot, 2011; Nicolini, 2017);
- (2) *material*: practices always interact with materials, for the analysis this implies moving beyond language and textualism (Bueger & Gadinger, 2018b; Reckwitz, 2002);
- (3) *discursive and narrative*: practices have a communicative and linguistic dimension. For instance, Czarniawska understands storytelling as a type of practice by proposing the notion of “enacted narratives”:

“for all the importance of tacit knowledge, there would be no continuity, no civilization, if people were not able to narrate their past, present and future action to each other” (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 24);

- (4) *non-propositional*: practices relate to a type of “embodied” knowledge which cannot be readily articulated, but are part of our tacit understanding (Schatzki, 2012), or “practical sense is a quasi-bodily involvement in the world” (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 66);
- (5) *performative*: practice is a process of doing something (Adler & Pouliot, 2011, p. 6);
- (6) *contextual*: practice always unfolds and is interpreted in a given context (Pouliot, 2014)
- (7) *relational*: practices are intersubjective, they link people and communities as an organising force (Wenger, 2002), and mediate between structure and agency (Adler & Pouliot, 2011);

(8) *patterned*: practices are performed repeatedly over time (Nicolini, 2017) and exhibit specific temporal and spatial regularities (Adler & Pouliot, 2011).

In the field of education, several studies have focused on practices, although mostly without explicitly engaging with practice theory. These include Grek's work (2010, 2012) on international comparative studies and competence assessments (such as the PISA survey) as transnational policy tools; Papanastasiou's (2021) analysis on the production of best practice in the education OMC; and Pasias and Samara (2021) on project-based learning in European policy discourse on the teaching profession. Brøgger (2016, 2018) has brought attention to performative materiality and non-human agency in education governance, including its links with policy instrumentation. In higher education studies, Elken & Stensaker (2018) propose to study everyday quality work in HEIs in a multi-process perspective, instead of policies, systems or culture. Their reference to "habit-oriented intentionality that emphasises reproduction and reapplying already taken-for-granted notions and schemas for action" (Elken & Stensaker, 2018, p. 195) resonate with the notions of habitus and practical knowledge.

Through a praxiographic lens, it is possible to make a broad distinction between two approaches to research on quality management in higher education. The first sees quality assurance as fulfilling a function of ordering, that is, involving a series of performances with a normative orientation towards specific behaviours and organisational forms (Adler-Nissen, 2016; Nicolini, 2017), which constitute a socially recognised field of professional competence. An equally sizeable body of scholarship has attempted to delimit the historical, temporal, and political spaces within which quality assurance practices disrupt or transform social realities in higher education (see [Paper 2](#)).

Furthermore, in the context of international politics and policy-making, Pouliot (2008) proposes to amend the classical institutionalist typology of "logics" (logic of

appropriateness, logic of consequences and logic of deliberation) of agency, by introducing and popularising the “logic of practicality” as a distinct mechanism of action. The logic of practicality presumes that actors follow neither rational choice, nor norms or discourse, but rather what appears as “self-evident” or “commonsensical” in the context of their everyday work. This approach permits to highlight the endogenous power dimension of knowledge-based policy instruments, which is often concealed by technocratic discourse.

To insist that instruments of communication and knowledge are, as such, instruments of power is to insist that they are subordinated to practical functions and that the coherence which characterizes them is that of practical logic. (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 81)

In order to analyse practices associated with European meta-level instruments in higher education quality assurance, this dissertation engages with three broad theoretical frameworks: [Paper 1](#) conceptualises transnational peer learning as a set of competent performances; [Paper 2](#) studies reflective practice in HEIs following Bourdieu’s praxeology; and [Paper 3](#) builds on a community of practice perspective.

## **5. Reflexivity: a review of selected literature**

Reflexivity is the third concept in the overarching theoretical framework which connects instrument and practice. Broadly speaking, it describes the process, outcome and direction of transformation. The dissertation does not claim to establish a new approach or theory of reflexivity, nor to provide an exhaustive treatise. Instead, through three studies adopting theoretically and methodologically distinct approaches to reflexivity, it aims to empirically explore the analytical meaningfulness of the concept in the field of higher education, in the context of the organisation of governance relations and instruments at the European level. Therefore, this section reviews only the most influential and relevant

definitions and approaches surveyed for the purpose of the present research.

In contemporary policy and governance studies, the term “reflexive” is not only polysemous, but is often used as an emphatic and somewhat redundant accessory (such as “reflexive learning” or “reflexive deliberation”), without prejudice to the ontology of reflexivity in the social sciences. In other words, it is often applied in an unreflective manner. Yet Bourdieu, who popularized reflexivity as an epistemic programme, sought to rid the practice of social scientific research of projections of theoretical thinking onto the study of practice (Bourdieu, 2003; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). It is therefore important to provide a cursory overview of approaches to reflexivity in various disciplinary traditions which influence conceptualisations of reflexivity in the study of policy-making.

It is possible to synthesise connotations commonly associated with the terms *reflexivity*, *reflective* or *reflexive* and its derivatives in the surveyed literature along the following categories:

- (1) *Cognitive*: self-aware, critical, purposeful action or state of mind (often opposing the pragmatic, tacit or habitual);
- (2) *Directional*: indicates mutuality, circularity or degree/ profoundness of change (e.g. reflexive learning as double-loop or deep learning);
- (3) *Normative*: associated with a superior social paradigm (for example, reflexive governance as a vehicle for democratisation and sustainable transition);
- (4) *Transformative*: relates to identity, associated with conflictual, dynamic and world or self-altering and identity-building properties (in studies building on reflexive modernization/ learning);

- (5) *Epistemic*: reflexivity as a mode of scientific inquiry in Bourdieu's sense, which involves acquiring an understanding of the limitations of our scientific understanding through self and participant objectivation (see [Chapter V](#)).

On the surface, reflexivity appears to be fundamentally at odds with practice, especially in the framework of practice theories which promote the primacy of tacit knowledge. This is the focal point of critical analysis in this dissertation, that is, to place practices on a continuum of reflexivity as critical and conscious examination of the self, versus unreflective, pragmatic, tacit and embodied action. In this regard, various social theorists have proposed intermediary concepts (such as the “reflexive habitus”) that attempt to resolve this tension (Adams, 2006; Decoteau, 2016).

The word “reflexive” originates from the latin “reflexus”<sup>14</sup>, and its primary definitions are bending, being directed or turned back on itself<sup>15</sup>. Reflexivity is also defined as “property of language, text, etc. of self-consciously referring to itself or its production” (L. Brown & Little, 1993). Generally, it is possible to distinguish between a sociocultural-epistemological strand (reflexivity as part of a socioculturally formed identity) and a cognitive or behaviourist strand (reflexivity as a heightened level of consciousness leading to identity transformation) of thinking about reflexivity cutting across the disciplines.

### **5.1. *Reflexivity in sociology***

Perhaps the most influential conceptualisations of reflexivity originate in the field of sociology. In his inventory work, Ashmore classifies conceptualisations of reflexivity in the sociology of scientific knowledge into categories of *self-reference*, *self-awareness*

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<sup>14</sup> Online Etymology Dictionary: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/reflexive>

<sup>15</sup> Merriam Webster Dictionary: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reflexive>

and “*the constitutive circularity of accounts or texts*” (Ashmore, 1989). Reflexivity as *self-reference* in society as a system of circular communications, which recursively creates and alters itself (autopoiesis), has been theorised by Luhmann (1985), who has exerted a wide influence on other fields, such as organisational theory (cf. Hernes & Bakken, 2003). The third category is further elaborated as the “mutually constitutive nature of account and reality” (Ashmore, 1989, p. 32), which in turn refers to the “double hermeneutic” problem in the social sciences: the notion that scholarly and real-world interpretations are circular and reflect back on historically unfolding events (Jackson, 2013). Wacquant contrasts Ashmore’s thesis, which he calls “textual reflexivity”, with Bourdieu’s notion of epistemic reflexivity, which aims to mitigate biases ingrained in the theory and practice of social scientific research (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). These biases include the researcher’s social class, her position in the academic field and the “intellectualist bias” of scientific method, or symbolic categorisations built in the tools of analysis (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 39).

For Bourdieu, reflexivity is only possible in relation to the habitus, in fact, it is the temporary suspension of the habitus in times of crisis. Bourdieu describes this as a case when rational choice can take over “routine adjustment” (understood as practical logic) in response to a situation (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 131). Reflexivity can also occur outside of this particular scenario, in everyday situations, for instance when actors occupying different positions in the same field interact, or when an actor develops “reflexive habitus” through socialisation (Mouzelis, 2008; Sweetman, 2003).

Other notable approaches include historically specific forms of reflexivity (Mouzelis, 2008), also referred to as the “extended reflexivity thesis” in sociology (Adams, 2006). The extended reflexivity thesis views reflexivity as pervading social life and identity in late modernity, elaborated in the works of Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck,



and Scott Lash. Giddens puts forward the notion of *institutional reflexivity*, which implies that “social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character” (Giddens, 1997, p. 38). Institutional reflexivity is also linked to the increase reliance on expert systems in everyday life (Giddens, 1997). Beck’s notion of *reflexive modernization* is elaborated in the context of the transition from the industrial society to the “risk society” (Beck et al., 1994). Somewhat counter-intuitively, he understands reflexivity as self-confrontation, the opposite of calculated reflection, and describes this process as an reflex-like, automatic, self-destructive force (Beck et al., 1994). Lash differentiates between *structural reflexivity* and *self-reflexivity*: the former is about reflection on the “agency’s social conditions of existence”, while the latter is a form of self-monitoring (Beck et al., 1994, pp. 115–116).

Finally, Archer theorises reflexivity as an “internal conversation” that all humans engage in incessantly, and locates it as the source of “morphogenesis” or social change; arguing that the explanatory power of Bourdieu’s habitus in contemporary societies is declining, as the rapidly changing social context forces individuals to find creative solutions and abandon social schemata (Archer, 2010, 2012, 2013; Decoteau, 2016). Building on a critique of reflexive modernization, she contends that modern society is characterised by “the reflexive imperative”, which stresses the role of agential autonomy and mental ability in the acceleration of social transformation (Archer, 2012). Archer differentiates between four modes of reflexivity: *communicative* reflexivity (reflexive deliberation), *autonomous* reflexivity (inner conversations), *meta-reflexivity* (a reflexive assessment of the inner dialogue) and *fractured* reflexivity (when individuals are prevented from fully exploiting their reflexive abilities) (Archer, 2012; Caetano, 2015).

These approaches that highlight the increasing importance of reflexivity for social theory are considered clearly oppositional to Bourdieu's epistemic reflexivity, which he defines in relation to the habitus as "the systematic exploration of the unthought categories of thought" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 40). Such reflexivity cannot be achieved by simply looking inwards, but by via participant objectivation, or directing the tools of scientific inquiry to examine one's own "academic unconscious", i.e. "the pre-reflexive social and academic experiences of the social world that he tends to project unconsciously onto ordinary social agent" (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 281).

While this short summary cannot comprehensively reproduce the complexity of contemporary sociological debates surrounding reflexivity, the conclusion for the framework of this dissertation is that reflexivity and routine sustain oppositional dynamics which need to be accounted for in the analysis of policy instruments that rely on reflexive appropriation in pragmatic contexts. As Archer suggests (2013), while different theorists may attach radically different emphasis to reflexivity in contemporary social theory, a common point of convergence can be located in the *practice of reflexivity*. While there are disagreements about whether self-conscious or habitual action is dominant in a particular social field or era, it is generally accepted that reflexivity can be practiced in different ways and to different degrees. Thus, from a sociological perspective, reflexivity should never be assumed to work in the same way and exert the same effects across different contexts and actors: it is the practice of reflexivity which has to be analysed first and foremost to understand whether in a particular situation reflective action supports the perpetuation of the status quo or results in change. This insight is especially relevant to explain the emergence and institutionalisation of different pragmatic forms of reflexivity in policy-making.

## 5.2. *Reflexivity in learning theory*

As the debates within the sociological tradition show, the concept of reflexivity is intrinsically linked to theorisations of identity. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century psychologists Lev Vygotsky and George Herbert Mead are considered seminal theorists of reflexivity, influencing contemporary sociocultural and constructivist approaches to the theory of learning (Jaramillo, 1996). Mead sees “reflexiveness”, or self-awareness, as an essential condition for the development of the mind. Defined as “the turning-back of the experience of the individual upon himself” (Mead, 1985, p. 134), reflexivity allows the individual to “take the attitude of the other toward himself” (Mead, 1985, p. 134). Mead argues that the sense of self is formed in social interactions and that this objectification occurs in particular cultural contexts, reflexive consciousness thus cannot transcend the culture in which it develops (Adams, 2003). Both Vygotsky (1981) and Mead (1985) understand learning as a fundamentally social process, and as a consequence, reflexivity occurs primarily through signs and language which leads to the idea of acquiring an understanding the self as a symbol (Wiley, 2021).

Building on the sociocultural thesis of cognitive development, theories of reflective learning have been further developed in the field of adult education. Mezirow’s theory of “transformative learning” espouses a Habermasian approach to domains and modes of knowledge, and posits that deep learning involves “perspective transformation” (Mezirow, 1981), which is achieved via critical reflection “on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7). Adult learning is self-reflexive, as it happens in relation to past (childhood) knowledge and experiences, including of the self: it is a process of recognising “culturally induced dependency roles and relationships” (Mezirow, 1981, pp. 6–7) or questioning our own habits and ways of thinking. In the theory of transformative

learning, the emphasis is on the *critical* nature of reflection. Reflection itself can be performed uncritically, within professional routines, without questioning underlying power relations and frames of reference (Brookfield, 2000). Thus, transformative learning as a theory of adult learning brings an additional layer of understanding by decoupling self-awareness (reflection) from self-critique (reflexivity).

Last, but importantly, organisational learning theories building on pragmatic conceptualisations of reflexivity are found in the works of Donald Schön, Chris Argyris and Martin Rein. First, their distinction between *single-loop and double-loop learning* in organisations, where learning is understood as the correction and detection of errors (Argyris, 1976), continues to be particularly influential in policy studies. While single-loop learning is circumscribed by organisational rules and role frames, double loop learning occurs “when error is detected and corrected in ways that involve the modification of an organization’s underlying norms, policies and objectives” (Argyris & Schön, 1978, pp. 2–3). Another important contribution of Donald Schön is his theory of *reflective practice* (Schön, 1983), which was formulated as a critique of the reigning positivist epistemology of practice that relies on a distinction between practice and research on practice. Schön asserts that professionals develop, apply and reflect on their own theories of their practice throughout their career. Professional practice does not simply consist of finding solutions for pre-defined problems: uncertain and unique situations engage practitioners in a reflective conversation concerning their own tacit operations, which is characterised by rigour (e.g., through performing practical experiments). Often triggered by puzzlement or surprise, reflexivity is allowing the situation to “talk back” through the unintended effects of the action (Schön, 1983, p. 131), which leads to a reframing of the problem. Finally, the concept of *frame reflection*, developed by Schön and Rein (1994), denotes a particular mode of policy deliberation

through which policy-makers develop the competence to reflect on and adjust their own framing of controversial policy issues, as well as develop an understanding of others' frames from within the "policy-making game".

Overall, sociocultural and organisational learning theories view reflexivity as a process of identity-building and transformation, individual and collective, relying on a combination of cognitive and social mechanisms. Reflexivity pushes the boundaries of learning as a purely rational endeavour and emphasises its social, communicative and critical aspects. Similarly to Bourdieu, both adult learning and organisational theorists emphasise the role of "disorienting dilemma" (Brookfield, 2009; Mezirow, 1981) or "puzzlement and confusion" (Schön, 1983) in bringing about critical consciousness regarding one's own practice. However, they differ in assessment of what extent this critique is truly subversive. As Brookfield notes on double-loop learning:

It is hard to see how this can be called critical if the ideological and structural capitalist premises of the workplace remain intact. (Brookfield, 2009, p. 297)

### ***5.3. Reflexivity in policy and governance studies***

In public policy, reflexivity is commonly discussed in the context of pluralist models of governance. The dissertation focuses on literature specialising on explaining Europeanisation and multi-level and networked governance in the European Union. These frameworks often build implicitly or explicitly on a combination of various theorisations of policy learning and organisational learning, which sometimes lack an explicit and rigorous theorisation or definition of reflexivity. Hence, this literature review is restricted to authors who adopt a systematic approach to policy learning, by discussing definitions, learning types, theories of causation and methodological issues. It is important to note that reflexivity and learning are not treated as synonyms: the aim is to explore how reflexivity is understood in relation to theories of policy learning.

For the purposes of the present research, three broad approaches to reflexivity can be distinguished, operating at different levels:

- (1) as *rational deliberation* that results in the change of individual policy preferences (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013) (individual reflexivity associated with outcome-based predictors);
- (2) as *organisational learning* oriented towards fundamental policy frames and choices (Daviter, 2018; Dunlop, 2015; Rietig & Perkins, 2018; Schön & Rein, 1994; Schout, 2009) (policy reflexivity associated with mechanistic predictors);
- (3) as an *organising perspective in pluralist systems* of decision-making (De Schutter & Lenoble, 2010; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008, 2010; Voß et al., 2006) (governance reflexivity associated with structural predictors).

As a theory of policy learning through socialisation, reflexive learning implies that “the objectives of learning are dynamic and endogenous to the process of social interaction”, resulting in policy which is “produced in the act of learning” (Radaelli and Dunlop, 2013, p.608). Dunlop and Radaelli (2013) understand reflexive learning as open and rational deliberation between social and political equals, and contrast it to other, more restricted forms of policy learning: epistemic learning, learning through bargaining and learning in the shadow of hierarchy. In their typology, reflexivity appears as “pure” learning, or “enlightenment for its own sake” (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013, p. 608), free of external constraints and predefined teacher-learner dynamics. Studies which depart from such a conceptualisation of reflexivity often examine under what conditions learning becomes dysfunctional, sub-optimal or blocked by exogenous factors (Dunlop et al., 2018), as opposed to analysing instrumental contexts which create conditions for reflexivity in the first place (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2020). This approach is rooted in

methodological individualism and is based on the assumption that reflexive learning occurs spontaneously when certain macro-level scope conditions are met. Scholars in the environmental field have suggested relaxing some of the assumptions of this ideal type, in order to accommodate more common forms of “constrained” reflexivity which are found in policy networks (McNutt & Rayner, 2018).

A second category of policy studies which borrow learning theories from organisation studies, conceptualise reflexivity as a process which alters the capacities of public administrations, organisations and sectoral networks towards becoming learning systems. While approaches to learning vary from realism to constructivism, the common denominator of these studies is that they attempt to link individual learning to system-level change, and hence differentiate between levels and capacities for learning. Although these authors do not always theorise reflexivity explicitly, I argue that given their assumptions about organisational transformation as a precondition for learning and an extension of the definition of reflexive learning as a collective process, they build a model of policy reflexivity. Such approaches link reflexivity to administrative (Schout, 2009), analytical (Borrás, 2011) and political capacity-building (Dunlop, 2015) in organisations.

Finally, the third level of reflexivity as a characteristic of pluralist governance systems, is discussed in this dissertation as a generic mode of organisation of multi-level relations, attached to normative claims concerning efficiency and legitimacy at the system level. Experimentalist governance is theorised as a dynamic process of policy-making, involving the reciprocal redefinition of ends and means through an iterated, deliberative, multi-level cycle of provisional goal-setting and revision, thereby giving structure to apparently fluid practices of “network governance” (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012). Sabel and Zeitlin (2008, 2010, 2012) establish strategic uncertainty and multi-polar or polyarchic distribution of power as scope conditions for experimentalist governance, both of which

are met in European higher education governance. By definition, the OMC itself is considered an experimentalist structure or organisational form. Normatively, experimentalist governance presupposes a possible democratisation effect in domestic arenas, due to peer-based scrutiny and the subversion of principal-agent relations, which engenders dynamic accountability (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012). In this context, reflexivity is understood in pragmatic terms, as a cyclical process of rule revision, based on different implementation experiences. Another underlying mechanism of the model is iterative policy learning (Harmsen, 2015, p. 788) which transforms governance into a “machine for learning from diversity” (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012, p. 176), based on the continuous feedback stream of solutions developed at the level of sub-units in response to similar challenges.

Extending experimentalist and pragmatist premises, reflexive governance places emphasis on reflexivity as enhancing capacities for learning both at the level of actors and the system (Lenoble & Maesschalck, 2010). It is future-oriented and involves the redefinition of problem frames rather than the exploration of multiple solutions. Reflexive governance has been developed both as an analytical framework and as a normative governance programme (Feindt & Weiland, 2018). Authors differ concerning normative orientation: for instance, sustainability scholars have proposed a minimal definition of normativity involving a value judgement about the non-annihilation of socio-ecological systems (Voß et al., 2006). In this perspective, the ideal governance approach is the one which can lead to a desired future state, hence it is functional. Others (De Schutter & Lenoble, 2010) make more generic claims, similar to deliberative and experimentalist theories, concerning the democratic, legitimacy and efficiency aspects of collective decision-making.



Reflexivity in this scholarly tradition is defined as the “internalisation’ of the conditions of learning” (De Schutter & Lenoble, 2010, p. XXX), which enables “to overcome structurally embedded ignorance of specialized organisations and institutions with regard to the external effects of their own operations” (Feindt & Weiland, 2018, p. 655). The governance perspective on reflexivity is particularly useful for the study of instrument reflexivity, as it enables moving beyond reflexivity as a fundamentally human, often sub-conscious operation towards conceptualising it as a problem for policy-making which can be tackled through systemic interventions. The dissertation aims to test the applicability of existing approaches to reflexivity in policy learning and governance theory, to conceptualise instrument reflexivity in the context of the ESG. In other words, the question is how can peer learning, deliberations and transnational governance arrangements which concern the genesis, revision, and application of the instrument be best explained at the level of individual, policy or system reflexivity?

## **6. Introducing the three papers: notes on methodology**

This section presents the three papers in relation to the overarching theoretical framework of the dissertation and discusses methodology. Although each paper includes a dedicated sub-section on methodology, it is useful to provide a comparative overview of the different approaches taken and regarding the application of the praxiographic methods.

Across the three papers, the focus of the analysis is the practice of reflexivity in different contexts and at different levels of instrumentation. Therefore, the common methodological approach is *praxiography*, or the study of practice. Praxiography may be associated with a broad range of possible epistemological orientations and methods, which nevertheless share two commonalities: a strong empirical anchoring (Bueger & Gadinger, 2018a) and the development of praxiographic sensibility in analysis and writing (Nicolini, 2017; Sedlačko, 2017). Since the goal of praxiography is to understand

socially meaningful patterns of practice in their context, data collection often involves observational methods (Bueger & Gadinger, 2018a), such as participant observation, shadowing or action research. However, in some instances, direct observation may not be possible (Pouliot, 2014), in which case alternative methods of data collection may be mobilised. Praxiographic research can be time consuming, costly and difficult to access for a PhD student. Therefore, the dissertation combines a range of different (predominantly qualitative) methods to grasp instrument reflexivity. [Paper 1](#) and [Paper 2](#) build on primarily observational data, while [Paper 3](#) combines qualitative interviews with mixed methods analysis of texts. [Chapter V](#) provides an in-depth discussion of observational methods, issues of access, positionality, reflexivity and ethics.

Praxiographic sensibility implies that the concept of practice and its various theorisations provide starting points for problematisation which guide the analysis (Bueger, 2018, p. 29) through direct engagement with empirical phenomena, allowing them to “bite back” (Nicolini, 2017, p. 25). According to Nicolini (2017), praxiography can be conceived a “package” of theory, method and vocabulary. Furthermore, praxiographic writing constitutes a genre of its own kind, and as such, is judged by its ability to produce “enlightening and critical narratives” (Bueger & Gadinger, 2018a, p. 134). This often involves thick description, which is also one of the key criteria for trustworthiness in ethnographic research (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2009).

Table 3 shows an example of how the empirical identification of reflective practices was guided by theoretical concepts derived from Bourdieu’s and Schön’s praxeology in [Paper 2](#). Focusing on temporal and pragmatic aspects of reflexivity, the analytical strategy relies on a distinction between “crisis” and “habitual” practices and processes and outcomes of reflection.

<b>Reflective practice</b>	<i>Reflection-in-practice</i> (process or principle)	<i>Reflection-on-practice</i> (outcome)
<i>Crisis reflexivity</i> (Preparation for external evaluation)	<b>Crisis reflexivity</b> Ex. 1a. Designing models for self-study  Ex. 1b. Revision of institutional data collection practices.	<b>Crisis reflection</b> Ex. 2a: Self-study report  Ex. 2b: Employee satisfaction survey.
<i>Habitual reflexivity</i> (Everyday academic, administrative and managerial practice)	<b>Habitual reflexivity</b> Ex. 1.c. Career coaching for researchers.  Ex. 1.d. Evaluation of teaching.	<b>Habitual reflection</b> Ex. 2.c. Role awareness.  Ex. 2.d. Adjustment of course plan based on course evaluation results.

*Table 3. Operationalisation of reflective practice in quality assurance and enhancement, with corresponding empirical examples (Paper 2). Author's own work.*

Table 4 presents the key parameters of the three studies. Paper 1 problematises reflexivity in the context of policy learning surrounding the ESG, by comparing transnational peer learning (TPL) across three transnational venues, focusing on the role of HEIs and their representatives as epistemic actors. The corresponding research questions are the following:

- (1) How is policy learning configured in the practice of TPL?
- (2) Does the involvement of non-state actors contribute to reflexivity in a multi-level learning setting?

The study follows a situational design (Nicolini, 2017), which involves comparing the situated enactment (or “scenes of action”) of the same category of practice in different contexts. In terms of its epistemological orientation, “critical realist congruence” implies that the study stresses the temporal interplay of structurally mediating factors (discursive and material configurations of the learning setting) and agents’ control over the learning

situation during the interaction. The main sources of inspiration for a critical realist orientation to the study of practice is Archer's work on reflexivity (Archer, 1995, 2012, 2013). She posits that practical or competent knowledge (such as playing a musical instrument) involves both a conscious commitment to self-improvement through practice and deliberate transformation of our technique based on experience (Archer, 2010). Critical realism and practice theory intersect in their understanding of structure and agency as relational and synchronous; but while the former posits that it is possible to analytically separate the two (analytical dualism) through sequential analysis of their emergence (Archer, 2010; Danermark et al., 2002), practice theorists typically avoid such dualism and advocate for co-constitution (E. Adler & Pouliot, 2011; Bueger & Gadinger, 2014). Without entering into complex epistemological discussions, the paper operates with an intermediary assumption that TPL practices are relationally configured, i.e. the learning setting conditions the interactions of participants, at the same time certain actors are able to control the tools and outcomes of learning over time more than others.

[Paper 2](#) challenges the conceptualisation of the ESG as a hegemonic regulatory tool, by showing how reflexivity is institutionalised in HEISs via diverse channels: through the formal external quality procedures and the everyday reflective routines of quality managers. It addresses the following questions:

- (1) How is reflexivity practiced at the institutions on the margins of external and internal policy change?
- (2) How did the reform of the external QA system affect institutional reflexivity?

The praxiographic orientation of this study is conflict-sensitive, that is, concerned with “the co-evolution, conflict and interference of two or more practices” (Nicolini, 2017, p. 30). In this case, the focus of the analysis is the interplay between reflexivity and habitus

in institutional quality practice.

[Paper 3](#) analyses the role of practice in contemporary higher education governance within a combined theoretical framework of reflexive governance and communities of practice. It can be best characterised as post-positivist in the sense that it seeks to generate useful insights across different cases based on contextual data (Pouliot, 2014), which, while does not amount to full-blown generalisability, can nevertheless help explain variation within a historical case. In praxiographic terms, it is a configurationally oriented study (Nicolini, 2017), as it investigates how different constellations of practices are connected and evolve over time. This involves “zooming out” from understanding localised forms of practices to interpreting how these practices impact the governance of the field. The research questions associated with this design are the following:

- (1) What role does practice play in the multi-level governance of higher education?
- (2) Does the institutionalisation of communities of practice in higher education indicate a move towards reflexive governance?

	<b>Paper 1</b>	<b>Paper 2</b>	<b>Paper 3</b>
<i>Conceptualisation of reflexivity</i>	Reflexive learning	Institutionalisation of reflexivity	Reflexive governance
<i>Reflexivity as an analytical lens</i>	critical	pragmatic	normative
<i>Empirical case</i>	Transnational peer learning, transnational case studies	Internal quality assurance, institutional case studies	transnational communities of practice in European higher education
<i>Practice as unit of analysis</i>	International practice	Reflective practice, organisational practice	Communities of practice, pragmatist approach to social learning
<i>Level of ESG instrumentation</i>	Transnational (non-local)	Subnational: institutional	European-institutional
<i>Ontological and epistemological orientations</i>	Critical realist congruent	Interpretive Constructionist/ post-structuralist (Bourdiesian and organisational narrative analysis)	Post-positivist
<i>Methodology</i>	Comparative qualitative case study	Praxiography-ethnography	Qualitative within-case analysis (practice tracing)
<i>Methods</i>	participant observation; qualitative interviewing and document analysis	ethnographic fieldwork	qualitative interviewing and document analysis
<i>Praxiographic approach (based on Nicolini, 2017)</i>	Situational orientation	Conflict-sensitive orientation	Configurational orientation

Table 4. Overview of the three papers featured in the dissertation.

## **II. Paper 1. Policy learning and reflective practice: European universities as epistemic actors in multi-level transnational peer learning**

This study contributes to the conceptualisation of transnational peer learning as an “emergent venue” of European education governance. In pluralist governance models, facilitated learning-oriented interactions between different levels hold the promise of enhancing reflexivity in the policy process. Focusing on micro-social practices, the paper shows how transnational peer learning conditions multi-level policy learning along three pragmatic-critical dimensions: problematisation, role framing, and the internal ambiguities of knowledge utilisation. It presents a comparative analysis of three sites in the field of European higher education, involving policy-makers, standard-setting organisations and higher education institutions. On the one hand, peer learning practices contribute to the emergence of transnational organisations as epistemic actors. On the other hand, between-group encounters are largely mediated by event hosts, resulting in varying patterns and “blind spots” of reflexive learning. For universities, reflective practice appears as a pragmatic logic of peer learning across the three cases, which implies a unique combination of organisational capacity-building and political agency-building.

### **1. Introduction**

Transnational peer learning is an increasingly institutionalised, professionalised and differentiated feature of European meta-governance in the education field. EU institutions and stakeholder organisations are developing their own techniques of “facilitated” or “guided” learning, which engage transnational and non-state actors, and their networks to enhance the effectiveness and bottom-up legitimacy of policy learning. In higher education, the institutionalisation of transnational peer learning accompanies a broader governance transformation, as universities are acquiring ever greater visibility as actors on their own right. In the past decades, stakeholder organisations and university alliances have shaped the policy agenda and built legitimacy both as interest groups and epistemic communities (Vukasovic, 2018), promoting peer learning and the creation of

communities of practitioners. Furthermore, in the context of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in education and training, the European Commission has been supporting “mutual learning” among Member States, as an institutionalised form of peer learning. An underexplored feature of these informal configurations is that they systematically involve representatives of higher education institutions (HEIs). Between 2015 and 2020, peer learning themes with direct relevance for universities included quality culture, academic integrity, inclusion and learning and teaching (Interview with EC expert 2021).

The study of multi-level peer learning ties up with scholarly debates assessing the learning effect of new governance arrangements in the European Union. Models of policy learning derived from pluralist governance theories consider multi-level set-ups to favour reflexive learning by design (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2020), by force of the participation of actors representing different levels of governance. At the same time, literature on policy instrumentation (Alexiadou, 2014; Brøgger & Madsen, 2021; Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004) suggests that due to their dual technical-social nature, instruments, including those guiding policy learning, exert their own empirically distinct effects on the actors involved. This paper argues that orienting our attention towards the micro-social dynamics of peer learning in different multi-level configurations can tackle often unchallenged assumptions about the pragmatic conditions of reflexive and epistemic learning. This includes the (often uneven) distribution of learning resources and capacities between actors of different social and political powers. The study compares three multi-level peer learning sites related to the implementation of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), focusing on practices involving transnational and non-state actors.



Quality assurance (QA) is one of the historically most progressive areas of European cooperation in higher education: a cornerstone of the intergovernmental Bologna Process and a dynamic lever of the EU's policy agenda. First published in 2005, the ESG is considered a success story within the European stakeholder community (Smidt, 2015). It is also an example of bottom-up policy-making, as it was jointly drafted by stakeholder organisations – including the so-called E4 group – at the request of education ministers. The 2015 revision of the ESG increased its focus on quality enhancement, alongside external evaluation, elevating the issue of internal quality assurance to the European level. Implementation has been accompanied by a range of transnational support activities, such as stakeholder meetings and trainings, multi-media platforms and tailored stakeholder services “to develop [...] institutional quality assurance system in line with European best practice” (European University Association, 2022a). However, despite their salience both as standard-setters and epistemic actors fostering dialogue between different governance levels (Vukasovic, 2018), the role of HEIs and their networks in producing transnational guidance for policy translation has received little scholarly attention to date.

Transnational peer learning as an empirical category regroups a wide range of practices from different institutional contexts in higher education: methodologies endogenous to the education and training OMC; the “structured peer support approach” as a working method of the Bologna Follow-up Group (Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2018) and a variety of stakeholder-driven activities, such as multi-level peer groups or communities of practitioners. At the level of the analytical unit, transnational peer learning can be defined as a series of “competent performances” (Adler & Pouliot, 2011) which produce policy-relevant knowledge with the aim of facilitating policy learning and transfer. Against the theoretical backdrop of

guided policy learning presented in the next section, this definition is further operationalised as practices 1) involving transnational peer-to-peer interaction; 2) which by design deploy various learning technologies to guide these interactions. Furthermore, drawing on educational psychology, peer learning as a pedagogical practice involves “the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions” (Topping, 2005, p. 631). Finally, it is important to recognise that the transnationality of such practices refers to the “emergent venues of global governance” (Stone, 2004), in which non-state actors and networks have gained prominence.

The paper is structured as follows: first, I situate the role of policy learning and the ESG as a learning-oriented instrument in European higher education governance. Second, I introduce a practice-based approach to the study of peer learning and link it to systemic theories of policy learning. Third, I outline the three cases and provide a description of methods. Fourth, the paper presents the findings of the comparative empirical study along three pragmatic dimensions. Finally, I discuss the implications of the findings for policy learning and reflexivity for HEIs and their organisations.

## **2. Policy learning in the governance of European higher education – the case of the ESG**

Scholarship on the Europeanisation of the education field has shown that the emergence of a “European learning space” has implications for meta-governance, insofar as it mobilises a range of new actors and practices which render heterogeneity governable through “persuasion and attraction, and the hidden politics of data and standards” (Lawn & Grek, 2012, p. 15). In the context of OMC, the European Commission has developed specialised tools and methods to accompany mutual learning between Member States. Over time, these practices have become increasingly differentiated, eventually leading to

divergent styles of learning across clusters (Lange & Alexiadou, 2010).

Moreover, the intergovernmental Bologna Process and the resulting European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has been analysed through the lenses of network (Elken & Vukasovic, 2014), multi-level (Fumasoli et al., 2018) and deliberative-experimentalist governance (Harmsen, 2015; Hoareau, 2012); establishing policy learning as a mechanism of policy change, and as a negotiated outcome that builds legitimacy in deliberative polyarchies (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2010). In these multi-actor arenas, learning is multi-modal and multi-directional, resulting more often in cognitive and discursive convergence (Radaelli, 2008), than in isomorphic policy change. On the one hand, this type of learning has a pronounced functional or instrumental aspect, by virtue of improving organisational problem-solving capacity in the face of uncertainty (Schout, 2009). On the other hand, deliberative models emphasise the reflexive, critical and destabilising character of learning vis-à-vis policy and political goals (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2010). As such, policy learning has been theorised to enable shifting between modes of decision-making, leading to “governance learning” (Schout, 2009).

By extension to the case of quality assurance in higher education, this shift can be assumed to occur primarily from governing universities as public bodies under direct state control to turning them into self-regulating policy actors, steered at a distance. In practice, this may involve an array of tools that are configured towards capacity-building at the organisational or system level (Borrás, 2011; Schout, 2009). Policy learning can also mobilise the production of “rules of conduct” and generate new dynamics of accountability with transformative effects for actors’ autonomy (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2010); moulding universities into a learning organisation along the ethos of “continuous improvement” embodied by quality assurance instruments.

By its design, the ESG as a policy instrument relies on a cascading process of learning. Its designated users are HEIs, including any actors within the institutions, external stakeholders (such as employers), quality assurance agencies, and ultimately, national authorities, as the standards prescribe system-level parameters. Implementation studies have emphasised the centrality of interpretation at each level of governance, speaking of translation rather than implementation (Westerheijden & Kohoutek, 2014). On the margin of the 2015 revision, the E4 group and the European Commission repeatedly warned against the use of the ESG as a compliance tool (ENQA, 2011), and instead have been advocating for its reflexive use: that is to embed its principles, standards and guidelines in diverse regulatory and cultural contexts. Policy learning can therefore contribute to filling in the “policy outline” with context-specific meaning.

### **Towards a practice-based analysis of transnational peer learning sites**

As an analytical lens, the practice turn has proven fruitful in studying everyday routines of EU policy-making (Adler-Nissen, 2016), especially in areas characterised by soft instruments and high levels of informality. In addition, the sociology of knowledge approach (Adler-Nissen & Kropp, 2015) offers valuable insights into peer learning as a practice which mobilises and validates pre-existing bodies of knowledge, shedding light on power asymmetries and legitimacy conflicts in multi-level settings (Saurugger & Mérand, 2010). Bringing together these perspectives can elucidate on how transnational peer learning transforms policy learning into “embodied experience” (Adler-Nissen, 2016, p. 87) for actors at different governance levels.

In any governance context, policy learning does not simply happen (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2020, p. 225). The learning experience is mediated by contextual factors which prompt or hinder actors’ learning, such as mental maps, heuristics, values, knowledge and

institutional culture (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013, p. 506). Mediating factors are simultaneously material and discursive, and are jointly mobilised in practice, through specific tools and technologies in what can be conceptualised a “guided” or “facilitated” learning setting. In this regard, sociocultural accounts of learning and teaching emphasise the role of learning environments, defined as a “set of conditions that enable and constrain learning”, which go beyond the physical attributes of the place of learning and orient focus on social interactions (G. Brown, 2009, p. 6). Such an ontological approach to learning (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000), when applied to policy instruments, emphasises the socio-technical and performative effects (Brøgger & Madsen, 2021) of practices mobilised in transnational peer learning, acting on the identities of learners and teachers.

In the analysis, I unpack the embeddedness of micro-level practices of peer learning in broader governance paradigms by linking them to an explanatory typology of policy learning theories proposed by Dunlop and Radaelli (2013). The authors take a minimalistic definition of learning as “updating one’s beliefs” and define scope conditions for four archetypes of learning<sup>16</sup> along two macro-level dimensions: problem tractability (or uncertainty) and actor certification. Their emphasis on knowledge utilisation permits to conceptualise learning in terms of processes rather than outcomes, which is appropriate for making non-state actors’ participation visible.

Based on the macro-level characteristics of the policy field, the analysis will predominantly focus on two general frameworks defined by Dunlop and Radaelli (2013), *reflexive* and *epistemic* learning. The quality assurance field is characterised by low problem tractability, assuming that there is not one readily available solution to the issue of “ESG implementation” or “quality assurance”; rather there are clusters of loosely

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<sup>16</sup> 1. reflexivity 2. epistemic learning, 3. learning through bargaining and 4. learning in the shadow of hierarchy.

defined issues<sup>17</sup> and a vast diversity of higher education systems. The ESG as a policy instrument strives to maintain this diversity as a resource for quality enhancement. Considering peer learning settings as transnational venues for guided policy learning; reflexivity and epistemic learning can both provide frameworks for understanding the facilitation of learning.

Epistemic learning theory guides the identification of influential actors (such as “teachers”, “contributors” or “facilitators”) in particular communities of experts, and explains their relative influence over policy-makers’ learning (Dunlop, 2009). A sub-type of epistemic learning is the so-called “producer of standards”, which favours a scenario where decision-makers engage in deliberations on “what works” in terms of meeting standards or goals set a priori by the experts (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013, p. 610). This category gains particular relevance in the context of the ESG, as standards are seen as “minimum requirements” by the E4 group, and peer learning is often oriented towards exploring innovative practices through experimental learning. The E4 group can be tentatively construed as an epistemic community (Vukasovic, 2013) producing technical knowledge based on shared causal beliefs (Haas, 1992, p. 18). However, there is also evidence that provides ground to classify them as interest groups (Vukasovic, 2018), representing various types of actors (students, institutions, agencies, etc.) with divergent policy preferences in the multi-level EHEA architecture.

A reflexive approach to learning highlights the boundedness of individual learning. Under ideal conditions, reflexivity manifests as a “pure” form of deliberative learning, in which learners maintain high control over both the learning objectives and the learning content and means (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013). In guided learning settings,

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<sup>17</sup> A prominent example is student-centred learning, which lacks a definitional consensus at the European level.

more constrained forms of reflexivity are theorised, in case of learners' low control over the learning objectives (experimental/informal learning) or the learning content (framing/non-formal learning) (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013). In these scenarios, the social certification of actors and the recognition of their competence are hypothesised as external to the learning environment (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013, p. 607), and temporally evolving, through processes of socialisation within a policy community (Hall, 1993). Can structured interactions between governance levels contribute to enhanced reflexivity in the policy learning process? It appears just as essential to study practices surrounding the selection of learners, the “becoming” of the peers, as it is in the case of teachers.

Therefore, in addition to asking who learns, what is learned and under what conditions (Moyson et al., 2017), we need to ask how do transnational peer learning practices order reflective and epistemic resources of learning in space and time? To capture variations at the level of the practice across institutional contexts, the analysis is guided by three dimensions which are derived from various critical approaches to policy instrumentation and organisational learning that highlight the pragmatic and performative aspects of TPL emphasised by the practice turn.

*Problematization* refers to particular logics (and processes) of emergence and rationalization of a policy (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004). Problematization in guided learning settings is understood as a type of policy framing (Bacchi, 2009, p. xii), defining the “content” of learning. Through the act of problematisation, actors discursively combine epistemic knowledge with their own policy frames, that is “underlying structures of belief, perception and appreciation” (Schön & Rein, 1994, p. 23), which usually remain tacit in policy discourse. In analysing the peer learning situations, it is not possible to trace changes in policy frames temporally, as outcomes are not known. Instead, the identification of reflective practice prompted (or not) by the learning technologies used

as evidence of the possibility of various forms of frame awareness and frame reflection (Schön & Rein, 1994).

