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Published online: 31 May 2022.

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Bounded innovation or agency drift? Developments in European higher education quality assurance

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ABSTRACT

As higher education quality assurance in many countries in Europe has become a mature activity, some agencies carrying out external quality assurance are developing beyond their core tasks and missions. The current study identifies new tasks taken up within quality assurance agencies and analyses the drivers behind such development. Based on an empirical investigation into six quality assurance agencies in Europe, the study finds that these agencies are still under substantial control of and influenced by national authorities—often resulting in new tasks and responsibilities that are added to older tasks and established responsibilities. The ongoing innovations can be characterized by two dynamics: 'bounded innovation' where new tasks and activities are induced by public authorities, and agency drift where agencies themselves redefine and expand existing tasks and activities. The developments also show a high degree of diversity, suggesting that mature quality assurance agencies do not develop on a convergent path.

Introduction

External quality assurance in higher education has become an established and mature task in Europe. Most countries have well-established external quality assurance procedures, and higher education institutions across Europe have introduced internal quality assurance systems. European level standards are in place to assure that the task is conducted in a manner that meets certain shared minimum standards and principles. Yet, despite the existence of shared standards, the European story of quality assurance is one of both convergence and divergence.

Developments at European level, in particular in relation to the Bologna process, have created several arenas and mechanisms leading towards stronger standardisation and coordination of quality assurance practices. Formal elements of cooperation in quality assurance have been developed through the Bologna process (Westerheijden et al. 2010). The introduction of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (the ESG) in 2005 was a milestone. There are a number of similarities in how quality assurance is carried out in Europe, e.g. the use of institutional accreditation (or audit) processes, involvement of stakeholders and quality assurance of cross-border education.

Nevertheless, the story of European quality assurance is as much a story of persistent variation, and agencies across Europe maintain diverse sets of tasks and mandates (Hopbach and Flierman 2020). As agencies have matured, many of them have obtained additional tasks other

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than those concerning the management of more 'traditional' forms of external quality assurance. Such tasks can be important for agencies to maintain their position and legitimacy within their own national system and in an increasingly international landscape of quality assurance (Stensaker 2019). However, while both convergence and divergence on the European landscape for external quality assurance can be observed, we have less knowledge about the drivers behind these developments *within* quality assurance agencies, and the consequences of these new tasks for the overall operation of the agencies.

The current study aims to address these issues, that is: Why do agencies develop new tasks? What are the key drivers behind innovative developments within the agencies? How do the new tasks influence the operation of regular quality assurance? We explore these questions by developing a classification for new tasks and activities within quality assurance and empirically explore developments in six quality assurance agencies in Europe. The study is important for three reasons: a) The study shed lights on future developments and trends in quality assurance—as data is drawn from a project on recent developments of 'frontrunners' in the field (see Elken and Stensaker 2020 for more details); b) Drawing on literature from quality assessment in higher education, change processes in organisational studies and agencification within public administration, we combine different theoretical perspectives and offer new insights into the drivers of the changes observed: internal from within the agencies, delegation from the authorities, and the wider quality assurance market; c) The study also develops and conceptualizes two core empirical change patterns within the agencies, labelled as bounded innovation and agency drift, and we apply and discuss these in relation to developments at six agencies in Europe that have non-traditional tasks in their mandate.

A conceptual framework for analysing quality assurance agency operations and innovations

External and internal drivers for change

The introduction of external quality assurance in Europe can be traced back to the 1980s. This was linked to the rise of the evaluative state and provided a means to assure accountability as state control was replaced with state supervision (Neave and van Vught 1991). While the role and purpose of formalised quality assurance varied, a shared characteristic in Europe was that the tasks of quality assurance were largely determined by the authorities. Depending on the national context in which quality assurance was introduced, this could either be associated with attempts of stronger public regulation (where little or none existed before), or as a means for deregulation and enhanced university autonomy (where stronger regulation existed before) (Westerheijden 2001; Dill and Beerkens 2010). The aims and tasks of external quality assurance agencies indicated a wide range of responsibilities, including more regulative tasks, accountability tasks, quality enhancement-oriented tasks as well as catering for the needs of the higher education sector and other stakeholders (see, e.g. Middlehurst and Woodhouse 1995; Kis 2005)