*Role framing*, a concept derived from theories of organisational learning, conditions both knowledge utilisation and reflexivity (Schön, 1983, p. 274). This dimension reveals the ways through which peer learning structures the interaction between different actors, in terms of “honour and shame, [...] propriety, obligation, trust, fidelity and commitment to others” (N. Rose, 2000, p. 324) resulting in a discursive-material creation of “actorhood” (Hasselbladh & Kallinikos, 2000). At peer learning venues, it is essential to explore which actors are positioned as “learners” and which as “teachers”; making it possible to trace shifts between different epistemic roles (such as expert, contributor, facilitator) (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013, pp. 608–610) across different institutional contexts.

Finally, the dimension of *internal ambiguity* denotes potential conflicts between the dual material and social nature of practice (Adler & Pouliot, 2011), highlighting struggles over the control of the learning situation via different learning technologies. For instance, the collection of “good practice” is part of the instrumental toolbox of the OMC, which can potentially influence directions of policy learning (Nedergaard, 2006b). However, the production and use of such practices in epistemic and practitioners’ communities remains rather ambiguous across contexts and can be linked to multiple functions, which can range from learning heuristic to strategic use (Macmillen & Stead, 2014). Contextualising good practice production within institutionalised peer learning settings and identifying alternative knowledge utilisation techniques can help trace the social dynamics of control over the means of learning.

### 3. Cases and methods

Building on a practice-based understanding of guided policy learning, the methodology



is consistent with a critical realist epistemology, in the sense of assuming an interactive relationship between structure and agency (Bache et al., 2012, p. 73). Practice theorists locate the focal point of the co-constitution of agency and structure in social practice (Adler & Pouliot, 2011). As the study of practices implies methodological situationalism (Adler-Nissen, 2016, p. 95), participant observation is a central method of inquiry, which involves a theory-guided thick re-description of the events in which peer learning practices were actualised.. Access to the peer learning events was granted in two cases, while the third case (the Commission PLA) is reconstructed via proxies, such as internal working documents and in-depth interviews with organisers. Further details on methodology are provided in [Chapter V](#).

While several within-case studies have been published on mutual learning practices in different OMC configurations (cf. Nedergaard, 2006a; Papanastasiou, 2021), a key novelty of the present study is that it introduces a comparative perspective by including horizontally organised multi-level peer learning sites. The selection of the cases of peer learning was guided by the identification of typical European-level venues of peer learning with topical relevance for the implementation of the ESG 2015 (see [Appendix I](#) for detailed overview). They include (1) a peer learning activity (PLA) of a Commission-hosted OMC working group; (2) a recurrent forum of quality assurance practitioners (EQAF); and (3) an EU-funded project establishing multi-level peer-learning groups (EQUIP).

The common characteristics of the three sites are the following: (1) multi-level set-up with the representation of national policy-makers, European stakeholders and sub-national actors; (2) participation of representatives of higher education institutions; (3) relevance of the topic linked to the 2015 ESG. Each site represents a different level of institutionalisation of transnational peer learning practices. The PLA organised by the

Commission is a case of a highly institutionalised form of peer learning between national experts, with specific methodologies developed in the context of the Education and Training (ET 2020) Working Group on the modernisation of higher education. EQAF (European Quality Assurance Forum) represents a moderate level of institutionalisation: it is an annual forum of quality assurance practitioners organised by the E4 group, launched after the publication of the first edition of the ESG in 2006. Finally, EQUIP (Enhancing quality through innovative policy and practice) was a three-year project of cross-stakeholder peer learning and training on the implementation of the ESG, which mobilised methods developed within stakeholder organisations, in particular the European University Association.

The analysis combines insights from discourse and content analysis of texts, including data obtained via participant observation at two of the three the sites (EQAF and EQUIP), manually coded in NVivo, adapting a ‘flexible deductive process of coding’ (Fletcher, 2017). The three pragmatic dimensions and their theoretical components were used to structure the first round of coding, flexibly allowing for the emergence of new codes from the materials and leading to the modification of existing codes. Expert interviews with eight individuals who managed the organisation of the events and projects were also conducted, for purposes of triangulation ([Appendix I](#)). The data comprises policy documents and project reports, background papers and information material distributed at the events; preparatory material (concept notes, templates, programmes) provided by the organisers with their explicit consent; 25 conference papers, 35 pages of handwritten notes reporting core observational data; 31 Power Point presentations and the recordings of three webinars.

## 4. Findings: from challenges of implementation to embedding quality culture

### 4.1. Nested problematisations

It is possible to discern two distinct moves of problematisation which frame the learning interactions across all three sites, by delimiting what can be learned. Due to external epistemic limitations regarding the translation of the ESG at the institutional level (which contribute to low problem tractability), knowledge produced by event hosts on drivers and barriers of implementation carves out a discursive space for peer learning in a given institutional setting. The Commission prepared a background paper for the PLA, which presents the challenge of implementation as a problem of *regulation*: possible solutions are formulated specifically for national authorities: these include different regulatory options, financial incentives and government programmes. The organisers of EQAF framed implementation largely as a matter of *technical competence* of the QA profession, featuring plenary presentations discussing methodological and management challenges. The EQUIP project approached implementation from a perspective of *compliance* for different stakeholder groups, identifying an implementation gap between policy and practice in HEIs.

A second act of framing occurs at the level of core policy beliefs via the interaction of organisers, active participants (such as invited speakers, paper or case presenters) and audience members in the guided learning setting. Problematisations of quality emerged in the intersection of three discourses of quality in higher education: *quality-as-culture*, *quality-as-process*, and *quality-as-service*. These were engaged as learning heuristics to construct generalised causal narratives (knowledge claims) which could potentially resolve cross-frame conflicts (see [Appendix I](#) for a detailed overview). As the empirical illustrations below show, some of these narratives remained tacit and contributed to reinforcing existing beliefs, and others were mobilised in frame reflection. While the

causal narration is depicted here as circular, this does not imply relativism; rather it refers to the different points of entry of participants in the learning process vis-à-vis the problem of implementation (Figure 3).

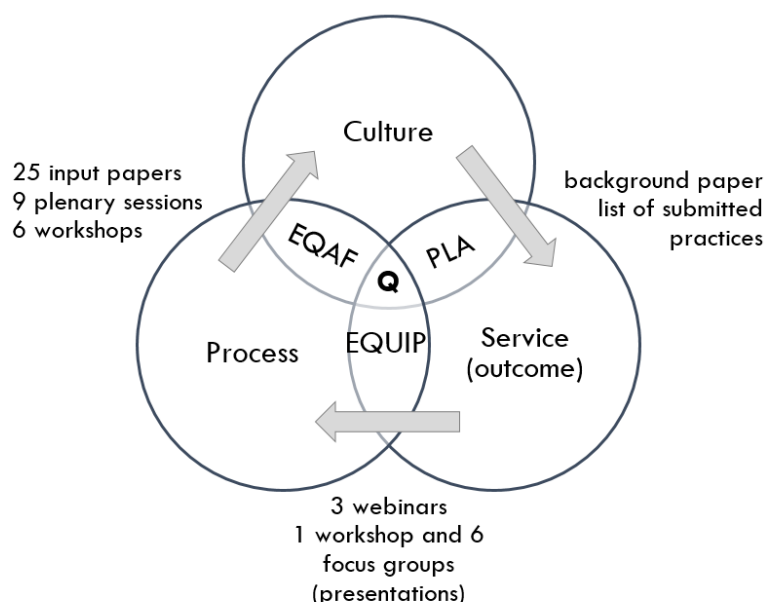


Figure 3. Three discourses on quality and dominant directions of frame reflection, based on the coded references of learning inputs (see [Appendix I](#))

*Quality-as-culture* encompasses meaningful statements about quality in higher education as a cultural artefact. Across the three settings, quality culture was recurrent in discussions and learning activities as a normative ideal: “every time we talk about quality assurance, we [...] end up talking about the culture” (EQUIP webinar moderator). *Quality-as-culture* is a temporally stable and institutionalised discourse: the ESG 2015 defines the development of quality culture as a basic principle for quality assurance. At all three venues, the most referenced definition of quality culture as a type of organisational culture originates from a bottom-up project involving university networks (EUA, 2006). At the same time, the notion was represented simultaneously as an explanatory variable and a normatively desired state, which can be ‘developed’ or ‘spread’. For instance, the Commission positioned quality ‘quality care’ as a politically

superior paradigm of quality assurance aiming for excellence; moving away from ‘quality control’. At EQAF, several paper authors and presenters attempted to disaggregate quality culture into measurable, discreet components, which can be manipulated by quality assurance. EQUIP and EQAF articulated cultural attributes, such as climate, community, mindset, attitude, identity; and ultimately, wider social embeddedness and tradition.

An enhanced focus on culture did not lead to the dilution or erasure of cognitive or instrumental conceptualisations of quality, which have long dominated the professional field of quality assurance (Stensaker, 2007). *Quality-as-process* remained an influential discourse, especially at EQAF, which featured the highest number of thematic blocks related to ESG standards 1.1. (policy for quality assurance) and 2.2 (methodologies fit for purpose) following quality culture. Quality-as-process offers a policy paradigm in which “fitness-for-purpose” becomes a logic of intervention: goal-setting happens in local contexts, whereas procedures and practices are universally accessible objects of knowledge. However, in all three settings, frame-reflective practice challenged a purely cognitive or instrumental function of procedures: by denouncing the desirability of “normative and mimetic isomorphism through instrumental convergence” (EQAF plenary presentation), turning QA to a “box-ticking exercise” (PLA background paper) and “doing QA just for the sake of it” (EQUIP focus group).

*Quality-as-service* is a discourse frequently mobilised in relation to the higher education’s teaching mission and student-centred learning (SCL), as new thematic elements of the ESG 2015. In this paradigm, quality is not an intrinsic feature of the academic profession, but rather an “added value” which needs to be re-created at each student-teacher encounter. A quarter of individual EQAF papers featured data-driven QA models, several of which aimed to show the compatibility of business management-type organisational models (such as ISO) with the ESG, attempting to resolve reigning

perceptions of frame conflict (interview with former Secretary General of EURASHE, 2021). A notable difference emerged between the groups of national experts and stakeholders: while the PLA stipulated the production of standardised data as a gateway to excellence, the EQUIP final report recommends a more cautious approach, noting that “what is measureable is not always meaningful [...] and what would be meaningful is not always measurable” (Gover & Loukkola, 2018, p. 17).

#### ***4.2. Universities as case studies, experts and learners***

The peer learning events activated various role frames which place organisers and participants, including university representatives, on a continuum ranging from learner to knowledge producer. Practices of participant selection and assigning different roles through learning technologies influence these positions. Interviews conducted with the organisers of the peer learning events were used to determine perceptions of their own roles and their relative influence over the learning situation (Table 5).

<b>Participants</b>	<b>ET 2020 PLA</b>	<b>EQAF</b>	<b>EQUIP</b>
<i>Policy-makers</i>	Self-selected and self-directed learners	Non-formal learners	Informal learners
<i>European Commission</i>	<b>Facilitator</b>	Non-formal learner	Informal learners
<i>Quality assurance agencies</i>	Contributors	Contributors	Informal learners
<i>E4 group organisations</i>	Contributors	<b>Facilitators</b>	<b>Producers of standards</b>
<i>Higher education institutions (HEIs)</i>	Contributors (leadership); formal (vs policy-makers) and non-formal learners (vs peers)	Contributors (QA professionals), non-formal learners	Informal learners

*Table 5. Overview of epistemic roles across the three sites, based on (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013).*

At the PLA, HEIs were overwhelmingly represented by leaders with strategic decision-making capacities, which corresponds to their discursively framed role as change agents of quality culture, connecting the institution with the broader higher education governance context. The institutions were selected by the permanent members of the Working Group – experts delegated from national ministries; jointly with Commission experts and consultants, who screened applications. The participation of institutional representatives was conditioned upon the relevance of the cases they presented to illustrate government interventions. In this case, learning in the “shadow of hierarchy”, a third type in Dunlop and Radaelli’s classification (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013, p. 604), can be a relevant framework for further exploration.

The EQAF is organised as a semi-professional, semi-academic conference, based on an open call for papers (classified into three categories: research, policy or practice). Its hybrid practices transform traditional academic codes to construct “shared notions of validity” (Haas, 1992, p. 3) in the QA practitioners’ community, therefore EQAF fits the best the traditional criteria of an epistemic community. It is precisely the ensemble of these practices that certify this specific configuration of organisations together with loosely affiliated QA professionals and researchers as epistemic actors. Interviews with E4 members also highlighted EQAF as a venue where Bologna policy updates are downloaded to the professional QA community, indicating a reflective-deliberative dimension. Finally, the EQUIP project was the most task-conscious of the venues, aiming to gather and validate common stakeholder positions on challenges of compliance with the ESG. Its workshops and webinars were set up following a traditional teacher-learner logic, and were advertised as opportunities to “learn directly from the authors” of the ESG (EQUIP website), establishing them in their role as “trainers”. Accordingly, the production of secondary interpretation by E4 group members regarding the new

provisions of the ESG prevailed across plenary interventions. The six focus groups allowed for self-facilitated interactions within peer groups (world café, gallery walk), nevertheless, these were guided by externally defined knowledge production goals.

In addition to the conditions of access and participation, policy beliefs and norms surrounding institutional responsibility, the first principle of the common European framework (ESG, p.8); exert ideational influence on who engages in peer learning and why. An *individualisation* of responsibility for QA was enacted through the mobilisation of organisational tools and knowledge which generated further categories of agency. For instance, the European Student Union (ESU) showcased the creation of student expert pools and peer-to-peer trainings on QA. Such practices contribute to the reification of the idea long advocated by the E4 group, that QA is not only a matter for professionals: all individuals within an institution should claim ownership of their own role and tasks regarding quality work. Academic and teaching staff were underrepresented at all events, and their attitudes toward quality assurance were described in terms of affective commitment, such as resistance, resignation, fatigue and resilience. Besides increasing awareness and expertise within the institution; organisers framed quality enhancement as a matter of “desire, enthusiasm, confidence and trust” (EQUIP workshop).

Such emerging layers of responsibility were codified in the policy recommendations in the EQUIP final report and the PLA report, for example: “institutions are recommended to design systems [...] serving the goals they set for their internal QA rather than focusing solely on meeting the requirements of external QA” (Gover & Loukkola, 2018, p. 20). This bears important implications for governance learning insofar as it recognises policy trends moving towards external quality systems based on institutional strategic management as competent governance models.



So there is a shared idea of what politicians should be aiming at. For instance, the agencies are [...] saying that [...] institutional responsibility [...] is the key, and institutions are accepting it. Whereas some time ago, that wouldn't have been so clear. (Interview with former deputy Director-General at EUA, 2021)

Thus, peer learning exercises addressed to institutional representatives were not only oriented toward organisational capacity-building, but also toward political “agency-building”, both within and beyond HEIs.

#### ***4.3. Internal ambiguities: good practice and reflective practice***

Across the sites, a variety of learning technologies were deployed to stimulate discussion and active engagement of the participants, including pre- and post-event activities. These can be critically unpacked as the pragmatic means of learning, which impact on the learners' experience and reveal internal ambiguities surrounding the goals of knowledge production.

Across all sites, the production of “good practice”, or “specific sets of practices presented as leading to improved performance or greater policy success” (Papanastasiou, 2021, p. 327) constitute an integral part of knowledge utilisation and can be indicative of attempts to steer the directions of learning. EQAF had no specific designation for good practices, but the selection of input papers, two-thirds of which were classified as presenting a practice, involves epistemic judgement, by virtue of the hegemonic status of the EQAF organising committee. The organisers of the EQUIP project issued a call for good practice examples among project participants, specifically to collect ESG compliant practices. At the EQUIP workshop, break-out session participants were asked to give examples of good practice “beyond the ESG”. Although these open calls were unsuccessful (interviews with former EQUIP project organisers, 2021), they point to the

underlying aim of broadening the stakeholders' organisational knowledge base on using the ESG as a tool of change for national reforms.

Knowledge production at the PLA was largely governed by the production of good practices, through a highly institutionalised process, underlining the role of the facilitator in the ex-ante and ex-post epistemic validation of good practice. The Commission's 'mutual learning' builds on the power of socialisation between peers through participatory practices observed across ET 2020 groups (Papanastasiou 2021, 335), which require each member of the group to contribute equally with a case study, featuring a government policy and corresponding institutional practice. A number of practices, both "good" and "bad", were included already in the preparatory materials. After the event, these initially submitted practices were reinscribed within key policy messages in the PLA report. In 2018, the Commission published a large-scale mix-methods report on quality assurance systems in the EU, which featured 17 selected examples of good practice, many among those presented at the PLA and EQAF. These practices were validated by external experts through a series of interviews with various stakeholders as "well-known", "notable" or "interesting" cases (European Commission, 2018, p. 18).

Beyond good practice production, a specific pattern of knowledge utilisation and reflective action has emerged from the study, which can be characterised as a pragmatic form of reflexivity or self-reflective practice. Approaches to policy learning which study outcomes of learning, such as policy transfer (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000) and lesson-drawing (R. Rose, 1991), hypothesise a process whereby knowledge (policies, programmes, ideas) is externally articulated in one (foreign) context of origin and is then transposed to another. To a certain extent, good practice production follows the same logic, by which "transferable" elements of situated experiences are reproduced through

epistemic practice aiming at extracting “generalizable” policy knowledge (Papanastasiou, 2021). In contrast, much of the learning experience of HEI professionals was managed via a series of techniques which prompt them to draw on local knowledge generated within their own organisation and cultural context through *self-reflection*, *self-analysis* and *self-assessment*.

Self-reflection entails meaning-making associated with the reflexive and contextual use of the ESG. Instead of internalising decontextualised schematas, institutions are encouraged to articulate their own definitions and strategies for quality culture, student-centred learning and learning and teaching; independently from external QA requirements. This was enacted through learning heuristics designed to prompt learners to reflect on their own roles and perceptions within an organisation or system, for instance, to situate themselves on a conceptual map of quality approaches. EQUIP organisers reported participants’ surprise at questions “they do not think about very often” (interview with former expert at EUA, 2017), although they also received criticism for “over-analysing” the ESG.

*Capacity for self-analysis* involves the development of organisational capabilities, as well as individual competences to produce and use data to support institutional innovation and self-evaluation. To this end, case studies and action research dominated methods of knowledge production at EQAF. *Self-assessment* mobilises practices of comparison, peer review and peer learning, and transnational collaborative tools, to situate the institution on the European and global ‘market’ of higher education provision. In this regard, the events promoted the use of composite quality indicators, self-assessment frameworks, reflective pedagogies, and peer-driven approaches to evaluation (Appendix I). These reflective tools incentivise the development of enduring

institutionalised routines and practices which support “institutional capacity to take charge of quality” (EQUIP workshop, 2017).

## **5. Discussion: Epistemic capacity-building or enhancing reflexivity?**

While much remains to be explored concerning the mechanisms and policy outcomes of facilitated encounters between policy-makers and non-state actors, the case of the ESG has illustrated some of the ways in which transnational peer learning practices may produce or inhibit social, material and ideational conditions for policy learning.

First, it has highlighted the role of the institutional setting in which the peer learning activities are organised. Control over the means and content of learning, as hypothesised by (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013), entails, in the case of peer learning, a range of institutionalised practices which imprint on the management of the learning setting. This includes access to the venues or the organisational capacity of the host organisation, to generate, analyse and validate good practices. Furthermore, for higher education stakeholders, multi-level peer learning is not exclusively geared towards deliberative learning, but functions as a platform for the social recognition of transnational actors in the context of broader processes of policy-making and forging issue-specific networks and alliances. For the E4 group, the events provided opportunities to reaffirm the need for an “ongoing dialogue” on the ESG with stakeholders at the European level, and cement their role as standard-setters.

Contrary to theory-driven assumptions, the facilitation of direct interaction between different governance levels was found to be limited. At the PLA, university leaders and government experts form a single group, however, the former are constrained by their assigned role to provide input for policy-makers’ learning, confining their control over the means of learning to pre-defined interpretations of the ESG. The EQUIP project’s focus groups and workshops were set up to encourage within-group rather than

between-group dialogue. Stakeholder-organised venues also struggled to attract a critical number of policy-makers. At the same time, the findings suggest that E4 group organisations assume a role to mediate and translate between the peer groups, and open up discussions beyond questions of implementation.

In terms of the distribution of resources for reflexive and epistemic learning, it is possible to identify “blind spots” in each of the transnational settings, which correlate with group composition and the epistemic positions of hosts. The PLA problematised the “bureaucratic and accountability” overload of universities, but metrics-based approaches to QA were less critically assimilated in the production of good practices, in comparison with the other two venues. Inversely, EQAF demonstrated high levels of policy reflexivity: for instance, through featuring action research and alternative approaches to the ESG. However, its policy output is temporally and structurally limited; thus, the blind spot for EQAF, as an epistemic community with moderate influence (Dunlop, 2009) is governance learning. EQUIP can be characterised as a venue for experimental learning, feeding into the policy advocacy activities of the E4 organisations, where the development of self-reflective capacities prevailed over multi-level deliberation.

The analysis has also revealed ambiguities surrounding the production of good practices. Norway’s 2016 white paper on quality culture, which was presented at all three events, is a fitting illustration for variations between epistemic logics. The PLA was hosted by Norway’s Ministry of Education, and participants travelled to Oslo to acquire an unmediated experience of the case directly from peers and academics. EQAF featured a paper advancing an anthropological approach to quality culture which induces change at system level through “localised knowledge and practice”. The EQUIP project platformed a speaker affiliated with the Norwegian QA agency, who emphasised the role of stakeholder involvement and consultation in the context of the white paper. As this

example illustrates, whereas much of the policy learning literature is concerned with ideas and discourse wielded by interest-driven agents, practice appears as an ordering component in the design of peer learning, highlighting the relational character of knowledge production.

A key finding of the study concerns the social and political certification of higher education institutions as policy actors. In this regard, classical techniques of capacity-building and agency-building role frames were jointly mobilised, resulting in a non-local form of reflective practice, appealing to the utilisation of internal sources of knowledge. Localised knowledge has been theorised a prerequisite for quality culture in higher education (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008), and the convergence across such practices can be indicative of a discursive shift within the Europeanisation of quality assurance towards governing through quality or “quality governance” (Veiga & Sarrico, 2014), ultimately introducing “dynamic accountability” in the system (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2010).

Reflective practice cannot be reduced to capacity-building alone, nor can it be functionally equivalent to organisational learning occurring within national administrations (Schout, 2009), due to the power imbalances between state and HEIs. Peer learning seeks to enhance universities’ capacities to learn as organisations, but at the same time, through the individualising-totalising narratives of quality assurance, it acts upon a systematic embedding of individual responsibility, ownership, mindset and ultimately, localised identity and values. Normatively, this would support an emancipatory agenda for universities as policy actors. However, it is important to recognise that reflective practice may also occur without deliberation, by decoupling questions of institutional responsibility from discussions on autonomy and accountability, keeping HEIs’ learning in the shadow of hierarchy.

Overall, based on the case studies, reflexivity appears to function best in small, pre-selected groups of peers with high levels of socialisation and structured interactions, which in turn limits the inclusion of a wide range of actors and can potentially undermine the power of deliberative rationality between groups of social non-equals. Further research into transnational arenas and practices of peer learning, within and beyond OMC type settings, can provide additional insights on how the growing institutionalisation of peer learning may impact the prerequisite fluidity of experimentalist practices, as well as the empowering effects of learning for universities.

### III. Paper 2: Reflexivity or routine? Quality practices and narratives in radically different higher education institutions

In the European Higher Education Area, quality assurance and enhancement are increasingly conceptualised by scholars and practitioners in terms of institutionalised reflexivity. To date, little scholarly attention has been devoted to how higher education institutions negotiate internal and external demands to develop such reflexivity in their organisational practices. This comparative study addresses this gap, based on fieldwork conducted at two extremely different higher education institutions in Sweden and Hungary, during periods of transition towards new internal and external systems of quality assurance. Building on a conceptual distinction between “crisis reflexivity” and “habitual reflexivity”, the analysis focuses on the emergence and codification of reflective practices, including narratives of self-representation. In both cases, “crisis reflexivity” led to an increased codification of responsibilities and informal practices. In the Swedish case, organisational narratives were engaged pre-emptively to fend off external (state) influence; while habitual reflexivity was guided by the hybridisation of academic and managerial habitus. The Hungarian institution’s response to accreditation pressures resulted in fragmented reflexivity, narrativising crisis reflection as habitual reflexivity, but remaining fragmented internally. Both cases demonstrate the resilience of academic habitus in the institutionalisation of reflexivity.

#### 1. Introduction

The past two decades have seen a surge of internal quality management<sup>18</sup> (IQM) systems in higher education institutions (HEIs). Beyond the influence of the global quality movement (Stensaker, 2007), national regulations and international guidelines for internal quality assurance have mushroomed. In the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) sets out a common framework for both external and internal quality assurance. In 2015, a new

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<sup>18</sup> In this paper, quality management is used as a collective denominator for quality assurance and quality enhancement.



edition of the ESG was endorsed by 47 ministers of the Bologna Process, strengthening the emphasis on institutional responsibility for quality assurance. Recent evidence indicates that an increasing number of countries are supporting an enhancement-oriented development of IQM systems, often in conjunction with external evaluations which assess the functioning of the system at the institutional level (European Commission, 2018).

Reflexivity has been conceptualised as a key component of IQM system development by practitioners and researchers alike. An ongoing reflexive process is implicit in the ESG themselves, requiring that “as goals and purposes change, so must the QA processes change to keep up with them and remain fit-for-purpose” (Gover & Loukkola, 2018, p. 29). Student-centred learning, a key element of the European QA framework, builds on constructivist theories of learning, which require a reflexive approach to the learning process from both students and teachers (cf. ESU, 2010).

Furthermore, the ESG’s underlying paradigm of quality culture promotes a learning-organisation approach in which quality assurance becomes “indistinguishable from everyday work practice” (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008, p. 237); and quality culture serves as a heuristic to reflect on “our current strategies, practices and principles” (Vettori, 2012). As a managerial tool of self-regulation, often translated into PDCA or EFQM protocols of cyclical action<sup>19</sup>. IQM thus strives to achieve institutionalised reflexivity, defined here as the *systematic exercise, codification and monitoring of reflective action at all levels of the organisation*. This involves a range of tools and policies of performance evaluation and competence development, as well as the inculcation of self-reflection in students, teachers, researchers, administrators and university leaders.

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<sup>19</sup> PDCA: Plan-Do-Check-Act. EFQM is a TQM (total quality management) model for organisations which provides criteria for the self-assessment of excellence (Rosa & Amaral, 2007).

Reflexivity demands additional efforts from HEIs to continuously adjust their goals and procedures to the ever-evolving expectations of stakeholders and society. However, this may prove challenging in the shadow of formal external accreditation and evaluation procedures, as meeting external expectations often takes priority in detriment to the development of reflexive capacities. Internally, the bureaucratic routinisation of self-evaluation poses further obstacles to the exercise of reflexivity as a critical and identity-shaping practice (Cardoso et al., 2019; Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2002). While a multitude of studies have explored the transformative potential of IQA and EQA respectively, little scholarly attention has been devoted so far to how external evaluation cycles imprint on the institutionalisation of reflexivity in everyday organisational practice.

To address this gap, this paper proposes a nuanced unpacking of reflexivity in practice at two HEIs. Reflexivity takes a double connotation: reflexivity oriented inwards, as part of a professional field of practice (QA) interacting with academic habitus, and reflexivity oriented outwards, as strategic-administrative practice conversing with organisational identity. The paper draws on conceptualisations of reflective practice in contemporary social and organisational theory, and incorporates a narrative approach to reconfigure organisational identity-building as a form of reflective practice in the context of external quality audits. The main contributions of the paper come from shifting the focus from outcomes and attitudes to reflection-as-practice and highlighting the relational, dynamic and embodied nature of quality work, which allows for reframing questions of effectiveness in terms of identity.

Although higher education systems and traditions differ in Sweden and Hungary, they both share a centrally regulated approach to QA, where the national agency conducts cyclical institutional reviews – audit in Sweden and accreditation in Hungary. In the mid-

2010s and roughly on similar time scales, both countries reformed their QA systems amid external and internal pressures linked to compliance with the ESG. At the time of the field research, the new national systems were still in their infancy and both institutions found themselves compelled to negotiate between changing external requirements and their own internal reforms. Ethnographic field research has allowed for tracing the emergence and codification of reflective practice at this unique historical moment at two extremely different sites: Uppsala University, the oldest and largest public research university in Sweden; and Apor Vilmos Catholic College, a small, regional and young higher education institution in Hungary, dedicated to the training of teachers and clerics.

The paper proceeds in six sub-sections. It first introduces a praxiographic approach to quality management and reviews literature on the interplay between reflexivity, habitus and practice. The second part provides a broader historical-political background on trends in quality assurance in Sweden and Hungary. The third section reports the methodology, including researcher positionality. The fourth and fifth sections present the case studies of the two institutions. The paper concludes with a discussion on emerging patterns of institutionalised reflexivity.

## **2. Reflexivity and routine: the practical nexus of quality work**

### ***2.1. Conceptualising reflective practice in quality management***

Reflexive quality systems imply an increased emphasis on institutional practices, which beyond formal structures, institutional bodies, rules, administrative entities and procedures also encompass informal, mundane and symbolic acts; such as bureaucratic routines, heuristics and institutional representations. The practice turn in social theory (Schatzki et al., 2001), and its influence on organisation and education research (Grootenboer et al., 2017; Higgs et al., 2012; Nicolini, 2016; Saunders et al., 2011) has

opened up new perspectives to study the everyday reality of quality assurance as temporally and spatially dispersed “doings” and “sayings” (Schatzki, 2012). Therefore, practice as a unit of analysis is defined in this paper as “organised constellations of material activities performed by multiple people” (Nicolini, 2017, 20, paraphrasing Schatzki, 2012).

Scholarship assessing the effectiveness of QA posits institutional reflexivity as a key attribute of quality culture, adaptability, organisational learning and trust (Cardoso et al., 2019; Teixeira, 2010; Yorke, 2000). In contrast, critical accounts of the audit culture in higher education (Burrows, 2012; Power, 1999; Shore & Wright, 2015; Strathern, 2000a, 2000b) warn of the murky effects of routinisation and transparency, which corrode trust and make quality assurance “decoupled as an expensive ritual” (Power, 1999, p. 102). Such critique tends to be directed towards quantification (such as bibliometric measures or rankings) and engages with resistance to “managerial colonisation” in academia, often glossing over other (native, narrative and hybrid) forms of routinized self-evaluation performed by academics and institutions. And yet, the externalisation of “internal” academic practices, such as peer review, as a form of public control (Neave, 2009) is gaining ground, which can produce equally noxious effects (Harvey, 2009).

Literature on quality assurance has shown that quality-related work<sup>20</sup> does not occur in isolation in institutions, but is integrated into organisational meaning structures (Vettori, 2018), management systems (Manatos et al., 2017), disciplinary contexts (Vukasovic, 2014); and ultimately, learning and teaching micro-cultures (Mårtensson et al., 2014) and institutional life (Elken & Stensaker, 2018). Analogously, reflective practice goes beyond producing self-referential accounts at punctuated intervals: it is

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<sup>20</sup> Elken and Stensaker (2018) propose the term “quality work” to denote dynamically interrelated, local practices which are concerned with the development, maintenance and enhancement of quality, which reshape institutions.

embedded in daily academic practice and even identity, giving rise to hybrid constructs such as the manager-academic (Reed & Deem, 2002). Analysing reflexivity thus cuts across the sharp polarisation of the managerial and academic, and invites to recast the question of ordering along the practical nexus of routine and reflection. Furthermore, a pragmatic approach illuminates liminal practices which often go unnoticed in institutionalist analyses of quality work (Elken & Stensaker, 2018).

## ***2.2. Reflexivity, habitus and narrative identity***

A turn to Bourdieu's notion of habitus, "a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception and action" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 86) offers further theoretical grounding to explore how reflexivity interacts with everyday (quality) practice. Drawing on a permeable operationalisation of the habitus as a conceptual tool (Reay, 2004), this study builds on a two-layered understanding of reflexivity: one that is formed within the habitus and one which confronts or displaces it.

Habitus is an influential concept in the study of academia as a global field (Marginson, 2008). Bourdieu's monograph on mid-20<sup>th</sup> century French intellectual elite (Bourdieu, 1996) elaborates the academic habitus as a set of dispositions acquired through education and socialisation in diverse institutional and disciplinary milieus, requiring the mastery of two set of competences: academic (social) and scientific. Academic capital helps agents navigate the complexity of competing principles of evaluation as they advance their academic career (Bourdieu, 1996). Challenging ingrained assumptions of considering research as inherently reflexive, he describes scientific activity as "a routine practice where the most scientifically decisive operations can be accomplished without reflection or critical control" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 31). Building on this legacy, higher education researchers have examined the transformation of the academic habitus, individual and collective, induced by various institutional policies (Deem & Lucas, 2007),

pedagogical development programmes (Jawitz, 2009) and external evaluation pressures (Rowlands & Gale, 2016).

Contemporary sociological debates consider habitus and reflexivity as two competing and fundamentally oppositional approaches to identity. Beyond its established meaning as self-objectivation in Bourdieu's epistemic tradition (Bourdieu, 2003), reflexivity has been conceptualised more broadly as an attribute of agency in the late modernity, a type of conscious and rational action directed at the self, operating at various levels of social life. Scholars of reflexive modernization contend that reflexive consciousness takes an institutionalised form in organisations, including the university (Giddens, 1997). To overcome limitations to capturing contemporary empirical realities, various authors have attempted to reconcile the two systems of thought through conceptual "hybridization" (Adams, 2006). For instance, Sweetman develops the concept of a flexible or "reflexive habitus", which can be acquired through socialisation in fields which are undergoing perpetual transformation, including higher education (Sweetman, 2003).

Organisational theories offer further directions to tease out the implications of different forms of reflexivity for quality assurance. In his seminal work on the reflective practitioner, Schön (1983) articulates "reflection-in-action", or reflection and subsequent adjustment on one's own patterns of actions during professional activity, in relation to a tacit "knowing-in-practice", implicitly governing the actions of practitioners who nevertheless "cannot state the rules and procedures" (Schön, 1983, p. 50) of their own operations. Bourdieu's concept of habitus intersects with Schön's reflective practitioner insofar as neither of them require the individual to consciously formulate their own theory of action before or during acting: it is embodied or tacit knowledge which "does not hinge on a prior intellectual operation" (Schön, 1983, pp. 51–52). This makes a Bourdieusian

reading of reflective professional practice as an “unreflexive bodily disposition to act” (Lechner & Frost, 2018, p. 68) possible, suggesting that reflection is an intrinsic and immutable part of the “unconscious competence” (Adams, 2006, p. 54) mastered by professionals, including academics.

Therefore, the question of reflexivity in the quality practice of higher education professionals arises simultaneously within and in opposition of the concept of the habitus. Quality assurance and enhancement require both *reflection-on-action* and *reflection-in-action* (Schön, 1983, p. 55), the former occurring at regular intervals through formal reporting procedures and self-assessments, whereas the latter are incorporated into everyday academic practice itself, for instance in course design or teaching methods. The introduction of (new) quality assurance rules, systems and processes in a specific institutional context may codify or ‘normalise’ existing practices of reflection or aim to transform the academic habitus itself by making it more reflexive and adaptable. This is where the puzzle of routinized reflexivity emerges: what happens when reflexivity becomes habitual over time, does it lead to a contradiction in terms? Can the momentum of continuous reflective action be sustained if reflection becomes codified and routinized practice or, alternatively, does it become a tool of bureaucratic control?<sup>21</sup>

To tackle this question, it is useful to consider the temporal dimension of reflexivity. In this regard, Mouzelis (2008) offers a helpful differentiation between two “modes” of reflexivity: crisis and routine. According to Bourdieu, a “crisis” (usually an event) can prompt the temporary suspension of practical logic in favour of rational action (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 131). In contrast, “everyday” reflexivity manifests in social interaction, intra-habitus tensions or reflexive habitus (Mouzelis, 2008). Applying

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<sup>21</sup> A similar line of questioning has been explored by environmental sociology in discussions concerning the institutionalisation of “reflexive governance” (M. Boström et al., 2017).

this distinction to the case at hand, two understandings of reflexivity emerge, corresponding to different temporalities. It is possible to apprehend, on the one hand, the period of looming external evaluation as a phase of “crisis reflexivity” at the institutional level. On the other hand, “habitual reflexivity” manifests in the everyday practice of teachers, researchers, administrators and university management to a varying degree, depending on their prior socialization and the positions they occupy in the organisation. The latter may set boundaries to the former: for instance, Slantcheva attributes the “resistance or outright hostility of groups in the university community towards evaluation and self-study” to the “persistent habit” of withholding information from the government in the Bulgarian socialist university (Slantcheva, 2004).

One of the ways in which the boundaries and forms of institutionalised reflexivity can be mapped out between the institutional response to the crisis and everyday reflective practices, is by analysing processes of codification. Codification, according to Bourdieu, alters the relation between actors and their practices: by making them visible and part of a set of explicit rules, they become objectified and formalised, and as such, it makes “possible a reflexive relation to practices [...] previously regulated by the practical sense of the habitus” (Cronin, 1996, p. 68). At the same time, codification eliminates ambiguity and uncertainty, and simultaneously confers a normative status to particular practices, leaving little room for improvisation and grey areas (Bourdieu, 1986).

Furthermore, in organisations, self-representation and corresponding narrative constructions of identity can be regarded as specific forms of reflective practice, which are mobilised in quality work. Czarniawska’s narrative approach to organisational identity (Czarniawska, 1997, 2004a) makes it possible to consider texts produced by members of the university (such as self-evaluation reports, mission statements, policies, presentations or interviews) as sites of symbolic competition, whereby agents attempt to



impose and modify their representations of the objective reality and their positions within that field (Bourdieu, 1996). Narratives also fulfil important functions towards the external world. Research indicates that storytelling as an organisational practice can reinforce or undermine the stability of university identity (Czarniawska & Wolff, 1998; Fumasoli et al., 2015). Such narratives produced for external audiences often have to do with self-preservation and risk reduction, which in turn shapes the “narrative presentation” (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 19) of institutional identity in self-study reports, while leaving certain aspects deep in the organisational “narrative unconscious” (Carlsen, 2016).

### **3. Situating extreme cases in changing policy contexts: Sweden and Hungary**

The study was guided by an extreme case selection strategy, in order to maximise variance of potential reflective practices within a limited number of cases (Seawright & Gerring, 2008), and to be able to explore possible interactions between various forms of habitus and the institutionalisation of reflexivity. This strategy also allows for assessing broader implications for policy-making: in the EHEA, the ESG should be applicable to all forms of higher education provision (ESG, 2015, p. 8), regardless of the regulatory context and institutional specificities. Despite stark differences in institutional profiles, the historical cases themselves remain comparable, due to the “double” transition at system and institutional levels occurring on similar timescales, connected to the compliance of the respective national QA agencies with the ESG and their membership in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

Besides the comparable size of the sectors<sup>22</sup>, the governance of higher education in both Sweden and Hungary is characterised by centralised state control with marketization tendencies<sup>23</sup>. In both countries, the research-teaching nexus continues to play an important role in institutional identity-building, a historical cleavage expected to be structuring academic habitus within specific institutions. Since the turn of the millennium, traditionally developed as a Nordic variant of the Humboldtian model, Sweden has been shifting towards a post-Humboldtian model, in which research and teaching are increasingly integrated (Schimank & Winnes, 2000). Meanwhile, Hungary has interrupted its trajectory towards the restoration of the Humboldtian model (Kovács et al., 2017), and since the 2010s, the two functions have again become separated. In addition, an expansion of academic programme offers by church-affiliated higher education institutions has led to further differentiation of functions (such as social-community outreach) in the Hungarian higher education system (Pusztai & Farkas, 2016).

### ***3.1. Hungary***

Quality assurance in Hungary was introduced in the 1990s with the post-socialist reform of higher education. The system is based on ex-ante and ex-post accreditation and programme and institutional level. In 2011, Hungary introduced a new law on higher education (Law no. CCIV on national higher education), which curtailed the independence of the Hungarian Accreditation Committee (HAC). In 2013, ENQA conducted a full membership review, concluding that the new legal context no longer

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<sup>22</sup> Hungary: 65 institutions (2022, Education Authority) and 287,000 registered students (2021, Hungarian Central Statistical Office); Sweden: 48 institutions (2022, UKÄ) and 384,500 registered students (2021, UKÄ).

<sup>23</sup> In 2019, Hungary has introduced a new governance model for higher education, which led to a large-scale privatization of public HEIs (as of 2021, only 5 universities operate as public entities). However, the state has retained its control through the creation of public foundations and through the chancellor system introduced in 2014.

sufficiently ensured the financial and operational independence of the HAC (ENQA, 2013). Furthermore, the review identified a “lack of clarity” regarding the relationship between HAC and the Educational Authority concerning competences of accreditation (ENQA, 2013, p. 31). Based on these concerns, ENQA decided to declassify the status of the HAC to ‘full member under review’. In 2015, the repeat procedure found the Agency substantially compliant with the ESG and re-admitted it as a full member. This was accompanied by legislative changes, such explicit references to the ESG 2015 as a basis for the procedures of the HAC. HAC has also been advised by international experts to strengthen its role “in helping to enhance the internal quality assurance of higher education institutions in a holistic way that goes beyond curricular and resource aspects” (IAB opinion, 2016, cited in Csépe & Rozsnyai, 2018), but has yet to develop a differentiated methodology for quality audit focusing on enhancement (Csépe & Rozsnyai, 2018). Thus, in the third accreditation cycle, which corresponds to the observed period, administrative control remained the principal focus.

### ***3.2. Sweden***

In Sweden, quality assurance is historically linked to Scandinavian agency culture and cognitive capitalism (Hansen, 2014), where forces of marketization and strong state control collide. A government reform in 1993 introduced deregulation and competition in Swedish higher education (Engwall, 2007), and laid the foundations of a systemic approach to quality assurance, in which HEIs assumed responsibility for the design of their own system (Engwall, 1997). The country has a long tradition of autonomous agencies with vertical political allegiances (Hansen, 2014, p. 211) thus, in 2010, a new government was able to push a radical reform, which received mixed reactions from the sector.

In 2012, the Swedish Higher Education Authority<sup>24</sup> (UKÄ), a founding member of ENQA, was demoted to affiliate membership in the organisation, when a review showed that it did not meet the ESG standard on operational independence (ENQA, 2012). In addition, the QA system as a whole, which relied mainly on a ‘one-size-fits-all’ evaluation of the final assignments (examinations, theses) of graduating students (Hansen, 2014, p. 207), was declared incompatible with the fundamental principles of the ESG (ENQA, 2012). Under growing pressures from the higher education community, the government issued an assignment for UKÄ to propose a new system, which was introduced in 2016, combining an enhancement-oriented review of HEIs internal QA system with a risk-based approach (B.-O. Boström & Kettis, 2017). In 2020, UKÄ launched a new review process for the evaluation of the quality of research. Overall, peer review and other fundamentally academic accountability mechanisms have been reinforced at the national level (Hansen et al., 2019), as HEIs reclaimed their autonomy to develop their internal QA systems.

#### **4. Methods and positionality**

I conducted in-depth fieldwork with praxiographic sensibility at both sites, albeit diverging in duration and positionality (for a detailed discussion, see [Chapter V](#)). Ethnographic fieldwork in organisations involves a combination of research tools to capture organisational life in its everyday complexity, relying on direct observation as a central method of inquiry (Ybema et al., 2009). In both cases, the primary focus was members of the administration and academic community engaged in quality assurance and enhancement activities.

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<sup>24</sup> Before 2013, its equivalent predecessor was the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (HSV).

Praxiographic sensibility implies adopting a methodological orientation (Nicolini, 2017) and using theory-derived sensitising concepts (Sedlačko, 2017) to guide fieldwork towards practice as the basic unit of analysis. This encompasses an emphasis on observing what people do and their narrative reconstruction of institutional practice; an attention to materials and devices that they interact with; and following a Bourdieusian agenda, the relational, contextual and emergent properties of practices. Based on the collected data, the analytical strategy consisted of identifying reflective practice along a distinction between *academic*, *managerial* and *administrative-collegial* habitus and establishing their temporal and spatial patterns in each case (see [Appendix II](#)). Academic habitus in the Bourdieusian tradition situates reflective practitioners on a map of disciplinary traditions and research-teaching career trajectories. Managerial habitus governs self-evaluative practices specific to quality management as a field of professional competence. Administrative-collegial habitus refers to a 21<sup>st</sup> century reconceptualization academic-administrators (or manager-academics), involved in collegial decision-making or strategic management to varying degrees.

In the Hungarian case, I undertook participant observation over a span of 12 months (October 2017 to October 2018). I assumed an auxiliary role in the institution's accreditation process, as a contracted external audit advisor to the Rector and the Project Committee on Quality Assurance, which was transparently and explicitly negotiated before entry in the field (cf. [Chapter V](#)). All participants produced informed written consent. Data includes observation notes of meetings of the Quality Assurance Committee and the Quality Project Committee, in-depth interviews with 7 members of university leadership and committee members; internal documents and drafts; institutional policies; accreditation reports and reports of three focus group interviews with students and faculty (a total of 28 participants), which I conducted as part of the

internal institutional review process. The entirety of the work was carried out in Hungarian.

At Uppsala, data was collected over a one-month period of fieldwork at the institution in April and May 2018, at the midpoint between the launch of the new review system (2016) and the external evaluation (2020). It comprises individual, pair and focus group interviews with a total of 28 members of the university (leadership, administration, faculty and students), key strategic documents (see [Appendix II](#)), internal documents (e.g. meeting agendas and minutes, draft policy documents, presentations), digital knowledge repositories, the institution's website, and documented field observations, including participation in two meetings. I was hosted by the Division of Quality Enhancement with full access to their workspace in the University Administration building, and engaged in daily interaction with staff in English. Field impressions on everyday interactions and observed practices were also documented.

## **5. Apor Vilmos Catholic College**

Established in 1977, Apor Vilmos Catholic College (AVCC) is a regional community college located in the town of Vác, 30 km north of Budapest, Hungary. Bishop Apor was a Catholic martyr, beatified in 1997 for his lifelong dedication to the poor and the persecuted. The institution offers degree programmes at BA and MA level in the area of early childhood education and care, teacher education, social pedagogy, social work, pedagogical sciences and religious studies (catechist-pastoral assistant and cantor), to approximately 1000 students. It also provides distance learning, adult education and continuous professional development for teachers. Education and research at AVCC is

organised in six departments, with 50% of the teaching staff holding a PhD<sup>25</sup>. The majority of admissions are first-generation higher education students<sup>26</sup>. AVCC operates under the conservatorship of the Diocese of Vác, and receives 70% of its budget from the Catholic Church. It exercises operational and academic independence and is subjected to the cyclical accreditation process applicable to all public higher education institutions in Hungary. During the observed period, senior leadership reported a laissez-faire approach on behalf of the Bishop of Vác in strategic and academic matters<sup>27</sup>.

Quality assurance is the responsibility of academic staff and the quality manager; no dedicated administrative unit exists. Leadership delegates quality-related tasks to staff members as a compulsory part of their job, which in the past they were often reluctant to accept: both sides articulated this as a form of “punishment” (e.g., for being a newcomer, or having fewer teaching hours). Quality assurance was first introduced in the late 2000s, and encompasses primarily survey-based data collection practices, graduate tracking, administrative reporting and an informal “familial” culture of handling student and employee complaints. Between 2009 and 2011, AVCC participated in an EU-funded project with other HEIs of similar profile, which introduced pioneering methods of graduate tracking and produced extensive research on active student data and graduate employability (see [Appendix II](#)); but these analyses were ultimately discontinued after the end of the project. In 2014, the previous round of institutional accreditation recommended that AVCC strengthen its feedback mechanisms at the institutional level;

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<sup>25</sup> 46 out of 92 (full-time and part-time) faculty members listed on the website (last consulted May 2022).

<sup>26</sup> The share of first-generation graduates was estimated at 70-80% by a 2012 study (Palovics and Tamáska, 2012) of active students. (new data) According to the same study, the parents of one-third of the students did not even complete upper secondary education.

<sup>27</sup> In this respect, the years between 2017 and 2020 can be regarded as an exceptional period for self-determination. With the arrival of a new bishop in 2019, a “new strategic relationship” has been established between the Diocese and the College (Institutional Development Plan, 2021-2024).

“reconceptualise, summarise and recodify” quality assurance related tasks and increase direct interactions between students and the management (HAC, 2014).

### ***5.1. From compartmentalised to fragmented reflexivity: externalisation of the crisis response***

In October 2017, I entered the field as a member of the Quality Project Team, tasked with supporting the quality reform process and the preparation of the self-study for the external accreditation. The group consisted of four members: the freshly appointed QA manager and psychology teacher, a sociology professor and former QA manager, an administrative assistant and myself as an external consultant. A Quality and Evaluation Committee with broader membership, including the Rector, representatives of teaching and non-teaching staff and a student representative was set up in May 2018 on a permanent basis. Besides official meetings which were documented, preparatory work proceeded through informal channels, such as phone calls, emails and bilateral discussions.

These processes can be re-described in terms of reflective practice corresponding to particular types of habitus operating within the institution, leading to the coagulation of compartmentalised (habitual) reflexivity into fragmented (crisis) reflexivity (see [Appendix II](#)). The institution’s quality management is characterised by a near absence of managerial thinking, except for the occasional SWOT analysis of study programmes.

Academic habitus permeated reflection on quality assurance, corresponding to the research profiles of members of the project team, myself included. Survey methodology and data analysis was at the centre of discussions and actions, in particular adapting national-level compulsory data collection (course evaluation and graduate tracking) practices to institutional realities. Focus group interviews with students and staff were organised to collect feedback on the use and perception of course evaluations, and as a result, a new questionnaire was designed. Such reflection also implied critical appraisal



of the usefulness of standardised questionnaires, as a method of course evaluation in case of small class sizes (10-30) with low response rates<sup>28</sup>.

A lot of data that we collect is not relevant. Small college, lack of capacity, dubious surveys. This is what I have been emphasising this whole past year, I would like to move into a direction of more sophisticated, better quality and humane evaluations. It is surely quick, spectacular and easy to execute. But as a sociologist if there is no sampling, it does not tell me much. (Interview with anonymous college professor, 2018, author's translation)

In addition, reflective academic habitus manifested in the interpretation of student demographic data, contributing to identity-building narratives:

On the one hand, we could interpret this fact [that students come from schools with weaker academic performance] that our college has to fill its seats with the “less talented”. On the other hand, we could posit that it plays a balancing role in the system of reproduction of social inequalities. (Pappné Palovics & Tamáska, 2012)

Academic reflexivity remained nevertheless highly compartmentalised during the “crisis” period, due to its odds with administrative objectives to fulfil accreditation standards. This, owing partially to severe constraints in time and resources, resulted in a primary concern for the external narrative presentation of the crisis response as habitual practice, over engaging in a more transformative internal dialogue. It stifled attempts at introducing experimentation, creativity, autonomy, dialogue and transparency; although much desired by the interviewees.

The organisation of the self-study followed a strict logic of administrative hierarchy, guided by the HAC accreditation questionnaire and a pragmatic classification of topics which reproduced tacit operational structures. For instance, the QA team was responsible for formulating answers to questions on quality policy, data collection and

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<sup>28</sup> 17,45% in the second semester of 2016/2017.

analysis and quality of the teaching staff; while student-centred learning was assigned to the vice-rector and was not discussed collectively, during the period of observation, at any of the meetings. This led to the fragmentation of reflective action, which presented an obstacle, as the interviews corroborated, to the institutionalisation of reflexivity; and instead continued to rely on, as the accreditation report also noted later, the personal commitment of individuals. Nevertheless, at the individual level, the self-study also elicited reflection-on-action:

This was a novel view, because whoever participates in [the activity], works on it continuously, logically moving from one step to another, but often we don't even articulate for ourselves where this belongs, what it means, what it connects to or what it asks. (Interview with anonymous college professor, 2018, author's translation)

As a crisis response, the administration resorted to legal expertise, for example by hiring an experienced lawyer to head the Rector's office. The new colleague was asked to conduct a legal audit of institutional policies, such as the rules for study programmes and examination; however, she lamented the lack of consultation with the quality committee. Certain issues which could conceivably pertain to the quality of teaching, were framed in terms of legal struggle with national authorities. Members of the leadership recounted two stories, in which a common plot was a shortcoming identified on the basis of legal ambiguity followed by the restoration compliance while safeguarding institutional specificities. One was about regularizing the employment status of religious studies teachers (priests), who were employed by the diocese. A second story, told by two separate interviewees, plotted a reprimand to the institution for issuing a degree certificate to student with a learning disability, who was exempted from taking an exam (which is a legal prerequisite for issuing diplomas), whereas the student should have already been excluded in the admission process according to the national criteria for admissions to teacher training. The institution and the student both requested the external opinion of the

relevant national authorities on the matter, who ruled that the student should be awarded the degree. These narratives were indicative of the compartmentalisation of reflexivity on academic, strategic and quality issues and served to externalise accountability in the pursuit of self-preservation.

### ***5.2. Codifying “Catholic habitus”: deflection and narrative lacunae***

In 2017, AVCC made conscious efforts to reinvigorate its Catholic mission. It relaunched its previously discontinued religious studies programmes. A slogan contest was organised among students and staff, which besides the winning entry (“Here you get a chance to give a thousand chances to others”) also yielded mottos for each study programme<sup>29</sup>.

Big universities usually emphasise quality or employability in their slogans. We have the possibility to express our true creed, which is that with the help of faith, our students – teachers and social workers – will be able to give a chance for a better life to those under their care. (Interview with former Rector, 2018, author’s translation).

The new quality mission statement codified quality goals for education and research as value-driven. This value orientation was also incorporated as criteria in the self-assessment report of teachers.

Educational and scientific work at the College is based on the principles of the moral legacy of Bishop Vilmos Apor, especially righteousness and social justice; the core values of the Hungarian Catholic Church; sensibility to societal issues; and the responsible education of future generations. The goal of quality assurance policy is to preserve, teach and develop these values. (Quality mission statement, 2018)

In meetings, numerous attempts were made to grasp Catholic identity in the context of quality assurance. Humorous remarks indicated critical self-awareness of its

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<sup>29</sup> Prior to 2017, AVCC’s slogan was “value-based pedagogy”. The new slogan was officially adopted by the institution between 2017 and 2020. In 2020, with another change of leadership, it was replaced with the more succinct and marketable “Knowledge. Faith. Future.”

elusiveness, for instance: “every second word should be Catholic” (on drafting the mission statement) or “we cannot tell student that they will go to Hell if they do not fill in the course evaluations”. In the focus group interviews on course evaluation, participants discussed the relevance of asking whether “the teacher linked the course to Catholic values”, for instance in the case of physical education or mathematics.

At the same time, at the level of individual practice, the introspective glaze deflected off Catholic pedagogy. In other words, despite numerous references both in the self-study and in the accreditation report, to a specific “Catholic habitus” that the institution embodies, crisis reflexivity did not seek to probe concrete pedagogical practices associated with such habitus. In contrast, discipline-specific reflective practices in the field of social pedagogy were described in detail (research-based pedagogy, curricular reform, student-centred learning etc.).

Similarly, the institution’s “familial climate”, building on personal relationships (i.e. mentoring), was cited as a token for the effective resolution of conflicts and productive communication in the reports, yet the focus groups reported that these personal relationships also made it more difficult for both faculty and students to consider the survey on the evaluation of teaching anything else than an outlet for grievances.

After the accreditation visit in Autumn 2018, as I transitioned back from practitioner to observer, I gradually discerned a narrative silence which masked a different, latent crisis and quest for identity (re-)building. A few months prior to the start of QA reform, which coincided with my entry in the field, a new leadership took over after a challenging period which left AVCC with drastically decreased student numbers, eroded internal trust and a tarnished reputation. This prompted a reflective re-reading of what first appeared as disjunctions, interruptions and lacunae. For AVCC, accreditation was not just an “ordinary” moment of crisis reflection, it was a question of survival.

Leadership efforts were directed at rebuilding institutional identity, restoring internal legitimacy, strengthening external partnerships and demonstrating full compliance with the law. Producing a coherent and credible narrative of a quality assurance system thus functioned as ordering and stabilising practice.

## 6. Uppsala University

Uppsala University (UU) is a public international research university in Sweden providing education for more than 50,000 students<sup>30</sup>, and offering postgraduate studies in 193 subjects across three disciplinary domains (Science and Technology, Medicine and Pharmacy, and Humanities and Social Sciences). The university promotes itself as “Sweden’s first university”<sup>31</sup>, playing on the double connotation of being the first university founded in Sweden and the wider Nordic region in 1477 on the one hand, and of pursuing excellence on the other, indicating its aspiration to consistently rank among the top universities in the world. Uppsala has built its institutional identity around a historical core of scientific accomplishments, principally in the natural sciences. Notable alumni include 15 Nobel prize winners, the botanist Carl Linneaus and the astronomer Anders Celsius. The university is also known for its active student unions and for the cultural traditions of its historic student communities or “nations”.

Academic governance is decentralised: faculties and departments enjoy considerable decision-making autonomy, which is also reflected in the QA system. Over the years, the university has seen an expansion of its administrative capacities, to cater for an growing research body. In 2018, around 600 staff members (roughly 10% of total employees) worked for the central university administration located in the newly built

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<sup>30</sup> Total number of registered students in 2021. The number of full-time students in 2021 was 29,126. (Uppsala University, 2021)

<sup>31</sup> [www.uu.se](http://www.uu.se)

(2017) Segerstedthuset, a modern, multifunctional hub, which provides an open space for collaboration across faculty administrators; but also perceived by certain career academics, including participants in this study, as an external projection of growing administrative power. One of the key determinants of organisational identity and habitus is the university's strong research profile: roughly 70% and 30% percent of the budget are allocated separately to research and teaching, respectively. A high degree of dependence on external research funding (above 50%) exerts pressure on staff with short-term research contracts and undercuts the strategic capacities of the central administration.

Corresponding to these characteristics, the university's internal construction of quality practice has taken a tripartite form: consisting of activities and structures informed by *collegial*, *managerial* and *academic* habitus. Managerialism in quality practice was introduced in the 1990s, following a philosophy of "open and systematic self-criticism" (Engwall, 1997, p. 230). This gained further ground with the establishment of an administrative support unit for quality development, which was reassembled into a larger division for Quality Assurance and Enhancement (Quality Division) in the 2010s. However, quality managers do not regard themselves merely administrators: many of them earned their doctorates at Uppsala University and consider quality assurance a domain of research just like any other. Collegial practices are interwoven in both formal and informal processes. The first collegial body for quality assurance was set up in 2001. In the observed period, this Quality Advisory Board (QAB) was directly reporting to the Vice-Chancellor and functioned as a "second opinion board" or a "extra discussion forum" (interviews with members of the QAB), mainstreaming a "quality angle" in institutional policies and functioning as the QD's collegial reference group. In recent years, quality work has become inextricably linked with strategic planning at the highest

level of university governance, which was reflected in the 2018 review of goals and strategies.

The evaluation of research and teaching have taken historically separate paths. The university had been pioneering evaluation and university-level pedagogical competence development well before to the launch of quality assurance at the national level (Engwall, 1997). Uppsala played a significant role in the universities' policy advocacy for the new national system, and pre-emptively developed its own internal model in 2017. It was also the first Swedish university to initiate a comprehensive research quality evaluation in 2007, which then was emulated by other institutions and was one of the inspirations for the national research evaluation framework. In both fields, faculties and departments have delegated responsibilities to varying degrees. For cyclical (6-year) education evaluations, they design their own models of self-review based on university-wide guidelines, whereas research evaluation is based on a more centralised approach. Academic units also conduct self-evaluations, involve students and staff, and suggest external peers for review panels.

### ***6.1. Crisis reflexivity: narrativization, anticipation, codification***

In 2018, crisis reflexivity unfolded within a meta-awareness of the impending institutional review by the agency planned for 2020. This was accompanied by anticipatory action and the narrativization of the policy change, resulting in the production of three intertwining plots which introduced reflexive awareness of the (potential) “misfits” which occur as they enter the field of quality evaluation. All three plots involve a passage from a state of equilibrium to a second, yet different stable state (Czarniawska, 2004a, p. 19). The first plot concerns reclaiming control in the evaluation process, and by extension, preserving academic self-determination: “it's better that we do it ourselves, because then we can actually make it useful rather than being the victims of somebody

else's way to think about it" (interview with head of the Quality and Evaluation Unit, 2018) and the threat of its reverse: "if we don't do it ourselves, UKÄ will force us to do it anyway" (interview with former chair of QAB). The second plot is related to the pilot institutional review round that the agency conducted in 2017, which resulted in an unsuccessful outcome for four out of five HEIs, configuring the preparatory reflection as risk management. The third plot is woven around the questioning of the agency's status as a result of the ENQA membership review: four interviewees uniformly dramatized the events as Sweden or the agency getting "thrown out" or "kicked out" of ENQA (or the "European community of universities"), emphasising reputational damage in the symbolic struggle between the university and the state.

The anticipation of external evaluation mobilised four broad clusters of reflective practice to varying degrees, each of which linked to a specific type of habitual reflexivity: historical, academic, managerial and collegial ([Appendix II](#)). First, the university continues to rely on tools of *comparison*, which has a long tradition in Swedish education governance as a productive field of practice (Grek et al., 2020). An example is the development and adaptation of UU's own bibliometric analyses following an expert-based approach to bibliometric data.<sup>32</sup> Student participation (referred to as "student influence") is another university-wide practice of particular historical significance: until 2010, membership in national student unions was compulsory in Sweden (Kettis, 2019). Students are represented in all processes, institutionalised or ad hoc, and they also submit a separate report in the external evaluation exercise.

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<sup>32</sup> UU uses three different systems (Norwegian, Web of Science, CWTS/Leiden) to analyse bibliometric data. An expert-based approach measures publication volume and level as opposed to the number of citations. This makes it possible to account for disciplinary traditions, as an attempt to increase comparability. (<https://mp.uu.se/en/web/info/vart-uu/bibliometri> - last accessed 30 April 2022)



The second, dominant source of reflective practice is linked to the academic habitus, specifically research. Quality managers unanimously described their day-to-day practice as a primarily scholarly activity, focusing on knowledge production and research-based support, and contrasting it with a “controlling” or “policing” function, which they displaced onto the government or the agency. Regular research seminars and conferences on quality assurance are organised for the whole university community.

Research as an activity is considered a golden standard, in which a concern for quality is routinely embedded within the core academic activity. Respondents described research as a historically and academically distinct practice in which self-reflection is second nature, and as such does not require conscious efforts to articulate its principles, in contrast with the evaluation of teaching and learning, which invites a translation or emulation of categories and routines identified in research.

We see this way of working with quality as our core academic activity, and that is actually the case when it comes to research, there quality assurance is completely integrated and has been for a long, long time. I mean, you submit your paper to peers that scrutinize it, that's quality assurance to make sure that they raise concerns and questions. (Interview with Head of Division for Quality and Evaluation, 2018)

In this regard, research evaluations (Quality and Renewal or KoF) have influenced the design of educational evaluations, leading to the codification peer review as a university-wide reflective practice.

External review is a well-established form of academic quality assurance, which in this context ensures that the University's programmes are subject to independent review and can be compared with equivalent programmes at other higher education institutions. Internal review by a colleague from another faculty/discipline helps to call into question matters that may be taken for granted in the subject area and enhances the exchange of knowledge and experiences across the University. (Uppsala University's Model for Review of Study Programmes)

Managerial, specifically risk-based practices and approaches prevailed in discussions of the agency's pilot institutional reviews, which produced unexpected results in the Swedish university community. For instance, crisis reflexivity in the QE unit was enacted through the discussion of a detailed questionnaire (gap analysis), which was compiled based on the analysis of reports and consultations with the institutions in question. It asked, among others, whether the internal reflection should be oriented to passing the agency's test or striving for excellence; whether the university has too many overlapping channels for quality dialogue; or whether they had a working understanding of research-based teaching. A prime concern was to depict the existence of a quality system in a narrative form. This narrative was enacted both externally and internally: efforts of external narrative presentation aimed at demonstrating internal coherence, effectiveness and distinctiveness; all the while persuading faculty and students that quality assurance is "nothing new" and has been an integral part of academic culture for "centuries or decades"<sup>33</sup>.

Collegial decision-making responded to the crisis with the codification: in this case, strategizing and rule-making, through the production and revision university-wide goals, strategies, action plans, frameworks and guidelines. In spring 2018, an ad hoc working group was set up to revise UU's quality policy, in view of integrating quality goals into a single strategic document, thus merging several thematic and discipline-specific strategies into a single hierarchy. In this process, reflection involved decisions about which topics can be considered under the scope of "quality goals". The working group took a firm stand on differentiating between goals related to research and teaching as immutable functions of the university and topics which they assigned a temporal

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<sup>33</sup> Words cited from a video of UU's website presenting the quality system, available at: <https://www.uu.se/om-uu/kvalitetsarbete/>

significance (gender equality, sustainability) defined by governmental priorities. A revised teaching and learning programme was also adopted in April 2018, feeding into ongoing evaluation work. Compared to the 2008 version, the new document contains a significantly higher number of references to reflective practice inherent in teaching and learning, and it specifically links to the university-wide educational evaluations.

## 1.4 Teaching and learning activities promoting student participation

University responsibility	Student activity
<p><b>1.4.1.</b> Teachers will choose teaching and learning activities that stimulate student activity, promote a deep approach to learning and encourage cooperation. Teaching and learning activities will be varied so as not to consistently favour or disadvantage particular types of students.</p> <p>The education will give students scope to reflect for themselves, to process their reading and to engage in critical thinking, and for discussions with teachers and fellow students aimed at acquiring, broadening and deepening their knowledge.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Responsibility for implementation: Teachers, faculty, course and/or programme coordinators</i></li> <li>• <i>Responsibility for favourable conditions: Relevant faculty board/disciplinary domain board</i></li> </ul>	<p>Students must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Take responsibility for their own learning and contribute to their fellow students' learning.</li> <li>- Participate in, and contribute to, discussions and group work.</li> <li>- Systematically reflect on their own approach to learning so as to develop good study habits and study skills.</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Responsibility for implementation: The student</i></li> </ul>

Figure 4. Excerpt from “Teaching and Learning at Uppsala University”, page 10. (original layout)

Informal routines also gained visibility in the 2017 research evaluation exercise (KoF), which, for the first time in its history, was decoupled from decision-making on resource allocation, and focused on research environments, with an emphasis on “strengthening quality-generating processes” (Malmberg et al., 2017, p. 21). To this end, the report included reflections on academic culture at the level of departments and research units. Some questions of the research environment survey explicitly probed academic habitus, for instance, whether the seminar culture was “too kind” or “too tough” (Malmberg et al., 2017, p. 50). The ability for self-reflection and “self-awareness” were used as implicit assessment criteria in the review panels, associated with strategic planning and strategic thinking. Cross-departmental variations in academic habitus are

exposed through detailed description of academic practices (publication strategies, supervision style, research-teaching linkages) and informal traditions:

There are established informal methods of celebrating success and achievement such as gatherings including cake, when, for example, there have been 10 papers published within a division. (KoF 2017, p. 337 – Department of Information Technology)

## ***6.2. Embracing third space, resisting third mission: a hybridisation of habitus?***

Symbolic “third” spaces are particularly illustrative of internal and external tensions which produce reflexivity. Internally, the Quality Division has embraced a third-space philosophy towards mediating between administrative and academic habitus. This involves practices that the head of division, who wields significant administrative power<sup>34</sup>, has referred to as “anchoring” or “administrative pedagogy”, pursued in an active informal dialogue with decentralised academic units. Quality practice thus mirrors the research-teaching nexus. Tailored consultation services, teaching and learning courses and career and leadership coaching offered by the division are designed to bring this third space into material existence.

Pedagogical development courses confront academic staff with their immediate departmental or faculty environment in which they are socialised, and reify teaching as a transdisciplinary practice by extricating reflection from routine. Faculty members participating in pedagogical development courses found it easier to discuss difficulties

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<sup>34</sup> The Head of Division has occupied her post for over 10 years and is a nationally and internationally recognised QA expert. She was a member of the expert team drafting the SUHF position, took part of the UKÄ advisory group for the education evaluation system, and contributed to the national research evaluation model. In the interviews conducted with members of the administration, she received the highest number of referrals.

with colleagues from other departments rather than in their own, citing hierarchy and old conflicts as factors hindering open discussion.

“I also think that this [...] triggers reflection upon the subject because I at least had not thought about so many aspects of this, because before I came here, I just did like everyone else in our department. (Focus group interview with faculty members, course on PhD supervision, 2018)

Career coaching and leadership training, which was launched as a follow-up on the results of KoF 2017, is striving to attune to the specificities of academic and scientific power, including addressing role awareness and role conflicts, while introducing coaching techniques. A new unit for academic leadership in the Quality Division was created as a result of an internal discussion around methodological approaches to training manager-academics.

Sometimes [researchers] don't understand that they are part of an organisation, [...] sometimes they think of themselves just being part of a research group and not part of a formal authority at Uppsala University. (Interview with Head of Unit for Career and Leadership in Academia)

In contrast, the university management administration has maintained a position of resistance at the level of narratives, to another, externally oriented third space, the so-called third mission, which was at the time an issue on the national agenda. All interviewees emphasised that the “third mission” (referred to as “collaboration with the surrounding society”) should not be understood a standalone area of university activity, but evaluated insofar as it constitutes an integral aspect of both teaching and research. While this approach is implemented in all evaluation practices, collaboration continues to exist as a structuring element in faculty board compositions, formal leadership positions and recruitment practices.

All collaboration is predicated on respect for the integrity of science and an understanding that the University operates under different conditions and with different goals than companies and other collaboration partners. (Uppsala University mission, goals and strategies, 2019)

## 7. Conclusions

“Still the academic is very independent.” (Interview with former Head of QAB, UU)

“We fully accept the autonomy of teaching activity.” (Interview with anonymous college professor, AVCC)

The two case studies demonstrate a mutually constitutive, temporally ordered interplay between reflexivity and habitus in quality practice. Although the two institutions display radically different characteristics and occupy contrasting positions in their respective domestic policy arenas – Uppsala as advocate and pioneer and AVCC as compliant and follower; certain patterns of reflective practice have emerged, inviting further exploration. Returning to the initial theoretical puzzle of reflexivity and routine, it can be concluded that the two temporalities of reflexivity – crisis and habitual – intervened in different ways with administrative, collegial and academic habitus; offsetting or amplifying transformative effects. At Uppsala University, efforts of the central administration towards the *habitualisation* of reflective practice intensified in the response to the upcoming external evaluation. At AVCC, the response to the crisis was *fragmented*, due to compartmentalised habitual reflection and the prevalence of administrative-legal habitus.

Through specific techniques (coaching), spaces (university-wide seminars, conferences) and administrative practices (anchoring), Uppsala University strives towards the habitualisation of reflexivity through a hybridisation of academic and managerial habitus, stretching across disciplines and research-teaching functions. At

AVCC, the habitual compartmentalisation of reflection sealed off distinct circuits of reflexivity in crisis: for instance, discussions on student feedback on teaching as a primarily problem-solving device was opened up to the community; while issues of pedagogical competence development in higher education were restricted to departmental realms or treated as staffing issues, excluding student engagement or crossing disciplinary boundaries.

In both cases, crisis reflexivity was accompanied by an increased codification of academic and managerial responsibilities by the central administration, in an attempt to reify locally dispersed clusters of practices as a coherent IQM system along external evaluation criteria. But while at UU, this concerned *reflection-in-practice*, in particular reflective practice in learning and teaching, AVCC sought to codify *reflection-on-practice*, that is, habitus-specific (Catholic, social-pedagogic, familial) approaches to evaluation and reflection. At UU, such codification was explained as “putting down what is already there in words” (Interview with Head of Quality Division), that is, enhancing the visibility of practices for internal and external audiences. Whereas at AVCC, the new quality policy documents gave form to what had not quite been there yet, serving as a template for future action. In both cases, crisis reflection reproduced existing organisational hierarchies: at AVCC, legal-administrative logic prevailed; at UU, collegial-managerial processes fused together in an increasingly formalised cyclical dialogue between academic units and central administration.

Academic habitus, structuring routine reflective practice along the research-teaching nexus, appeared particularly resilient in habitual reflexivity, at times deflecting/displacing crisis reflection. In AVCC’s quality practice, research and teaching is not differentiated. In the self-study process, research appeared somewhat instrumental to teaching, the latter resting on a linguistic-conceptual differentiation between education

(*oktatás*) and “spiritual education” (*nevelés*)<sup>35</sup>, alluding to familial and pastoral teacher-student relations, which is inherent in religious careers. The self-reviews of research activities of religious studies programmes underlined the interpersonal and faith-related elements of theological practice. By contrast, Uppsala considers reflections on quality a “more fundamental practice” in research than in education, which interviewees often linked to the public service function of the university. At the same time, due to high levels of disciplinary autonomy in the evaluation of research, it had escaped thus far the type of centralised and systematic control to which education is subjected. The resilience of academic habitus manifested in the design of study programme reviews and through the codification of peer review as habitual reflective practice, in which academics retain nevertheless the authority to select their own evaluators, often reproducing networks of academic power.

Narratives played a central role in gatekeeping crisis reflexivity. At both institutions, members of senior leadership referred to their practices, unprompted, as storytelling. At UU, such storytelling implied, on a day-to-day basis, connecting issues of quality, integrity and responsibility with the university mission, that is, weaving narratives for the external representation of university identity. At AVCC, storytelling was used to conceal lack of reflection on certain topics in which the institution had not yet engaged. In addition, a latent narrative concerning a previous institutional crisis pervaded crisis reflection, contributing to fragmented reflexivity.

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<sup>35</sup> The term also signifies “upbringing” and is particularly used in the context of children’s education.



#### **IV. Paper 3: Towards reflexive governance in European higher education? The role of transnational communities of practice**

This paper contends that practice is becoming an increasingly institutionalised feature of contemporary higher education governance in Europe. The study explores these developments in the framework of reflexive governance, which assesses how certain governance arrangements support collective learning and capacity-building. Relying on a combination of theory-driven and inductive qualitative methodology, the analysis traces the emergence of communities of practice in the fields of quality assurance and learning and teaching. The findings indicate that communities of practice engage in an ongoing negotiation of meaning based on a shared European framework for quality assurance, through the production of secondary interpretations in the form of policy frameworks, self-reflective tools, principles, toolkits etc. This permits stakeholder groups to actively build their roles simultaneously as experts and advocates in formal intergovernmental cooperation structures. While this dynamic carries a potential to induce reflexivity in European higher education, its sustainability remains precarious.

##### **1. Introduction**

This paper argues that contemporary European policy-making in higher education is increasingly organised around the production, transfer, evaluation and emulation of practices. On the one hand, the turning to “what works” as the *fil rouge* of collective action can be most readily observed in the face of volatile and often intractable challenges, emerging on a global scale. The importance of day-to-day institutional practices has manifested in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic on learning and teaching (Cirlan & Loukkola, 2021): higher education institutions (HEIs) had to demonstrate a high degree of flexibility and adaptability, while maintaining their standards of quality set and monitored within more rigid and sluggish systems. Experimentation and innovation in higher education in response to societal challenges has been openly embraced by global and regional policy agendas. For example, in recent years, the European Higher Education

Area (EHEA) has promoted the exploration of innovative practices in teaching and learning (Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2018, 2020).

At the same time, the appraisal of practices as bundled units of performance, competence, meaning and material (Adler & Pouliot, 2011; Wenger, 2002) is not new, nor is it confined to emergencies. In fact, practices have served over time as organising elements within social networks of the EHEA, populating a map of seemingly infinite diversity across higher education systems, which has been formulated in the literature as a puzzle of surface convergence of objectives and discourse and persistent diversity of policies and practices (Vukasovic & Huisman, 2018). Since the early years of the Bologna Process, the development of common reference frameworks and the dissemination of best practices have been declared means to support the embedding of Bologna commitments (Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2001). Stakeholder communities have engaged in a growing number of projects and other forms of transnational collaboration, acknowledged in the literature as signs of intensified stakeholder involvement in the governance of the Bologna Process (Elken & Vukasovic, 2014; Fumasoli et al., 2018; Smidt, 2015). However, these activities have not been systematically studied in terms of their feedback to policy-making or implementation.

In a field of extreme heterogeneity, common understanding and interpretations through practice replaces the need for a shared vocabulary and serve as units of cognition. For instance, there are over 300 types of external quality assurance activities (EQAR, 2020c) designated by dozens of often non-congruent terms (accreditation, audit, certification, etc.) which satisfy the admission criteria in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). Due to the existence of a shared European framework of interpretation

and evaluation, and a common European database<sup>36</sup>, they can be all nonetheless recognised as credible and trusted practice of quality assurance.

Empirically demonstrating the pervasiveness of practice is not sufficient to meet the demands of a well-grounded scholarly inquiry, which should also aim to assess theoretical significance. What does a pragmatic “turn” imply for scholarship on the governance of European higher education? Can this be interpreted as a move towards what some authors have termed “reflexive governance”, a mode of steering which aspires towards collective learning and routinely examines its own practices?

In this paper, I present an exploratory mapping of transnational cooperation in contemporary European higher education by focusing on three distinctive premises of reflexive governance: *collective learning*, *reflexive capacity-building* and the *centrality of pragmatic logic*. The empirical case is the emergence and institutionalisation of communities of practice in the field of quality assurance. Literature on reflexive governance and on communities of practice share epistemic claims, insofar as they both ascribe to a thick theory of collective action and learning, complementing various institutionalist and deliberative-collaborative theories of governance.

The analysis brings additional insights to existing studies on the role of transnational actors, venues and practices, which has been predominantly framed in a classical dialectic of bargaining and socialisation and less in terms of theories of collective learning. I argue that shifting the focus from the analysis of punctuated communicative practice (policy positions, statements) to studying the performative and competence-building aspects of everyday transnational organising (participation in projects, peer

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<sup>36</sup> DEQAR, the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (<https://www.eqar.eu/qa-results/search/>) permits to access and visualise quality assurance reports of different systems in a harmonised and contextualised format. It was set up in 2018 and has been since recognised by Bologna ministers as a transparency tool.

learning) offers a more nuanced account of the social dynamics of transnational policy-making in higher education.

The paper is organized as follows. First, I provide a brief review of the literature on reflexive governance, and distil three analytical components for higher education, in conjunction with Wegner's theory of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 2009; Wenger, 2000, 2002). This is followed by a discussion on data and methods. The empirical analysis is presented in three sub-sections, focusing on the emergence, evolution and repertoire of peer learning communities. Finally, I analyse the implications of the findings for reflexive governance and conclude with a call for a pragmatist research agenda in higher education policy.

## **2. Reflexive governance: elements of a pragmatic framework for higher education**

### ***2.1. What is reflexive governance?***

Reflexive governance is a relatively recent concept, which has gained momentum in the context of environmental and sustainability studies, notably sustainability governance and transition management. Its core premise is shifting the focus from governance as dynamic problem-solving to governance as a system of collective learning, which implies the flexible transformation and adaptation of instruments in response to continuously arising new challenges and knowledge. Literature on reflexive governance can be situated at the confluence of social theories of reflexive modernization (Beck, 2006; Beck et al., 1994); deliberative-experimental (Fischer, 2003; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2010) and learning-based (De Schutter & Lenoble, 2010) approaches to network and multi-level governance in the European Union; and related studies in law and meta-regulation (Lantschner, 2021; Scott, 2008).

In sustainability research, reflexive governance has been further developed as a strategic agenda, to address concerns related the effectiveness of institutions in the face of “spatially entangled governance challenges” of global sustainability transition (Feindt & Weiland, 2018). Thus, reflexive governance as a loosely coupled, nevertheless distinct research agenda, evolved from preoccupations inherent to the ecological field. Yet, due to its broad anchoring in wider social and political theories, it offers a rich ground to cross-fertilise research in other policy areas. While reflexive governance suffers from conceptual stretching (Collier & Mahon, 1993) to a certain degree, this paper engages with some of its core tenets, in particular those which distinguish it from other multi-actor frameworks, and which support an analytical strategy to underpin a possible turn to practice in the field of higher education.

The philosophical underpinnings of reflexive governance are commonly derived from the thesis of reflexive modernization, which contends that in the era of risk society, institutions regularly engage in “self-confrontation” by coming face-to-face with the consequences of modernization (Beck et al., 1994). Beck stresses that this self-confrontation is not a result of conscious reflection, rather, it is an “autonomous dynamic” (Beck, 2006, p. 35), which can lead to the destabilisation of the very process of rationalist problem-solving (Voß et al., 2006).

Consequently, reflexive governance is concerned not only with *first-order*, but with *second-order reflexivity*, meaning that besides identifying unintended consequences of instruments of governance as problems (for instance the perverse effects of rankings or metrics in higher education), actors engage in meta-reflexivity concerning the underlying social and political conditions of these effects (Voß et al., 2006). In higher education, first-order reflexivity has been analysed by Reichert (2010), who pointed out the unintended effects of the Bologna Process impacting institutional and system-level

governance, such as the diffusion of transparency-based governance tools, for instance performance contracts (Jongbloed et al., 2018). An example for second-order reflexivity in higher education is Barnett's ecological university, sketching a "feasible utopia", an ideal which is nevertheless rooted in present empirical conditions (Barnett, 2017).

Reflexive governance shares many similarities with polyarchic, network, and multi-level approaches, such as collaborative (Ansell & Gash, 2008), participatory (Fischer, 2012), and deliberative-experimental (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008, 2010) models. Like other pluralist frameworks, it has been referred to as a "third-way approach", between market and command-and-control modes of regulation (De Schutter & Lenoble, 2010; Feindt & Weiland, 2018). For instance, Weiner defines reflexive governance as "an emergent encapsulated trust-building corporatism where network participants are neither state functionaries nor market entrepreneurs but network reciproqueteurs" (Weiner, 2018). The applicability for higher education is again apparent: trust-building and reciprocity are key mechanisms that drive forward the development of Bologna tools.

European higher education has been studied in the framework of various pluralist governance approaches (Fumasoli et al., 2018; Hoareau, 2012; Vukasovic et al., 2018), which highlight the role of new governance instruments and processes in reconfiguring boundaries of the domestic-supranational and the centre-periphery (Fumasoli, 2015), through the dispersion of authority across various levels. What is then the added value of introducing yet another, potentially overlapping approach? While networks, experimentation and participation of a broad range of stakeholders remain central to the understanding of reflexive governance, it diverges from other perspectives on three key assumptions surrounding the theory of learning, the capacities of actors and the role of practice.

First, while learning is central to deliberative-experimental and multi-level governance, their underlying theory of learning and conditions which are required for the success of such “learning operation” are rarely discussed explicitly (Lenoble & Maesschalck, 2010). On the one hand, learning tends to be conceptualised as an individual cognitive process, often linked to deliberation (Hoareau, 2009, 2012), i.e. it involves the possibility (if not the eventuality) of the alteration of preferences based on openly negotiated rational arguments. This conceptualisation however does not account for intractable controversies (Schön & Rein, 1994) or differences in communicative power (Pellizzoni, 2001). On the other hand, in multi-level and network settings learning is treated as an epiphenomenon of participatory policy-making, resulting from social interactions and corresponding mimetic behaviour (Checkel, 2001; Ravinet, 2008; Vukasovic, 2018). By contrast, reflexive governance posits learning as a collective process and goal (Lenoble & Maesschalck, 2010; Voß et al., 2006), which is by design incorporated in the instruments of governance. In other words, reflexive governance is concerned with developing a social theory of learning, instead of deducing its mechanisms from a theory of social learning.

Second, in contrast to other pluralist models, reflexive governance approaches do not presume that each actor possesses equal capacity and resources to engage in learning and deliberation, rather they suggest that these capacities should be purposefully created (Lenoble & Maesschalck, 2010). In this regard, linking transnational learning to organisational learning (Schout, 2009) and role awareness and role framing beyond mere facilitation (De Schutter & Lenoble, 2010) have been proposed as key levers. Reflexive capacity-building encourages actors “to scrutinize and reconsider their underlying assumptions, institutional arrangements and practices” (Hendriks & Grin, 2007, p. 333). Its ultimate goal is the transformation of identities, beliefs and mind-sets; as a result of a

collective imagination oriented towards the future (De Schutter & Lenoble, 2010). This resonates with recent trends in higher education policy. For instance, student-centred learning requires a shift in roles, perceptions and attitudes towards learning and teaching. At the level of governance, reflections in the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) on the future of the Bologna Process have concluded that “implementation at the grassroots level requires a slow process of information and consensus-building in single institutions, departments and subject areas, and is aimed at deeper cultural change” (BFUG, 2015).

Finally, reflexive governance places higher premium on the role of social practice rather than ideas as a source of learning. While the role of ideas and discourse is not diminished, they are attached to specific localities and “ways of doing things” (Pouliot, 2014). Practices are not simply locally developed solutions which are then uploaded to higher levels of decision-making in an abstract form, but they encapsulate particular, local forms of reasoning and contingent power relations (Feindt & Weiland, 2018). In order to explore how practice becomes a central vehicle for organising reflexive interconnections between groups at different governance levels, in the following section, I propose to link it with a well-anchored theory of “practice learning”.

## ***2.2. Transnational communities of practice in higher education: a theory of collective learning***

Reflexive governance embraces a pragmatist theory of collective action and learning, and normatively aspires towards the organisation of governance instruments around the acknowledgement of their contextuality (De Schutter & Lenoble, 2010). This stems from the growing appreciation of practical knowledge to address complex problems; requiring a shift from discipline-specific and purely theoretical expertise to factoring in the tacit knowledge of social actors (Voß et al., 2006).