The wider environment for quality assurance agencies in Europe has changed substantially in the last 20 years. After the introduction of the Bologna process in 1999, quality assurance became one of the most prominent elements of the discussions of harmonisation at a pan-European level (Westerheijden, Stensaker, and Rosa 2007) and European-level developments became a source for inspiration in the further development of quality assurance. The European level provided an arena for transnational communication and some degree of convergence (Voegtle, Knill, and Dobbins 2011), not least through networks such as ENQA (the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) which established arenas for mutual learning. ENQA also formalised structures for assuring some degree of compliance with the ESG, i.e. the agency review process. Nevertheless, national higher education systems in Europe remain highly diverse and national developments in quality assurance are sometimes compatible with

and sometimes clash with broader European developments (Hopbach and Flierman 2020). More recent mappings of agencies across Europe suggest that the variation has not been reduced in a substantial manner, despite the introduction of European level standards (see, e.g. ENQA 2008, 2012, 2015).

Conceptually, the establishment of quality assurance agencies represents a process of agencification, authority delegation from governments to specialised public organisations. This is similar to other delegation processes in other sectors across Europe (Trondal 2014). In this process of delegation, it is possible to distinguish between vertical and horizontal specialisation. The vertical dimension concerns the division of authority between the government and the agencies, while the horizontal dimension concerns the organisation and grouping of tasks on the same level into different units (Christensen and Laegreid 2006, 2012). For example, in the domain of higher education, the vertical dimension would concern the extent to which specific tasks are being delegated to agency level, while horizontal specification would concern how tasks are divided between agencies. There may be one large agency that carries out a number of tasks concerning higher education, or there may be separate units for quality assurance, quality enhancement, research funding, internationalisation, etc. Dividing tasks between agencies requires coordination and can also lead to friction. For the individual agency, that means that the 'competitive' environment it is embedded in may vary substantially. While some may be the only agencies with responsibilities in their respective area, others may need to engage in boundary management with adjacent units.

While quality assurance is often labelled as a mature task, this maturity also masks some uncertainty. This uncertainty does not only concern adjustments of the tasks or minor reorganisations; uncertainty also remains about quality assurance as a public responsibility and how this task is organised and conducted. While public agencies have been widespread in the European context, this is not necessarily the case world-wide, and in many countries private actors have a key role in offering quality assurance services (Karakhanyan and Stensaker 2020). The maturation of agencies in Europe has not reduced this uncertainty, rather the opposite as questions of efficiency and value added have become more prominent. An example of this is the use of 'risk based' approaches (Karakhanyan and Stensaker 2020), representing a more light-touch mode in quality assurance. Moreover, when public budgets become constrained during, or in the aftermath, of public crisis situations (the pandemic may well provide one such moment), this can ultimately lead to questions concerning the funding principles for higher education and quality assurance. These frequent changes in their framework conditions, tasks and mandates, as well as the potential for questioning operating principles of the agencies, can challenge capacity for strategic development and in this manner also lead to organisational fragility. Thus, while quality assurance increasingly becomes an integrated part of governance arrangements, the way in which agencies operate may change swiftly.

Apart from more direct external threats concerning basic framework conditions, agencies are also facing more normative threats from the environment and the 'users', including both questions of legitimacy and fitness of purpose. Legitimacy is important for current European practices of quality assurance; it is important for agencies to seem fit for purpose and conduct quality assurance in a manner which is perceived as relevant. This is not always how quality assurance is described. Quality assurance procedures have been described as compliance rather than enhancement oriented (Huisman and Westerheijden 2010), showing limited evidence of improving teaching (Bloch et al. 2021), and questions are raised whether current quality assurance procedures would be challenged by methodological and technological changes (Hopbach and Flierman 2020). In other words, there are basic questions of whether quality assurance is performed in a manner which is appropriate. This suggests that in order to maintain legitimacy in the system, agencies need to continuously develop their tasks, consider adding new tasks or radically rethink existing ones. In other words, the quality assurance 'market' can act as an important driver for change processes.