In organisation studies, Czarniawska coined the concept of action-nets (Czarniawska, 1997, 2004b), which connect individuals in their habitual interaction, both within and across formal organisational boundaries. Such an approach helps illuminate not only the ways in which solutions derived from practical experiences at lower governance levels may find their way into higher-level policy discussions; but also how organisations develop common ways of working together while maintaining their own distinct structures and identities (Lindberg & Czarniawska, 2006).

Wenger's theory of communities of practice (Wenger, 2000, 2002) offers further pointers to understand the design and evolution of social learning systems in reflexive policy-making. He contends that in such collectives, practice is the principal source of coherence of a community (Wenger, 2002, p. 72). A community of practice (CoP) is therefore distinguished from other types of groups or networks, as neither formal affiliation with an organisation, nor interpersonal relations or flows of information are the key determinants of membership (Wenger, 2002, p. 74). Instead, it is a joint enterprise requiring mutual engagement in common activities, through which participants enter in a constant process of negotiation of meaning, which enables them to continuously develop their practice and repertoire, or tools and resources for more effective coordination (Wenger, 2002). Taking further the analogy between communities of practice and action-nets, the key contention here, which opposes actor-centred and institutionalist accounts of network governance; is that identity does not hinge on the existence of organisations or networks, instead, such organisational forms and identities are produced through practice (and by extension, learning) (Czarniawska, 2004b; Wenger, 2002).

The theory of CoP has been applied by numerous studies in higher education (cf. Tight, 2015), but its analytical potential for transnational communities and their participation in European policy-making remains underexplored. For instance, the

Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) working and advisory groups have been identified as communities of practice (Klemenčič, 2019), however without further unpacking their underlying social practice and mechanisms of learning.

In the following, I propose to examine various groups of actors in European higher education governance, often construed in terms of transnational networks, interest groups or epistemic communities; from a thickly theorised communities of practice perspective, which permits to evaluate their potential for reflexive governance. At the European level, one of the longest-standing and influential stakeholder communities are the E4 group (ENQA, ESU, EUA, EURASHE), active primarily in quality assurance as a collective, but individually equally prolific in diverse policy areas. The E4 is composed of four organisations representing HEIs (universities and professional HEIs), quality assurance agencies and students (and student unions). The rose into prominence at the policy level as the community tasked with the elaboration of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). A fifth organisation, the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) can be grouped together with the E4 as an upcoming actor in its own right; although it has a special regulatory role, as the only official legal entity established as a result of the Bologna Process. These stakeholder communities, together, individually and via their extended domestic and transnational networks, present variable characteristics.

Literature on multi-level governance in higher education has noted that there is a lack of systematic understanding “of where specific policy ideas come from and how they might be adapted and translated by different actors operating across governance levels” (Vukasovic et al., 2018, p. 329). Several authors have recognised the role of stakeholder organisations in providing expertise and fostering policy learning (Chou & Gornitzka, 2014a; Klemenčič & Galán Palomares, 2018; Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018). One well-

established theory of policy learning is rooted in the epistemic approach (Dunlop, 2009; Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013; Haas, 1992), which defines learning as reducing the knowledge gap of policy-makers via expert input in highly specialised and ambiguous matters. However, the classical definition of epistemic communities as a network of experts with an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within a specific domain (Haas, 1992, p. 3); has proven too rigid in the face of innovation in collaborative policy-making. For instance, in the health field, it has been scrutinised for its lack of explanatory power when it comes to the social dynamics of epistemic communities, such as conditions of their emergence, their relative influence or outright failure (Akrich, 2010; Dunlop, 2009; Löblová, 2018).

Other studies see European stakeholder organisations as rational interest-driven actors which channel collective preferences of their members into European-level decision-making (Ala-Vähälä & Saarinen, 2009; Vukasovic, 2017, 2018), and for good reasons. The E4 group are not simply a group of experts advising decision-makers, but the very authors of the policy, whose position is widely recognised and are referred to as the “owners of the ESG” in the Brussels QA community. Across the four organisations, the boundaries of consensual technical knowledge are limited to the procedural minimum of ESG, leaving the politics of quality open to deliberation and contestation between competing interests and discourses (cf. Veiga and Magalhães 2019). In addition, while many of their activities are funded by the EU, they are ultimately self-sufficient membership-based organisations<sup>37</sup>, with preferences that are clearly distinct from the EU or national positions. Nevertheless, research which focuses on policy statements as their

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<sup>37</sup> ENQA originally started out as an EU-funded network of quality assurance agencies. In 2004, it was registered as an association under Belgian law.

main outputs for the policy fora leaves a large proportion of their activities, such research, network and community-building or peer support unaccounted for.

Consequently, I argue that the contribution of transnational organisations to European policy developments in higher education cannot and should not be reduced to “stakeholder input” in the context of the rationalist pursuit of sectoral interests, nor can it be fully explained in the epistemic community framework. Instead, the working hypothesis is that the core mechanisms of social learning within and across these communities, is the formation and strategic maintenance of communities of practice, often clustered thematically across groups and governance levels. According to Wenger, these communities are permeable and often organise around boundary objects (Star & Griesemer, 1989) understood as “arrangement that allow different groups to work together without consensus” (Leigh Star, 2010), such as documents, concepts or standards. These objects can be part of a CoP repertoire, defined as “resources for negotiating meaning” (Wenger, 2002, p. 82). In a policy context, these repertoires may include frameworks, guidelines, indicators, benchmarks and good practices. A second type of link between CoP are brokers: individuals who hold membership in multiple CoP and are thus able to transfer practices from one to another (Wenger, 2002). Brokering is a similar concept to policy entrepreneurship, but with a focus on practices.

Furthermore, CoPs integrate newcomers through legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) (cf. Lave & Wenger, 2009), which is based on an “approximation of full participation that gives exposure to actual practice” (Wenger, 2002, p. 100). This involves granting legitimacy to new members for the purposes of learning, who otherwise fall short of the standards of admission. For example, ENQA offers affiliate membership to agencies cannot or do not want to fulfil the criteria for full membership.

### 3. Methods and data

Proponents of reflexive governance as an analytical framework suggest to proceed in a two-step sequence: first, a structural analysis of institutions and governance settings, followed by an analysis of how these structures enable or impede learning (Feindt & Weiland, 2018, p. 665). Accordingly, this paper focuses primarily on exploratory structural analysis, guided by the theoretical premises of reflexive governance on collective learning, reflexive capacity-building and the role of practice in the organisation of learning.

As a second step, I aim to develop an explanatory theory of practice for higher education's possible shift towards reflexive governance, building on CoP. In this phase, the analytical strategy draws inspiration from the methodological approach of practice tracing, developed by international relations scholars (Adler-Nissen & Drieschova, 2019; Pouliot, 2008, 2014). While I cannot claim to be fully aligned with the interpretivist epistemological practices developed within the IR community, as I take a more structuralist approach; their conceptualisation of practice and corresponding tools lend analytical rigour to the transnational aspect of the study; complementing the CoP theory, which is conventionally applied in organisational contexts. Thus, practice tracing as an inductive strategy is used to introduce interpretive nuance in the primarily structural deductive approach of reflexive governance, by highlighting local variations in “learning through practice” and associated repertoires in interconnected social communities. The advantage of this combined strategy is that it permits to analyse the role of E4 organisations in connecting communities of policy-makers and stakeholders, both within organisation and across organisations.

Practice tracing represents a “methodological middle ground where patterns of meaningful action may be abstracted away from local contexts in the form of social mechanisms that can travel across cases” (Pouliot, 2014, p. 238). It is a pragmatist variant

of the classic qualitative research technique of process tracing, or within-case analysis to generate causal explanations of the case (Bennett & Checkel, 2014). Pouliot contends that practices qualify as *processes*, since they are socially meaningful actions which occur repeatedly over time, and they also carry *causal power*, actualised in particular local settings, but which are nevertheless amenable to analytically useful generalisations (Pouliot, 2014).

Actors may follow a “logic of practicality” (Pouliot, 2008) (as opposed to logic of consequences or appropriateness), qualifying practice as a causally generative force; however the social effects of these actions can be only interpreted in context. In Wenger’s CoP theory, (legitimate peripheral) participation and reification are two complementary mechanisms which contribute to the negotiation of meaning through practice and are “sources of continuity and discontinuity” (Wenger, 2002, p. 90.) in the evolution of CoP. However, these are primarily theoretical constructs which allow to produce cross-case insights (Pouliot, 2014), therefore local forms of causation within specific communities need to be inductively reconstructed from context.

To fulfil the criteria of a rigorous within-case analysis, multiple streams of evidence were collected. This includes policy and administrative documents (such as Bologna Ministerial Communiqués, BFUG meeting documents, Erasmus+ call specifications, guidelines and action plans etc.), reports and presentations produced by stakeholder organisations, including online resources (see [Appendix III](#)). This is complemented by semi-structured interviews with 11 European quality assurance experts, including representatives from each organisation of the E4 group and EQAR, the European Commission and the BFUG thematic peer group on quality assurance (see [Appendix III](#)). Section 4.2. presents a more in-depth exploration of EQAF. This is based on the qualitative analysis of topics, format and meta-data (author, organisation, country,

paper type) of 276 papers presented at EQAF between 2006 and 2021, available in the EUA online publication repository<sup>38</sup>. In addition, notes from participant observation at EQAF 2017 were used to inform the analysis (see [Chapter V](#)). Texts were coded in NVivo, using a combination of in vivo and selective coding. As a first step, core themes were identified and then refined around emerging patterns of coding. The coding of themes follows overlapping categories: for instance, a paper which presented international cooperation of student expert pools, was simultaneously coded to “international cooperation” and “students as experts”. All in all, 374 references were coded to 67 themes, which were then manually refined to 47 thematic nodes ([Appendix III](#)). All texts were also coded to structured nodes: author, organisation, country of origin (of the organisation) and paper type. Other pre-defined nodes, such as classification according to internal and external QA or relevance for ESG were established on the basis of the policy. Finally, an interpretive analysis was performed on a sample of papers which were identified in the process of coding as examples for reflexivity was performed. The analysis of country challenges in the Bologna Thematic Peer Group is based on a simple thematic coding of ESG standards referenced in the Action Plan of the Group (Bologna TPG C, 2022).

EQAF publication practices have themselves changed over time. Thus, for the years 2006-2011, only papers which were selected and published in the annual EQAF publication, and which constitute a “representative sample of the contributions to the Forum” (Bollaert et al., 2009) were analysed. For the transition period of 2012-2013, for which individual papers were also uploaded in the EUA repository, the full range of papers were covered. For the years 2014-2021, in the absence of a standalone publication, all papers presented at the Forum (and uploaded in the repository) were considered, and

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<sup>38</sup> <https://eua.eu/resources/publications.html>

coding was based on the common paper submission template and abstract. However, some full papers were missing from the repository. For these cases, wherever available, I relied on PPT presentations and abstracts of the papers, as long as they included all information needed (author, title, organisation, country, topic and methods).

#### **4. Mapping structural reflexivity in higher education governance: zooming in on communities of practice**

This section traces how transnational communities of practice came about, what qualifies them as CoP, and how their practices and repertoire have developed over time. The analysis samples from two interconnected areas: quality assurance (an “established field”) and learning and teaching (a “new field”). Quality assurance has been one of the pillars of the Bologna Process since its start. It is also the most institutionalised, yet equally stakeholder-driven area. This dynamic has congealed into an inherent tension in the ESG, which provides a common European framework for quality assurance. It is both a regulatory tool and a malleable artefact: on the one hand open to the ongoing negotiation of meaning, as “agreed and accepted practice for quality assurance in higher education in the EHEA” (ESG, 2015, p. 9); while on the other, it serves as a basis for external quality evaluations of HEIs, often with legally binding consequences.

Learning and teaching, especially its innovative and collaborative aspects, has gained prominence on the policy agenda only more recently (Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2018). However, it had been an area of transnational stakeholder cooperation for many years, for instance through the EFFECT project<sup>39</sup>, which served as an inspiration for recommendations to national authorities enshrined in the Rome Communiqué (2020). Learning and teaching relates to the strategic

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<sup>39</sup> <https://eua.eu/101-projects/560-effect.html>



prioritisation of the core mission of HEIs (cf. Gaebel & Zhang, 2018) and is intrinsically linked to the policy paradigm of an enhancement-oriented approach to quality assurance. In the stakeholder community, the ESG itself is interpreted primarily as a model for the peer evaluation of learning and teaching.

#### ***4.1. Transnational communities of practice in quality assurance – a case of collective learning?***

The emergence of European-level CoP dates back to the early days of the Bologna Process, with the creation of the E4 group itself in 2001 through regular joint meetings and collaboration. Initially, this constellation was formed to amplify stakeholder views and strengthen bottom-up legitimacy in the Bologna Process, amid a general wariness around giving the Commission too much leverage, a sentiment which continues to linger on to this day. The cohesion of the group was cemented by the joint enterprise of drafting the ESG, first adopted by Bologna ministers in 2005 and revised in 2015<sup>40</sup>. Over the years, they have consistently expanded their membership base and have spearheaded countless joint projects, all the while maintaining their own distinct agendas. They have also been admitted in the BFUG as consultative members.

The European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) is the longest-standing annual event of European quality assurance stakeholders and experts, gathering approximately 500 participants each year. The idea was first proposed in 2003 by the Deputy Secretary-General of EUA in the context of the development of the ESG (EQAF 2010 Steering Committee, 2011, p. 9) and officially launched in 2006 by the E4 group. The Bologna Ministers endorsed its continuation in the 2007 London Communiqué (2007). The Forum was initially (2006-2010) financed as a project under the EU Lifelong Learning

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<sup>40</sup> Other two organisations which have developed a working relationship with E4 in the context of the ESG 2015 are Education International (EI) and BusinessEurope, but which .

Programme, but since 2011 it has been operating on a self-funded basis, all the while continuing to attract a large number of participants. An analysis of the trends in EQAF practices over 16 years is presented in section 4.2.

Another type of CoP is those constituted and institutionalised within stakeholder organisations, mostly in the forms of working groups, expert networks and communities of practitioners on a variety of topics. Quality assurance agencies have been especially active in transnational collaboration. Since its establishment, ENQA<sup>41</sup> has been regularly organising various workshops, seminars, peer learning activities and has coordinated or participated in numerous European projects, in accordance with its mission to drive the development of external quality assurance in the EHEA (ENQA, 2021). Its Working Groups bring together representatives of QA agencies for a duration of 1-3 years, with the aim to collect information and develop guidance (indicators, approaches, elements to consider, competence frameworks, etc.) regarding specific topics of interest identified by ENQA members<sup>42</sup>. This work is predominantly analytical and typically includes surveying agency practices and screening and selecting relevant sources of information, such as projects and publications. Some working groups have focused on examining how the ESG are interpreted and applied in practice by the agencies.

EURASHE, the organisation representing professional HEIs, runs a working group on quality assurance, which engages primarily with policy issues. However, after the adoption of the ESG 2015, its activities decreased considerably, as organisational priorities shifted towards capacity-building. In 2018, EURASHE started a Quality

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<sup>41</sup> ENQA was first created by the European Commission as a network of quality assurance agencies 2000, and in 2004 it was established as an organisation representing QAAs.

<sup>42</sup> The topics of the reports published on the ENQA website ([www.enqa.eu](http://www.enqa.eu)) are: academic integrity, micro-credentials, e-learning, recognition, practical approaches to excellence, knowledge on Part 3 of the ESG, stakeholder involvement, staff development, lifelong learning, and the measurement of the impact of external QA.

Assurance Community of Practice, a platform for grassroots' practitioners of member organisations to exchange experiences through concrete cases and study visits at institutions, with the long-term perspective of creating a "European-level knowledge base", which caters to the specificities of professional higher education (EURASHE, 2018). Through collaborative projects with other E4 members, the EURASHE Secretariat identifies potential new people within their community who are able to act on behalf of the sector at the European level. Thus, developing capacities for advocacy hinges on peripheral participation in the CoP.

EUA, the biggest organisation of the E4, has been active in several large-scale QA projects with lasting policy impact, for instance the one involving 134 institutions to develop a bottom-up approach to quality culture (EUA, 2006). EUA has been steadily widening its repertoire of analysis and peer learning for its membership over the years. In 2017, it organised the first Forum on Learning and Teaching, which in its form can be considered as an example of "practice spill-over", as reported by interviewees to have been inspired by the success of EQAF. To accompany the Forum, EUA also convenes thematic peer groups for exploring "practices and lessons learnt in organising and implementing learning and teaching at the institutional level", covering also topics of evaluation. These groups are self-steering and their activities have been linked to organisational change and increased connectedness by two-thirds of respondents participating in an impact assessment conducted by EUA (Peterbauer, 2021).

In 2009, ESU launched its student expert pool in quality assurance, with the aim of training student representatives to effectively participate in quality assurance as student experts, both domestically and internationally, including in international QA reviews, such as the Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) developed by the EUA. In 2012 the expert pool was integrated in the ESU executive structure, and the model has functioned

as a catalyst for the creation of national expert pools in some countries, for example in Latvia and Lithuania (Kažoka, 2015). A former member of the expert pool defined it as a “community of trained student representatives with specific competences” (Kažoka, 2015). The idea that the transfer of new policy approaches in domestic contexts occurs through competence development was also stressed by a former president of ESU, who cited the example of mainstreaming student-centred learning in Polish higher education via specific trainings organised by the QA agency.

Importantly, the institutionalisation of peer learning in European higher education governance is driven by the new peer support structure of the Bologna Follow-up Group. The concept of thematic peer support groups was developed on the margins of discussions concerning the future of the Bologna Process, which identified the uneven implementation of key commitments as a critical obstacle to progress (Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2018). Its working methods are directly inspired by the mutual learning toolbox of the education and training OMC, consisting of peer learning, peer review and peer counselling. In this respect, the instrumentation of the two processes show increasing convergence, which is supported by both the interviews and documents. For example, the Commission’s restricted call supporting the peer groups included a booklet explaining the above mentioned activities as possible forms of peer support. Participation in at least one TPG is mandatory for all signatory countries. The TPG C on quality assurance was set up in September 2018. With the participation of 41 countries out of 48 in the EHEA in the second work period (2021-2024), it is the most populous TPG of the three<sup>43</sup>. All E4 organisations and EQAR are

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<sup>43</sup> The other two groups are TPG A on Key Commitment 1, the three-cycle structure compatible with the overarching Qualifications Framework and the use of ECTS, with the participation of 29 countries; and TPG B on Key Commitment 2, on national legislation and procedures compliant with the Lisbon Recognition Convention, with the participation of 39 countries.

also members. The Flemish Community in Belgium, recognised for its enhancement-oriented QA system reform, has been co-chairing the group, with two other co-chairs (presently Kazakhstan and Romania). The activities of the TPG are organised around challenges each country faces in the implementation of the ESG. Participation is explicitly linked to the results of Bologna stocktaking, the scorecard system with “traffic light” colour coding, as part of a *sui generis* repertoire of monitored coordination (Ravinet, 2008). In the context of peer support, the scorecard functions as a boundary object, allowing for an ongoing negotiation of what “implementation” means for each country beyond meeting minimum standards.

“It's not about the green ones helping the orange and the red ones. [...] it should not only be about helping the ones that are lagging behind, it should really be a cooperation and learning for all countries. [...] For example, Flanders has been dark green in the implementation reports for quite a while. But that doesn't mean that we don't have any work to do anymore. [...] So it doesn't mean that if you [...] have the status of fully implemented that you cannot evolve anymore in that country.”  
(Interview with co-chair of TPG C, 2022)

A thematic analysis ([Appendix III](#)) of the challenges entered in the work plan of TPG C<sup>44</sup> by 36 countries shows that although many countries focus on reaching full alignment with the ESG, at the same time, they also seek to address unintended consequences (corresponding to first-order reflexivity) which arise in the application of the ESG. This includes for instance improving the strategic positioning of quality assurance or maintaining its relevance and effectiveness after multiple evaluation cycles. The TPG is also working on collective goals related to agendas set by the EU, for instance to develop QA approaches for micro-credentials and the European University alliances. As an example for second-order reflexivity, Switzerland has offered to work on a proposal

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<sup>44</sup> Version of 20 May 2022.

on “how a future revision of the ESG might more directly take into account the dimension of Sustainable Development, the Swiss experience offering an example of analysed practice” (Bologna TPG C, 2022).

Staff mobility within the peer group is a particularly popular feature<sup>45</sup>, which provides an opportunity for legitimate peripheral participation of ministry, agency and stakeholder organisation staff in another CoP, for instance through job shadowing, observation or training in partner countries. This is the most immersive form of practice learning, in which TPG co-chairs, together with representatives of ENQA and EQAR, act as “matchmakers” or brokers in CoP terminology, ensuring an optimal pairing of learning partners. In some cases, this working arrangement has even led to more permanent structural cooperation between countries who carried out joint staff mobility.

#### ***4.2. A closer look at the evolution of EQAF as a community of practice***

The case of EQAF is explored more in depth, to trace its evolution as a community of practice over 16 years. Over the years, the event has attracted individuals with a variety of profiles affiliated with quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions, national authorities and other organisations from the field of quality assurance. Overall, the level of participation has been stable: between 400-500 attendants, with certain years even reaching maximum capacity of the venue. While granular data on participants is not publicly available, EUA, who has remained the main logistical coordinator of the event, keeps track of participation, and has noted a trend towards an increased activity of HEIs. Although there is a steady turnover of their representatives, the participation of a number of “core” organisations has been consistent. EUA also identified 3 people who have been

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<sup>45</sup> The Matchmaking Committee received 81 applications, but due to Covid-2019 restrictions, only 22 physical mobilities could take place between 2019 and 2021 (Report of the Matchmaking Committee, 2021).

to all 16 events.

Typically, the Forum unfolds over 2-3 days, and takes place at a host institution, recruited through an open call among EUA member HEIs. One of the key activities at EQAF is the presentation and discussion of input papers. This is organised via an open call on a specific topic each year (see [Appendix III](#) for topics and titles). The topic for each year is determined in function of ongoing trends and policy developments, and is aligned with Bologna developments at the ministerial level. The EQAF programme committee (previously steering committee), composed of delegates from E4 organisations and academic representatives, decides on the programme and selects the papers. Submissions usually by far exceed the number of presented papers, thus the committee plays an important role in epistemic knowledge production.

The papers presented at EQAF between 2006 and 2021 show pronounced trends in the evolution of papers in terms of authors, format and themes. The analysis identified 510 authors from 244 organisations and 49 countries ([Appendix III](#)). Roughly 14,5% (74) of authors had published more than one papers, the highest number of papers attributed to a single author is 7. Geographically, the biggest author groups are German and Anglo-Saxon: in particular, Ireland and Scotland stand out with their consistent activity over the years with a wide range of organisations. A possible (although not verified) explanation for the Irish dominance is that the president of ENQA between 2013 and 2017 was Irish. Other countries owe their representation to one main institution, such as the Vienna University of Technology and Business in Austria. Although the EQAF is linked to the EHEA, the majority of paper presenters are from EU Member States: in fact, only non-EU<sup>46</sup> EHEA countries represent only 3% of total publications. This is a strikingly different pattern from the TPG C, which requires that countries representing different

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<sup>46</sup> EFTA countries (Switzerland and Norway) and the UK are also grouped with EU countries.

levels of implementation are matched. Moreover, the most frequent contributors to the Forum are quality assurance agencies, several Irish universities and the European Student Union. Interestingly, the European Association of Conservatories has been particularly prolific in producing papers on the quality assurance in professional music education. In general, universities are by far overrepresented in comparison to professional HEIs, a trend which also reflects the disparity of capacities between EUA and EURASHE.

Based on the thematic coding, the most consistent and common topics are national QA frameworks, QA methods and metrics, presentation and analysis of agency practices, student involvement in quality assurance and quality culture; mirroring the composition of the E4 group. Overall, the evolution of EQAF as a CoP can be interpreted in three phases: 1. *epistemic anchoring* (2006-2011) 2. *expansion* (2012-2016) and 3. *pragmatic consolidation* (2017-2021). Initially, the Committee promoted EQAF and the resulting publications as “an opportunity to test their ideas for new quality assurance initiatives or to receive feedback on ongoing activities” (EQAF 2008) and invited HEIs, QA agencies, students and academics “to reflect on the relationship and interaction between European and national policy decisions and the institutional and agency-level realities” (EQAF 2010).

Most authors were already established experts and published academics on the topics, and it was not uncommon for the same authors to follow-up on their discussions or speeches from earlier years. The Committee also published keynote speeches and the summaries of the Forum discussions, maintaining a dialogue between organisers and participants. In this period, the epistemic community aspect was the most salient. The period of expansion is characterised by the diversification of author profiles and origins, as well as an emphasis on data-driven analyses. In 2016 and 2017, the organising



committee experimented with grouping papers in three categories, “research”, “policy” and “practice”, to orient participants towards sessions of their interest.

Over time, the submission template for papers has been streamlined and the word limit restricted, to make the information more digestible for practitioners. For the first time in 2022, contributors are invited to submit “practice examples” separately from papers. Throughout the years, the most common format has been the single institutional case study, while only a handful of comparative studies were presented. As Figure 5 shows, there has been an increased tendency towards presenting practices, such as project results and experiences from the field. For the coding purposes, the criteria to differentiate between a research paper and a “summary of experiences” is that the former features a basic structure which is socially recognised as “scientific”, such as research question, literature review and methodology; while organisational case studies and summaries of practical experiences were typically presented in a narrative/ descriptive form. However, it is acknowledged that the boundaries between academic/epistemic and practitioner’s knowledge is increasingly blurred in EQAF knowledge production.

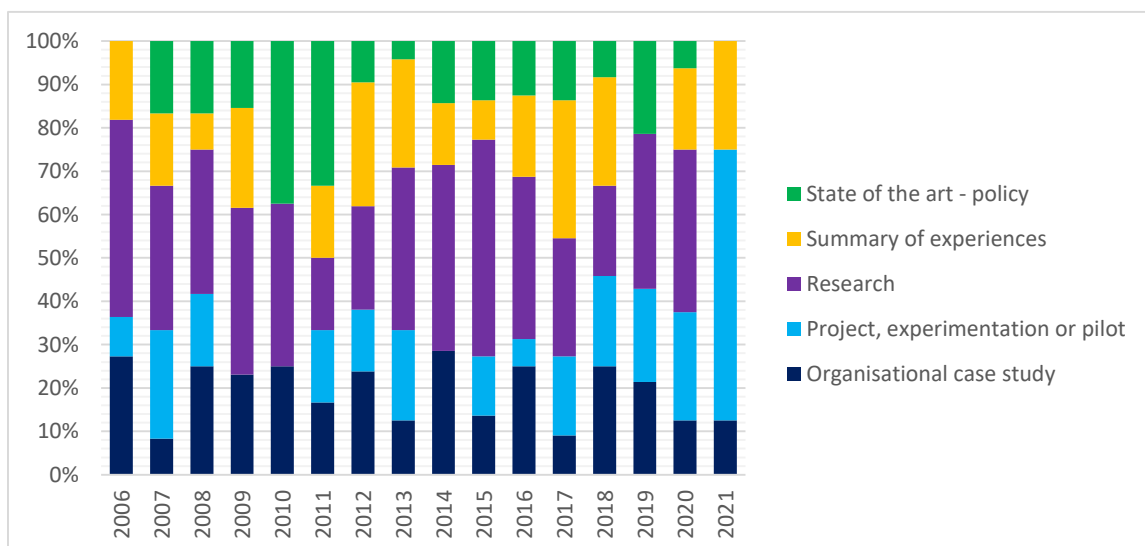


Figure 5. Distribution of EQAF paper formats (2006-2021).

Through the interpretive analysis of the sampled texts, *transferability*, *interoperability* and *matchmaking* were identified as the three main uses of pragmatic

knowledge within the community of practitioners. Transferability refers to the strategy of the EQAF programme committee to incentivise participants to think about how the practices they present may be relevant for other contexts.

We believe that by sharing our experience of student involvement in Denmark, we can contribute valuable input to the discussion of how to broaden the scope of QA, as well as inspire other QAAs to successfully implement similar initiatives.  
(Excerpt from sampled paper from EQAF 2018)

Interoperability refers to the guiding logic of presenting research results in a form that is interpretable in pragmatic contexts. Several EQAF editions dedicated sessions to the use of data and metrics in quality assurance.

In this paper, we present and discuss a case study for the assessment of research and teaching quality in university departments. The study illustrates how AQU Catalunya is changing the way it presents quantitative data, benchmarking clusters of indicators to foster debate about the results.  
(Excerpt from sample paper from EQAF 2015)

Finally, matchmaking is another pragmatic goal fostered by EQAF, which encourages networking among institutions based on common approaches.

Six quality assurance agencies have recently decided to be part of an active yet informal network (réseau FrAQ-Sup) with the goal of sharing professional experience and supporting the development of a quality culture within the French-speaking higher education sector. They jointly organise quality events and support various projects. One of them was to translate into French the newly revised version of the European standards and guidelines (ESG 2015). This task has lead the agencies to examine further and compare their national QA frameworks and quality standards and discover how much they were alike and to which extent they would differ. (Excerpt from sample paper from EQAF 2016)

### ***4.3. Reflexive capacity-building: participation and reification via secondary guidance***

This section reviews the repertoire produced by transnational communities of practice and assesses to what extent they support reflexive capacity-building among the organisations and their constituencies. The central “boundary object” around which the organisation of transnational activities revolves in the quality assurance field, is the ESG itself. The “interpretive flexibility” (Leigh Star, 2010) of the ESG is what allows policy-makers, quality assurance agencies and institutions to build trust by coordinating their practices according to shared principles, without the need to reach consensus on specific interpretations. The authors of the ESG recognise this flexibility and aim to safeguard it as such. When asked whether they consider the ESG political statement, a policy framework or a practical guidance document, experts interviewed at E4 organisations agreed that the document simultaneously fulfils all of those functions, albeit they considered the policy framework to be the most relevant in their own practice.

The beauty of this document is that it allows for interpretation. It allows for creativity. And the more creativity there is, the better. (Interview with expert at EUA, 2021)

Transnational communities regularly produce interpretations of what is considered as good practice or “ESG-compliant” practice within their own stakeholder networks. This practice mirrors the definition of a boundary object, which is “worked on by local groups who maintain its vaguer identity as a common object, while making it more specific, more tailored to local use within a social world”. (Leigh Star, 2010, pp. 604–605). I use the term “secondary guidance” to designate such tailored interpretations of the ESG. Based on the analysis of documents and interviews, it is possible to distinguish between two types of secondary guidance produced by stakeholder

communities: one which favours participation, broadening the scope of interpretation; and another which tends towards reification and thus limits interpretive flexibility at the system level.

An important proportion of participatory guidance is produced via EU-funded<sup>47</sup> projects with connect various CoPs. Examples include guidelines, frameworks, and self-assessment tools for specific topics and innovations. The WEXHE project<sup>48</sup> (2016-2018) involved a consortium HEIs (universities and applied sciences), stakeholder organisations and public authorities (chambers of commerce) which developed a package of 77 case studies of good practices in work-based learning (WBL). One of its outputs was a QA model for WBL, aligned with the ESG. Another project, TEFCE<sup>49</sup> (2018-2020) piloted a self-reflection tool for community engagement in higher education with the involvement of 180 experts and practitioners. It was presented at the 2019 EQAF, where its link with quality assurance and the ESG was discussed. These projects were carried out in partnership with Dutch HEIs with robust higher education policy research programmes, involving academic-practitioner brokers who can easily pass between CoPs. A further example is a study produced by ENQA's working group (Huertas et al., 2018), offering guidance for agencies on the translation of ESG for the assessment of online provision, also incorporating insights from two projects.

Structurally, transnational project work with stakeholders is increasingly interlinked with policy reform support. In 2018, the European Commission introduced conceptual changes to the Erasmus+ funding call dedicated to support national

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<sup>47</sup> This designation refers to in most cases, the Erasmus+ programme, under the previous (2014-2020) and current (2021-2027) programming period. However, certain projects may be funded through other EU programmes and funds (such as Horizon), therefore EU funding is used as an umbrella term.

<sup>48</sup> <https://wexhe.eu/>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.tefce.eu/>

governments in implementing Bologna commitments, making cooperation with other EHEA countries and the involvement of stakeholder organisations as partners part of the award criteria. This marks a departure from the previous funding strategy, which was based on national allocations for higher education reforms. A specific strand of the programme also supports the activities of the Bologna peer groups.

“[stakeholder organisations] are actually very efficient in bringing together different ministries and they are more used to doing all the administration around it [...]. For national ministries it's more difficult to administer grants directly. This is why some involve an agency or other entity for this purpose. But [...] especially for the smaller ministries, this help of the international organisations like ENQA, EUA, EQAR is very useful.” (Interview with expert at European Commission, 2021)

These projects not only target implementation, but also encourage innovation and experimentation. For instance, the EUniQ project brings together six ministries, QA agencies, EUA, ESU and ENQA to develop a QA framework for university alliances, and it reports regularly to the Bologna TPG C. Its coordination is delegated by the Flemish Community (the TPG co-chair), to the Dutch/Flemish QA agency (NVAO). The project is explicitly linked to the European Universities initiative, which has received much attention in the higher education community and fuelled scholarly interest as a new transnational model for the European university (Cino Pagliarello, 2022a). The initiative envisages bottom-up capacity-building in European higher education via the creation of alliances serving as “catalysts for the launch of new instruments and legal frameworks” (European Commission, 2022)

Examples of participatory guidance are produced through the interconnections of various CoPs and are disseminated via brokers. However, the pendulum may also swing in the other direction, when “secondary” guidance leads to reification, that is, the social imposition of a specific interpretation, generating coercive and mimetic pressures. This

is the case of ENQA membership reviews and decisions of the EQAR Register Committee. While both procedures assess the compliance of QA agencies with the ESG, the former grants access to a stakeholder network, while the latter functions a European quality label of being recognised as a trustworthy agency. Membership in ENQA and registration in EQAR enjoy wide social and political legitimacy in the EHEA, and most countries aspire towards both. Recent studies have revealed inconsistencies between the decision-making practice of ENQA and EQAR. In some cases, different decisions were made based on the same review, applying the same criteria, with EQAR tending towards a more restrictive interpretation of the ESG (Amaral & Rosa, 2021). An external review of EQNA agency review practices found that the EQAR interpretation has infiltrated the practice of ENQA reviewers, raising concerns about its independence (Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education, 2019).

While access to ENQA as a community is open to peripheral participation to partially compliant agencies, this is not the case with EQAR, which requires “substantial compliance”. Since its establishment in 2008, EQAR has also been producing more detailed guidance for external quality assurance, currently entitled “Use and interpretation of the ESG” (EQAR, 2020b). It is based on the decision-making practice of the EQAR register committee, which is colloquially referred to as “case law”, indicating prescriptive reification. The publication of the document was not met with enthusiasm in the E4 group, who perceived it as a threat to the already established consensus on the ESG. Discussions are underway in the European QA community about resolving tensions stemming from the different roles of ENQA (learning) and EQAR (compliance), via a possible reconciliation of interpretations through the harmonisation of review practices; which in turn has fuelled reflection concerning the revision of the entire system of agency reviews (Walsh & Hopbach, 2021). This illustrates, on the one hand, that decisions of compliance

are made on the basis of locally developed interpretations of practice, which engender very real political and policy effects. On the other hand it indicates the presence of first-order reflexivity in communities of practice.

## **5. Discussion: does the institutionalisation of CoP in higher education indicate a move towards reflexive governance?**

This is how advocacy is done. You need to have data, [...] so that it is reliable enough. And then you put forward statements that would represent institutions and their interests. And that's what the EUA has been doing in the BFUG, in all the meetings. EUA has been present in TPGs on quality assurance, on recognition, on qualification frameworks and also in in key projects now on micro-credentials, on the EUniQ project, [...]; in the projects that ESU puts forward from the perspective of students. We have been also very active in those. So these are the channels that we use to voice what institutions [...] inform us about, via Trends or all our other surveys. (Interview with policy analyst at EUA, 2021)

This paper has argued that the creation, institutionalisation and transformation of communities of practice is a key mechanism of transnational learning and stakeholder participation in European higher education governance. Based on the exploratory mapping of communities of practice, three types of mechanisms can be identified: institutionalisation of peer learning, brokerage, and the production of secondary guidance. The analysis of a variety of peer learning practices has shown that E4 group organisations build capacity and competence through the development of repertoires for the negotiation of meaning, via their extended networks of practitioners. Trends in the institutionalisation of peer learning indicate an opening of the governance of European higher education towards a system of collective learning and experimentalism.

However, it is too early to say whether these tendencies, which this paper has mapped in the fields of quality assurance and to a smaller extent, teaching and learning, are indicative of a “shift in gear” towards reflexive governance of European higher

education. Further research should cover other thematic areas and longitudinal analyses. Nevertheless, such future research could benefit from embracing a more pragmatist research agenda towards multi-level and network governance, transcending rationalist actor-centred perspectives. The study has shown that the concept of practice as an analytical unit and as a logic of individual and collective action is particularly apt to grasp the social and political dynamics of European stakeholder communities in a more systematic way. This involves going beyond “visible” policy statements and exploring the social context of their production, through which actors and their practices are interconnected.

Alternative explanations also warrant further exploration. As others have noted before, the rapprochement of organisations in their positions (Fumasoli et al., 2018) and their increased entanglement through practice invites questions of isomorphism and continued link to lower level constituencies. “Revolving doors” is common between the Brussels secretariats of E4 organisations and continuity is often maintained through individuals switching positions, among whom the salience of ESU alumni has been analysed (Elken & Vukasovic, 2014). This begs the question of the emergence of a supranational community of practitioners, which has eventually evolved into an epistemic community through the convergence in their policy beliefs. Nevertheless, the CoP approach invites a further examination of the idea that individual allegiances and preferences do not stem directly from formal institutional affiliations.

In terms of reflexive capacity-building, the analysis has identified strong indications of first-order reflexivity regarding the unintended consequences engendered by the European quality assurance framework, for instance in the context of agency review practices. Interpretive insight from EQAF as a community of practice has shown the importance of the production of cognitive templates which enable accessing and



extracting transferable knowledge from local practice and matching communities of practice across borders. Reflexive capacity-building is stimulated through legitimate peripheral participation, making EQAF a meta-community of practice, or in other words, a transnational juncture point through which geographically dispersed communities of practice can connect. At the same time, the specialisation of the formats of contribution, focusing on maximising practice transfer, may undermine the possibilities for second-order reflexivity, i.e. the questioning of the philosophical and epistemological foundations of doing quality assurance, which was more common in the early years of the Forum.

Finally, perhaps one the main obstacles to maintaining the reflexive momentum is found in its own reflexes towards institutionalisation, reification and specialisation. E4 organisations have a strategic interest in maintaining the ESG as a boundary object, but at the same time, they encounter growing pressures towards reification both from above and below: policy-makers are moving towards establishing structured formats for bottom-up experimentation (through peer support or university alliances), while agencies and institutions call for clear interpretations to navigate the complexity and multiplicity of guidelines, principles and best practices. Hence, it is imaginable that the current dynamic hinging on interpretive flexibility will collapse from within.

## V. **Liminality, positionality, reflexivity – an introspective account of the researcher-researched relationship**

The child mimics other people's actions rather than 'models'.<sup>50</sup> (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 74)

No research on reflexivity should be devoid of discussions of reflexivity as an epistemic practice. This chapter attempts to give a reflective account of the evolution of my own position as a researcher and a practitioner, focusing on the transformations and limitations occurring within the practice of academic research vis-à-vis the object of the study. A standalone chapter on these issues is warranted for multiple reasons. First, a growing number of scholars assume hybrid professional identities during various stages of their career, including PhD students choosing non-academic career paths or mid-career professionals embarking on graduate studies. The rise of the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983) and the practitioner-researcher in various fields such as public administration, transnational policy-making or education (Jarvis, 1999) is expected to be amplified by the mass migration of PhD graduates from academe to industry and government. Longitudinal data reports a 11.5 percentage point drop in academic placements and a 18.1 point increase in industry job entries of U.S. PhD graduates over a 30-year period (1990-2020) (Williams June, 2022)<sup>51</sup>. Confronting the implications of this trend for social scientific research is unavoidable.

Second, journal articles leave limited space for in-depth methodological discussions, thus this chapter can be read as an extended appendix to the papers featured in the dissertation. Furthermore, in public policy research, the academic vocation is closely intertwined with a commitment to the public good, oftentimes dissimulating

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<sup>50</sup> “On n’imite pas les « modèles », mais les actions des autres.” (Bourdieu, 2015, p. 189)

<sup>51</sup> According to Eurostat data, only 32.4% of full-time equivalent researchers in the EU were employed in the higher education sector in 2020 (Eurostat, 2021a).

political effects through technical expertise. Being member of an academic community which prides itself in being socially concerned (Elkana & Klöpper, 2016) and connected to policy-making, through the activities of the Yehuda Elkana Center for Higher Education, reflection is also a moral duty.

Writing about reflexivity in the context of ethnographic and praxiographic research is in itself a performative act of reflection. Accordingly, this chapter documents the practical steps and the materials I engaged with during the research process to understand in what ways and to what extent my physical presence, my actions, my socio-demographic characteristics, my background knowledge, as well as my worldviews have interfered with the process of research. I also aim to show how my own professional practice has shaped my scholarly interest in understanding practice and pragmatic knowledge as elementary units of social and political life. This is further contextualised within a discussion of methodological choices and analytical strategies.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that as an agent of “reflexive individualisation”, the writing of this chapter is concomitant with the process of constructing my own biography (Beck et al., 1994, p. 15). Autoethnography, in moderate dosage to avoid traps of solipsism; can illuminate how lived experiences of the researcher situated and conditioned within a broader social field, and thus imprints on the research process and the output (Schwartz-Shea, 2014, p. 133). The discussion is structured along three guiding notions: *liminality*, *positionality* and *reflexivity*; as a researcher-practitioner’s triad underpinning methodologically sound and ethically grounded qualitative research.

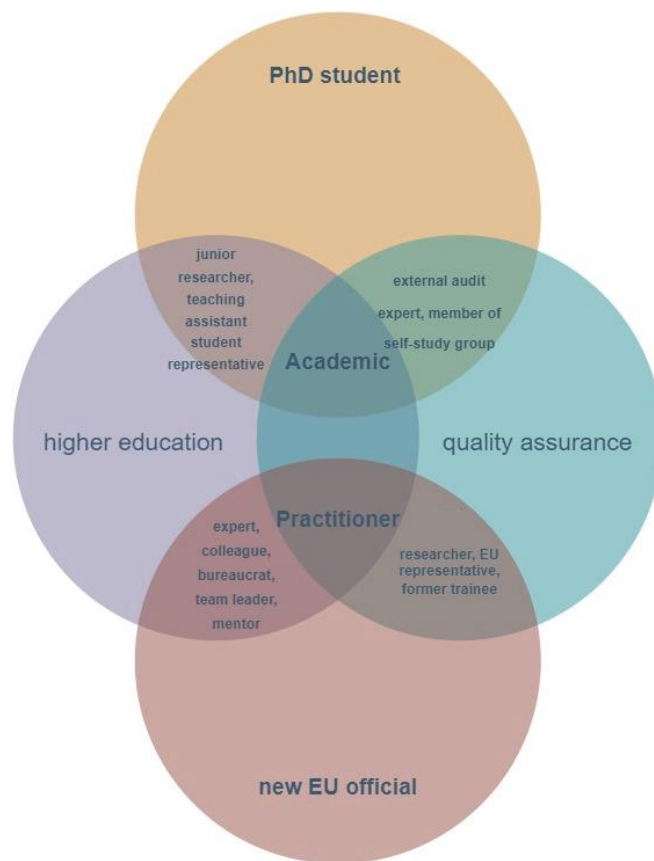
In this endeavour, I draw inspiration from the work of policy anthropologists, organisational ethnographers and practice scholars, such as Cris Shore (Shore, 2006), Barbara Czarniawska (Czarniawska, 1997, 2007), and Rebecca Adler-Nissen (Adler-

Nissen, 2016; Adler-Nissen & Drieschova, 2019) . In addition, I rely on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice and epistemic reflexivity to guide me in the analytical exploration of the interactions between my liminal position and the study of the multiple fields (higher education, EU governance and quality assurance) in which I claim membership.

## **1. Liminality**

This section interprets the development of my professional identities that have determined my positionality as a researcher, through the concept of liminality, which has been defined as an “in-between space in relationships, social roles, and contexts in times or at places of transition and change” (Davis, 2022). Another term I use to narrate my experience of liminality is peripherality, which accentuates the spatiality of in-betweenness, and indicates the possibility of more temporally sustainable forms of liminality than the one originally conceived by Turner (1967). Peripherality, as developed by Lave and Wenger in the context of collective learning theory based on the study of apprenticeship (Lave & Wenger, 2009; Wenger, 2002), denotes a modified access to a given community of practice, associated with limited responsibility and legitimacy which hinges on learning.

Transitioning into and between professions simultaneously may help the researcher acquire a reflexive habitus (Sweetman, 2003), in which a constant oscillation between various identities produces an effect of surprise and unfamiliarity at each encounter with the other world. This is especially useful when studying practices of communities in which one holds membership (see [V./3.2.](#)). There are also numerous limitations and disadvantages stemming from liminality and peripherality, which are linked to uncertain social recognition and an uneven mastery of skills. Figure 6 depicts my positionality across temporal (orange/red shades) and spatial (blue/green shades) dimensions during the research process (2015-2022).



*Figure 6. Visual depiction of my memberships in multiple communities of practice. The sets of “PhD student” and “new EU official” indicate liminal positions. Intersections of sets in the diagram indicate peripherality. Author’s own work.*

The beginning and end of temporal in-betweenness are marked by rites of passage (Turner, 1967). In Academia, the status of the PhD student is often cited as the very definition of liminal existence. In the literature, doctoral liminal experiences are signposted by reaching certain disciplinary thresholds, emotional and mental experiences (Atkinson et al., 2021; Keefer, 2015), linked to the ambiguous state of being “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1967). However, the doctoral thesis is not merely a learning process, but as Bourdieu writes, an act of “recognition granted to an institutionalized thought only on those who implicitly accept the limits assigned by the institution” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 95), passed on from master to apprentice. It is thus a symbolic power transfer, on the basis of which not only the student, but also her supervisor (and ultimately the institution) is judged. This experience is further conditioned by structural factors of the higher education

system, for instance, whether PhD candidates are considered employees and junior peers or students in a master-apprentice dynamic. I discuss the saliency of specific liminal experiences in the context of participant observation in [section 2.2](#) and liminal reflexivity in [section 3.2](#).

In the European civil service, the ultimate rite of passage is succeeding the “concours”, the multi-stage entrance examinations centrally administered by the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO), which has also been a target of criticism for its selectivity and disputed efficiency. The prestige of the competition is associated with the fact that it is the only way to access permanent positions in EU institutions. The ritualistic dimension is reinforced by the low rates of success, which is reported to be on average less than 2% (European Court of Auditors, 2020), comparing the number of candidates to laureates. In the 2015-2016 generalist competition (which serves to recruit fresh university graduates), in which I participated, 159 candidates were selected for the “reserve list” from 25,379 initial applications (European Court of Auditors, 2020), resulting in a success rate of 0.6%. However, not all laureates of the reserve list are guaranteed a job, and applicants usually take several years to progress from the initial test to getting a job offer.

Figure 7 depicts the timeline of the different rites of passage and their intersections with the research process. I applied both for the concours and the PhD programme in January 2015, entering two lengthy initiation processes or rituals spanning over 7 years. I was selected for the reserve list in April 2016 and I started working at the European Commission in December 2018. I designed the research project and completed about 70% of data collection by the time I entered the EU civil service. However, when comparing my social position in the two communities, I may be perceived as more established within the EU administration due to my status as an official, despite the fact that I have more

professional experience in the academic field. Another risk is that in contemporary careers, which are often characterised by hybridity, liminality can become more enduring, without acquiring institutionally recognised forms (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016).

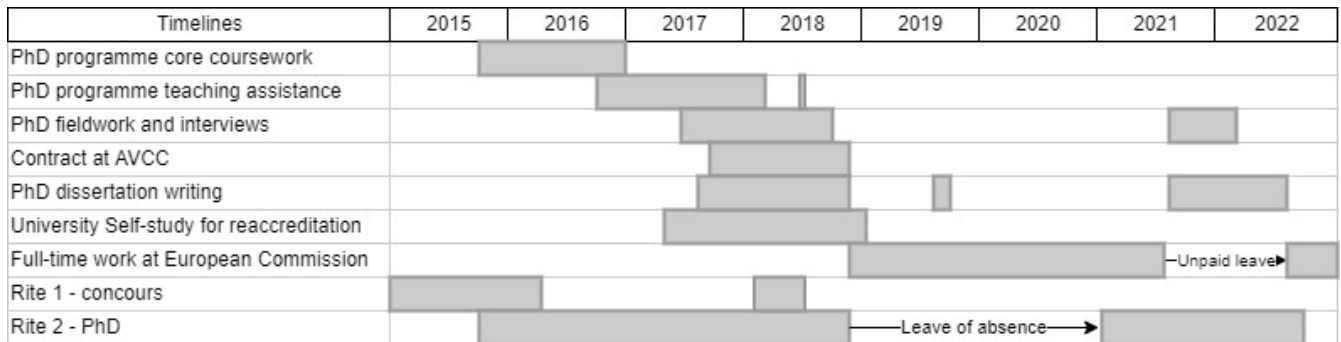


Figure 7. Parallel timelines of research and professional activities 2015-2022.

The European civil service, and specifically its core personnel (including officials, temporary and contract staff according to the official terminology), the so-called “Eurocrats”, has offered a popular research topic since the dawn of European integration. In this scholarly tradition, the image of the Eurocrat is associated with technocratic power and a quasi-mythical multicultural society of “Eurocracy” (Kelemen & Tarrant, 2011), populating the “Brussels bubble”. In the past ten years, the key trends shaping the European civil service include changing demographics, the reconfiguration of recruitment practices towards generalist skill profiles and diverse internal tensions. A recent monograph on the political sociology of the European civil service (Georgakakis, 2017) has sought to unravel the different myths and popular representations associated with the figure of the “Eurocrat”, marked by both stigma and “differentiated European excellence” (Georgakakis, 2017, p. 19), the fabrication and constant re-production of which is embedded in the historical dialectics of European integration.

In this respect, Georgakakis (2017) argues that in fact, Eurocrats themselves engage actively in the creation of the political construction of their identity. This observation is also reinforced by an earlier in-depth anthropological work by Chris Shore

(2006), who argued that idea of European citizenship was constructed politically by Brussels elites; as well as more recent work on the sociology of knowledge in the EU, which highlights “the co-production of theories and practices of European integration” (Adler-Nissen & Kropp, 2015).

At the same time, research on the new generation of young Eurocrats is extremely scarce: the majority of studies deal with “senior” EU officials, holding managerial positions, such as director-generals, directors or head of units. Among the exceptions is a study on national civil servants as a class of “new Eurocrats” (Geuijen et al., 2008), which exemplifies how EU officials themselves are becoming more and more diverse with heterogeneous identities. Following the 2004 enlargement of the EU, the demographics of EU officials have shifted, due to the mass recruitment of officials from new member states. My position as a junior official is a bit of an outlier, as my age group represents 3% of the total population of employees (Eurostat, 2021b). It is more typical for those in my age group to work on fixed-term contracts as trainees, junior professionals, contract agents or temporary agents.

It is relevant to discuss my position within this densely symbolic field, for two reasons. The first relates to how this mythical figure is recreated within my thoughts and actions, influencing the development of my scholarly thinking and practices. The second reason is how the pervasiveness of the myth may impact others’ perceptions and judgements of my identity and by extension, my academic work, which, in turn affects my own reflexive disposition. Here, Bourdieu’s notion of the “oblate” may be considered to orient self-reflection, albeit in a different sense in which he understood his own “oblateness” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 213). Oblates are the “miraculously lucky” members of the cultural elite, rising to the top from modest backgrounds via meritocratic channels, who uncritically appropriate the values and practices of the institution to which



they attribute their social ascent (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 100). In my case, the open competition seems to have catapulted me from the monolingual Hungarian countryside middle class into the circles of the stereotypically most socio-economically privileged, such as multilingual and multinational cosmopolitans educated at the College of Europe, which is, when compared with the objective characteristics of the population, is no more than a “well-founded illusion” (Durkheim, cited in Georgakakis, 2017). Still, I may be regarded as someone who by default is characterised by unquestioned loyalty to the institutions and whose ability to exercise critical judgement is distorted by socialisation into these political and technocratic elites. There is a risk that by constitution I can never reach a desired level of reflectiveness in my research.

The mutual permeability of the EU administrative and academic communities, to this date, has only been marginally studied, and almost never critically addressed by their own members, despite the fact that Shore already noted 20 years ago that

“an extraordinarily high number of EU officials are themselves prominent writers, academics, pundits and experts within this newly institutionalised domain of knowledge. Equally striking is the large number of publications that have been produced by writers who are connected to the EU institutions either as recipients of EU funding or as current or former employees. (Shore, 2006, p. 28)

Entering the field of Eurocracy for a defined time period, with the aim to gain access to “insider knowledge” is a widely encouraged academic practice, including at CEU, for instance, as a trainee (often during the PhD studies) or a detached expert (in the case of more senior scholars). At the same time, in my undoubtedly limited, yet recurring experience, continuing to take part in academic activities (especially if that scholarship concerns EU policy-making) as a fully-fledged official is treated at best with mutual suspicion (and occasionally, mutual envy), in certain cases leading to more durable forms of liminality, especially if the individual gets “stuck” at relatively low positions of

hierarchy in both fields. I have been advised by my academic mentors not to accentuate my “official” status (the distinction is drawn here between the bureaucrat and academic as established identities, not the employed and affiliated), when participating in a project or submitting my manuscript for publication, to “avoid being regarded as a bureaucrat”. This is again striking in the light of Shore’s research, whose interviewees saw themselves primarily “as policy-makers and intellectuals rather than administrators and public servants” (Shore, 2006, p. 189). On another occurrence I participated at an academic workshop, where I was struck by the outright aversion of some members of the research group to initiate a dialogue with Brussels policy-makers about the findings of the project, when I inquired about how they were planning to fulfil the project’s goal concerning the presentation of findings to policy-makers.

While at first glance it may seem that this issue concerns a privileged few and may not merit a more exhaustive examination, it also may resurface on the long term more systematically, due to the expansive practice of EU institutions to outsource research-intensive tasks to networks of experts, and the growing number of PhD graduates pursuing non-academic careers, while retaining academic aspirations. The discussion links to the wider research agenda of the sociology of EU integration and the sociology of higher education as an academic field.

My own research on transnational communities of practice and policy learning, presented in [Papers 1](#) and [3](#), indicates that stakeholder organisations in higher education build expert capacity through linkages with HEIs and research centres specialising in higher education studies, notably in the Netherlands, UK, Portugal and Norway. Several of the authors of EQAF, especially in senior positions, hold multiple affiliations, with national authorities and quality assurance agencies, HEIs and stakeholder organisations. EUA and ESU are two organisations which have seen many in their leadership and senior

advisory ranks rise to prestigious academic positions and vice versa, which leads to the accumulation of social and scientific capital (Bourdieu, 1996). In one of the few existing studies on knowledge production in European higher education, Deem (2015) identifies EU-funded collaborative research projects gatekept by top-heavy and close-knit higher education research networks, predominantly in Western Europe, as one of the main drivers of contemporary knowledge generation in the field. She issues a warning to young researchers to preserve their independence from Brussels bureaucrats who commission the collaborative projects, noting that policy makers “don’t tend to look around for new ideas by reading the evidence, they look for evidence that fits what they have already decided to do” (Deem, 2015, p. 270).

Although she notes that “established academics” are the ones closest to the bureaucrats with the actual capacity to influence policy, by far more entrenched in power structures than their younger colleagues, their lack of reflexivity on their influence on policy-making is not problematised, as it is assumed that their classical training and experience social sciences shields them from being captured by politicians, in contrast to the “naïveté” of young researchers. Note that the data only includes interviews with early career researchers.

While supporting early career researchers in developing a reflexive disposition is crucial, continuing to overlook the socio-economic and cultural-paradigmatic transformations (such as hybrid identities) affecting their employability only leads to more asymmetry, less anchoring in social theory, and the reproduction of social-scientific power in these networks. Another important insight of Deem’s study is that many researchers working in the field of higher education do not have a background in social science, hence “their projects often reflect local conditions or practitioner challenges, not European concerns” (Deem, 2015, p. 265). However, in contrast with calls to nurture a

culture of mutual avoidance, which is not structurally possible if one wants to make a career in higher education research, an alternative way forward is mutual engagement, both from the side of academics and practitioners. Entering a reflexive conversation concerning roles and the situatedness of knowledge claims should be integrated into academic training at doctoral level and methodological repertoire of collaborative research projects. The issue is likely to gain further salience with the expansion of the European universities initiative.

At the individual level, the researcher may resort to a Bourdieusian agenda of turning the tools of social science against oneself and one's own field. To mitigate the biases of generalising my own personal experience, and introduce a modest form of participant objectivation (Bourdieu, 2003), I conducted a small-scale survey, based on a snowball sampling method, among anonymous employees of international organisations on perceptions linked to the reconciliation of liminal identities. The questionnaire is included [Appendix IV](#). While the sample is not representative of the population of researcher-practitioners (which is a yet unspecified category with unknown parameters), thus excluding generalisability, the results can be indicative of directions of future research. The questionnaire was sent to my personal (mostly business) contacts at various international organisations based in Brussels and Geneva, whom then forwarded it to colleagues with relevant experience. Responses were collected in June 2022, over a three-week period via Google Forms.

In total, 11 responses were received<sup>52</sup>, from anonymous employees (including recent former employees) of the European Commission, European Parliament, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the European University Association and other

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<sup>52</sup> Due to the low number of respondents, data visualisation is not appropriate. The results are reported in a narrative format and the questionnaire is included in [Appendix IV](#).

unspecified international organisations. The respondents in the sample obtained or plan to complete their PhD degree between 2005 and 2025 in the fields of international relations, political science, international law, sociology and the humanities (history and literature). 81% (9) reported engaging at least once a year in academic activities, such as teaching, peer-reviewed publishing and attending academic conferences. While those who work in their field or an adjacent area felt that their academic skills were valued in their non-academic organisation; of those who reported having academic career aspirations (7), only one person agreed that their professional work did not interfere with their research career.

87% (7 out of 8) of those who reported academic activities found it difficult to reconcile the two roles, and the same percentage reported that their academic work benefits from their professional experience. In terms of perceptions of liminality, the results showed a mixed picture: only less than half of the respondents identified either as researcher-practitioner or practitioner-researcher, while 3 respondents did not wish to label themselves either as a researcher or a practitioner. Nevertheless, 72% reported that hybrid careers are not common in their organisation. Overall, this exploratory survey has highlights the asymmetry between self-perceptions of liminality and institutionalised activities, and indicates the need for further research in this direction.

Negotiating liminality also presents a growing challenge within universities themselves, particularly in the era of rapid expansion of university administration (Baltaru & Soysal, 2018). Administrators or staff with non-conventional research positions (project officers, community organisers, data analysts, pedagogical developers) often hold doctorates, engage in research activities through their work, and publish in peer reviewed journals; yet they struggle to obtain symbolic recognition of their hybrid status. The interviews I conducted at Uppsala University have shown, for instance, that

administrators at the Division of Quality Assurance and Enhancement, who had previously worked full time traditional academic jobs (as researchers, lecturers) at the same university, continued to consider themselves as researchers and scholars, and tended to describe their activities as scholarship; while tenured academics at denied them the same appreciation.

Quality assurance in higher education is another space of in-betweenness, although the space is limited here to explore all possible ramifications of this debate. In the context of this research, student participation in quality assurance can be understood as a form of peripheral participation in higher education governance. This was highlighted by one of my interviewees:

[...] it's easier if you're from Poland, probably Hungary, to convince your government to implement Bologna reforms because they're internationally recognized, than to convince them [...] on their own. Because [...] they're more trusted and taken more seriously. And that's the problem of students' movements, because representatives [are] often considered as junior people in the room. (Interview with former Vice-President at ESU, 2021)

In 2017, I was invited to participate as the student representative in the Steering Committee responsible for the reaccreditation of CEU with a US accreditation agency. I was identified as a “competent person” partially because my PhD project is linked to quality assurance, although I was rather researching the politics and sociology of quality assurance, than mastering quality assurance as a professional field of expertise. This experience gave me an insight into the self-study process, where I was assigned to the self-study group on ethics and integrity, and organised focus groups on the concept of academic freedom. At the time, the topic was a central preoccupation in institutional narratives that aimed to secure CEU’s survival against the threats imposed by the Hungarian government’s new policy, which fundamentally challenged CEU’s existence.

I also gained access to how the university, through its double (Hungarian and US) accreditation model, produced two different self-studies, one based on the ESG, and another based on the US accreditation standards. Gaining an “insider” perspective on the pragmatic organisation of the accreditation process, while remaining on the margins of most of the decisive conversations was pivotal in understanding the limits of the “student as expert” position in quality assurance. It made me experience the oft-cited tokenism: for instance, I wrote about a petition launched by students in an effort to increase doctoral stipends to keep up with rising living costs under the affordability section; however, this did not make it in the final report. The space here does not allow me to elaborate further on the complexity and the significance of the accreditation process, which took place in the context of a historically unprecedented political attack against the institution, but it is important to mention it as a source of inspiration for focusing the analysis on institutional narratives and lacunae in my research.

## 2. Positionality

Positionality is closely linked to both liminality and reflexivity, as it involves the identification of the researcher’s position vis-à-vis the object of her study and in the wider social field. It indicates a “partiality of view [...] that flows from how a researcher enters the field and negotiates occupational and other hierarchies therein” (Schwartz-Shea, 2014, p. 133). It is especially important to elaborate on the context-specific circumstances of participant observation, as the term encompasses a wide variety of methods, perspectives and identities. In this regard, I found Czarniawska’s (2007) guidance most relevant for my situation: she restricts the usage of *participant observation* to situations in which the researcher truly assumes an insider position, by participating in the same activities as the people she observes. She proposes *shadowing* to designate techniques of observation which involve accompanying and observing individuals in the context of

their daily activities, for example at their workplace (Czarniawska, 2007). Shadowing is a particularly useful technique to observe *reflection-in-action* (Schön, 1983) and to study practices in general (Bueger & Gadinger, 2018a).

### ***2.1. Participant observation at European quality assurance events and follow-up interviews (Papers 1 and 3)***

Following the publication of the ESG 2015, several European-level projects and peer learning activities were launched to accompany its implementation. I decided to select the EQUIP project and the EQAF for participant observation, as they were the biggest multi-stakeholder peer learning events related to the implementation of ESG in 2016-2017 (my second and third year of PhD studies). These were also the ones to which I was disposed to gain legitimate access. I signed up to both events as a PhD student, and I communicated about my research topic and my intention to note observations to the organisers. As open venues, it was not technically feasible to ask for written consent from the 111 (EQUIP workshop) and around 450 (EQAF 2017) registered participants, thus my next best alternative was to obtain the informed consent of the organisers to use my observation notes and the materials circulated at the events.

In addition, about 80% of the materials were uploaded on the website of the project and the events and were publicly available. An example is the EQUIP webinars, which are currently (June 2022) still accessible on YouTube. When I returned to my PhD studies in 2021 and amended the initial research design by adding a third case (the ET 2020 peer learning activity or PLA), I repeated this request and recorded the consent of the members of the EQUIP project organising team and the EQAF organising committee during the follow-up research interviews ([Appendix IV](#)).

My position at the EQUIP workshop in 2016 and at EQAF in 2017 was that of peripheral-member-researcher (P. A. Adler & Adler, 1994), which involves “light”



participation in the activities. I participated in group exercises and discussions to the extent that this did not interfere with the group dynamics, and in these smaller settings I disclosed my research objectives to the fellow participants, but in general I refrained from taking an active role voluntarily (such as volunteering to present a good practice in group activities). I also used these occasions to approach the organisers of the events to ask questions about the organisation and establish contacts for further interviews. Since participation at EQAF incurs a fee (120 €), I received a travel grant from the Doctoral School. My travel and accommodation was supported by the Yehuda Elkana Center for Higher Education, in exchange for logistical and professional support for the study visit of a group of university rectors from Myanmar, who were accompanied by colleagues of the Center.

I conducted most of the interviews with members of the EQUIP project and the EQAF organising committee after I returned from my two-year hiatus to the doctoral studies, in 2021. In some cases, I chose to re-interview the same person twice, and asked about the outcomes and the follow-up of the project (since it was closed in 2018). The questionnaire was amended with additional questions on other topics, as some interviews were also used to inform research for [Paper 3](#). I also obtained internal materials from the organisers, such as briefings, Power Point presentations, participant lists, programmes, and survey results, from the organisers. The analysis of the learning settings in [Paper 1](#) largely relies on these preparatory materials.

The selection of participants in interviews for [Papers 1](#) and [3](#) followed a targeted strategy, combined with snowballing. The pool of possible interviewees was rather delimited, as E4 organisation secretariats are quite small: in most of these organisations, only one policy officer is in charge of all QA-related activities. I also targeted senior officials (Secretary-General, deputy Secretary General and Director). Out of 13 initial

contacts, only one was refused. The interviewees cover all major stakeholders in quality assurance at the European level: E4 organisations, EQAR, the European Commission, Eurydice, and the BFUG Thematic Peer Group C on quality assurance. At the European Commission, the number of policy officers who specifically deal with quality assurance in higher education is 2, both of them were interviewed. Both of them had been active in the field for over a decade (one of them since 2001), hence their insight and “institutional memory” was particularly useful.

I did not attend personally the ET 2020 PLA in 2017, simply because as a PhD student I had no access to it – it was not advertised publicly prior to the event. I could have contacted the Working Group to inquire about its activities, but at the time I was not aware that stakeholders were also invited to these events, and thus it was not in my focus. Despite this shortcoming, I decided to add it as a third case to my research, as I believed I was able to obtain sufficient data via other sources.

In order to maintain the boundary between my position as a researcher and as an EU official, I obtained written permission from the responsible Head of Sector to use the technical documents for research purposes ([Appendix IV](#)). In addition, as an EU official, I was obliged to obtain prior authorisation and pass an ethical clearance procedure for any outside activity while on leave on personal grounds. This was granted for the purpose of the PhD research. I also maintained the boundary by only contacting my interviewees via my CEU PhD student email address. However, I also disclosed my affiliation with the Commission to all of the interviewees, which may have impacted their perception of me.

Another potential source of conflict of interest came up during the interview with the Director of EQAR, as CEU’s Yehuda Elkana Center (YECHE) was selected to coordinate EQAR’s external evaluation in late 2020. The review process coincided with my round of interviews, in October 2021. The evaluation process was closed in 2021,

prior to the writing of [Paper 3](#), which contains references to EQAR review practices and secondary guidance. I confirmed my independence to the Director, as I did not, in any form, participate, or have access to any information about the evaluation process. I physically spent the final phase of my PhD research and dissertation writing (2021-2022) in Brussels and in Hungary (Budapest and Debrecen), thus I avoided any exposure to informal encounters with colleagues at YECHE, which is based in Vienna.

## ***2.2. Participant observation and organisational ethnography in Sweden and Hungary (Paper 2)***

Originally, I intended to select two or three institutions for the comparative study representing diverse cases in different regulatory contexts with regard to quality assurance (Nordic, Benelux or Anglo-Saxon and Central and Eastern European). Due to their ESG-related reform processes in external quality assurance, Sweden and Hungary quickly became my primary foci of interest. My involvement with AVCC is due to serendipity: I learned from an unaffiliated colleague that the institution was looking for an external advisor who would visit the institution and offer ESG-related expertise for the reform of its internal QA in preparation for the accreditation process. I happened to match the profile they were looking for. I assessed this offer thoroughly from the perspective of research design before accepting it: while due to its unique profile it was far from a typical case, it presented a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to immerse myself in the field during a period of transition and gain an insider's view into institutional reflexivity, which is otherwise almost impenetrable from an outside vantage point. In addition, there was a direct connection to the ESG, since the institution was actively seeking to translate the ESG into its own institutional reality and practices.

Consequently, when selecting the Swedish case, I adjusted my design to fit an extreme case selection strategy: while AVCC is a small, young, local and specialist

institution, affiliated with the Catholic church, Uppsala University is a large, old, international public research university. Additionally, Uppsala was also in the process of preparation for the new institutional evaluation procedure, which allowed me to conduct my fieldwork on the same timeline in both institutions, albeit my visit at Uppsala was much shorter. This research design offered several theoretical and methodological benefits:

- (1) *Policy relevance*: both institutions referenced the ESG in the development of their internal QA system. Both institutions were preparing to be evaluated in a national QA system based on the ESG. One of the core principles of the ESG is that it is supposed to be applicable to any type of higher education provision across all national contexts.
- (2) *Practice theory*: An insider position is useful to develop familiarity with local practice, which has an inherently non-propositional (material or bodily) character (Nicolini, 2017).
- (3) *Reflexivity*: In both cases, the development or reform of the IQA system preceded an external evaluation, making it possible to study different temporal dimensions of reflexivity (habitual and crisis) and to maximise variation in local reflective practice by choosing two very different cases.

#### 2.2.1. *Apor Vilmos Catholic College, Hungary*

At AVCC, I was formally employed as an external contracted expert on quality assurance from October 2017 until November 2018, when my assignment was terminated by mutual agreement (as I was preparing to enter employment at the European institutions). In this capacity, I completed four main tasks: 1. organising, conducting and analysing focus group interviews with students and faculty on course evaluations; 2.

collecting and translating documents and good practices related to the ESG; 3. participating in the meetings and discussions of the Quality Project Team and Quality Assurance Committee; 4. commenting and contributing to draft documents (institutional self-study questionnaire, new QA handbook). From the outset, this engagement was explicitly negotiated with the leadership's and participants' agreement to be studied as part of my research project during this period. All participants gave their written consent to be observed and interviewed (see [Appendix IV](#)).

In this position, I consider myself a legitimate peripheral participant, “who participates in the actual practice of an expert, but only to a limited degree and with limited responsibility for the ultimate product as a whole” (Lave & Wenger, 2009, p. 15). Accordingly, I did not assume any formal responsibility in the actual accreditation process of the institution, my tasks were limited to the facilitation of internal dialogue and expert input based on my academic background. In addition, through my remunerated contributions to the internal quality reform process, my mode of participation can be described as productive (Knox, 2005).

In anthropology, paid work has been conceptualised as a way of moving from “imitative participation”, which implies that the researcher participates in an activity for a different reason than other participants, to full productive participation. According to Knox, this can lead to an identity crisis, a conflict between the dual purpose of participation, as the participant-researcher gradually “becomes governed by norms, values, decision-making processes and sentiments which also inform participants’ action” (Knox, 2005, p. 6). As I describe below, I also experienced this crisis as a conflict between multiple roles, and had to make decisions which I could not foresee in advance. However, this situation is also one that has the potential to enhance reflexivity. As my research topic is precisely reflexivity, this type of participation is particularly useful to gain an

approximate understanding of other participants' internal struggle between habitus and reflexivity. Renowned ethnographer Dvora Yanow cautions junior scholars about the dangers of getting entangled in the quagmire of ethnographic and productive roles, and underlines the importance of an explicitly negotiated entrance to the field (Yanow, 2012). This criterion was strictly observed in this research, nonetheless, I did make mistakes along the way, which probably would not have occurred, had I been more experienced. Yet, I take these as opportunities for learning and reflexivity.

### *Ethical considerations*

Regarding the ethical dimensions of my research, I sought guidance from my PhD Supervisory Panel and I also consulted with the Chair of the CEU Ethics Committee on 5 April 2018. I was advised to conduct a self-evaluation on the basis of the institution's checklist for research ethics, which I completed in 2018 and again in 2022, before the submission of my dissertation. The supervisory panel did not require me to go through the official ethics approval procedure, but advised me to take the following steps:

- (1) Include a section in my paper and dissertation which shows reflection on this issue.
- (2) Consult and reference relevant literature on ethnographic research.
- (3) Discuss the added value of my approach from the perspective of research goals.
- (4) Take necessary steps to ensure that my paid work does not interfere with the research.

Accordingly, all above points are addressed in the present chapter. The steps I took to minimise interference between my paid work and the research are further detailed in section 3.1.

*Reflections on my positionality and roles*

Beyond engaging my own reflection process on my position as a researcher, I also must reflect on how tensions between my own role awareness and other's perceptions of me as an expert shaped my actions and behaviour. At AVCC, I was initially perceived as a neutral external person, "of whom nobody is dependent or afraid" (Interview with anonymous college professor, 2018) and therefore can facilitate internal conversations between management, staff, and students. Initially, I viewed myself as an expert who can translate European good practices, advise on meeting accreditation requirements, and indicate international venues and conferences for exchange and professional training on QA for staff engaged in quality assurance.

However, throughout the entire process, the ambiguity and vagueness surrounding my role(s) grew thicker. This stemmed from, on the one hand, my own inexperience in negotiating contracts and expecting clear task and role definitions, and from the contractual and social context of my employment on the other. My ability to control the situation was further diminished by the fact that I worked on an hourly rate basis, but within a limited budget, which I often had to negotiate. Nominally, I was contracted by the administration to provide external expert support and coordination regarding quality assurance issues, which were quite broadly formulated, and tasks were assigned to me on a rolling basis.

Formally, my immediate supervisor in the administrative hierarchy was the quality assurance manager, but the committee functioned with an informal hierarchy, even though the Rector and her office always had decision-making prerogative, they trusted the team in technical matters. I worked closely with the QA manager and another member of the team, the former quality manager and respected professor, who continued

to exercise symbolic authority and was informally more involved in decision-making, regarding for instance team composition, task allocation and methodology.

Both members assigned me tasks and raised sometimes conflicting expectations. In general, as I also elaborate in [Paper 2](#), the tension between administrative and academic habitus and corresponding quality goals was partially embodied through my experience: one expected me to contribute as much as possible to the administrative preparation of the accreditation procedure, while the other hoped that I would assist in conducting an in-depth sociological study (for which I did not consider myself qualified at the time), including writing research articles for the locally edited journal. I categorically resisted this last request, which was more of wishful thinking than an eventuality, but continued to feel pressured. Ultimately, I developed an interpretation of a situation in which I was expected to take up the role of a “wild card”, that is to fill in the gaps wherever there was a lack of time or expertise, for instance I was asked to make diagrams for the accreditation visit presentation. I quickly became aware of my own limitations both in terms of skills and knowledge, as well as time (I was still a full-time stipend student with occasional teaching assignments and I conducted fieldwork research at another sites in parallel), and over time I managed to assert boundaries more successfully, but not without conflicts (see [V./3.1.](#)).

I conducted all interviews at the end of my assignment, following the accreditation team’s visit, to make sure that both my interviewees and myself were in a position in which we could engage in a conversation as free from external pressures as possible. The quality manager referred to my activity as a form of external audit, a label which although used officially, I never truly embraced, as I perceived my role to be much more limited and academic in nature. My recommendations were made in the context of the implementation of the ESG, and focused on engaging faculty and students in a dialogue



about quality. In hindsight, I behaved more like an assistant executing requests than an expert with her own sense of initiative. The accreditation process itself, as I report in [Paper 2](#), was steered by the college administration and I had limited access to its internal dynamics. Therefore, I was better positioned to understand how the quality team enacted reflexivity through their approaches, theories and habits through which they confronted the task of internal reform in the shadow of the external evaluation. I also resorted to in-depth interviews with the academic leadership to collect additional data concerning the accreditation process and its preparations.

### *2.2.2. Uppsala University, Sweden*

At Uppsala University, which was a cold contact, my fieldwork spanned between 20 April to 15 May 2018, and supported by a departmental research grant (SPP). I was officially hosted by the Division of Quality Assurance and Enhancement. I shadowed the Head of Division and the Head of Unit for Quality and Evaluation, who introduced me to their colleagues and welcomed me in meetings. I shared working space with the colleagues of the Unit, in an open office setting, which enabled me to observe their daily interactions and traditions. One of this was the traditional Swedish coffee break – fika – where I was invited to join, allowing me to engage in small talk and developing more personal acquaintanceship with the administrators. I sometimes shared lunches with them as well, and I organised a small “farewell” fika before I left. Overall, I developed and sustained friendly relations with the people I was observing the closest. Some of the quality managers came to Budapest in the summer of 2018 for a conference, and we had dinner together. In 2022, I re-contacted them to offer the opportunity to comment on my draft paper, to which they duly responded.

I was also able to interact informally with academic staff through three channels, via the educational developers and their courses for faculty, my targeted contact with the

Department of Business Administration and my personal contact with a family of university professors, whose AirBnB I was renting. The Department of Business Administration also invited me to one of their research seminars to present my PhD project. I also used these channels to organise the faculty focus groups, making sure that I obtain a sample of respondents who represent various areas across the three disciplinary domains. However, I was less successful with reaching out to students (see [2.2.3.](#)).

While I do not speak Swedish, therefore my full participation in meetings was hindered, I was able to observe social dynamics and practices. The meetings were characterised by dynamic consensus-seeking, meaning that usually the discussions on specific topics were very active and lively, and culminated in strong, often non-verbal expressions of agreement. The atmosphere was almost always relaxed and what I would characterize as joyful, but at the same time professional: for instance, time keeping was very strictly imposed and respected. Scheduling is a very important practice for organising the working time for quality managers and pedagogical developers: they all have a personalised timetable, which estimates the time spent on each activity, course or consultation. As one interviewee put it, it serves them to “adjust the task according to the time”. It also provides visibility for the entire unit, as everyone can see what others are working on.

Scheduling extends to personal and leisure time: for instance, it is considered to be disrespectful to not join fika twice a day with colleagues and choose to work instead. Work-life balance is equally protected: employers cannot oblige employees to stay overtime or to rearrange their schedule on demand. Culturally, compared to my own socialisation, I sensed a bit of rigidity in this practice which impeded my position as a researcher. For instance, an illness prior to the trip prevented me from preparing an exhaustive interview list and making contacts in advance. In addition, given that Uppsala

is a large university, I hoped to rely on the contacts recommended by my hosts for better targeting. This turned out to be a larger obstacle than I originally expected, as many of those that I contacted found it difficult to schedule a meeting with me with such short (less than 3 weeks) notice, and I ended up backloading my schedule.

Collaboration and a collegial way of working, which was frequently emphasised in the interviews, was a core principle guiding social interactions. Nevertheless, I also observed that certain individuals stood out as authority figures, appealing to their expertise and seniority, whose leadership was implicitly recognised by those in the room and made visible through their informal interactions. Although everyone was encouraged to speak and freely express themselves, it was usually the authority figure who structured and steered these discussions and drew final conclusions. These characters also have institutionalised control over official narratives through their positions of accumulated academic capital (Bourdieu, 1996). Such authority figures include the Head of Division, an emeritus professor and a Head of Unit. As I recount in section 3.3., due to a cultural tendency to avoid confrontation, it was sometimes difficult to elicit accounts of internal conflict, disagreement or negative opinion, especially among administrative staff, and to a lesser extent among career academics. However, confrontational attitudes were quite common when discussing the university's relations with other actors, such as the state, the agency or stakeholders.

### 2.2.3. *Negotiating access to the fieldsite*

For any research dealing with practice, access to sites where often informal and undocumented practices can be directly observed makes or breaks the case. However, it is notoriously difficult to gain access to close-knit transnational policy communities, especially those involving governmental experts, due to political sensitivity, confidentiality and reputational concerns. Thus, as a junior researcher, some of these sites

(for instance a Commission PLA) were completely out of my reach at first. Another difficulty is linked to the object of the research itself: peer learning as a methodology and a collective learning philosophy is often restrictive about the presence of non-participants. For instance, despite the fact that I completed an internship at EUA in 2013, and thus I had a pre-established personal connection with EUA organisers of the EQUIP project, I was denied access to observe the EQUIP focus groups organised for HEI representatives on an invitation-only basis. The explanation in this case was that my presence would disrupt the group dynamics.

As alternative strategies to the classical observer participant I opted to gain access to certain sites via legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 2009) and observation by proxy, both of which strategies were afforded by my liminal position. As explained in section 2.1., legitimate peripheral participation at EQAF and EQUIP was a valid and transparent strategy, although limited to events which were open to the general public (those working in higher education). By *observation by proxy*, I refer to my data collection concerning the ET 2020 PLA. While I personally did not attend the event, I interviewed the policy officer in charge of the organisation of the event, and one of the participants. Furthermore, I relied on technical background documents to reconstruct the dynamics of the learning setting. But perhaps most importantly, although I was not present at this particular PLA, I had attended other similar events before, as part of my job at the European Commission. The playbooks of these events are very similar, and I drew on my own insider's knowledge as a participant and organiser to understand the political and policy contexts in which these events are embedded. These experiences helped me formulate questions in a way that spoke to the tacit pragmatic knowledge of the organiser, using a jargon which is familiar to both of us. On the balance, I must

acknowledge that without prior knowledge or contacts, it would have been probably very difficult, if not outright impossible for a junior researcher to access this site.

In the context of organisational fieldwork, an important lesson for future research is that in complex organisations, such as HEIs, access to the field is often limited to particular sub-units of the organisation. To my surprise, both at AVCC and Uppsala, I struggled more with establishing contacts with academic staff and students than I did with administrators and senior leadership, despite the fact that I identified much more with the former groups in my own university community.

At AVCC this can be partly explained by my formal role in the process, but at Uppsala I encountered more of a cultural barrier when it came to access to student spaces and communities. First, I was based in the administration building, so naturally it was more difficult to encounter students informally. Second, “sacred” symbolic student spaces were completely closed off to outsiders. I happened to be in Uppsala during the Walpurgis celebrations (Valborg) in the Spring, which date back to 18<sup>th</sup> century traditions of Swedish “student nations”. Many ceremonial activities (such as breakfast with champagne and cake along the river Fyris) were only accessible to the initiated members of these communities, so I eventually resigned to my role as a foreign spectator of public events. Most student representatives were also occupied with preparations during this period, thus I largely failed in securing interviews with all but one of them, as I my time in the field was very limited.

Finally, an important dimension of access to local knowledge (Wilkinson, 2014) is language. In Hungary, I was conducting the fieldwork in Hungarian, and thus often took quick notes in Hungarian, which then I re-worked later in English. In Sweden, I interacted with all participants in my study in English, but naturally, observing meetings, which were mostly conducted in Swedish, was more challenging. While the language

barrier prevented me from gaining a full understanding of meetings in real time, I took notes of paralinguistic features and social dynamics, such as seating arrangements or group interactions. Furthermore, I was granted permission to record the meetings, which were later translated by a native speaker student. In addition, after each meeting, I immediately sat down with one of the participants who recounted the meeting to me and answered my questions in English. I also used internal meeting notes taken by the participants in Swedish. For the translation of documents, I relied on the English versions provided by the university whenever possible, for the remainder I used the DeepL machine translation tool.

#### 2.2.4. *Trust, taboo and trustworthiness*

Trust is a key component both for the researcher-researched relationship and presenting the research findings to the scientific community and external readers in a transparent and methodologically rigorous manner via trustworthy narratives (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2009). Perhaps the most difficult part of my PhD experience has been to learn how to master the implicit norms of different disciplinary communities and methodological “camps” to produce a coherent and intelligible; technical to prove mastery of method and jargon, yet not too obscure or esoteric; detailed enough to show depth and credibility, yet sufficiently succinct and analytical text. In this respect, I found it particularly challenging to develop a narrative style which speaks to the theorists and practitioners of the diverse scholarly traditions, whose insights I incorporate in my project.

One of the challenges was how to render issues of taboo amenable to analysis without breaching the hard-earned trust of the participants of my research. A concern with trust was particularly present in my relationship with AVCC, as I was very self-aware about how I may be perceived as a professional and a representative of CEU in what I initially understood as a conservative community with opposite political

allegiances. Due to these preconceptions, I was overly cautious about navigating sensitive issues.

In both institutions I encountered deeply entrenched institutional taboos which were imbued in narrative silence and which I had to decipher from different clues that my interviewees scattered in our conversations. At Uppsala, a leadership crisis dating a few years back and a more recent internal conflict surfaced in the interviews. The first one was marginal to the case study, but more illustrative of the struggle between internal academic power and externally vetted leaders, connecting to the historic context of the relationship between universities and the state (Engwall, 2007). The second conflict unfolded between two administrative units surrounding the concept of academics as employees and involved participants in my study. In both these cases, the strategy of my respondents was to objectivise the events, that is, to recount them as briefly, factually and without emotions, as possible. This “avoidance of accounts” hindered the reconstruction of internal organisational narratives (Czarniawska, 2004a) and power struggles.

At AVCC, the situation was different, as I was working alongside my interviewees for more than a year, when they slowly started to open up to me about an institutional crisis that was beginning to resolve a just few months before I joined the team. The crisis was long and profound, and affected all aspects of institutional life, including institutional reflexivity and quality assurance, and shaking the foundations of any previously legitimate attempts at interpretation of certain actions and practices I observed. Out of consideration for the protection of the participants in the study, I cannot disclose more details, but from a methodological point of view, it is important to document this episode. In the interviews, the narrative silence surrounding the taboo was, from time to time, punctuated by euphemisms: “structural simplification” (radical dismantling) or “then he left, if I want to put it in a nice way” (he was fired or he left due to the conflict); avoidance

and referrals: (he knows exactly what happened, I wasn't there); and periphrasis “there was a wave when almost the entire faculty was fired” (there was a period of management crisis).