While this might suggest change drivers for quality assurance stem from external pressures, internal drivers also exist. Changes can also be the result of internal organisational dynamics at the agencies. They can be found within the field of quality assurance, in discussions about best practices, appropriate models and relevant data sources, as quality assurance practices have matured over time. For autonomous agencies, this also concerns organisational learning, and the balancing of 'exploitation' and 'exploration', creating a more ambidextrous organization (March 1991); that is, spending time on improving existing practices and fine-tuning quality assurance procedures, and exploring novel tasks and new fields to engage with. Finding an appropriate balance between the two is important for the long term survival of organisations. From this perspective, threats emerge if agencies become too concerned with finding the most efficient ways to conduct existing quality assurance procedures without attention to finding new approaches; or, when agencies are too concerned with expanding to new tasks without attention to improving their core quality assurance activities. This suggests that changes in quality assurance can also be a result of internal dynamics, as a part of strategic development of the task and the agencies.

Conceptualizing key change patterns in European quality assurance

Looking back at the development of European quality assurance during recent decades points towards a rather dynamic and heterogeneous process; leaving agencies in a constant state of reorganisation, dependent on political will and preferences (Westerheijden et al. 2014). Quality assurance is thus both something increasingly taken for granted and at the same time also subject to frequent changes and pressures, some of which stem from the technical or normative external environment, and some of which are internal. A key question for these processes of change is how they are mandated and managed. Although agencies enjoy considerable autonomy regarding the ways they may interpret their mandate, many governments have still created rules and regulations that provide them with substantial influence over agency activities. Many quality assurance agencies receive a considerable amount of their funding from public sources. For many national governments, quality assurance agencies are increasingly seen as an integrated part of their governance arrangements, where optimising the uses of available resources, time and energy in dealing with various political issues often drives the political agenda (Dill and Beerkens 2010).

Given this context, we conceptualise two key change patterns as lines of empirical inquiry. First, given that most agencies in Europe are still public agencies, a primary source for changes is through formal delegation. As a result, agencies are exposed to what we could label as *bounded innovation*—tasks and responsibilities they are instructed to take on, through new laws and regulations. There might still be some space for innovation in this process as some agency autonomy normally exists with respect to identifying and exploring the ways and means to achieve the delegated responsibility. Thus, even within the scope of delegation, agencies do have space to engage in both exploitation and exploration, yet their overarching frame of reference remains set. Second, one could also argue that quality assurance agencies in Europe are relatively autonomous legally. This means that agencies can also take a more proactive stance and take strategic initiatives to both secure their existence but also shape their profile, in order to assure legitimacy and power. This is often referred to as *agency drift,* a process where existing tasks and responsibilities are refined, redefined or expanded beyond the original mandate (Trondal 2014). The drivers can be both external and internal (e.g. professionalisation, new competencies), and often are a mixture of both. This suggests a more active and strategic role by the agency, where they use their formal autonomy to strengthen their organisational capacity. In the European context, the existence of ENQA and an increasingly open European market for cross-border quality assurance has widened the playing field. This can further strengthen agency drift.

Based on the concepts of bounded innovation and agency drift, it is possible to identify three basic ways in which agencies change and develop beyond existing tasks and

responsibilities. First, they can be mandated or take up new task within the legal field they are operating in. An example is when an agency normally engaged in accreditation takes up consultancy tasks for higher education institutions. Second, they might extend their existing tasks and responsibilities into a new legal field—either domestically or at European level. An example is when an agency conducts accreditation of educational offerings in another country. Third, they might engage or be instructed to take on new tasks in a different legal field. An example is when an agency engages in consultancy activities at European level. Our cases explore these three forms of task expansion.

Data and methodology

The article builds on six case studies at European quality assurance agencies, where we explore the dynamics of bounded innovation and agency drift. The six agencies were selected based on a broader mapping of quality assurance agencies through expert consultations and a review of formal mandates. Case selection is thus purposefully focused on agencies engaging in task expansion/exploration of some sort. In total, six cases were selected for the analysis: A3ES in Portugal, Evalag in Germany, FINEEC in Finland, NVAO in the Netherlands, QQI in Ireland and UKÄ in Sweden.

There are two key data sources—interviews with key informants and documentary data (reports, strategy documents, websites, etc.). The documents included provided information about the agency, its profile and descriptions of the tasks the agency had engaged in. Documents include, for example, presentations, reports and evaluations of the agencies' activities when these were available. In addition, secondary data has been examined, for example, the self-evaluation reports prepared for the ENQA agency reviews, particularly what the agencies have emphasised in their SWOT analyses. We also conducted in total 17 interviews with key informants at the agencies, which was an important source for the factual data reported under the cases. Most of the interviews lasted about 45 min, some up to an hour. The topics included recent developments at the agency, how the external environment and their internal practices had changed in recent years, how and why new tasks had been developed and how they viewed the future development of their agency and of quality assurance in Europe. Data collection followed relevant ethics rules and obtained informed consent from the interviewees.

Bounded innovation and agency drift in European QA agencies: empirical illustrations

A3ES—research as core task

The Portuguese quality assurance agency A3ES was established in 2009 and started its first cycles of accreditation in 2012. From initially only conducting study programme accreditation they now also carry out institutional assessments. The agency operates as a 'private law foundation established for an indeterminate time'. The agency received a grant for establishment from the ministry but is not dependent on funding from the ministry at this point; it now operates in a self-sustaining manner. It is a relatively small agency with a rather stable number of about 20–30 employees. Its core activities are in Portugal, with some limited quality assurance related activities in countries like Angola, Macau, Mozambique and Sao Tome and Principe. It is both a member of EQAR (the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education) and ENQA.

Since its establishment, A3ES has maintained a research unit with research-oriented staff. From the very outset, analysis was considered as an integral component of quality assurance tasks and is at this point well-established. The research that is conducted is expected to provide a relevant knowledge base for quality assurance, but the researchers also engage in research that has more indirect relevance, providing more general knowledge about higher education

in Portugal. Researchers thus work both on quality assurance related tasks but also have scope to explore topics that they view as relevant. While A3ES participates in international collaborative projects, the research unit is not dependent on external funding to carry out research. The research unit at the agency is both co-located and collaborates with CIPES (Centre for Research in Higher Education Policies), a higher education research unit founded by universities in Aveiro and Porto that also includes other higher education institutions in Portugal. A3ES is an example of an agency where novel tasks have been conceived from the very establishment. They have prevailed and become institutionalised within the agency. On the one hand, its regular quality assurance tasks have remained relatively stable, while, on the other, the strong focus on research is an example of new tasks within their existing field. In the case of A3ES, these tasks have by now also become well-established in the system.

Evalag—quality assurance, consultancy and research

Evalag was founded in 2000 and it is one of the ten quality assurance agencies in Germany, primarily oriented towards Baden-Württemberg. As it is not the only agency in Germany, Evalag faces a more competitive environment. The quality assurance 'market' in Germany has in recent years become more competitive: accreditation periods have expanded and focus has been shifted from programme towards institutional accreditation.

Formally, the agency operates as a foundation under public law, and its funding is in the form of a basic grant from the Ministry of Science, Research and the Arts in Baden-Württemberg, as well as external income from fees. Initially, Evalag's main activities consisted of evaluations and audits. Evalag started accreditations only from the mid-2000s. Since 2009, the agency is also licenced by the German Accreditation Council (Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Programmes in Germany). Evalag has a rather small team composed of a chief executive officer, secretary, 14 employees and four others for administration/information technology. It is a member of EQAR and ENQA.

Despite its small team, Evalag has a comparatively broad range of tasks, making it rather atypical as an agency. They have many traditional quality assurance tasks but are also involved in consultancy and research. Evalag's internal structure reflects these tasks, as there are separate departments for quality assurance, consultancy/evaluation/organisational development and engaging in applied higher education research. This structure is expected to be flexible, and staff work across departments. The department for research and development tasks was established about two years ago and it is expected to provide research that is of relevance for quality enhancement. Consultancy tasks and research projects are seen as mutually reinforcing, while not always having direct relationships. Research tasks also strengthen Evalag's European profile, e.g. through engagement with Erasmus + projects. Evalag is an example of an agency where new tasks have grown from a variety of sources, including a more competitive environment and evolutionary growth patterns within the agency.

FINEEC—evaluation beyond higher education

The Finnish QA agency, FINEEC (the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre) was initially founded in 1996 as FINHEEC, and it is the single quality assurance body in the country, covering all levels of education. In its current form, FINEEC was established in 2014, as a result of a merger of the evaluation activities of FINHEEC, the Finnish Education Evaluation Council and the Finnish National Board of Education's Unit for Evaluation of Learning Outcomes. FINEEC is not a separate organisation, it operates as a unit within the Finnish National Agency for Education. While it is a branch under the Ministry of Education and Culture, it is considered to have autonomy in its

work as it is labelled 'an independent expert operation'. FINEEC has a staff of about 40–50 individuals, with a limited number of them only doing evaluations of higher education. FINEEC is a member of ENQA and EQAR.