In both cases, I offered the opportunity to members of both organisations to review the final text of [Paper 2](#) and provide feedback, which I incorporated in the revision.

### 3. Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the epistemic practice in qualitative research which involves maintaining a constant reflexive awareness with regard to the impact of the researcher's situatedness on the research design, the research process, the findings and their interpretation. In the Bourdieusian tradition, reflexivity involves self-objectivation (Bourdieu, 2003). Instead of phenomenologist auto-ethnography, it seeks to produce an anti-biography, transcending individual accounts and instead aiming at unravelling the objective relations and social characteristics of a field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 213). This requires going beyond temporary participant observation to a deeper immersion within a field, which often puts the researcher in an ethically precarious position (Rowe, 2018). Reflexivity can be engaged in different ways depending on the researcher's positionality, therefore I structure this section according to Berger's (2015) classification of the researcher's position, as it accounts for liminality. The *insider position* – or studying the familiar – offers numerous methodological advantages, including access to otherwise difficult-to-obtain information, but also carries the risk that the researcher conflates her own experience with that of her participants. The *liminal position* indicates “studying while becoming” (Berger, 2015, p. 226), and invites the re-examination of previously held misconceptions in the light of new experiences during the passage. Reflexivity engaged as part of participant objectivation is regarded as the most difficult and controversial form (Rowe, 2018). The *outsider position*, which promises a



reflexive distance, may impede gaining full understanding of the cultural context of the observed phenomena.

### **3.1. Insider position**

According to this typology, I consider my observation while being employed at AVCC an insider situation. One of the key decisions I took was not to be present at the accreditation visit itself, which prevented me from getting a first-hand experience, but at the same time it diminished my responsibilities and thus allowed me to re-establish a reflexive distance from the process, and gradually turn back to my researcher role as I moved towards exiting the field. The institution's leadership endorsed this decision, with full awareness about the underlying reasons.

I used three main tools to keep track of my activities and trace their potential impact on the research: 1. *field notes* (consisting of quick handwritten notes during meetings in Hungarian and typing up more detailed notes right after meetings in English); 2. *comments and track changes function* in draft documents; and 3. a *performance log*, in which I recorded the number of hours I spent every month on the assignments, which I then reported to my employer. According to these records, I received salary for 223 hours of work over 12 months during my assignment between October 2017 and November 2018 (with the exception of March and July 2018). I paid my own travel expenses between Budapest and Vác. In my fieldwork notes I also recorded, albeit not systematically, a daily breakdown of activities which helped me separate the 'paid hours' from the unpaid portion of my research work. For instance, in-depth interviews I conducted for my own research in November 2018 were naturally not included in this log. The three focus groups with students and faculty were included, since they were specifically designed as part of the quality assurance renewal process on the topic of the

course evaluations. However, in the paper I do not present them as part of my independent research work, but as work conducted as part of my assignment.

Overall, I found it quite straightforward to keep the two types of activities separate, as the focus and nature of the work itself was rather different: my work at AVCC was structured and associated with specific written outputs, while my research focused on observing the process of reflexivity in action. In addition, I did not start processing the data during the 12-month period, which made it easier to keep any analytical work I undertook within the boundaries of my professional assignment.

The following excerpt from my field notes of my participant observation at AVCC illustrates the steps I took to maintain a reflexive relation to the object of my study during meetings:

- QA policy – we reviewed my comments
  - Q to myself: how did I come up with the comments?
    - ESG was definitely on my mind – preparing the good practice draft, background analysis
    - considered the self-assessment questionnaire of MAB (directly relying on ESG, giving their own interpretations)
    - considered logical consistency and common sense
    - academic background influence – for example: need for clear definitions
      - I mentioned the fitness-for-purpose approach to quality, but also said that we can make up our own definition of quality

*Figure 8: Excerpt from AVCC fieldwork notes, original layout.*

In 2017-18, the Quality Project Committee set out its tasks in four areas. First, it sought to review the key elements and results of the quality assurance system in the institution. Second, it contributed to drafting the institutional self-evaluation as part of the accreditation. Third, it put forward a QA strategy on the basis of the ESG 2015. And fourth, it aimed to establish permanent structures for quality assurance in accordance with institutional goals. Besides the internal documents that I authored myself (focus group questionnaire, focus group analysis, overview of the ESG 2015 and good practices in the EHEA, project team action plan), I was regularly asked to review draft documents and to suggest changes and provide comments and additions. I contributed to the following official documents:

- (1) *Quality mission statement, policy and handbook*: I was charged with drafting the three quality documents: a mission statement, a policy and a handbook. In practice, this meant holding the pen and putting the ideas of the Quality Project Team on paper. According to my field notes, I had expressed serious doubts about being assigned to draft these documents, as I did not want to influence their content.
- (2) *Institutional accreditation self-study questionnaire*: The Quality and Evaluation Committee was responsible for replying to 17 questions of the 97 questions in the questionnaire (17.5%). I added 17 comments on substance related to 9 questions, 15 of which were taken up in the final text submitted to the Hungarian Accreditation Committee. Most of the comments referred to the work of the Quality Project Team and the findings of the focus groups.
- (3) *Power Point presentation for accreditation visit*: I contributed to re-designing the diagram visualising the different elements of the QA system. Excerpts from my collection of good practices were used as illustration. Interviewees reported that

the presentation was not requested by the accreditation team, and therefore was not shown.

- (4) *Institutional surveys*: I provided written comments on draft questionnaires for the evaluation of teaching and student satisfaction.

During the interviews, which I conducted after the accreditation visit had taken place, I tried to elicit some of the recurrent conversations that we had over the course of our one-year collaboration, for the purpose of triangulation, and asked interviewees to describe their roles and practices. This prompted some of them to call me out for asking about issues (taking a “naïve” stance) that we had discussed already in our professional context: for example, “as you know”, “just like we discussed the other day” or “you were there, too”. While transcribing the interviews, I noticed how my behaviour changed, for instance my level of confidence, the tone of my voice, or the words I chose to formulate questions, from one person to another; depending on the nature of the work relationship (ranging from a more formal demeanour with the Rector to a critically open conversation with jokes and common stories with Quality Project Team members). Another way that my positionality influenced my interviewing technique was that I refrained from asking about certain issues which were not clear to me about internal QA practices, since as a professional I did not want to show ignorance about them.

During the fieldwork I encountered several “uninterpretable moments” (Kurowska, 2020), which elicited emotional and cognitive dissonance, that can nevertheless be productively exploited in the process of reflection. I group these moments into three interrelated, but distinct series of lived experiences according to the source of each, which I identify as *external*, *intersubjective* and *internal*, respectively.

First, the general narrative silence surrounding “the” crisis (see 2.2.4.), although originating in events exterior to my interactions with the field, nevertheless imprinted on

my internal ruminations about my dual role. On the one hand, as a researcher, I had interpreted the gradual exposure of my interlocutors' most vulnerable experiences as a promising sign of trust-building. As an external expert however, I was left feeling somewhat betrayed, expecting them to reciprocate my (self-perceived) openness and transparency at the very beginning of our collaboration about my own research goals. At the same time, I was also to blame for my own ignorance: somehow it had never occurred to me to simply google the institution before I accepted the role. Eventually, I concluded that this initial unawareness had proven to be rather blissful from a research perspective, as I entered the field without potentially distorting preconceptions about the objects of research, allowing the organisational "narrative unconscious" (Carlsen, 2016) to peak through the surface naturally as the work relationship progressed.

The subjective source of uninterpretable experience is my own emotions I developed towards the work: when I terminated my assignment with AVCC, I developed feelings of guilt, dissatisfaction and abandonment, as well as relief. For a long time, I could not face the materials that I was supposed to analyse without provoking unease. I confronted the source of general discomfort through Kurowska's use of the concept of countertransference, "the partly unconscious conflicts activated in the researcher through the research encounter, which may lead to imposing meaning on the other" (Kurowska, 2020, p. 431). One such conflict unravelled between my professional and research roles and objectives through intersubjective encounters. I developed frustration and even resentment towards tasks which seemed to place the "burden" of institutional reflexivity on me, for instance, I consciously refrained from forming authoritative opinions on how certain quality assurance concepts should be translated into the institutional context, which could have been a legitimate expectation of my employers.

However, it would be self-indulging to conclude that I did not fulfil my role: rather I shaped my own role, which was already suspended in perpetual ambiguity (see [2.2.1.](#)), to allow me to tread through role conflicts. In retrospect, I believe I was unconsciously prioritising my research and was less proactive as I could have been as a professional, had I not been conducting a fieldwork. Over time, as my participation in deliberations diminished amidst growing informational asymmetry as the accreditation visit was approaching, I moved towards an observer participant position, in which I felt more comfortable.

Finally, as an external source of uninterpretability, I also recognised that some of these anxieties originate not as much in others' expectations towards me as from my own projection of self-image to what I presumed to be opinions others held of me, stemming from my liminal status as a professional. Two examples illustrate this predicament. The fieldwork commenced in 2017, the year when CEU became a target of political controversy that forced it to relocate to another country. Vác was a stronghold of the Catholic branch of the governing party, and AVCC had been deeply entangled in regional power positions. Representing CEU as a professional expert in such a milieu did not come without stakes, and I held myself under tight self-scrutiny. Over time, my discomfort had eased considerably due to expressions of mutual respect and openness, which transpired in my interactions with AVCC leadership, and which lead-me to re-examine my own prejudices which I had initially projected on the situation.

The second example concerns emotions related to moving goalposts. One of my assignments was to compile a collection of ESG-related good practices, and formulate recommendations for the College. I was completely free to design the content and the form of the document, which my employers started to refer to as a “study” (a designation I did not agree with). I ended up producing a 40-page document including a

comprehensive overview of quality definitions and literature, something that I imposed on myself, fuelling expectations. However, I submitted it in a draft state, without completing the final formatting and without elaborating on specific recommendations, as I was moving abroad for a new job, and as the discrepancy grew between the hours I reported for the assignment (and for which I received compensation) and the actual work hours, the latter by far exceeding the former.

While in my understanding, this document was initially conceived as a “living” document to inform internal quality work, as the external pressure grew on the quality project team, my employers decided that they wanted to publish it as a “study” as an evidence of the process of institutional reflection, which I unconsciously resisted by not completing the task. Despite the fact that I completed all other tasks on time and received positive feedback, I left the assignment with a feeling of profound dissatisfaction with my performance, notwithstanding moving goal-posts and the general ambiguity surrounding my employers’ expectations. What should have been an important learning moment for me as a professional, was overshadowed by a perception of failure to meet expectations, which I ultimately did not seek to discuss openly, at the risk of severing ties and ultimately can jeopardising trust in the researcher and the research process.

While I cannot undo this mistake, I can certainly reflect productively on the extent to which I reify my experience as a researcher (in a position of authority) as part of an intersubjective dialogue between professional unequals (where I occupied an inferior position). In this spirit, I resorted to member-checking, that is, I contacted my former employers to offer them the opportunity to comment on the final draft of the paper. This was politely declined by one of the members before the submission of the dissertation. I am nevertheless committed to continue pursuing this reconciliatory dialogue.

### 3.2. *Liminal position*

According to Pouliot, studying practices from a liminal position is akin to “sitting on a fence between the community of practitioners and that of researchers, a position that generates a form of knowledge that is at once native and foreign” (Pouliot, 2014, p. 244). Thus, the main challenge of this position is to retain the ability to zoom in and out, to maintain both familiarity and distance. An important insight that I gained while transitioning into policy-making is that from a practitioner’s perspective, policy-making can be best approximated as “bricolage” (Mérand, 2011), an everyday exercise in practical problem-solving, relying on “a repertoire of social networks, behavioural attitudes, standard operating procedures, rules of thumb, tactics and strategies” (Mérand, 2011, p. 182). Although I occupy a junior rank within the hierarchy, through my work I gained access to workflows and exposure to ways of working at all kinds of levels.

Practical knowledge and heuristics are not just a practitioner’s luxury. Rather, they are the key to her survival, as the information flow and the speed at which tasks are expected to be completed, especially compared to the pace of research work, are so high, that only mental shortcuts, such as whom to call in which DG to find out X information, make it possible to navigate such complexity. This experience has also profoundly shaped my scholarly approach towards analysing informal policy processes in my PhD project, such as peer learning. This does not mean that I fashioned my research design to fit my practical experience, my project had been already well developed and much of the data had been collected when I started working in Brussels. However, I do credit my experience with orienting my research towards the incorporation of theories of practice.

Another critical observation concerns the sociology of knowledge and policy within higher education as a field. I found it quite astounding that what may appear as a large decentralised network of thousands of stakeholders, institutions and actors from a



distance; on the tip of the iceberg that is Brussels life, it boils down to a few dozens of individuals in key positions (usually national representations and organisations' secretariats), who frequently sit together in different configurations. For instance, one of my interviewees reported that there is a significant overlap between the group of representatives in Bologna TPG C and the EU's working group on higher education, due to capacity issues in public administrations and stakeholder organisations. From this perspective, it is difficult to treat these groups anything other than communities of practice who master the pragmatic codes of multiple "governance arenas" (Ravinet, 2011) and can switch between them with ease. As an example, in quality assurance, EUA or EURASHE will always be represented by the same one or two policy officer in different meetings, accumulating a significant amount of practical knowledge over the years.

Following Shore's advice, it is important to analyse how the conflation of roles of EU officials as both "protagonists and analysts" of the EU influences research and policy (Shore, 2006, p. 28). As a newly minted official, my responsibilities are limited, but my direct influence on policy is undoubtedly higher than any outsider researcher's. In my daily work at the Commission, I contributed to the drafting of strategic policy documents, briefings and background documents, and while these documents are co-produced, as Adler-Nissen and Drieschova (2019) have shown; I have access to internal knowledge about their genesis, for instance, who proposed X or Y in a text. However, due to the pace of work and the large turnover of documents, this kind of insight quickly fades away as the text becomes appropriated by members of the institution. In contrast to academic writing, policy writing does not recognise any author other than the voice of the institution.

As an official, I am also bound by the Staff Regulations, which Shore describes as the "fonctionnaires' Bible" (Shore, 2006, p. 194). In particular, I have to "refrain from

any action or behaviour which might reflect adversely upon” my position, and “from any unauthorised disclosure of information received in the line of duty, unless that information has already been made public or is accessible to the public”<sup>53</sup>. These are clearly limitations that must be acknowledged. However, the interference of these limitations with my research are mitigated by 1) the fact that the Commission and its practices are not the primary focus of the research; 2) the methodology, which ensured that any information can be traced back to a public source or an informant who consented to participate in the project.

It is important to mention here that I did not directly engage in any policy work in the precise field of my research: higher education or quality assurance. However, I did have access to internal documents about such policy work. In reality, officials often work in a very delimited space, and only encounter texts when their input is needed at a specific time, for example briefings, which are background documents prepared on particular subjects. The complexity, the mass and the speed of documents, requests and information does not allow an individual official to muse about texts produced by other units. It is a very different pragmatic logic of handling and even reading texts from research practice.

Thus, I can declare that I never contributed to or consulted any of the documents related to the ET 2020 PLA in Oslo 2017 in my capacity as an official. I do not analyse any texts in this research that was directly or indirectly produced by me or my immediate colleagues. The Commission is a large institution (30,000 employees), which means that throughout my entire career, I will not personally encounter over 90% of my colleagues. Yet, another way that my professional status impacts my research is access to information, not only in terms of documents, but also in terms of contacts. Arguably, I had easier access

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<sup>53</sup> Articles 12 and 17 of the Staff Regulation No 31 (EEC), 11 (EAEC), laying down the Staff Regulations of Officials and the Conditions of Employment of Other Servants of the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community (OJ P 045 14.6.1962).

than a cold contact and I can objectively attest to this, by comparing my success rate as a PhD student and as a hybrid professional.

My experience working as a junior practitioner, both in the case of my field research at AVCC and at the European Commission, resonates with Czarniawska's contention that "the main form of organizational knowledge is the narrative" (Czarniawska 1997, 21). As a newcomer in an organisation, it is more cost-effective to ask a person of reference (someone who is socially qualified to behold authoritative knowledge – not necessarily corresponding to positions occupied in the organigram) for the history of a "file", than to look into official documentation. First, such documentation omits important interpersonal and intersubjective elements such as temporal sequence, the relative importance of items and organisational rumours. Second, it is just as important for a practitioner to understand what narratives are dominant in a specific organisational unit than to acquire factual knowledge about past events, akin to acquiring a "common language" to interact with colleagues. For instance, in modern bureaucracies, a "handover note" is typically prepared when a person leaves their post, to ease the transition for their successor, enacting institutional memory as a form of storytelling (cf. Corbett et al., 2020).

The analysis of interviews was guided by Czarniawska's approach to narratives: the emphasis is not simply on first-person accounts of events, but on the practice of storytelling and the construction of organisational narratives which yield representations of organisational reality produced by its agents (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 14), part of a process of "officialization" (Bourdieu, 2006). This helps explain correspondence and discrepancy between observed organisational realities and official institutional narratives produced during the audit. Organisational self-narratives are not always articulated in a directly accessible form, they may surface in fragments or may reside in the "narrative

unconscious” (Carlsen, 2016), therefore it is important to look out for emotive clues and temporal discontinuities.

Another salient aspect of my practitioner’s experience is how I interact with technology in my everyday work. My experience as a practitioner concurs with the observation that in technologically mediated policy-making, “the single most important activity” is the collective drafting of texts via track-changes (Adler-Nissen & Drieschova 2019, online appendix, p.9.).

This tacit knowledge helped me better understand and steer the interviews with European policy experts. For instance, when asked how they interpret the sentence calling for an “enhancement-oriented approach of the ESG” in the 2020 Rome Ministerial Communiqué, one of my respondents recalled the original wording which they proposed initially and how it was “watered down”, emphasising that the actual sequence of words was less important than the overall message. Yet, her memory was clearly triggered by seeing the document, and she even said that once she sees the text, she can recall the entire conversation on the subject. The take-away from this is that in this case, the expert did not remember it as a battle of ideas (as sometimes these kinds of discussions are depicted in scholarship), but as a sequence of graphic bubbles of words. And what anchored this memory further was the comparison of this official wording to their original “LTT”, or “line to take”, which practitioners one often memorise word by word over time, like a rhyme.

Such elements of a pragmatist’s repertoire become “boundary objects” (Leigh Star, 2010), which instead of codifying, often very much remain open to the negotiation of meaning (Wenger, 2002). Thus, a question about how a specific wording came about can prompt answers connected to both the material conditions surrounding the production of the text, as well as the acquired or “settled” meaning within the institution, which may

be very different from both the original intentions of the legislators as well as from the personal opinion of the respondent in question.

In terms of analytical strategies and the interpretation of research results, two sources of bias can be noted. First, I may be legitimately criticised for inflating the importance of the transnational dimension of higher education governance as well as of policy learning, due to my professional embeddedness in these communities. Another way that my tacit insider knowledge has influenced my practice of research writing is through the vocabulary and familiarity with the jargon, which makes me automatically inclined to scrutinise other academic texts. For instance, I understand the OMC in a very restricted way, as an ensemble of specific institutionalised practices, whereas many authors use the concept to refer to a broader category of processes in soft law. I am also involuntarily irked by the nonchalant use of terms I perceive to be politically significant, such as the European Higher Education Area or the European Education Area. Furthermore, I had to readjust to the style of academic writing after being trained for almost three years in “lean” policy writing.

### ***3.3. Outsider position***

Interestingly, despite the cultural and language differences and outsider position, I felt that Uppsala was closer to my own academic socialisation than AVCC, which is located in my own country, but in a socio-cultural environment very different from mine. Over and over again I felt surprised by and estranged from the social and academic codes operating at AVCC, it took me much time to comprehend their ways of thinking and doing. Berger’s criteria in this respect is useful to tease out incoherencies between the formal positioning of the researcher (as an employee or an external researcher) and her socio-cultural background.

At Uppsala University, this perceived familiarity was also a potential source of limitation, as was transparency. As [Paper 2](#) shows, the central administration at Uppsala has a strong control over external narratives about the university. Moreover, people at Uppsala are “used to” being observed and studied, not only by their own peers in the framework of quality assurance, but also as objects of research. Since the 1990s, Uppsala University and its departments have served as case studies for research in numerous areas, for instance: university governance (Engwall, 2007), leadership roles (Eriksson, 1999), the effect of research evaluation systems on academic practices (Hammarfelt & de Rijcke, 2015), student participation (Kettis, 2019) and peer review in quality assurance (Hansen, 2022). Uppsala researchers routinely engage in self-reflection through scientific production, often focusing on practices. Organisation scholars at the Department of Business Studies have been particularly active in producing research with local relevance, and have used it as a basis to develop of a new training programme for academic leaders, introduced in 2018.

On one of my last days of the research trip in Uppsala, I was discussing the topic of hospitality with my hosts. One of them made a comment on the alleged impenetrability of Swedish society from the perspective of foreigners: she said she would not consider inviting someone to her house spontaneously, for instance on a weekday, not even a work colleague, as she would not feel comfortable showing the house in its natural state, without tidying up specifically for the guest. This cultural metaphor can be carried to the fieldsite, where everything was set up for me exactly as if I were guest in someone’s house. This was however an obstacle to eliciting narratives from some of the respondents, as questions which were perceived provocative or conflictual were often met with strategies of avoidance or referral (Czarniawska, 2004a).

## VI. Conclusions: Towards a meso-level theory of instrumentation in higher education governance? Instrument reflexivity and the ESG

### 1. Understanding reflexivity as instrument and practice

In this dissertation I argued that not only reflective practice is central to quality assurance as a field of professional competence, but that it increasingly constitutes the implicit theorisation of policy instruments, and by extension, the governance of European higher education. Based on the findings of the three papers, reflexivity can be construed as a logic of instrumentation, which encourages the embedding of a theory of practice within policy instruments, connecting different levels of governance. In layman's terms, instruments which rely on reflexive appropriation require that those who implement the instrument actively consider their own practice and context when developing implementation measures or issuing further guidance. This often leads to a "instrumentation within the instrument", or further innovation and adaptation both vertically and horizontally, and as such, distinct from linear implementation. This concluding chapter discusses the implications of each study for the understanding of reflexivity within the framework of policy instrumentation presented in [Chapter I](#). Accordingly, while each paper adopts a different theoretical approach to explore reflexivity, which occasionally may even be contradictory, they all aim to explore its pragmatic dimension (see [I/5](#)).

Addressing the first overarching research question, that is, *How are policy instruments transformed in and through practice in multi-level settings?*, the papers contribute to the conceptualisation of instrument reflexivity in European higher education in terms of the following mechanisms:

- (1) dynamic transposition of horizontal principles in particular contexts, relying on local knowledge and practice;

- (2) emergence of transnational instrument constituencies who generate feedback loops between different levels of instrumentation;
- (3) capacity-building of transnational and subnational actors in multi-level settings promoting identity and role transformation;
- (4) horizontal organisation of network relations through communities of practice;
- (5) primacy of logic of practicality over logics of consequences, appropriateness or communication.

Regarding the second overarching question, *What are the possible implications of reflexivity for the governance of European higher education*, it is more challenging to draw conclusions that are predictive or generalisable, also due to the methodological limitations of the practice approach. One key insight emerging from the three studies points towards the growing formalisation of reflexivity at different levels of governance (institutionalisation at the European level and codification at the institutional level), but further research is needed to fully map the extent and the consequences of this trend. It is also possible to indicate some tentative future directions, taking existing theories and paradigms as a starting point. The following discussion highlights the added value of focusing on reflexivity as a fundamentally pragmatic concept vis-à-vis alternative explanations: *ideation*, *rational-deliberative models*, *experimentalism* and *epistemic communities*.

### 1.1. *Ideas and discourse*

First, complementing perspectives on the influence of ideas and discourse in higher education governance, the findings suggest that learning between different governance levels is mediated through different practical arrangements. The pragmatic context in which certain ideas or discourses are presented, matter just as much as the normative



ideational content. Thus, from a political sociology perspective on instrumentation, the governance “ideas” that the ESG embodies cannot be separated from the material and cognitive tools and techniques applied in context and in the process of policy learning. For instance, [Paper 1](#) showed how the same “good practice” serves as a pragmatic vehicle for competing framings of the issue of quality culture across different peer learning configurations. Additionally, it revealed how epistemic actors deploy various learning technologies to mobilise the local knowledge of participants in the learning process. [Paper 2](#) highlighted habitual reflective action as a “pragmatic filter” of ideas surrounding the everyday practice of quality assurance, and the importance of liminal spaces, for instance teaching and research competence development across academic disciplines. In this sense, reflexivity can be understood as a type of learning which occurs primarily through critically confronting one’s own practice.

### 1.2. *Rational-deliberative models*

The thesis does not seek to challenge assumptions regarding the central role of deliberation in higher education governance. However, there are two important differences between the rational-deliberative approach to policy learning and the idea of instrument reflexivity developed in this dissertation. First, the analysis of transnational venues and communities showed that horizontal policy diffusion frequently occurs at the level of the practice, instead of the level of abstract ideas, concepts and programmes. Although deliberation continues to be an important driving force of the Bologna Process at the political level, there seems to be a shift towards designing working methods which are concerned with linking the different levels of implementation and tackling non-implementation as one of the political priorities (Viðarsdóttir, 2018).

In addition, the boundaries between different institutional mechanisms (for instance between EU and Bologna working formations) are becoming increasingly

blurred, which makes the study of fields and communities of practice all the more relevant. Ravinet (2008) argues that the familiarity and “taken-for-granted” approach to the design of Bologna follow-up mechanisms, inspired by the Community method, contributed to turning voluntary coordination into something more binding. In a similar vein, it is possible to conceive that replacing the logic of appropriateness with a logic of practicality (see Pouliot, 2008), through encouraging peer learning, could be an attempt to further enhance ownership and a sense of obligation amidst decreasing political interest and participation (Bergan & Deca, 2018). Instrument reflexivity indicates that European higher education governance is moving towards asking questions of “how to comply?”, instead of “why comply?”, which has been also referred to as ends/means reversal (cf. Veiga & Magalhães, 2019), or alternatively, a “supply push” for policy innovation (Béland & Howlett, 2016; Voß & Simons, 2014). Yet, reflexivity should not be understood exclusively as primacy of functionalism over normativity, rather, it requires the acknowledgement of the role of local and transnational actors in instrumentation.

The second important conclusion is that reflexivity is socially conditioned and hinges on the capacities of actors. This means that multi-level deliberation is not inherently democratic or self-reflective, but rather works within its own self-imposed limits (see [VI/6.](#))

### 1.3. *Experimentalism and reflexive governance*

Learning and reflexivity are central to the models of experimentalist and reflexive governance (see [I/5.3](#)), and the dissertation aimed to explore the applicability of these frameworks for the study of reflexivity in transnational learning arrangements higher education governance. Quality assurance can certainly be regarded as an experimentalist field, since QA agencies and European bodies exercise delegated autonomy and “discipline” sub-national units through peer review. But while Sabel and Zeitlin (2008,

2010) place emphasis on recursive rule-making and learning from local experimentation, they stop short of developing a theory of social learning. According to theorists of reflexive governance, experimentalism omits the “teaching” element of learning (who learns from who, under what conditions) (cf. De Schutter & Lenoble, 2010). In addition, goal revision is usually contained within the hegemonic structures<sup>54</sup>, therefore there is little discussion of reflexivity as organisational identity transformation or capacity-building. While experimentalist governance embraces a pragmatic approach, it focuses on *regulatory reflexivity*, or the anticipation of the transformation of rules (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012) based on regular reporting and the collection of experiences with implementation.

By contrast, experiential learning surrounding the ESG in transnational venues goes beyond the detection of errors and retroactive calibration of tools of implementation: it also involves the *reflexive anticipation* of future policy developments and frame reflection, i.e. the adjustment of fundamental problem frames at the organisational level. For example, one of the most widely discussed implementation challenge concerns student-centred learning (standard 1.3), which may be interpreted or measured in a variety of ways, calls not only for an adjustment of internal quality assurance frameworks in HEIs, but should also be reflected in external QA procedures. In 2017, EQAF and EQUIP discussed the implementation of ESG 1.3. from the perspective of QA agencies, linking it to systemic issues of national qualification frameworks and learning outcomes, as well as the QA agencies’ role in guiding HEIs in the local implementation of student-centred learning.

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<sup>54</sup> For instance, within the education and training OMC, a quantitative target may be revised as a consequence of a failure or lack of political agreement to reach that target, but the process of target-setting has not been compromised in three consecutive strategic cycles. Similarly, the Bologna tools may be updated based on experiences on the ground, but the fundamental architecture of goal-setting and monitoring in the Bologna Process has remained intact.

[Paper 1](#) found that stakeholder organisations utilise reflective learning technologies to build strategic capacity and political agency of universities as actors of governance through practices of *self-reflection*, *self-analysis* and *self-assessment*. A further conclusion for experimentalist governance and related theories of policy learning is the critical assessment of the assumption that reflexivity can have a democratising effect in multi-level and networked settings, as the roles of teachers and learners are not pre-determined (cf. Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013). However, studies in other fields have argued that network governance itself does not automatically ensure reflexive learning, and the institutionalisation of learning inadvertently fixes epistemic roles (cf. McNutt & Rayner, 2018). The study of three typical venues of transnational policy learning in higher education ([Paper 1](#)) show that different pragmatic and institutional configurations do confer specific social and cognitive roles to participants, which varies according to group composition. Moreover, the E4 group and the European Commission as nodal actors steer the learning process between participants, leaving surprisingly little room for facilitated direct interaction between different levels of governance.

Thus, the conclusion is that while the social and pragmatic conditions of peer learning surrounding the ESG create the possibility of build reflexive capacities of participants, the realisation of this potential depends on maintaining a delicate equilibrium of interdependencies between various levels. A recent study hypothesises different possible pathways for the temporal expansion or reversion of experimentalist arrangements, based on perceptions of strategic uncertainty within a field (Rangoni & Zeitlin, 2021). In one such scenario, actors acknowledge strategic uncertainty as all-pervasive, eventually leading to the institutionalisation of experimentalism. Reflexive governance in the context of the ESG can be approximated to this particular scenario, in which responsiveness to future challenges becomes a central concern at the system level.

[Paper 3](#) has explored how “secondary guidance” related to applications of the ESG to new topics (online and distance learning, university alliances) may simultaneously enlarge and restrain the scope of its interpretation. However, pressures for more prescriptive clarity could tilt the balance towards another scenario, which could entail the reversal of the experimental phase to hierarchical rule-making (see [Section 4](#)).

#### 1.4. *Epistemic communities and instrument constituencies*

The dissertation examined the role of transnational stakeholder organisations as epistemic actors in policy learning ([Paper 1](#)) and as communities of practice ([Paper 3](#)). It has highlighted how these actors produce and accumulate knowledge which is relevant for the application of the instrument in local contexts. This function has been linked to different concepts in public policy analysis, most commonly to epistemic communities, whose main role is to channel expert knowledge into policy-making. The analyses of knowledge production practices of the E4 group revealed close links between development of expertise through practice and the advocacy capacity of both the stakeholder organisations and their individual members. [Paper 1](#) asserts that EQAF is a specific sub-formation of the E4, which takes the characteristics of an epistemic community, while [Paper 3](#) argues that it is a community of practice. In fact, this is not a contradiction, but rather a sign of temporal evolution. Studies in the health field have demonstrated that communities of practitioners may develop over time into epistemic communities through experiential learning (Akrich, 2010) or that the same group of actors may behave in different ways depending on the common practices they engage in (Wagner et al., 2019). This reinforces the argument to move from actor-centred to practice-centred analysis, and acknowledging that epistemic positions and identities are not static, but socially dynamic.

Moreover, it is not only shared interests (advocacy coalition/ interest group perspective) or causal beliefs about a policy problem (epistemic communities) which can connect these network of actors, but the policy instrument itself. Instrument constituencies have been conceptualised as “webs of interrelated practices” (Voß & Simons, 2014, p. 736), “oriented towards developing, maintaining and expanding a specific instrumental model of governing” (Simons & Voß, 2018, p. 17). They represent a specific form of agency or a policy subsystem, and have gained visibility in the scholarship relatively recently, most notably in the fields of energy, environmental (Simons & Voß, 2018; Voß & Simons, 2014) and social policies (Béland & Howlett, 2016). Reflexivity is key dynamic for the functioning of instrument constituencies: there is an ongoing self-reinforcing feedback loop between the instrumental model as an abstract concept and the local applications or implementation arrangements (Simons & Voß, 2018). The result of this reflexive process can be policy innovation, instrument spill-over and “solutions chasing problems” (Béland & Howlett, 2016), i.e. when the transnational community of practice pre-empts problem definition at the political level.

Instrument constituencies and other types of agency are not mutually exclusive. As mentioned above, they share many similarities with epistemic communities, but the literature considers the former more solution- than problem-oriented (Simons & Voß, 2017). Overall, the dissertation finds that the QA-related peer learning activities of the E4 group are better explained by the concept of instrument constituencies than by the dichotomy of epistemic communities or interest groups. Since the concept articulates a practice-based theory of policy instrumentation, it allows to capture reflexivity through the examination of the “social life” of an instrument in transnational settings. [Section 4](#) of the present chapter expands these conclusions in relation to the empirical findings concerning the ESG as a boundary object.

## 2. The geography of good practice production: further insights from transnational peer learning

Paper 1 provides a cross-sectional analysis of three major European peer learning events on quality assurance in 2017, shortly after the adoption of the ESG, and thus historically significant as a “peak year” for such activities. In terms of the internal ambiguities of good practice production, there are certain patterns which can be observed across the cases presented at the events. Temporal bias is found in the tendency to select examples of recent or ongoing reforms that demonstrate innovativeness and experimentation rather than those which had been subjected to some type of evaluation or impact assessment. This can be to an extent explained by self-selection; and partly also by the strategic use of case studies by reflective learners as a way of gathering feedback from transnational peers in early phases of implementation; or by organisers as a way of collecting information on innovative approaches to ESG translation, this latter providing evidence for an experimental variant of reflexive learning (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013).

Moreover, good practices at the three events discerned a specific geographical clustering (Table 6), both at system and institutional levels: Nordic models of quality culture development (Norway, Denmark, Finland, and to a lesser extent Sweden), Anglo-Saxon models of data-driven higher education governance (UK and Ireland), and Benelux institutional strategic autonomy and enhancement oriented reforms (the Netherlands and Belgium). In addition, institutional-level examples from Austria and Switzerland were presented three and two events, respectively. There was a notable absence of cases from France, Germany (except for research funding schemes which are not closely related to the ESG), Italy, Spain and other Southern European countries, which is somewhat surprising given the high level of participation of these countries in Erasmus+ projects (cf. Jungblut et al., 2020) The 2018 Commission study cites HEI’s resistance to reforms

of internal QA amid fears of increased administrative burden (European Commission, 2018, 32) as possible explanations for a lack of interest in QA matters in these countries. EUA representatives referred to “system maturity” as an intervening factor in interviews: in countries which are more advanced in the implementation of the ESG, discussions at the domestic level revolve less around compliance and more around enhancement, innovation, and institutional responsibility, which likely spills over to transnational venues.

Although numerous examples from Central and Eastern Europe were discussed at the events, they made up only a small fraction of the presented practices<sup>55</sup> (PLA: 9.6%; EQAF: 14.2%; EQUIP: 8%) despite the comparatively strong presence of participants from these regions at both EQUIP and EQAF. In other words, participants from these countries – regardless of their institutional affiliations – were more likely to be positioned as learners than teachers. Furthermore, while the ESG is linked to the Bologna Process, which has 48 signatory countries, only one EHEA country which is not part of EU/EFTA<sup>56</sup> was featured with a case study (Armenia, at EQAF – an ESU-coordinated project) in 2017. This is part of a long-term trend: the analysis of EQAF papers published between 2006 and 2021 (IV./4.2.) reveals that only 3% of published papers were authored

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<sup>55</sup> Share of practices linked to Central and Eastern European countries (following the OECD definition: Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia) of the total number of practices presented at the venues. Sources: 1. PLA background paper and report (31 practices) 2. EQAF papers, workshops (papers and ppts) and parallel plenary sessions (28 practices); 3. EQUIP final publication and webinars (25 practices). Practices only include single-country national or institutional case studies – EU projects with multiple partners or comparative studies are not included.

<sup>56</sup> The EFTA (European Free Trade Agreement) countries are Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway and Switzerland, and they are, with the exception of Switzerland, part of the EEA (European Economic Area). The application of EU internal market rules, and cooperation in several policy areas, including participation in the Erasmus+ programme, is extended to the three EEA countries. Until 1 February 2020, the United Kingdom was a member of the European Union.



by contributors from non-EU EHEA countries. Participation may also be influenced by the relatively high registration fees since EQAF became a self-funded event in 2011.

Country	EQUIP project	EQAF (2017)	PLA	Total
Belgium	4	4	0	8
Norway	2	2	4	8
Austria	1	3	3	7
UK	2	3	2	7
Ireland	1	2	3	6
Finland	1	1	4	6
Netherlands	1	2	2	5
Switzerland	3	0	2	5
Sweden	0	1	3	4
Denmark	1	1	1	3
Poland	0	1	2	3
Armenia	0	2	0	2
Croatia	1	1	0	2
France	1	0	1	1
Germany	0	0	2	2
Lithuania	1	1	0	2
Portugal	1	1	0	2
Czechia	0	0	1	1
Greece	0	0	1	1
Malta	0	1	0	1
North Macedonia	0	1	0	1
Romania	0	1	0	1

*Table 6. Distribution of good practices by country presented at the observed TPL venues.*

Since the collection of good practices is a largely informal process coordinated via networks of stakeholders, the geographical location and proximity of knowledge providers may influence case selection. However, an alternative explanation could be that peer learning practices reproduce patterns of compliance and resistance to the policy instrument itself, and promote policy learning between those who are already willing, undercutting the argument that learning-based instruments produce conditions for deliberation by design (cf. Saurugger and Terpan 2016). In this respect, the more institutionalised Bologna peer support approach attempts to overcome the asymmetry of voluntary participation by expecting countries to join at least one TPG, and differentiating between teaching (countries which self-identify as successful implementers, having no red scoreboard indicators) and learning (countries which self-identify as not or not sufficiently implemented the key commitment, or having red scorecard indicators) roles (Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2018).

Previous research has shown that the ability to produce best practices influences the direction of policy learning more than similarity in economic-political background<sup>57</sup> (Nedergaard, 2006b). Additionally, the structure and the presentation of examples have been found to influence good practice production (Papanastasiou, 2021). At the same time, pre-defining epistemic roles constrains reflexivity (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013), insofar as it determines the direction of learning and reproduces existing asymmetries of performance, by promoting internationally recognised reference models. In the case of

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<sup>57</sup> An interesting area for further research is to ascertain variation and temporal evolution of teacher-learner dynamics in peer learning across different policy areas. Nedergaard's 2006 study of policy learning in four OMC Committees (employment, social protection, vocational training and economic policy) identified Denmark, the UK, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands as dominant "tutors" (Nedergaard, 2006b), countries which are also found among the top most cited good examples in the TPL QA. Papanastasiou's research on an education and training OMC working group shows that internationally recognised high performing countries (e.g., Finland, Estonia in the PISA survey), are more commonly identified as best practice by participants (Papanastasiou, 2021).

TPG C, this argument is nuanced by the interview data, challenging the direct correspondence between good and less advanced performers as teachers and learners.

Another source of ambiguity concerns the very definition of “good practice”, which is often taken for granted both in policy and research. [Paper 1 \(II./4.3.\)](#) elaborated on the different techniques of knowledge production and different functions of “good practice” depending on the learning goals. Generally, the collection and dissemination of good practice is studied in the relation to policy learning and policy diffusion, however, it is less commonly analysed whether they contribute to more reflexive deliberations. Across the three venues, the identification and selection of good practice was ambiguous, insofar as they did not follow any pre-established evaluative criteria, but rather combined different practical and strategic considerations, such as geographical balance, thematic fit, or transferability. While the EQUIP project aimed to collect examples of good practice which go “beyond” the ESG, organisers of the ET 2020 PLA asked the participants in advance about what they would like to learn.

At the same time, there were a few examples of reflection on what is considered “good” practice. For instance, one of the EQAF 2017 papers discussed the Finnish system of external quality audits, noting its influence as a golden standard for other countries, from a critical perspective, highlighting implementation deficiencies (Overberg & Alavähälä, 2017). While the majority of practices were considered “good” or “best”<sup>58</sup>, a handful of cases were discussed as failed, challenging or ambiguous. These have been linked in the policy transfer literature to the concept of “negative lesson drawing”, and are expected to contribute to reflexivity (Stone, 2017). For example, the Commission

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<sup>58</sup> As [Papanastasiou \(2021\)](#) notes, in recent years there has been a shift in policy discourse in international organisations (OECD, European Commission) towards talking about “good practice” rather than the previously dominant phraseology of “best practice”. My own research confirms this; all documents which I analysed use the terminology “good practice”.

invited a HEI to showcase how change in institutional leadership rebuilt trust, quality and reputation in an institution on the brink of closure due to poor quality. While the emphasis was on the solutions that the institution implemented, the discussion of failure challenged underlying notions of institutional quality culture. It is worth noting however, that this example was specifically selected by the EC policy officer and not submitted via the usual round of call to the working group members. Featuring failed policies or cases in TPL may require prior identification and active facilitation from the organising institution.

Overall, the analysis reveals that it is important to study knowledge production practices and patterns surrounding “good practice” in order to assess to what extent they contribute to reflexivity in the policy learning process: whether they are used by epistemic actors as means to fish for new ideas or whether they directly benefit participants’ learning experience. Both functions can contribute to instrument reflexivity, since experimental learning for stakeholder organisations serves the purpose of identifying common implementation issues, while guided learning for the participants may contribute to frame reflection concerning the local application of the instrument.

### **3. The ESG as narrative and heuristic device for institutional reflexivity: ethnographic experiences from Sweden and Hungary**

[Paper 2](#) has shown that the translation of Part 1 of the ESG (internal QA) in HEIs may be mediated through multiple channels at the same time, triggering different circuits of reflexivity. As the analysis of *externalisation of the crisis response* at AVCC ([III./5.1.](#)) and of the narrative opposition between *third space* and *third mission* at Uppsala ([III./6.2.](#)) show, crisis reflexivity is deeply rooted in a pre-emptive and self-preserving approach to external evaluation in both cases. At the level of the individuals participating in this study, both examples point towards a shared belief in the primacy of the inherently reflexive nature of academic habitus (reflection-in-action). At AVCC, Catholic pedagogy

(impenetrable by both internal and external audit) serves as a pragmatic guide for the improvement of teaching; while members of Uppsala University continued to view the scientific method and peer review as the most authentic practice of quality control and enhancement.

*Compartmentalisation* and *hybridisation* are two examples of situated practice which show how habitus structures and is in turn transformed by the institutionalisation of reflexivity, highlighting the benefit of distinguishing between crisis and day-to-day reflexivity. Codification emerged as the primary crisis response at the level of the administration, making certain practices visible for external scrutiny, but dissimulating others, especially those deeply seated in the organisational “narrative unconscious”.

*External reflexive capacities* seemed to play an important role in successfully negotiating “crisis reflexivity”, in terms of the mobilisation of bureaucratic and intellectual resources to engage pro-actively with external threats and opportunities. At Uppsala, this is apparent in the decade-long policy advocacy at the national level, and a wide-ranging engagement in international networks. At AVCC however, the previous phase of pioneering methodological experimentation was abruptly replaced by a narrative of self-preservation, which resulted in the external projection of the internal process of self-reflection.

The historical context allows for isolating compliance with the ESG as one of the key factors of changes in quality practice, albeit in different ways. At Uppsala University, QA reforms and ESG-compliant QA practice were already in place when the national policy was found to be misaligned with the ESG; while AVCC’s internal reform unfolded in the shadow of the new accreditation procedure, which was adapted to the revised ESG. In both cases, the ESG served as a heuristic of crisis reflexivity and a legitimising tool for administrative power within the institution.

Both institutions demonstrated awareness about the ESG, although this was limited to the leadership and quality managers, who are directly engaged in quality assurance in their daily work. Interviews and observational data reveal that faculty and administrative staff in charge of quality assurance encountered the ESG via two principal channels: via translation through the national external review process and through their participation in national and transnational projects and networks of practitioners. In the first case, the national QA agency produces specific compliance-oriented interpretations of the ESG, incorporated into the external review criteria, which is often presented in specific material forms, such as templates or guidelines. In the second case, quality managers discuss thematic issues within the scope of the ESG with peers, in the context of good practices and projects, as part of a horizontal learning process. These two forms of knowledge about the ESG are temporally layered or conflated, depending on the policy context.

In Sweden, compliance with the ESG played a central role in the Swedish universities' policy narrative for the revision of the national QA system. The Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions (SUHF) included international legitimacy among their five principles for the new QA system, defined as “full concordance with the ESG” (B.-O. Boström & Kettis, 2017, p. 79). This was fulfilled, as the new external review system explicitly references the ESG, and a new ENQA review found UKÄ overall compliant with the ESG, granting it membership in 2020 (Vinther-Jørgensen et al., 2020). UKÄ was also admitted to EQAR in 2021. However, the political compromise fell short of SUHF's expectations regarding the clear division of roles between HEIs and the agency (B.-O. Boström & Kettis, 2017). As a result, HEIs continued to perceive the agency's prerogative to conduct programme reviews as a threat to the exercise of their self-responsibility for quality (B.-O. Boström & Kettis, 2017). This apprehension

transpired in interviews at Uppsala, which often contrasted the agency's "controlling" and "policing" functions to the enhancement-led perspective of institutional quality work.

Members of the Quality Division and the university administration supported the university's policy advocacy on the national level: as part of the expert team drafting the SUHF position and the UKÄ advisory group for the new national QA system. Internationally they have also built their competence and legitimacy as QA experts, by taking part in international reviews and expert pools, presenting the Swedish system at EQAF (2016 and 2018) and participating in EUA thematic peer groups<sup>59</sup> (cf. [Paper 3](#)). In addition, the Head of Division contributed to the conceptual elaboration of the new national research evaluation framework, which was launched in 2020. In this regard, the ESG functioned as a heuristic device, an instrumental model for standard-setting in SUHF's policy work: to develop a joint framework for quality assurance and quality enhancement of research (SUHF, 2019) and to reflect on the quality of HEI administration (Kivistö & Pekkola, 2018).

Overall, the ESG served as a tool for external reflexivity, that is, for positioning Uppsala as a policy actor domestically and for building international legitimacy and expertise in the field of learning and teaching. Internally, the ESG played a marginal role in the reform process, as quality managers considered them minimum standards, or a "reminder of the essential aspects of the quality assurance system" (Interview with Head of Quality Division, 2018), which the university's internal QA system had long surpassed. In addition, the UKÄ's institutional review procedure covers 6 assessment areas<sup>60</sup>, which

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<sup>59</sup> Members of the Quality Division at Uppsala University participated in the EUA TPGs on "Evaluation of learning and teaching" (2018) and on "Internationalisation of learning and teaching" (2019).

<sup>60</sup> The assessment areas are: 1. Governance and organisation (structures, procedures, processes of QA system); 2. Preconditions (for courses and programmes implementation, student learning, continuous professional development for teaching staff); 3. Design, implementation, outcomes (of courses and programmes); 4. Gender equality; 5. Student and doctoral student perspective;

only loosely follow the ESG's structure, nevertheless it substantially addresses all standards under Part 1 (UKÄ, 2020). Enhancing internal visibility and communicating external coherence of the QA system appeared as primary concerns for crisis reflexivity, in line with the agency's expectations to ensure the "traceability and clarity" of structures and processes for internal audiences (UKÄ, 2019).

At the same time, an increased focus on learning and teaching, its measurement and evaluation, and moving towards a more strategic and centrally integrated QA system, mirrors developments introduced by the 2015 ESG. Some interviewees attributed the increased focus on learning and teaching to international trends and the Bologna Process. Uppsala is plugged into European networks of HEIs (such as EUA or the U4Society Network<sup>61</sup>), which connect university administrators through projects and good practice exchange.

In contrast to Uppsala, AVCC focused on "narrow" compliance with the ESG. This was primarily mediated through the HAC accreditation questionnaire, which is based on the detailed interpretation of each standard and of the corresponding guidelines. The template closely follows the structure of ESG Part 1 and contains a series of questions which translate the standards and guidelines into formal accreditation criteria. In addition, there are two other sections: one which asks the institution to describe the process and the organisation of the self-study, and a third part on the evaluation of research. The questionnaire requires the formal documentation of each element, interlinking them with existing national legislation and often introducing additional quantitative aspects. As an

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6. Working life and collaboration. ESG Part 1 is translated into "assessment criteria" mostly under areas 1-3.

<sup>61</sup> Besides Uppsala University, the network consists of Ghent University, the University of Göttingen, the University of Groningen, and the University of Tartu (<https://u4society.eu>). In 2020, the network, along with 4 other universities, was awarded funding under the European Universities Initiative, to form the Enlight university alliance (<https://enlight-eu.org>).



example, one of the questions associated with ESG 1.5. (assuring the competence of the teaching staff) is the following:

Is there an analysis of staff composition (e.g. department, programme, age, student/teacher ratio)? List five concrete institutional decisions which were based on such analysis (max. 2500 characters). (HAC, 2018, p. 15, author's translation)

Hence, at AVCC, two approaches to the ESG can be distinguished. First, the ESG served to increase the legitimacy of the newly assembled Quality Assurance and Evaluation Committee, and internal review processes initiated by the administration, such as the revision of the course evaluation questionnaire. Part of my work as an external advisor was to propose recommendations based on international good practices associated with the ESG, focusing on student and staff involvement in QA and internal communication about QA, as well as rebuilding trust within the institution. The quality manager attended multiple national-level seminars on different QA related topics, participated in one of the EQUIP workshops<sup>62</sup>, and was actively seeking out opportunities to exchange with international peers, despite limited financial possibilities.

At the same time, these discussions were decoupled from the formal process of institutional self-reporting in the context of the accreditation, based on the agency's detailed instructions on data collection and presentation, resulting in divergent interpretations and applications of the ESG within the institution. The accreditation report itself notes that the self-evaluation was undertaken by the internal administrative control instead of the QA system (HAC, 2019), echoing the findings of [Paper 2](#) concerning the fragmentation of institutional reflexivity between the academic and the administrative

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<sup>62</sup> The EQUIP project was carried out by the E4 group to disseminate knowledge and good practices linked to the 2015 ESG at the grassroots level. It consisted of a series of webinars, multi-level peer learning seminars and focus groups. A detailed description and analysis of the project as a peer learning venue is presented in [Paper 1](#).

habitus. The ESG was used as a tool for learning and reflection, but this process was not guided by the accreditation questionnaire; at the same time, the latter structured the process of administrative reporting. On the one hand, the Quality Project Team focused on creating the basic structures of a functioning internal QA system after a period of institutional crisis, and responding to the recommendations of the previous accreditation report, which emphasised the need for developing an internal institutional dialogue and closing feedback loops between internal QA and institutional decision-making. On the other hand, the final accreditation decision declared AVCC partially compliant with the ESG 2015: while it recognised the efforts that the institution has made to translate the ESG, it found its internal QA system too formalistic and insufficiently embedded in a dynamic and strategically oriented quality culture (HAC, 2019). The report did not assess the progress made on the recommendations of the previous evaluation cycle.

In conclusion, the role of the ESG as a narrative and heuristic device was inverted at the two institutions, representing different levels of QA system maturity. At Uppsala, the ESG was narrativised internally as the token of international legitimacy of the external QA system, and its heuristic value was recognised by the quality managers rather at the level of national policy discussions. At AVCC, the QA team approached the ESG as a heuristic to inspire change within the institution, within a timeframe delimited by the looming external evaluation. Narrativisation occurred externally, i.e. through the self-study questionnaire, which required to show how the institution addresses the standards, guided by the secondary interpretation of the agency. There is however a risk that the accreditation decision, which requires the institution to address shortcomings by 2022 in a new self-evaluation based on the ESG, under close monitoring of HAC, only reinforces administrative control over QA processes (i.e. prolongs the period of “crisis reflexivity”),

and stifles habitual reflexivity, instead of allowing time for the institution to develop its quality culture from below.

This begs the question whether external evaluation based on the ESG truly promotes institutional reflexivity, without factoring in the maturity of internal QA systems. The two extreme examples showed that neither in the case of highly mature, nor in the case of rudimentary IQM could the ESG function as a catalyst for the institutionalisation of reflexivity. Further research would benefit from more longitudinal analyses to capture the temporal dimension of quality management as a continuous cycle of reflexivity, and any diminishing return of repeated cycles of evaluation. Given the considerable time lag involved in the systemic adaptation of national systems to the European framework, the continuous reflexive revision of the ESG has the potential to undermine its internal coherence as a compliance tool.

#### **4. Conceptualising instrument reflexivity: the ESG as a boundary object**

The findings of [Papers 1](#) and [3](#) advance the argument that since the inception of the Bologna Process, various forms of *transnational peer learning* in higher education have become increasingly institutionalised, specialised and differentiated. *Institutionalisation* means that learning through practice is becoming a formal structuring element of actors' interactions in the context of the Bologna Process and EU cooperation in higher education. In this regard, the Paris Communiqué (2018) marked an important shift: leading up the 20<sup>th</sup> year of the Bologna declaration, debates on its future had intensified (Bergan & Deca, 2018; Bergan & Matei, 2020). Second-order reflexivity (see [V./2.1.](#)), concerning the working configurations and monitoring mechanisms of the EHEA gained prominence in these discussions, as exemplified by the institutionalisation of the peer support approach.

Furthermore, *specialisation* implies that peer learning as a transnational practice is becoming increasingly professionalised, with regard to material resources, technologies, participants, follow-up and impact assessment. In addition, peer learning itself often leads to professionalisation, i.e. the acquisition of specialised competences for those who participate in the activities. Finally, *differentiation* indicates a trend across stakeholder organisations to set up their own internal groups and networks of practitioners among their members and stakeholders, resulting in various interconnected clusters and nodes of learning (Wenger, 2002, p. 252), making it increasingly difficult to acquire an overview of ongoing activities and outputs for a single actor at any given point in time; which accentuates the role of brokers (individuals with simultaneous access to multiple CoP) and the uneven distribution of capacities across stakeholder organisations.

In quality assurance, transnational CoP have evolved both within and across stakeholder groups and formal coordination mechanisms, maintaining permeable boundaries, but nonetheless acquiring increasingly structured and sustainable forms over time. In the broadest sense of the term, it could be possible to speak of the entire population of European quality assurance practitioners as members of the same CoP, through their engagement, at various levels, in QA activities and their participation in the ongoing interpretation of the ESG.

In a way, the through these transnational networks of practitioners, the ESG has started to live its “own life” as a policy instrument (cf. Simons & Voß, 2018), leading to the development of further resources, frameworks and guidelines, as well as spill-overs to other policy areas (such as learning and teaching), often in anticipation of new policy developments. The E4 group and their networks can be thus conceptualised as part of an *instrument constituency*, in which

*actors reflexively pursue the management of interdependencies emerging from their joint engagement with an instrument*, they mutually enrol each other for the realisation of particular versions of the instrument according to the specific expectations that they attach to it. (Voß & Simons, 2014, p. 738, emphasis by author).

Table 7 presents an overview of transnational projects which have produced instrument-related outputs that have had or are expected to have impact at the policy level. These projects were selected based on literature review, the documents accompanying the three TPL venues in 2017, the analysis of EQAF papers and expert interviews. These projects contribute to the development of frameworks, standards and other secondary guidance for the application of the general principles in particular contexts. After 2015, an increasing number of transnational projects have focused on producing guidance on the evaluation of teaching and student-centred learning, contributing to the Europeanisation of the issue of internal QA.

Project title	Project dates	Project coordinator or consortium	Outputs	Links to communities of practice	Policy links
Quality culture project	2004-2006	EUA	Network report and final report – bottom-up definition of quality culture	134 HEIs in 18 networks EQAF (highest number of citations)	most referenced practioners' definition of quality culture
MAP-ESG: Mapping the implementation and the application of the ESG	2010-2012	E4 group (ENQA, EUA, EURASHE, ESU)	Final report (submitted to BFUG)	EQAF E4 group membership	revision of the ESG Bucharest Ministerial Communiqué
PASCL – Peer Assessment of Student-Centred Learning	2013-2016	ESU	Peer assessment framework and training for SCL	ESU and national student unions	referenced as “golden rule for ESU”
MusiQuE – Music Quality Enhancement	established in 2014 as a public foundation CEU eTD Collection	n/a	conducts quality assurance activities for the music education	based on the results of multiple international projects (Erasmus+ network of international external	consistent presence at EQAF (2007, 2009, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2021)

			sector, registered on EQAR	examiners, international benchmarking exercise)	
<a href="#">BUILD-PHE</a> – Building Professional Higher Education Capacity in Europe	2015-2017	State Higher Vocational School in Tarnow, Poland	Online open access self-reflection framework and self-assessment tool for professional HEIs and database of good practices of PHEIs to improve their relations with the world of work	EQAF 2017	Presented at PLA 2017
<a href="#">EFFECT</a> – European Forum for Enhanced Collaboration in Teaching	2015-2018 CEU eTD Collection	EUA	exchange of experience and effective methods in terms of university teachers' development at the European level	rectors' conferences, teachers' trade unions, universities working groups targeting national, regional and pan-European audiences	Presented to the Bologna Ministerial Conference in Paris (2018), inspiration for Recommendations to National Authorities for the Enhancement

			Ten Principles for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching		of Higher Education Learning and Teaching in the EHEA (Annex III of Rome Communiqué, 2020)
<a href="#">EQUIP</a> – Enhancing quality through innovative policy and practice	2016-2018	EURASHE	Comparative analysis of ESG 2005 and 2015 Recommendations to policy-makers	Multi-level peer learning groups Workshops and webinars EQAF 2017	Messages presented at the 2018 Ministerial Conference
<a href="#">TeSLA</a> – Trust-based e-authentication and authorship e-assessment analysis	2016-2019  CEU eTD Collection	Open University of Catalunya	E-assessment system ensuring learners authentication and authorship in online and blended learning environments	ENQA working group on quality assurance and e-learning EQAF 2018 collaboration of 80 professionals from 8 universities, 3 QAAs, 3 tech companies and research institutes	



<a href="#">Microbol</a> – Support Future Learning Excellence through Micro-Credentialling in Higher Education	2020-2022	Flemish Ministry of Education and Training (Belgium)	Common framework for micro-credentials in the EHEA  Working groups (experts and partners) to evaluate how existing EHEA tools can be used for or adapted to accommodate micro-credentials	EUA, ENQA, EQAR	Results presented and discussed in BFUG TPG C
<a href="#">DEQAR</a> and <a href="#">DEQAR CONNECT</a>	2017.-2019 and 2020-2022	EQAR	Database of external quality assurance results  Policy briefs and studies	EQAF 2018	reference in European Strategy for Universities Rome Communiqué (2020)
<a href="#">EUniQ</a> – Developing a European approach for comprehensive QA of European university Networks	2019-2021  CEU eTD Collection	NVAO (Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders)	Framework for the quality assurance of European university alliances (replacing multiple procedures)	EUA, ESU, ENQA  8 QA agencies, 6 ministries	Results presented and discussed in BFUG TPG C

<a href="#">CALOHEE</a> - Measuring and Comparing Achievements of Learning Outcomes in Higher Education in Europe	2016-2018 and 2020-2022	University of Groningen (International Tuning Academy)	multi-dimensional instrument to measure and compare learning in HE: European Qualifications Reference Frameworks and Assessment Reference Frameworks in different subject areas	75 universities in 5 subject areas, 15 countries each EQAF 2018	Presented at PLA 2017
<a href="#">BWSE-Forward</a> – Bologna with Stakeholder Eyes for a Stronger Future of the Bologna Process	2020-2022	ESU	update of the publication “Bologna with Student Eyes” organisation of peer learning activities	ENQA, EUA, EURASHE	Supporting project for BFUG TPG C on QA
IMINQA – Implementation and Innovation in QA through peer learning	CEU eTD Collection 202-2025	Flemish Ministry of Education and Training (Belgium/Flemish	supports the overall operations of TPG C, meetings, staff mobility, PLA, work programmes	41 countries, 7 organisations (EI-ETUCE, ENQA, EQAR, ESU, EUA,	Umbrella project supporting the work of Bologna TPG C on QA

		Community), ENQA, EQAR, ARACIS (Romania)	on micro-credentials, European Universities and the digitalisation of QA	EURASHE, European Commission)	
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*Table 7. QA related transnational projects with (potential) policy impact.*

The social status of the ESG as “boundary object” is a precondition to its reflexive appropriation in local contexts and to safeguarding the political relevance of the instrument constituency. While the interests of different stakeholders are heterogeneous, they are united by the common venture of promoting the ESG as a Bologna tool. In 2020, the E4 group issued a joint statement on the continued relevance of the ESG (E4 Group, 2020), amid pressures from policy-makers calling for its revision to accommodate new developments in the field (such as university alliances, micro-credentials or digital provisions). The statement is indicative of the common interest of the E4 to maintain their hegemonic position as standard-setters, holding the monopoly of expertise and informational-analytical capacity to connect political actors with the grassroots levels, and thus influence policy-making through reflexive anticipation. It is important to note however that actors diverge in their views regarding the interpretive flexibility of the ESG: based on the interviews, the European Commission and EQAR tend to favour a stricter interpretation, in which the guidelines represent important policy messages; while other members of the E4 consider that the standards carry more weight for judging compliance than the guidelines.

Finally, and leading towards the discussion of blind spots in the next section, some concerns of the E4 to maintain the status quo of the ESG as a flexible instrument are linked to the increased risk of politicisation, which could potentially reify particular interpretations or move the scope of the ESG from its current focus on learning and teaching. For some time, quality assurance has been widely regarded as a technical and depoliticised domain, the realm of experts and practitioners, despite its instruments explicitly building on an assumption of institutional autonomy and academic freedom. In the past years, the E4 had repeatedly expressed their concerns about politicians trying to overload the ESG with what they consider political discourse. With the ongoing

discussion on monitoring fundamental values in the EHEA (cf. Paris Communiqué, 2018; Rome Communiqué, 2020), such pressures are likely to grow. A recent study based on a survey of 17 EQAR-registered agencies shows that several EHEA countries have national level QA provisions in place which contain references to fundamental values and there is evidence at the agency level to consider these values in accreditation and evaluation practices (Craciun et al., 2021). At the same time, little is known still about how QA instruments and tools can effectively tackle a wide range of systemic policy issues in higher education through organisational learning and self-reflection.

## **5. Reflexivity as practice and its “blind spots”**

The introductory chapter concerning the theoretical premises of reflexivity and its relation to practice (see [I/5.](#)) points to the inherent limitations of reflexivity as a pragmatic exercise. In fact, it could be argued that the emergence of more permanently sustained, i.e. institutionalised and instrumental forms diminishes reflexivity’s critical edge. Revisiting the fundamental tension between reflective and practical action, reflexivity appears as a wicked problem for policy instrumentation. On the one hand, if reflexive capacities and identities can be consciously developed, they are amenable to systemic policy interventions which can make learning and deliberation more reflexive. On the other hand, reflective action, especially if repeated over time, may be performed uncritically and routinely. Schön, (1983) underlines that knowing-in-action is self-limiting, i.e. there is both a temporal gap between action and reflection, as well as a barrier to the practitioner’s cognitive capability to fully access her own intuitive, tacit operations. Bourdieu elaborates a similar argument when he refers to the “unthought categories of thought, which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought” (Bourdieu, 1982, cited in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 40).

Simply put, it is not possible to productively sustain a state of self-awareness in relation to one's own practice at all times. For instance, writing self-assessment reports year after year may lead to the routinisation of certain ways of responding and eventually loses its effect of puzzlement. Theoretically speaking, the dissertation contributes to the debate concerning the dichotomy of reflexivity and routine by refining the understanding of reflexivity as practice in various institutional contexts. Practice theorists generally warn against the entrapment of binary thinking (Bueger & Gadinger, 2014), and the dissertation's findings are in agreement with this assertion, especially [Paper 2](#), which identifies other intermediary forms, such as hybrid or fragmented reflexivity. At the same time, critical realists reject the idea that focusing on the notion of practice should lead to the analytical conflation of structure and agency (Elder-Vass, 2016). In this regard, an important insight is that *reflexivity as an instrument and in relation to policy instruments* takes practical, institutionalised forms, and as such, can be performed radically differently in different contexts and at different points in time. The study of reflexivity through practice thus illuminates its malleability as an instrument of policy.

A broadly cast conclusion which emerges from the three studies is that the limits of the practice of reflexivity in institutional settings are self-imposed. Reflexivity is never perfectly symmetrical in practice and often plays out in social situations between actors of different power status and resources. Moreover, the reflexive appropriation of policy instruments by non-state actors does not automatically lead to the democratisation of policy processes, as it does not by itself address issues of access and representation. The fact that the E4 group is increasingly involved in Bologna working formations, connecting various levels of governance (cf. Elken & Vukasovic, 2014), does not make higher education governance automatically more participatory. However, the way these organisations channel instrument-related knowledge and expertise they acquire through

their communities of practice can have an impact on their legitimacy and political capacity, hence their ability to secure consensus within their constituencies and influence deliberations (cf. Dunlop, 2015). Reflexivity also carries the risk of self-indulgence, of inflating one's own relative importance and of intellectual navel-gazing; which in organisations such as the university may even exacerbate existing issues. For policy analysis, the implication is that simply more reflexivity is not always desirable, nor it leads necessarily to successful learning. The question is rather how reflexivity is enacted in practice and by whom.

[Paper 1](#) identified blind spots for reflexivity in the practice of peer learning in each transnational setting, which mirrored group composition and the epistemic position of the organiser or facilitator of the event. Organisers facilitated, and at times restrained, the learning experience of participants via different learning technologies which configured the social dynamics of learning, through mechanisms of *problematism*, *role framing* and *knowledge production and utilisation*. Participants engaged independently with the learning settings, however, at times they encountered barriers when they reached beyond the scope of deliberation set by the organisers.

For example, during a break-out session at the EQUIP workshop, university representatives from Eastern European countries raised the challenge of changing traditional methods of teaching without governmental support. The moderator of the session dismissed these concerns by stating that the application of the ESG should be independent from national contexts, and that this shows that “there are limits to learning through reflection”. This was not an isolated occurrence: while there was certainly room for informal socialisation at the events, the analysis found that facilitated interactions between stakeholder groups – for instance, policy-makers and academic staff, were limited. The EQUIP project explicitly encouraged peer learning within groups, for

instance through the use of colour codes for identification of stakeholder categories at the workshops or the organisation of focus groups. The PLA “paired” HEI leaders with Ministry experts, in an attempt to invite them to think more strategically about quality culture and look beyond their own national contexts, but in this case, too, organisers emphasised the peer effect. In general, at all three events, the voices of (not QA specialist) academics and students were the least represented. An EQUIP project co-organiser acknowledged that they failed to mobilise a critical number of teaching staff and that it is difficult to attract participants to these events beyond the “usual suspects”. This view was nuanced by another co-organiser, who reported an increased interest in QA among professional HEIs. Finally, an important, yet often overlooked aspect of peer learning is the organisational resources devoted to the “curation”, the identification, collection and follow-up of good practice examples, which bridges discussions in the situated peer learning setting and institutionalised processes of policy transfer and diffusion.

[Paper 2](#) found that institutionalised reflexivity in HEIs may be practiced both from within a particular habitus and in-between spaces, but that external crisis or an element of “surprise” tends to trigger defensive mechanisms and codification instead of the habitualisation of reflexivity, which is a counter-intuitive finding that could be explained by the perception of external audit as a threat to institutional autonomy or even existence. The hybridisation of managerial and academic techniques of self-reflection appears as a viable strategy to instil reflexivity in an institution, as it permits individuals to confront aspects of their practice from different sense-making perspectives (cf. Lueger & Vettori, 2010), that is, it links individual reflection to broader institutional-administrative processes. At the same time, HEIs subjecting themselves to be studied in the context of academic research can function as a form of reflexivity vis-à-vis growing administrative powers.



Blind spots for reflexivity observed at both institutional cases were linked to, on the one hand, the academic habitus itself (peer review at Uppsala and Catholic pedagogy at AVCC), and to the institutional narratives and stories (both explicit and tacit) which are expressions of collective beliefs about organisational identity and relations to the external world, often implied, but not necessarily brought to the surface in the self-assessment process (cf. Carlsen, 2016). This omission can be also reproduced by the self-assessment or accreditation reports. For instance, AVCC's accreditation report states that "staff satisfaction surveys were instrumental for the process of leadership change, but such data collection practices were not used in the prior period" (HAC, 2019, p. 12, author's translation). In the paragraph, the historical context of leadership change was completely omitted, nevertheless, the text implies a latent narrative of (mis)using quality assurance tools to assist collegial emancipation.

Paper 3 attempted to map the scope conditions for reflexive governance in contemporary higher education and found that there is a delicate reflexive momentum upheld by the suspension of the ESG as a "boundary object" through its ongoing interpretation within and among of the E4 organisations. Interview data corroborates the assumption that the E4 are not converging necessarily on core beliefs underlying the ESG, but rather on its interpretive flexibility as a policy instrument. The production of further standards, guidelines and secondary guidance for interpretation for specific situations have resulted in a continuous push for "*instrumentation within the instrument*", which are uploaded to the level of policy-making. The new Bologna TPGs are designed as reflexive hubs where these new products are presented to national Bologna representatives. EQAF also stands out as a transnational venue for policy innovation and evolutionary learning (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013), with an increasingly pragmatic orientation, materially

organised to enhance *transferability*, *interoperability* and *matchmaking* between practices and participants.

Instrument reflexivity may risk becoming an automatic and ultimately self-defeating process (Beck et al., 1994), as the scope of the instrument is extended to newer and newer themes and types of higher education provision, which can ultimately undermine effective implementation and can be exploited for self-serving purposes, i.e. ensuring the continued political relevance of stakeholder organisations. This can happen for instance the case of importing themes of environmental sustainability, fundamental values, the social dimension or university alliances in the future revision of the ESG. The same risk applies to the promotion of *peer learning* as an instrument of self-reflection in the BFUG, which, akin to a “magic cure”, is expected to solve long-standing implementation challenges and bring consensus on highly political topics, by linking (or even replacing) the logic of appropriateness with a logic of practicality. For instance, the final report of the BFUG task force for future monitoring of values states that the “established role of the ESG in the EHEA provides a pragmatic opportunity to strengthen collective EHEA responsibility for academic freedom” (BFUG, 2021, p. 7) and that a monitoring system for fundamental values would “encourage self-reflection, positive peer learning and dialogue” (BFUG, 2021, p. 6). Given the existing limits of TPL to enhance reflexivity between governance levels, further research is necessary to understand where the boundaries of such a peer support approach lie, and how reflexivity can contribute to pressures and perceptions of accountability.

A final question is whether instrument reflexivity leads to the transnationalisation of QA policy. [Paper 3](#) has shown that reflexive capacity-building through joint projects is an important sphere of activity of European stakeholder networks, which contribute, for instance to the diversification of national QA agencies’ functions and activities. At

the European level, earlier studies have identified a tendency towards isopraxis (Stensaker et al., 2010), which has most recently manifested in a tendency towards institution-based external quality evaluation. Notwithstanding, quality assurance as a category of practice (competent performance) remains very much determined nationally (Elken & Stensaker, 2020; Smidt, 2015).

## 6. Limitations and directions for further research

An important limitation of the three studies is that due to their exploratory nature, they cannot claim to be comprehensive, which impairs their generalisability. The paper-based structure also excludes a more systematic and in-depth analysis of the various aspects of instrument reflexivity. This initial exploration of situated and practical reflexivity can be developed further towards more systematic analyses of reflexive capacities<sup>63</sup> in networks, higher education systems or university alliances. The case of the European network of quality assurance agencies is especially desirable to explore through methods such as social network analysis<sup>64</sup>, as agencies remain one of the most powerful groups of actors in QA both in terms of their transnational organisational capacities (analytical, political and administrative) and their influence on the interpretation of the ESG at the national and institutional levels.

Chapter V addressed challenges of data collection and limitations inherent within the methodology. As the research design focused on non-national and non-elite actors, the national layer of instrumentation is only marginally examined in this dissertation.

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<sup>63</sup> For an example of a heuristic framework on reflexive capacity-building in local networks in the environmental field, see [Gottschick \(2018\)](#).

<sup>64</sup> The 2018 (not peer-reviewed) report on the implementation of European QA policies contains a sub-section which presents the findings of a survey-based social network analysis of European QA agencies, which contends that 70% of the surveyed agencies (n=45) reported mutual learning and the exchange of good practices as a significant area of international cooperation (European Commission, 2018).

Further research should investigate how the domestic layer is implicated in transnational communities of practice and instrument constituencies. Furthermore, at TPL venues, the collected data does not include perceptions of the participating universities on their own roles in the learning settings. This was on the one hand due to the difficulties of real-time access to some of the venues, data protection regulations preventing entering directly in contact with participants retroactively and a time lag between various phases of data collection. On the other hand, the methodological focus on practices structuring peer learning directed the analytical gaze towards the actions and perceptions of the activity organisers. Certain stakeholder organisations have started conducting impact analyses of their peer learning activities (cf. Peterbauer, 2021) which could generate data for further research. Action research is another possible avenue for TPL organisers who do not wish to compromise the integrity of their events by admitting non-participant observers.

Another perspective for future consideration is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the institutionalisation of transnational peer learning, especially when it comes to their physical, social and geographical components and their impact on the individual learning experience as well as on policy learning. In the case of the Bologna TPG C staff mobility project, almost two-thirds of planned visits were cancelled due to travel restrictions in 2020 and 2021 (Bologna TPG C, 2021). Other venues have embraced virtual or hybrid solutions. In 2020 and 2021, EQAF was organised fully online and attracted a greater number and more geographically diverse participants (interview with policy analyst at EUA, 2021). However, in 2022, the event has returned to its traditional in-person format. The long-term effects of the digitalisation of these meetings on learning, network- and capacity-building will be especially important to examine, given the transformative implications of ICT for the practice of policy-making (see [V./3.2.](#)).

Finally, it will be important to reassess the role of transnational actors and venues in the light of future policy developments towards the supranationalisation of the quality assurance field and potential further revision(s) of the ESG, which is currently already under preparation (in 2022) and is expected to be launched at the 2024 Ministerial Conference. The new European strategy for universities (European Commission, 2022) foresees the establishment of further European university alliances, expanding to 500 HEIs by 2024, a legal statute for such alliances and the possibility to deliver joint European degrees. The development of a European quality assurance and recognition system is also envisaged, based on the review of the 2006 Council Recommendation. The new system aims to transcend legal and administrative barriers to transnational cooperation in higher education, although it is not yet clear what role the ESG and its multi-level instrument constituencies would play in it, and to what extent the current multi-level governance set-up would be transformed. Nevertheless, the Commission foresees the “launch of new instruments and legal frameworks” (European Commission, 2022, p. 3), which foreshadows a scenario that is potentially limiting to reflexive governance, and could instead provoke reversion to conventional hierarchical rule-making after an experimentalist phase (Rangoni & Zeitlin, 2021). It can be expected that stakeholder groups, particularly the E4, will continue to oppose the uniformisation of QA procedures and the duplication of administrative layers (cf. European University Association, 2022), as the following quote from an EQAF keynote speech illustrates:

“Any attempt to force them into a one-size-fits-all compliance mechanism covering every higher education institution in the EHEA should be strongly resisted.”  
(Williams, 2011)

Exploring these developments from a political sociology perspective will be essential to gain a more nuanced understanding reflexivity as instrument and practice in public policy.

## Appendix I – Paper 1

<i>Site description and code name</i>	<b>ET 2020 peer learning activity (PLA)</b>	<b>European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF)</b>	<b>Multi-level peer learning project (EQUIP)</b>
<i>Event title</i>	Enhancing quality culture in higher education institutions	Responsible QA: Committing to impact	Enhancing quality: from policy to practice
<i>Dates</i>	16-17 November 2017	23-25 November 2017	2016-2018
<i>Organiser</i>	European Commission and Ministry of Education, Norway	EQAF Steering Committee (representatives of the E4 group)	E4 group and project partners
<i>Host/Venue</i>	Ministry of Education, Oslo, Norway	Riga, Latvia (University of Latvia)	multiple venues across the EU
<i>Meeting formats and learning technologies</i>	Host country study visit, country case presentations, small group and plenary discussions	3-day conference: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 plenary sessions</li> <li>• 6 parallel plenary sessions</li> <li>• 6 workshops (2 with papers)</li> <li>• 23 individual paper sessions</li> </ul>	Series of events: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 workshops</li> <li>• 3 webinars</li> <li>• 6 focus groups</li> </ul>
<i>Institutionalisation of peer learning methods/tools</i>	High	Moderate	Low
<i>Institutional context and objective</i>	Education and training OMC/ Mutual learning between Member States	Annual forum of quality assurance practitioners	EU-funded project/ embedding the ESG 2015 at the grassroots level
<i>Target audience</i>	Members of the ET 2020 Working Group and external experts	European quality assurance community	ESG users
<i>Learning Inputs</i>	Background questionnaire Background paper on quality culture Oral presentations of national cases by participants	Conference papers submitted in an open call for proposals (25) Oral presentations by organisers, paper authors and invited guests	Participant surveys Print booklet of ESG 2015 Comparative analysis of the ESG 2005 and 2015
<i>Learning Outputs</i>	PLA report List of good practices	Conference papers	EQUIP study featuring findings of the focus groups and examples of good practice

			Oral presentations by organisers and invited guests
<i>Policy outputs</i>	EC study on quality assurance in the EU (2018) and various policy initiatives (indirectly)	No specific policy output	Recommendations for each stakeholder group and for policy-makers
<i>Conditions of access</i>	Restricted access (only organisers and invited participants selected by the EC)	Open to QA practitioners, access is conditional on registration fee	Open access to workshops, webinars and project materials  Restricted access to focus groups (invitation only)
<i>Number and distribution of participants</i> <i>(QAA: quality assurance agencies EC: European Commission)</i>	Total: 43 Ministry representatives: 12 (28%) QAA: 3 (7%) HEI representatives: 14 (32.5%) Stakeholder organisations: 5 (11.6%) EC and consultants: 5 (11.6%) Host ministry: (4.3%)	Total: cca. 450 (442 on participant list) Ministry/ government agency: 33 (7.5%) QAA: 88 (20%) HEI representatives: 259 (58.6%) Stakeholder organisations: 40 (9%) Student unions: 15 (3.4%) Other: 7 (1.5%)	Vienna workshop (total:111) Ministry/government: 4 (3.6%) QAAs: 21 (18.9%) HEI representatives: 50 (45.1%) Students: 21 (18.9%) Stakeholders: 15 (13.5%)  Focus groups: 1. students (15) 2. universities (21) 3. lecturers (6) 4. universities of applied sciences (25) 5. QAAs (N/A) and 6. national authorities (54)  Webinars: 120 participants (mean) webinar, unknown distribution
<i>Number of countries (EU and non-EU)</i>	14 countries	49 countries	Workshop observed: 36 countries  Focus groups: between 6 to 24 countries
<i>Participant observation – researcher's access</i>	No access to event, access to materials, interviews	Full access to event and materials, interviews	Partial access to events (one workshop and webinars), access to focus group materials, interviews

Table 8. Overview of key data of the peer learning sites.

	<b>ET 2020 PLA</b>	<b>EQAF</b>	<b>EQUIP</b>
<i>General framing</i>	How can governments incentivise higher education institutions to pro-actively engage in quality culture	How can the QA practitioner community achieve and measure impact?	How can the European stakeholder community ensure institutional take-up of the ESG across contexts?

	development?						
<i>Causal narratives on quality</i> <i>C (culture)</i> <i>P (process)</i> <i>S (service/ outcome)</i>	Reinforcing quality culture yields better outcomes for students. (C→S) Data-driven/ evidence-based evaluation and enhancement lead to quality teaching and learning. (P→S)	System-level processes contribute to quality culture. (P→C) A strong quality culture creates ownership and buy-in of participants (managers, staff, students) in QA processes. (C→P)	Involving stakeholders in system design increases impact and efficiency of QA. (S→P) A student-centred learning approach reinforces quality culture. (S→C)				
<i>Dominant frames (implementation) in coded references* of learning inputs</i>	<i>Quality culture</i> <i>Funding</i> <i>Governance</i> <i>Relations between levels</i>	Plenary interventions and workshops: <i>Relations between levels; Impact; Governance; Resistance</i>  Input papers: <i>Quality culture; Compliance; Bureaucracy; Resistance</i>	Webinars: <i>Student-centred learning; Interpretation of ESG; Impact; Compliance</i>  Workshop: <i>Student-centred learning; Adaptation to new ESG; Impact; Compliance</i>  Focus groups: <i>Student-centred learning; Impact; Diversity of contexts; Legal frameworks</i>				
<i>Dominant frames (quality assurance) in coded references<sup>65</sup> of learning inputs</i>  (QA: quality assurance)	<i>Evidence-based QA/metrics</i> <i>Learning and teaching</i> <i>Collaborative tools</i> <i>Institutional responsibility</i>	Plenary interventions and workshops: <i>Institutional responsibility; Management; Evidence-based QA/metrics; Learning outcomes</i>  Input papers: <i>Institutional responsibility; Internal perceptions; System development; Division of responsibilities; Learning and teaching</i>	Webinars: <i>Institutional responsibility; Division of responsibilities; Internal-external QA link; Meeting expectations</i>  Workshop: <i>Learning and teaching; Internal-external QA link; Institutional responsibility</i>  Focus groups: <i>Strategic management; Communication; Move to institutional self-accreditation</i>				
<i>Examples of 'good practice'</i>  <i>IQA: internal quality assurance</i> <i>EQA: external quality assurance</i>	National policy frameworks for quality culture Strategic agendas for HE Data-driven QA policy development Performance-based funding and other funding schemes Teaching and learning excellence initiatives Shift to institutional-	Distribution of paper authors: 28,1% HEI QA staff; 25% QA agency; 17,1% HEI academic staff; 12,5% stakeholder organisation; 9,4% HEI leadership; 6,3% PhD student; 1,6 % other (64 total)  Thematic distribution of papers (N=24): <table border="1"> <tr> <td></td> <td>IQA</td> <td>EQA</td> <td>Mix</td> </tr> </table>		IQA	EQA	Mix	Supporting the 'third mission' (society) in higher education Division of responsibilities in EQA Use of metrics in EQA Adapting to institutional level EQA Advisory and regulatory roles of QA agencies Communicating about QA Fostering quality culture (ownership, student participation, external
	IQA	EQA	Mix				

\*Indicates highest coding frequency in decreasing order across input units (plenary sessions, presentations, papers), adjusted for the 'strength' of the frame (interpreted as the conceptual relevance of the reference for the entirety of the input) – e.g.: 'quality culture' is presented as a central implementation problem in 5 input papers.



	level EQA Multi-actor platforms and dialogues Institutional QA practices Transnational collaborative projects and tools	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>Policy</td><td>1</td><td>1</td><td>2</td></tr> <tr> <td>Practice</td><td>9</td><td>2</td><td>2</td></tr> <tr> <td>Research</td><td>4</td><td>3</td><td>0</td></tr> </table>	Policy	1	1	2	Practice	9	2	2	Research	4	3	0	stakeholders) Professional development of teaching staff
Policy	1	1	2												
Practice	9	2	2												
Research	4	3	0												
<i>Geographical distribution of good practices</i>	<p>Most cited good practice: <b>Norway</b> (quality culture); <b>UK</b> (Teaching Excellence Framework); Denmark (student-centred learning); Belgium (Flemish institutional review system); Poland (graduate tracking); Finland (quality audits) /practices featured at all 3 events in bold/</p> <p>Absolute number (min. 2): Belgium (8), Norway (8), Austria (7), UK (7), Finland (6), Ireland (6), Netherlands (5), Switzerland (5), , Sweden (4), Denmark (3), Croatia (2), Germany (2), Poland (2), Portugal (2)</p>														
<i>Reflective practice – learning technologies</i>	<p>Presentation of ‘country case studies’ and corresponding institutional models and practices</p> <p>Organisation of PLA according to country-specific learning goals</p>	<p>Self-studies (action research): 12 papers</p> <p>Pilot initiatives: 4 papers</p> <p>Reflective exercises: simulation of a multi-perspective evaluation meeting; translation of academic concepts into market ‘language’ (workshops)</p>	<p>Focus groups: world café and ‘gallery walk’ on 1) Concepts of quality; 2) Purposes of higher education; 3) Division of responsibilities in the QA system</p> <p>Workshop: collection of examples ‘beyond the ESG’</p>												
<i>Reflective tools and approaches for QA</i>	<p>online self-assessment framework for professional HEIs (BuildPHE Erasmus+ project)</p> <p>digital self-monitoring tool (University of Helsinki)</p> <p>Multi-dimensional assessment of learning outcomes (CALOHEE Erasmus+ project)</p>	<p>self-reflective institutional QA models; critical friends approach; transnational benchmarking; cross-sparring; European principles for learning and teaching; online self-assessment framework;</p>	<p>Student portfolio (webinar)</p>												

Table 9. Overview of key results of the analysis.