FINEECs evaluative tasks cover all educational levels—from early childhood to higher education. In early childhood education, evaluations are a rather novel idea. In higher education, Finnish quality assurance practices are now primarily enhancement oriented. Different educational levels are also the basis for internal organisation at FINEEC—higher education and liberal adult education, vocational education, and general education and early childhood education. Evaluative practices at higher education have also provided inspiration for quality assurance procedures for other levels of education. While all units have tasks within a specific educational sector, some evaluations cover several levels of education, e.g. an evaluation of transfers between educational levels. While FINEEC can also engage in fee-paying activities, for the higher education sector this is rather limited. FINEEC is an example of an agency where new combinations of tasks can be rather innovative as evaluative tasks have been applied to new fields, yet these take place in a context where the agency retains a strong public agency profile.

NVAO—assessment reimagined and cross-border organisation

NVAO is a unique quality assurance agency in Europe in that it operates as a cross-border agency in both the Netherlands and Flanders. It was established in 2005 as a joint accreditation agency. Its main mandate is to work with quality assurance, encourage improvement and promote a quality culture. NVAO is formally an international treaty-based body with legal status under public Dutch law. It is funded by the Dutch and Flemish governments and by the fees collected. NVAO has about 30 FTE of staff for quality assurance (about 40 in total), with about two-thirds working on the Dutch side of NVAO. NVAO is a member of both ENQA and EQAR.

Given its cross-border nature, NVAO is organised in separate units for the Netherlands and Flanders. The quality assurance procedures also vary between the two countries. The Dutch system remains based on audits and programme accreditation. In Flanders, a new approach has been developed—the so-called 'appreciative approach'. The approach was developed from 2014 and has been implemented since autumn 2019. The core idea is to move away from a standard and compliance-based approach to quality assurance. The main idea behind the approach is that when quality assurance systems emphasise standards, institutions tend to focus on performing well on those, while the appreciative approach is based on a set of questions. This puts more focus on dialogue. The approach is intended to give institutions an incentive to critically discuss and enhance their quality. There are also debates on whether such evaluations could include research and innovation tasks. In the case of NVAO, the development of tasks seems to take multiple parallel paths, indicating that even in cases of a high degree of cooperation, the specific national contexts do not necessarily go in similar directions. However, when changes happen in the environment and new expectations emerge, this also shows how agencies can strategically position themselves in a new landscape.

QQI—transformation of quality assurance and new regulative tasks

Quality and Qualifications Ireland was established in 2012 as a result of a merger of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and the Irish Universities Quality Board. In addition to quality assurance, QQI also has responsibility for the national qualifications' framework in Ireland (NFQ: Irish National Framework of Qualifications) as well as recognition and international education. QQI is an independent state agency. About a third of its funding is from the Department of Education and Skills and from grant-in-aid, the remaining from various fees and

charges. Compared to the other agencies, QQI is a relatively large organisation, employing about 75 FTEs. QQI is a member of ENQA and EQAR

QQI has been evolving in two different directions. Its approach to quality assurance of public higher education includes a stronger strategic dialogue orientation with the sector and stakeholders. QQI leadership has dialogue meetings with institutional representatives; these dialogue meetings supplement the annual quality reports in which institutions describe their internal quality systems and compliance with the ESGs. Dialogue also is a means to discuss innovative themes and identify good practices—and allows QQI to develop analysis of key trends and act as a facilitator for institutional learning. In addition, QQI has obtained a stronger regulative role for the private educational sector. QQI has the responsibility to examine the financial viability of private institutions and whether they operate in compliance with existing legal frameworks. Thus, QQI has evolved in two rather different directions: both a more regulative role by taking up new tasks as well as more facilitative role, where dialogue and engagement are in focus. QQI is an example where it is possible to identify both a methodological development of quality assurance approaches, while new tasks are a result of delegation from the authorities—suggesting a parallel development.

UKÄ—expanding into quality assurance of research

The Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) was established in 2013, replacing the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, which had been in operation since 1995. UKÄ has responsibilities in the area of quality evaluation, analysis and also official statistics in Sweden. Formally, UKÄ is an independent government agency, funded by public sources based on a yearly public service agreement. UKÄ is independent in its decisions, but there is a legal mandate for its operations that states its responsibilities and tasks. UKÄ is quite a large agency, with about 90 employees. Since 2020, UKÄ has been a member of ENQA and since spring 2021 also of EQAR.

UKÄ can obtain new tasks from the government through so-called 'government assignments'. In 2017, UKÄ received an assignment from the government to develop quality assurance mechanisms for research and third mission. The main rationale for this is the desire for quality assurance to have a more holistic view on institutions' activities. The framework was to a large extent developed through consultation with the sector, taking into account feedback throughout. The evaluation design does not look into evaluation of research results or content, but at whether the institutions have procedures to secure and enhance research quality. In 2019, a pilot was launched, involving three institutions. The pilot shows that education and research quality enhancement are distinct and with different underlying logics, raising questions whether a comprehensive evaluation would be appropriate and feasible. UKÄ is also an example of an agency where new tasks are primarily obtained through delegation, which has resulted in rather innovative approaches as UKÄ has maintained is autonomy in shaping the tasks.

Bounded innovation and/or agency drift?

Each of the six agencies analysed has non-traditional elements concerning prevailing QA practices in Europe. Although all the agencies have legally defined formal autonomy to engage in quality assurance tasks, their formal status varies. In addition, their practical opportunities to embark on new endeavours vary both due to legal restrictions and intra-agency characteristics. For example, engaging in new tasks is very much dependent on the available economic resources and personnel. Several of the agencies analysed in the current study are also comparatively small. This can emphasise the necessity to work in a flexible manner as small size can make agencies vulnerable to environmental changes and changing demands, either from the authorities or the quality assurance market.

In our sample of agencies, there is clear trend of agencies being subject to various mergers and reorganisation processes where new tasks and responsibilities have been delegated to them by public authorities. This can be observed, for example, in Finland and Ireland. The merger in Finland means that the agency now also has to engage in evaluative tasks for other educational sectors. In Ireland, the quality assurance agency also has responsibilities for qualifications. A similar situation can be observed in Sweden, where the new agency established in 2014 also is responsible for educational statistics, and where they were also mandated the task of exploring how evaluation of research could be done within the existing framework of quality assurance. Such merger or reorganisation processes can be seen as a means for authorities to address the issue of fragmentation that has taken place in the horizontal specialisation in agencification processes (Christensen and Laegreid 2006). Hence, in three of our six cases, there is clear evidence of processes of bounded innovation—changes instigated by public authorities on agency operations. One could also argue that the case of NVAO is related to bounded innovation as the initiation of the process leading up to the 'appreciative approach' was set in motion by public authorities—a process where the agency pro-actively engaged with the situation to shape the process. As the scope and focus of the changes vary considerably between the various countries, these processes seem to further diversify the quality assurance agency landscape in Europe.

Our findings further suggest that agency positioning both in the national context and the international field of quality assurance is quite important for the development processes taking place. Although some agencies show a clear sense of path dependency, others have made more radical breaks and shifts in their development. Pressures towards path dependency involve staff competence profiles over time (low turnover of staff), lack of domestic competition (a single agency with an established position), and a stable higher education system. Pressures towards more radical shifts include a more unstable environment and enhanced competition (Gornitzka and Stensaker 2014). We may expect that, for several of these agencies, the future may bring further changes as the questions of fitness for purpose and value for money will not be reduced. A more unstable environment and enhanced competition can be associated with agency drift. We can find evidence of agency drift in our data, yet perhaps not in pure forms. Two examples are A3ES and Evalag where the internal capabilities of the agencies have resulted in research and consultancy activities being taken up by the agencies. For Evalag, one could argue that the interest in consultancy is not only the ability to engage in such activities but also the competitive quality assurance landscape in Germany. A3ES instead saw strategic possibilities not regulated by existing policies, and engaged in what can be described as a form of political opportunism. The latter fits well with how agency drift has taken place in other sectors (Thatcher and Coen 2008; Trondal 2014). Yet, in this instance, the 'drifting' took place during the establishment of the agency and represented a departure from the traditional forms of quality assurance as a phenomenon, rather than a gradual intraorganizational process.