Interviewee profile	Date and place of interview	Role in the organisation of peer learning
1. Former project and policy officer at EUA	Brussels, 11 December 2017 and 16 November 2021	EQUIP project partner, EQAF organisation, co-author of EQUIP project report
2. Expert at European Commission	Brussels, 5 July 2021 and online 11 November 2021	PLA co-organiser, author of PLA background paper and report
3. Director at EQAR	Brussels, 13 October, 2021	EQUIP project partner, EQAF participant
4. Former President of ESU	Brussels, 19 October 2021	EQUIP project partner

5. Former EQUIP project co-organiser at EURASHE	Online, 2 November 2021	EQUIP project coordinator
6. Former Secretary General at EURASHE	Online, 12 November, 2021	EQUIP project coordinator, EQAF participant
7. Former Deputy Secretary General at EUA	Paris, 22 November 2021	EQUIP project partner, EQAF Steering Committee member, co-author of EQUIP project report, PLA participant
8. Policy analyst at EUA	Online, 24 November 2021	EQAF organisation

*Table 10. List of interviews.*

## Appendix II – Paper 2

### 1. List of interviews and fieldwork material

	<i>Interviews (individuals and pairs)</i>	<i>Meeting observations</i>	<i>Focus groups</i>
<b>Uppsala University</b> (April-May 2018)	University leadership University administration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ QA professionals</li> <li>▪ pedagogical developers</li> <li>▪ other professionals</li> </ul> Quality Advisory Board	2 meetings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Meeting of the Division for Quality Enhancement</li> <li>▪ Meeting of the horizontal working group on quality policy</li> </ul>	Academic staff
Total number of respondents/ participants	23		5
<b>AVCC</b> (October 2017- December 2018)	University management Quality Assurance and Evaluation Committee	5 meetings of the Quality Project Team and the Quality Assurance and Evaluation Committee (2017-18)	Focus group with lecturers and students as part of internal quality reform process – reports used to inform research
Total number of respondents/ participants	7		28

Table 11. Summary of fieldwork activities at Apor Vilmos Catholic College and Uppsala University.

### 2. Fieldwork at Uppsala University

Interviews and focus groups:

1. Interview with Head of Quality and Evaluation Unit, 25 April 2018.
2. Interview with project manager, Quality and Evaluation Unit, 27 April 2018.
3. Interviews with Head of Division for Quality Enhancement, 2 and 7 May, 2018.

4. Focus group interview with associate professor of neurobiology; lecturer at Department of Neuroscience and psychologist at Department of Psychology; and researcher at Department of Earth Sciences, 2 May 2018.
5. Interview with Head of Unit, Quality and Leadership in Academia, 3 May 2018.
6. Interview with anonymous member of University Management, 3 May 2018.
7. Interview with Vice-Rector for Science and Technology, 4 May 2018.
8. Interview with 2 members (administrator and student) of the Quality Advisory Board, 4 May 2018.
9. Interview with professor emeritus, Department of Business Studies, 7 May 2018.
10. Interview with Vice-Rector for Humanities and Social Sciences, 8 May 2018.
11. Interview with 2 project managers, Quality and Evaluation Unit, 8 May 2018.
12. Interview with project manager and pedagogical developer, Division for Quality and Enhancement, 8 May 2018.
13. Interview with project manager, Quality and Evaluation Unit, 8 May 2018.
14. Interview with education developer, Unit for Academic Teaching and Learning, 8 May 2018.
15. Interview with analyst, Planning Division, 9 May 2018.
16. Interview with Head of Unit for Academic Teaching and Learning, 9 May 2018.
17. Interview with University Director, 9 May 2018.
18. Interview with deputy Head of Unit for Academic Teaching and Learning, 9 May 2018.
19. Focus group interview with Chair Professor at Department of Philosophy, and assistant lecturer at Department of Government, 14 May 2018.
20. Interview with faculty programme director, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, 14 May 2018.

21. Interview with 2 anonymous respondents and faculty offices, 15 May 2018.
22. Interview with Senior administrative officer, Faculty Office for Humanities and Social Sciences.

Public documents:

1. University mission statement, programmes and guidelines:
  - a. Uppsala University goals and strategies (v. 2014, 2019)
  - b. Learning and teaching program (v. 2008, 2018)
  - c. Programmes and action plans for quality work (2008, 2017, 2018-2020)
  - d. Guidelines for course evaluations
  - e. Uppsala University's Model for Review of Study Programmes – Guidelines (2015)
2. Research evaluation: Quality and Renewal (KoF) 2007, 2011, 2017 – final reports
3. Quality reports (2018, 2019, 2020, 2021)
4. Education evaluation – periodic review of study programs
  - a. Faculty education review models
  - b. Halftime review of the pilot
  - c. Schedule of educational evaluation

Internal documents and drafts:

1. Gap analysis against the background of UKÄ's pilot institutional reviews, draft for unit meeting, 26 April 2018
2. PPT presentations – Division meeting, 25 April 2018
3. PPT presentations – Quality conference, 8 December 2017

Online resources:

1. University website and its various sub-pages: <https://uu.se> (last accessed 31 May 2022)
2. Videos on quality assurance system: <https://www.uu.se/om-uu/kvalitetsarbete/> (last accessed 30 May 2022)
3. The Vice-Chancellor's blog (2012-2020): <https://vicechancellorsblog.uu.se> (last accessed 30 April 2022)
4. GLIS internal knowledge repository (last accessed 15 May 2018)

#### Meetings:

1. Meeting of Division for Quality Assurance and Enhancement, 25 April 2018
2. Meeting of horizontal working group on quality policy, 7 May 2018

#### **3. *Fieldwork at Apor Vilmos Catholic College***

#### Interviews:

1. Interview with Quality Assurance Manager, Budapest, 7 November 2018.
2. Interview with former Rector, Vác, 14 November 2018.
3. Interview with Head of the Rector's Office, Vác, 14 November 2018.
4. Interview with anonymous college professor, Vác, 14 November 2018.
5. Interview with Vice-Rector for Education, Vác, 16 November 2018.
6. Interview with anonymous college professor, Vác, 20 November 2018.
7. Interview with anonymous college professor, Budapest, 21 November 2018.

#### Documents:

##### Publicly available documents:

1. Quality Mission Statement (2018)
2. Quality Assurance Policy (2018; 2021)
3. Quality Assurance Handbook (2018; 2020)
4. Institutional Development Plan, 2021-2024

5. Summary of experiences of students and teachers on the questionnaire for student feedback on teaching, based on focus group discussions (2017-2018), author's work.
6. Éva, Pappné Palovics and Máté, Tamáska (2012): The college as a channel for social mobility (A főiskola, mint mobilitási csatorna). Internal analysis of graduate tracking data.
7. Ferenc, Bódi and János, Jelli (2011): Employers at AVCC – graduate tracking studies (Munkáltatók az AVKF-en – Diplomás pályakövető kutatások). Online study of the Pegasus project.
8. János, Jelli and Klára, Kabainé Tóth (2011): Research results on graduate tracking at AVCC (A diplomás pályakövető rendszer kutatási eredményeiből). Final study of the Pegasus project.
9. Decision no. 2019/6/V/1/2/1. of the Hungarian Accreditation Committee on the institutional accreditation of Apor Vilmos Catholic College.
10. Accreditation Report for Apor Vilmos Catholic College (Annex to Decision no. 2019/6/V/1/2/1. of the Hungarian Accreditation Committee)
11. Decision no. 2014/2/VII/1. of the Hungarian Accreditation Committee on the institutional accreditation of Apor Vilmos Catholic College.
12. Accreditation Report for Apor Vilmos Catholic College (Annex to Decision no. 2014/2/VII/1. of the Hungarian Accreditation Committee)

Internal documents and drafts:

1. Self-study for the accreditation process of Apor Vilmos Catholic College (draft versions and final version)
2. Other files included in the “Accreditation package” (e.g., PPT presentations of quality assurance work and study programmes, self-study coordination plans)

3. Draft versions of Quality Mission Statement, Quality Assurance Policy and Quality Assurance Handbook.
4. Good practices for the institutional transposition of the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance (author's internal draft version, submitted to AVCC in 2019)
5. Minutes and notes of meetings

#### Online resources

1. Institution's website (2018)
2. Institution's website (2022)

#### Meetings:

Bilateral meetings are not listed.

Date	Participants	Topics
18 October 2017	Rector, Vice-Rectors, Head of Administration, IT representative, members of the Quality Project Team	Kick-off meeting Preparation for accreditation Graduate tracking system and survey design Membership of permanent QA committee
8 November 2017	Quality Project team	Organisation of focus group interviews Methodology Accreditation self-study
16 January 2018	Quality project team	Feedback from focus groups on the evaluation of teaching Annual plan for quality assurance Strategy and collection of good practices



		Preparatory discussion on quality mission statement, quality policy and quality assurance handbook
5 April 2018	Quality project team	Preparatory discussion on quality mission statement, quality policy and quality assurance handbook
22 May 2018	Quality and Evaluation Committee	Debate of draft text of quality policy and handbook

*Table 12. List of observed meetings.*

### 3. Overview of reflective practice

Reflective practice	Crisis	Habitual
<i>Swedish education field</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students-as-partners</li> <li>• Comparison</li> </ul>	Report of the local student union as part of the external assessment  Comparability with institutions in the pilot round	Student participation in boards, committees, working groups  Tailored bibliometric analyses
<i>Academic/ collegial</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collegial leadership</li> <li>• Research habitus</li> <li>• Peer review</li> </ul>	Collegial informality (ad hoc working groups)  Piloting and experimentation	Peer review and critical friends  Seminar culture (regular workshops and conferences on QA)  Pedagogical development courses  Organisation research
<i>Managerial (QA and NPM specific)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risk management</li> <li>• Project management</li> <li>• Coaching</li> </ul>	Gap analysis, identification of risks and vulnerabilities  Project-based work	“Anchoring”  Career coaching and other coaching tools (e.g. skills wheel for identification and articulation of competences)
<i>Administrative (academic)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administrative performance control</li> <li>• Codification</li> </ul>	Strategic goal-setting  Development and revision of university-wide policies, strategies and guidelines	University-wide data collection (surveys, reporting)

Table 13. Types of reflective practice corresponding to habitual and crisis reflexivity at Uppsala University (2018).

Reflective practice	Crisis	Habitual
<i>Hungarian higher education field</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>centralised higher education databases</li> <li>historical dominance of legal thinking in public administration</li> </ul>	seeking legal and administrative opinion of national authorities on unique cases	annual and bi-annual standardised questionnaires (graduate tracking, student evaluation of teaching)
<i>Academic</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>sociology</li> <li>ESG-related research</li> </ul>	Reflection on survey design and methodology Focus group discussions Study on concepts of the ESG	Sociological analysis of student background and employment trajectories Collaborative curriculum design in social pedagogy
<i>Managerial (QA and NPM specific)</i>	C-SWOT analysis project team external audit collection of good practices	informal dialogue and surveys with employers and internship providers quality assurance of events
<i>Administrative (academic)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Codification</li> <li>Legal audit</li> </ul>	Quality mission statement, policy and handbook Legal audit of institutional policies and strategies	
<i>“Catholic habitus”</i>		Catholic pedagogy Familial climate (tutoring)

Table 14. Types of reflective practice corresponding to habitual and crisis reflexivity at AVCC (2018).

### Appendix III – Paper 3

#### *List of interviews*

1. Interviews with expert at European Commission, Brussels, 5 July 2021 and online 11 November 2021.
2. Interview with analyst at European Commission, Brussels, 21 July 2021.
3. Interview with Director at EQAR, Brussels, 13 October, 2021.
4. Interview with former President at ESU, Brussels, 19 October, 2021.
5. Interview with former Secretary General at EURASHE, online, 12 November, 2021.
6. Interview with Deputy Director at ENQA (current Director), Brussels, 16 November 2021.
7. Interview with former Deputy Secretary General at EUA (former member of EQAF Steering Committee), Paris, 22 November 2021.
8. Interview with policy analyst (quality assurance) at EUA, online, 24 November 2021.
9. Interview with policy analyst (teaching and learning) at EUA, online, 24 November 2021.
10. Interview with international QA expert (former member of EQAF Steering Committee and EURASHE QA working group/ community of practice), online, 29 November 2021.
11. Interview with expert at Flemish Ministry of Education and Training (Belgium), co-chair of the Bologna Thematic Peer Group on Quality Assurance (TPG C), online, 11 January 2022.

Organisation/ CoP	Type of document	Number of documents	Description
TPG C	Action plan	1 ( 20 May 2022)	
TPG C	Proposal for a renewed approach to the implementation of key commitments within the EHEA	1	Joint proposal of WG2/AG3 to the BFUG
TPG C	Reports	1. Final report of the Matchmaking Committee on staff mobility (2021) 2. Final Report: Implementing the Bologna Key Commitments through Peer Support	
TPG C	Guidelines for BFUG peer support	2 (2018-20 and 2021-24)	
TPG C	Meeting documents	31	PPT presentations, meeting minutes, draft documents
EQAF	Selection of EQAF papers	8 (2006-2013)	Self-standing publication containing a selection of papers and keynote speeches

EQAF	Individual EQAF papers (published on EUA website)	199	
EUA	Reports of the EUA Thematic peer groups on learning and teaching	16	
EURASHE	Annual reports	2 (2018, 2019)	
	QA CoP working documents	9	
ENQA	Working Group reports	10	
	Statutes and work plans	2	
EQAR	Use and interpretation of the ESG	1	informs agencies on requirements of EQAR registration, related practice and interpretation of ESG
Erasmus+ projects	project calls with annex (3)	1. EHEA call 2018 2. EHEA call 2021	invitation sent from the Commission to national authorities

		3. Annex on examples of possible peer support activities	
	book of abstracts (1)	EHEA call 2019	document containing short descriptions of selected projects
	project websites and reports	5 projects	
Bologna/EHEA	Ministerial Communiqués	12	
Bologna/EHEA	other documents	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Final report of the Advisory Group on learning and teaching (2018-2020)</li> <li>2. Final report of the Task Force for the Future Monitoring of Values</li> </ol>	

Table 15. Overview of source documents.

Learning goals	Challenges	Related ESG	Countries
<i>ESG implementation: system level</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Legislative audit or change</li> <li>EQA methodologies</li> <li>EQA procedures and reports</li> <li>QA system compliance and alignment</li> <li>Support for IQA</li> </ul>	Part 1 (internal QA) and Part 2 (external QA)	Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czechia, Holy See, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Romania, San Marino, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, UK/Scotland
<i>ESG implementation: quality assurance agencies</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>agency compliance with ESG</li> <li>agency internal QA</li> <li>agency registration in EQAR/ENQA</li> </ul>	Part 3 of ESG	Albania, Cyprus, Czechia, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Moldova, Malta, Norway, Romania, Slovenia, San Marino, UK/Scotland



<i>ESG implementation</i>  <i>salient topics</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ student involvement in EQA</li> <li>▪ cooperation with stakeholders</li> <li>▪ international experts</li> <li>▪ thematic analysis</li> </ul>	1.1. Policy for QA 1.3. Student-centred learning 2.3. Implementing processes 2.4. Peer-review experts 3.1. Agency activities, policy and processes 3.4. Thematic analysis	Austria, Albania, Azerbaijan, Croatia, Czechia, Cyprus, Georgia, Germany Greece, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Latvia, Lichtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, The Netherlands, Norway, Slovakia, Slovenia, San Marino, Switzerland
	enhancement-oriented use of the ESG		Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Holy See, Iceland, Italy, Malta, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Switzerland, UK-Scotland
<i>First order reflexivity</i>	consistency of implementation		Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany, Georgia, Finland, Holy See, Ireland, Luxembourg, Latvia, Norway, Slovenia

	digitalisation of QA/ QA of digital provision		Armenia, Georgia, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden
	strategic positioning of QA		Austria, Croatia, Greece, Holy See, San Marino, UK - Scotland
	maintaining relevance and impact		Finland, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, Switzerland
<i>Second order reflexivity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ micro-credentials</li> <li>▪ European university alliances</li> </ul>		Armenia, Austria, Belgium, France, Hungary, Italy, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, San Marino, Slovenia, Sweden
	innovative approaches		Belgium, France, Italy, Slovenia
	social dimension		Croatia, Italy, Slovenia
	academic integrity		Austria, Ireland
	sustainable development		Switzerland

Table 16. Thematic analysis of country challenges in Action Plan of Bologna TPG C (2021-2024), version 20 May 2022.

Year	Title	Thematic focus	Bologna/ EHEA commitments
2006	Embedding quality culture in higher education	QA as institutional and academic responsibility	1999 (Bologna) 2001 (Prague) call on ENQA to develop common framework of reference and to disseminate best practice EUA, EURASHE and 2003 (Berlin) institutional autonomy and responsibility for QA EUA, EURASHE, ESIB (ESU) consultative members in BFUG 2005 (Bergen) adoption of ESG ENQA consultative member in BFUG principle of a European register
2007	Implementing and using quality assurance: strategy and practice	strategic dimension, wider socio-economic context	2007 (London) encouragement of annual EQAF
2008	Trends in Quality Assurance	strategic tensions, QA and democracy	model of quality assurance register strategy on EHEA in a global context guidelines for quality provision in cross-border HE

<b>2009</b>	Creativity and diversity: challenges for quality assurance beyond 2010	outside-the-box approach to QA (aims, organisation, methodology)	2009 (Leuven/ Louvain-la-Neuve) student-centred learning and the teaching mission of HE national qualifications framework quality of transnational HE
<b>2010</b>	Building bridges: making sense of quality assurance in European, national and institutional contexts	policy impact of tools and processes implemented at agency or institutional level	2010 (Budapest-Vienna declaration) launch of EHEA developing new working methods
<b>2011</b>	Quality and trust: at the heart of what we do	purposes and essence of both EQA and IQA	
<b>2012</b>	How does quality make a difference?	impact of IQA and EQA on higher education policies and institutional realities	2012 (Bucharest) endorsement of E4 report MAP-ESG call for the revision of ESG
<b>2013</b>	Working together to take quality forward	the role of QA in the daily lives of organisations and individuals	

<b>2014</b>	Changing education – QA and the shift from teaching to learning	shift from teaching to learning	call for agencies to register in EQAR employability and learning outcomes commitment to dismantle obstacles to joint programmes and degrees
<b>2015</b>	Taking stock and looking forward	stocktaking of developments and assessment of impact on stakeholders	2015 (Yerevan) adoption of revised ESG adoption of European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching development of EHEA governance and working methods
<b>2016</b>	Quality in context – embedding improvement	embedding QA in diverse contexts	
<b>2017</b>	Responsible QA – Committing to impact	transparency and responsibility in QA	
<b>2018</b>	Broadening the scope of QA	internal QA systems of institutions and agencies	2018 (Paris) commitment to removing the remaining obstacles to their implementation of ESG in national legislations and regulations development of DEQAR adoption of structured peer support approach innovation and strategy for learning and teaching commitment to develop the role of HE for sustainability, SDGs recognition of the potential of digitalisation
<b>2019</b>	Supporting societal engagement in higher education	demonstrating value to society through QA	

<b>2020</b>	Flexible higher education: implications for QA	flexible learning paths and alternatives to traditional qualifications	2020 (Rome) Enhancement-oriented use of the ESG flexible learning paths and micro-credentials HE contribution to SDGs academic and scientific integrity commitment to promote and protect shared fundamental values adoption of Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA
<b>2021</b>	Building trust and enhancement: from information to evidence	use of data in quality assurance	
<b>2022</b>	Shaping or sharing? QA in a value-driven EHEA	role of QA in shaping, safeguarding and promoting shared values	

Table 17. Overview of EQAF topics in the light of Bologna commitments in QA (2006-2021).

Name or acronym of organisation	Type of organisation	Country	Number of submissions
AQU Catalunya	QA agency	Spain	11
Dublin City University	HEI	Ireland	9
CIPES – Centre for Research in higher education policies	Research centre	Portugal	7

European Student Union (ESU)	Stakeholder organisation		7
NVAO	QA agency	Belgium (Flanders) and the Netherlands	7
Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU)	HEI	Austria	7
NOKUT	QA agency	Norway	6
QAA	QA agency	UK	6
QQI	QA agency	Ireland	6
AEQES	QA agency	Belgium (Wallonia-Brussels)	5
European Association of Conservatories	network (professional music training)		5
National University of Ireland Galway	HEI	Ireland	5
University of Edinburgh	HEI	Scotland/ UK	5

Table 18. List of organisations with highest number of paper submissions at EQAF.

Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Ireland	2	1	2	2		2	1		3	2	2	2	3	2	3	
Germany	3	1	1				2	4	3	1	1	2	4		2	2
United Kingdom	2	2	2	1		2	2	1	1	2	2	2	2			
EU-level or EU project		2		1	1	1		3	1	2		2	2	1		
Portugal	1	1		2			1	3	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	
Austria	1	2			1	1	1	2			3	1	1		1	1
Spain	1	2	1		1		1	2		1		1	1	2	1	1
the Netherlands							2	4	1	2	1	1	2			2
Flanders (Belgium)	1			1			3	2		1	1	1	1	1		1
Norway	1		1	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	2				
Switzerland		1	1						1	3	2		1		1	1
Scotland	1		1				1	1	2			1	2		1	1
Poland	1						1	1	1			1	1		2	1
Sweden				1			2	2		1	2	1				



Finland								1	1	2		1			1	2
Denmark			1				3			1		1	1			
France	1							1			1			1		2
Wallonia (Belgium)								1		1	1	1				1
Croatia							1					1		2		
Italy		1						1	1							1
Latvia			1	1								1		1		
Estonia							1		1				1			
International organisation					1	1									1	
Malta										1		1	1			
Slovenia	1								1		1					
Ukraine					2										1	
Australia										1	1					
Cyprus													1	1		
Czechia								1								1

Israel								1	1							
Lithuania							1						1			
North Macedonia												1		1		
Russia							2									
United States							1		1							

Table 19. Distribution of country affiliation per publication (minimum 2 and above).

Topics	Frequency in publications
National QA system	25-30
QA agency methods and practice QA models, methods and metrics Student involvement in QA Quality culture	20-25
IQA system development	15-19
Learning and enhancement Online, distance and open learning Programme level QA QA of a profession or disciplinary area Quality assurance and enhancement Impact of QA Social dimension and third mission in QA	10-14

Data and information management Internationalisation and cross-border cooperation Covid-19 adaptation Institutional accreditation, evaluation or audit Quality definition or philosophy Student evaluation of teaching and student satisfaction Teaching or teaching competence assessment Use of the ESG Bologna Process Doctoral education Student as experts, expert pools Innovation, creativity, diversity Regional QA framework Learning outcomes	<b>5-9</b>
HEI staff perceptions and role Joint programmes Employability Monitoring and assessment of student learning and experience Stakeholder involvement in QA QA as a field of expertise Graduate surveys and tracking QA for research Role of HEI administrators Student-centred learning QA for administration Strategic planning and management Work-based learning Academic integrity Credentials and micro-credentials EQAF	<b>1-4</b>

QAA external evaluation Qualifications framework Sustainable development	
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*Table 20: Distribution of themes in coded references. Each publication was coded to at least one topic, one publication can be coded to more than one topic.*

## Appendix IV – Forms and questionnaires

### 1. Sample consent form – focus group interview

#### CONSENT FORM for participation in focus group interview

Researcher: Adrienn Nyircsák, PhD candidate at Central European University

Study title: Reflexivity in European higher education governance – exploring forms of reflexivity in quality assurance at Uppsala University

	Initial Showing Consent
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the project in which I have been asked to take part and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during the interview without giving any reason.	
I understand that that I am free to withdraw my data without giving any reason before my contribution is processed. <b>30 June 2018</b>	
I understand that interview will be recorded and that the audio file will be stored securely and only listened to by the researcher signed below.	
I understand that my responses will be anonymised in the interview transcript. In the recorded data, I choose to (please tick a box!) <input type="checkbox"/> be identified by my position (ex. “assistant lecturer”) <input type="checkbox"/> be identified by my profession (ex. “economist”) <input type="checkbox"/> remain completely anonymous <input type="checkbox"/> other (please specify: _____ )	
I understand that all personal data about me will be kept confidential.	
I agree to take part in the above research project.	

I, ..... (**Participant’s** full name) hereby volunteer to participate in the study as a participant.

If you wish to receive a notification of any future publication of the research, please provide your email address: .....

**Signed** (participant) .....

**Date 2 May 2018**

I, ..... (Researcher's full name) certify that the details of this procedure have been fully explained and described in writing to the subject named above.

Signed (researcher) .....

Date.....

## 2. Sample interview guide

### Interview for PhD research: guide and consent form

#### **Summary of the PhD project: Reflexivity in European higher education governance – the case of the ESG**

My doctoral project explores the effects of policy instruments and tools in the EHEA on the social and political identities of higher education institutions. The study focuses on changing organisational practices of quality assurance within universities, which are directly or indirectly linked to the introduction of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). From a theoretical perspective, I propose to explore “reflexivity” embedded in quality assurance policy principles and corresponding governance tools, prompting organisations to adapt techniques of continuous improvement and to engage in transnational trust-building, networking and peer learning.

The central research questions aim to guide our understanding of HEIs as actors of governance by examining the various ways higher education institutions engage with the European framework in their everyday practices: 1. *How do changing internal quality assurance structures impact the HEI as an organisation, in particular when it comes to defining its mission and its identity?* 2. *How are higher education institutions involved in peer learning and network-building activities at the European level?*

My dissertation is paper-based. The first paper presents in-depth case studies on two European HEIs (in Hungary and in Sweden) at a historical moment of introducing new external and internal QA requirements. The other two papers provide analyses of policy learning and the exchange of good practice related to the quality assurance at the European level, with particular attention to reflexivity and emerging communities of practice.

In my European level analysis, I attempt to provide a more refined understanding of reflexivity as a principle of governance in multi-level policy settings and networks. I primarily concentrate on learning-oriented direct interactions between the subnational (HEI/university) and the supranational level (European stakeholder groups) and try to understand how peer learning activities and projects support reflexive policy practice. I am particularly interested in learning about projects specifically designed to promote the institutional take-up of the ESG (such as the EQUIP project, organised by the E4 group between 2016-18). Your expertise therefore constitutes an invaluable input for the research project.

#### **Interview**

The interview will take place in person and will last about **60 minutes**. It is a **semi-structured interview** consisting of a few guiding questions and follow-up questions. The primary aim is to

explore issues related to the implementation of the ESG and the participation of higher education institutions in policy-making at the European level. The language of the interview is **English**.

Most of the questions refer to the time period that you spent at EUA – please feel free to restrict your replies to your personal views. You can give your answers in an individual capacity, as a QA expert.

### ***Guiding questions***

#### *Background/ context questions - implementation of the ESG*

- ✓ Do you consider the ESG as a political statement, a policy framework or rather a practical guidance document?
- ✓ In your professional experience, what has been the role of EUA and representatives of universities in fostering policy change in the field of QA?
- ✓ Do you consider higher education institutions to have their own policy agenda in QA independently from or in complementarity with national or system-level policy preferences?
- ✓ Do you consider the ESG still relevant and useful in today's policy context?
- ✓ Can you explain what led to the 2020 joint E4 statement highlighting the continued relevance of the ESG? In what policy context has the question of revision come up?
- ✓ The latest EHEA ministerial communiqué (Rome 2020) calls for an “enhancement-oriented use of the ESG to support innovation in higher education and its quality assurance”. Can you elaborate on this, especially when it comes to its practical application?
- ✓ What do you think are the biggest remaining obstacles to the full implementation of the ESG at the institutional level?
- ✓ Regarding the trend towards the institutional approach in external QA: would you agree that this approach supports increased institutional autonomy and quality culture?
- ✓ Do you see a trend towards the use of performance indicators? What is your view on this potentially adversely impacting the principle of peer review in external QA?

#### *The ESG and peer learning*

##### *General*

- ✓ Do you think it is important to promote awareness about the ESG among institutional leadership and staff? What kind of knowledge do institutions and agencies “learn” from European peer events and projects that they cannot obtain at the national level?
- ✓ In general, how do you see the function of examples and good practices in inspiring policy learning between institutions? Are there limits to the transferability of the examples when it comes to their application in local contexts?
- ✓ What are the most effective tools to encourage transnational peer support and exchange of good practices in quality assurance?

- ✓ Do you see any specific patterns of diffusion of internal QA models? Do you consider that certain institutional QA models are more influential or more frequently emulated by other institutions? Could you give some examples?

#### *EQUIP project (2016-2018)*

- ✓ What was the main purpose of the project?
- ✓ What were the methodological considerations and expectations behind the different event formats: workshops, focus groups and webinars?
- ✓ Many of the themes discussed in the different project events pertained to internal quality assurance. What was the reason behind focusing on this specific aspect?
- ✓ How did you collect and select examples of good practice for the final EQUIP publication? Was there an agreed set of criteria within the project consortium?
- ✓ One of the recurring themes was *institutional responsibility*. Has there been further cross-stakeholder reflections on institutional responsibility since the EQUIP? In your professional opinion, is there a way to map or measure the internalisation of QA principles versus formal compliance with external requirements? Do you see a need for further guidance for institutions?
- ✓ Specific definitions, such as Schindler et al.'s (2015) typology for quality in higher education, and CoE's definition of the purpose of higher education were used as discussion prompts. Can you elaborate further on the use of these specific prompts during the discussions? Why did you choose these particular definitions and typologies?
- ✓ How did you promote the outputs of the project? What has been the take-up of the recommendations to policy-makers? Were the recommendations presented at the Bologna Ministerial Conference, and if yes, in what format?
- ✓ Did you observe increased awareness about specific issues and challenges surrounding the ESG as a result of the project in the higher education community/ EUA members?
- ✓ In your view, did the project manage to reach institutions and individuals that are usually not so engaged in European-level activities?
- ✓ What is the significance of organising cross-stakeholder events for the implementation of the ESG?
- ✓ To your knowledge, are there any plans to follow-up the project or to organise a similar multi-stakeholder project in the future?

#### *EQAF*

- ✓ Could you describe briefly the origins and evolution of EQAF over the years?
- ✓ Can you describe briefly the work of the EQAF Programme Committee?
- ✓ How do you assess the role of EQAF in policy learning about quality assurance at the level of national authorities and institutions, respectively?
- ✓ How do you assess the role of EQAF for policy-making? Do policy-makers attend EQAF?
- ✓ Do you see interactions (e.g. agency staff vs institutional representatives) across stakeholder groups at EQAF?



- ✓ Do you have the impression that EQAF has succeeded in creating a stable quality assurance community? How would you assess trends in participation (with regard to specific stakeholder groups, academics, etc.) over the past years?
- ✓ In 2017, EUA launched its “Learning and Teaching Forum”. Was this inspired by the success of EQAF? Does it build on similar organisational practices?
- ✓ What happens to the outputs and the knowledge generated at EQAF (papers, etc.)?

#### Other questions

- ✓ The EUA Secretariat has undergone an internal reorganisation – there used to be a separate unit for quality assurance, which is currently titled “Institutional development”. What were the main reasons behind this change?
- ✓ EUA offers consultancy services on developing internal QA systems through EUA Solutions. Can you tell me a bit about the methodology? How is it different from the IEP?
- ✓ What is your impression, has there been a growing demand for professional or peer support for internal QA among EUA members?
- ✓ Do E4 organisations regularly take part in Commission-organised peer learning activities (such as the ET 2020 WG on higher education and its successor)? If yes, what is the role of the stakeholders in terms of providing expertise/ input to these meetings?

#### Modalities of the interview – permissions:

I would like to ask for your permission to

a, record and transcribe the interview in its entirety. This is necessary for methodological reasons: as this is a qualitative research comprising of discourse analysis to a certain degree, it is important for me to record the exact words you use to describe certain phenomena.

b, refer to this interview in my paper/dissertation. The interview may be given a specific code name, by referring to you either by your name, your position or as a European QA expert. There is also possibility for full anonymity.

Furthermore, I would like to consult you if you have any reservations against using my notes that I took during the **EQUIP Workshop in Vienna in May 2016** and the **EQUIP project webinars in 2016**, and the **EQAF in November 2017**, where I took part as a registered participant, in my capacity as a PhD student. These notes contain my observations regarding the topics and the format of interactions between organisers and participants, to trace the dynamics and tools of peer learning.

The information that you will provide me in this interview will be used solely for academic purposes. My dissertation will be made available to the users of the CEU library and will also be downloadable online. The data will also be used for analysis in articles to be submitted for publication in peer reviewed academic journals.

### 3. *European Commission – consent form*

#### **Information leaflet and CONSENT FORM for the use of ET 2020 expert documents for research purposes**

Researcher: Adrienn Nyircsák, PhD candidate at Central European University

PhD project title: Reflexivity in European higher education governance

#### **Summary of the PhD project: Reflexivity in European higher education governance – the case of the ESG**

My doctoral project explores the effects of policy instruments and tools in the EHEA on the social and political identities of higher education institutions. The study focuses on changing organisational practices of quality assurance within universities, which are linked to the introduction of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). From a theoretical perspective, I propose to explore “reflexivity” embedded in quality assurance policy principles and corresponding governance tools, prompting organisations to adapt techniques of continuous improvement and to engage in transnational policy learning.

The central research questions aim to guide our understanding of HEIs as actors of governance by examining the various ways higher education institutions engage with the European framework in their everyday practices: 1. *How do changing internal quality assurance structures impact the HEI as an organisation, in particular when it comes to defining its mission and its identity?* 2. *How are higher education institutions involved in peer learning and network-building activities at the European level?*

My dissertation is paper-based. One of the papers which form the core of my thesis compares different forms of transnational peer learning in European higher education and applies a theoretical policy learning framework to explore variations in how the learning environment conditions the learning of university representatives about quality assurance. The focus of this paper is on the institutionalised practices of knowledge production and use of expertise across three sites of transnational peer learning. I primarily concentrate on learning-oriented direct interactions between the subnational (HEI/university) and the supranational level (European stakeholder groups/ expert communities) and try to understand how peer learning activities and projects support reflexive policy practice. I am particularly interested in learning about activities specifically designed to promote the institutional take-up of the ESG. As part of my broader research project, I conducted expert interviews with Commission officials, as well as representatives of European stakeholder organisations, who all volunteered to participate in the research.

As HEI representatives are regularly invited to peer learning activities organised in the framework of the education and training OMC, featuring an example of peer learning practices of a former ET 2020 Working Group is a theoretically and methodologically well-founded choice to ensure the representativeness of the existing types of transnational peer learning processes. Peer learning is a core working method of European cooperation in higher education, with various methods and tools that have evolved over the years.

#### **Use of documents – Peer Learning Activity on Quality Culture**

In the past years, several PLAs were organised by the ET 2020 Working Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education in relation to topics that were directly relevant for the implementation of the European Standards and Guidelines. One of these events was the PLA in Oslo hosted by the Norwegian Ministry of Education, focusing on quality culture. Quality culture is a central concept of the European quality assurance framework, which makes the choice of this PLA as one of my cases valid according to the case selection criteria.

Technical documents prepared by the Commission and its consultants to accompany the event provide a wealth of information on the topic, methods and the results of the peer learning; and can be thus helpful sources for an accurate analysis of the peer learning practices. In the case of the Oslo PLA, these include the following:

- Oslo PLA programme and participant list (no names or countries even, only categories of participants - I would only refer to information about the ET 2020 Working Groups that is available on the public Register of Commission expert groups)
- Oslo PLA background paper on quality culture
- Oslo PLA concept note (aim and focus of the event)
- Oslo PLA report
- Oslo PLA list of cases/ examples of peer learning

These documents are all technical working level documents, accessible to experts and the general public, and are usually found on the Register of Commission Expert Groups and other similar entities and on the Commission website. However, the documents linked to this particular PLA are not currently accessible on these online platforms – the official organising the PLA shared them with me at my own request, as a follow-up to our expert interview. The participant list contains personal data, but this will not be subject to analysis, it will only inform my background knowledge on the approximate size of the group, for instance the number of HEIs represented.

These documents would figure in the analysis to the extent they provide information on the practices of peer learning and knowledge production in the ET 2020 WG, and support data obtained via the expert interviews.

### **Information on researcher's positionality and conflict of interest**

I am a permanent official at the European Commission, in employment since December 2018. Until June 2021, I was employed as policy officer and later team leader in DG EAC A1. Between 1 July 2021 and 30 April 2022<sup>1</sup>, I am on leave on personal grounds (CCP), to complete the writing of my PhD dissertation. This activity, and all corresponding research activities have been officially approved as external activity during CCP by DG HR and the appointing authority. In the description of these activities, I declared no conflict of interest between the object of my research and my duties as an official. However, in my dissertation, it is necessary to acknowledge the role of the European Commission in European higher education governance in general, and in particular in peer learning and knowledge production to the extent this role is acknowledged and established in the literature.

I enrolled in the Central European University's Doctoral Program in Political Science, Public Policy and International Relations in September 2015. I was awarded a Yehuda Elkana fellowship, following a specialisation in higher education policy under the supervision of Dr. Liviu Matei (current Pro-Rector of Central European University and incoming Head of School of Education, Communication and Society at King's College London). My research topic was selected and 80% of the data collection completed prior to my joining the European Commission. Hence, my status as an EU official did not influence the choice of the research topic. Between 2018 and 2020, I was on leave of absence from the Doctoral Program.

In terms of my own knowledge about peer learning practices of the Commission, I declare that I did not consult these specific documents prior to the research work, in the context of my previous job. Furthermore, in 2017, when the PLA in question took place, I was not yet employed by the Commission and I did not attend the event in any capacity. Hence, there is no conflict of interest to report in relation to the use of these documents. In my previous role, I did however acquire specific knowledge about the activities of the Working Groups and personally attended various peer learning activities. This background knowledge, in my view, will only reinforce the accuracy of the analysis, as I have obtained a situational understanding of the different roles and processes, which are not easily accessible to a complete outsider. Peer learning cannot be studied solely on the basis of secondary data obtained

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<sup>1</sup> These dates reflect the CCP decision as approved by 13 December 2021 without prejudice to further possible extensions.

via documents and interviews – it is an inherently social phenomenon. In the case of the other case studies featured in the research, I rely on participant observation as a research method to understand the particular social and institutional context.

My PhD dissertation will contain a section on *researcher positionality*, which will describe in a transparent manner my affiliations with the topic of my research, including my institutional affiliations. The entire research process is closely monitored by a Doctoral Supervisory Panel, consisting of three professors. Before publication of parts of my PhD research as papers in peer-reviewed scientific journals, I will undergo an additional ethical clearance procedure at the Commission. After the completion of my dissertation and the end of the CCP, I will ask to be re-instated in my job as an EU official.

## CONSENT FORM

I confirm that I have read and understood the information leaflet for the project and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the technical working documents listed above are public documents, and can be used for research purposes, among others for the above mentioned PhD project and subsequent potential scientific publication. I draw the attention of the researcher that all personal data obtained through these documents should be anonymised and should be used only in an aggregated format, in accordance with the applicable rules on data protection.

Signed (position: ) Kinga Szuly  
Head of Sector  
Higher education policy

Date 31/01/2022



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I, .....Adrienn Nyircsak..... (Researcher's full name) certify that the details of this procedure have been fully explained and described in writing to the subject named above.

Signed (researcher) .....Nyircsak Adrienn.....

Date .....31/01/2022.....

#### 4. *Survey on reconciling liminal identities*

1. What are your current official institutional affiliations?

*Please indicate your primary (and secondary, etc.) affiliation, if applicable. Primary affiliation is defined as the place where you spend a greater share of your working time.*

2. What year did you obtain your PhD?

*If you are a candidate, please note the year when you expect to graduate.*

3. How many years (in total) have you worked in non-academic jobs?

4. How many years (in total) have you worked in academic jobs?

5. Do you identify as...?

- ☐ a researcher
- ☐ a practitioner
- ☐ a researcher-practitioner
- ☐ a practitioner-researcher
- ☐ none of the above
- ☐ other: (please fill in)

6. What is your field of expertise as a researcher?

7. What is your field of work as a practitioner?

8. What kind of academic activities do you engage in on a regular basis (at least once a year)?

- ☐ Teaching (in higher education, adult education or continuing professional development)
- ☐ Independent research (independent or part of a research team external to your primary institutional affiliation)
- ☐ Research (as part of your current job)
- ☐ Attending academic conferences and workshops
- ☐ Publishing (peer-reviewed journals, academic book contracts or book chapters)
- ☐ Publishing (academic blogs, policy papers, and other non-peer reviewed scientific publishing)
- ☐ None of the above
- ☐ Other (please fill in)

9. Do you agree with the following statement? The non-academic organisation where I work accommodates my needs and aspirations as a researcher.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Mostly agree
- ☐ Neither agree, nor disagree
- ☐ Mostly disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Not applicable
- ☐ Other (please fill in)

10. Do you agree with the following statement? I feel that my academic skills and competences are valorised in my non-academic job.
- ☐ Strongly agree
  - ☐ Mostly agree
  - ☐ Neither agree, nor disagree
  - ☐ Mostly disagree
  - ☐ Strongly disagree
11. Do you agree with the following statement? I find it easy to balance my academic aspirations with my professional career.
- ☐ Strongly agree
  - ☐ Mostly agree
  - ☐ Neither agree, nor disagree
  - ☐ Mostly disagree
  - ☐ Strongly disagree
  - ☐ Not applicable
- 11.a. Can you elaborate on the reasons behind your response?
12. Do you agree with the following statement? My professional career has never interfered with my job and career prospects as an academic.
- ☐ Strongly agree
  - ☐ Mostly agree
  - ☐ Neither agree, nor disagree
  - ☐ Mostly disagree
  - ☐ Strongly disagree
  - ☐ Not applicable
- 12.a. Can you elaborate on your answer to the above?
13. Do you agree with the following statement? My academic work (teaching, research, etc.) benefits from my experience as a professional.
- ☐ Strongly agree
  - ☐ Mostly agree
  - ☐ Neither agree, nor disagree
  - ☐ Mostly disagree
  - ☐ Strongly disagree
  - ☐ Not applicable
- 13.a. Can you elaborate on your response to the question above?
14. In a fantasy world, if you were free to choose careers without any external constraints (financial, family, geographical, etc.) but you could only choose one, which one would you choose?
- ☐ An academic career at a university or a research institute
  - ☐ A career in policy-making
  - ☐ A career in politics

- Other (please fill in)

14.a. Can you elaborate on your response to the question above?

15. Do you agree with the following statement? Hybrid career paths are beneficial for both the individual and society.

- Strongly agree
- Mostly agree
- Neither agree, nor disagree
- Mostly disagree
- Strongly disagree

16. Do you agree with the following statement? Hybrid career paths are common in my field of expertise.

- Strongly agree
- Mostly agree
- Neither agree, nor disagree
- Mostly disagree
- Strongly disagree

17. Do you agree with the following statement? Hybrid career paths are common in my (non-academic) organisation.

- Strongly agree
- Mostly agree
- Neither agree, nor disagree
- Mostly disagree
- Strongly disagree

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