The consequences this may have for regular quality assurance come across as diverse, and the new tasks are not always tightly connected to quality assurance procedures. These diverse and disconnected patterns can be identified across both agency drift and bounded innovation. In the case of delegation, in some instances this may result in considerable innovation also for regular quality assurance (e.g. NVAO and development of new quality assurance mode), in others delegation merely means that regular quality assurance has remained reasonably similar (perhaps moving from programme accreditations to institutional audits, but nevertheless being recognizable quality assurance), an example being FINEEC. Similarly, there may be internal drivers that also shape the development—both in cases of agency drift and bounded innovation. Available personnel, their profile and capacity can be important facilitators or barriers for innovation.

Do our six cases disclose any particular trends with respect to the type of task they undertake and the field they focus on? Most of the new tasks keep agencies well within the field of

higher education, expanding the scope of quality assurance to activities such as research, consultancy, statistics or financial regulation. Some agencies may use these new tasks to enter into new fields as well, some venturing to other sectors, others (working on) expanding activities from the domestic sphere to the European scene.

Conclusion

By studying six agencies in different parts of Europe, we have illustrated some dynamics that are currently playing out in the field of quality assurance. From these six cases, we cannot claim that European quality assurance is radically transforming as a whole—in this respect, the selected cases are by no means representative of Europe as a whole. The agencies were chosen because they are among those in the field that have substantial experience while at the same time being exposed to new tasks and responsibilities—they are 'frontrunners' in the field. In this way, our six cases could provide an early look into the future of quality assurance.

What have we found? We observe that agencies—despite tremendous interest in building a European Higher Education Area—tend to have a strong national orientation and they are still under substantial control and influence by national authorities; and change patterns can be explained as bounded innovation activities. This continued political interest in the agencies can be interpreted in various ways. On the one hand, it may illustrate a need for national authorities to have a potent instrument in the continuous steering of higher education. On the other hand, the political attention can also indicate an interest in having an instrument at their disposal allowing for experimentation and piloting new political initiatives in the sector. As such, one could argue that the current dynamics are part of the continuing incremental changes that always take place in quality assurance. It also points to the continuous search for 'what works' in national steering, and how quality assurance can play a role in overall steering approaches. Changing aims for the higher education sector in Europe may create new debates, examples of this being the focus on sustainability, green transitions and strategic development goals. These represent global concerns that may also substantially alter what are considered as standard practices for higher education and quality assurance in Europe in the future.

We should, however, not forget the European dimension of quality assurance. Even though in our cases the European dimension has been somewhat in the background—not least because of the strong national orientation and dependency—Europe may still be both a source of inspiration as well as creating tensions between domestic and European roles and responsibilities (not least that Europe is an interesting 'market' for the agencies to expand into). Although some agencies in Europe are already operating in other countries, recent initiatives such as the European Universities—opening up for more transnational educational offers—may represent interesting options for further expansion and broadening of quality assurance in Europe. Here, a number of issues remain unresolved, not least concerning quality assurance.

Essentially, the continuous transformation and polishing of 'regular' quality assurance, while expanding to new tasks and fields, portrays quality assurance agencies as ambidextrous organisations (March 1991). For legitimacy, they depend on providing quality assurance tasks that are perceived as relevant, efficient and accepted. Nevertheless, they also need to embark on new tasks and fields to remain at the forefront of developments. The arguments about ambidextrous organisations suggest that to be successful and survive over time, organisations need to balance both exploitation (further develop existing tasks in efficient ways) and exploration (engage in new tasks)—as evidenced by the tendencies of agency drift and bounded innovation we have observed in our study. These two identified change patterns, along with the different change drivers, add both scholarly and practical value. For future research it may provide a heuristic to map change patterns in agency development in a more systematic way. For quality assurance agencies, it may provide a framework to discuss their own strategic development in more analytical manners, for example in identifying ways to adapt to the emerging global sustainability

challenges facing higher education and quality assurance. Our conceptualisations may provide a means to discuss quality assurance agencies as ambidextrous organisations in a more nuanced manner, not only being a way of balancing old and new tasks but also paying attention to the complex dynamics characterising European higher education. Future research can hopefully explore wider European and global developments in this respect.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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