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Quality in context – embedding improvement

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Proposal

Title: The relevance of international experts in capturing the national higher education context in institutional evaluations

Abstract (150 words max):
The paper aims to contribute to the on-going discussions on whether the solely international teams of experts are able to correctly grasp the national system-level features when evaluating the higher education institutions. As higher education systems are, generally, very diverse across EHEA, previous research on IEP emphasises the need for "evaluation teams [to] acquire adequate information on the country and its higher education system, which may be a high demand placed on the limited resources of the IEP secretariat" (Rovio-Johansson et. al., 2008, p. 53). However, our study shows that international experts accurately capture the system-level features. Even more, they bring an additional value to the institutions by referring to the European framework policies and practices, and by addressing the feasibility of these policies and practices for the individual institution.

The paper is based on: research / policy / practice (select one)

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details. No

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Introduction
Today higher education institutions are faced with declining public investment, increasing competition for students and research funds, growing demands from stakeholders, demographic changes, and challenges to traditional modes of education structure and delivery (OECD, 2015). In order to successfully manage these challenges, the institutions need to have in place a well-developed internal procedures for implementing their missions, as well as the procedures for analysing levels of achieved goals of these missions. Moreover, institutions need to be able to adjust and incorporate the necessary changes into their structures.

In this context, quality audits are seen "as the key instrument for probing into the institution's own self-declared aims and objectives and the procedures and regulatory mechanisms in place for their achievement" (Hoecht, 2006, p. 546). More specifically, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) defines an audit as "an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the quality mechanisms established by an institution itself to continuously monitor and improve the activities and services of either a subject, a programme, the whole institution or a theme (Costes et. al., 2008)."

EUA's Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) can be considered to be one form of quality audit model. IEP is a quality assurance agency, listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), which offers institutional evaluations that are voluntary to the participating higher education institutions (HEIs) and with no consequences in case of weak performance. The main purpose of IEP evaluation is to support institutional development (IEP, 2015). With more than 400 evaluations and follow-up evaluations performed in 45 different countries worldwide (IEP, 2016), IEP integrates a variety of knowledge and experience on diverse higher education systems and international trends.

According to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), the external quality assurance "should be carried out by group of

external experts that include (a) student member(s)" (ESG, 2015, p. 19). Next to the more often used teams of national experts the ESG standard 2.4 (2015) encourages the involvement of international experts in the external quality assurance processes.

International experts are typically expected to add a further dimension to knowledge-base and experience to the external quality assurance. This is especially relevant in times of the above listed global challenges, where the exchange of latest international experience in higher education (HE) is very valuable. However, as every institution functions primarily in its national environment, the national context cannot be neglected and concerns have occasionally been raised about the ability of internal experts to appropriately understand the context, in which the institution operates.

In IEP's case the challenge posed by the diversity of cultures and higher education systems in Europe was acknowledged when IEP decided that its teams would consist purely of international experts. The IEP team never consists of members from a country, where the evaluated institution is based, and each team member comes from a different country. There was a strong belief that this was necessary so to provide international perspectives to the development of institutions, while ensuring that the team members are not personally or institutionally involved in the evaluated institution (Amaral et. al., 2008). In this manner, IEP provides an objective view on the institution. However, at the same time such approach raises a question to which extent are these international experts acquainted with the specifics of the national higher education systems.

The paper therefore asks: *Does the IEP international team of experts correctly capture the relevant system-level features for the evaluation purposes, and, what additional value (or, in terms of ESG "a further dimension") does it bring to institutional evaluation?*

The question will be addressed through an analysis of a sample of IEP evaluation reports. For this purpose, the IEP approach to quality assurance will be particularly suitable due to the international character of its evaluation team, as described above. The paper firstly elaborates on the methodology used for analysing the research question. Afterwards, the contents of the IEP reports is analysed. Following this, the paper unveils the system-level features that are discussed in the IEP reports and their accuracy. Special attention is given to the relevance of IEP international experts' findings from the national perspective. The paper then concludes with the lessons learnt and the implications for future.

Methodology

To answer our research question, all IEP evaluations that were carried out in the Republic of Slovenia between 2012 and 2015 were included in the sample (six higher education institutions: three universities and three other higher education institutions)[1]. Table 1 provides an overview of included institutions.

The reason for selecting the Slovenian sample lies in the fact that the number of evaluated institutions in this country provides a decent sample in a relatively short period of time. Four HEIs, included in this research, gained funds for the IEP evaluation based on a national tender for financing the external evaluations. The Ministry for Education, Science and Sport, and the European Social Fund published a call in year 2012 to finance a quality audit by an EQAR listed agency (MESSRS, 2012). Altogether 17 institutions applied for this funding, among them being the four analysed universities. Other two analysed institutions funded their participation in IEP evaluation through other sources.

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[1] The higher education sector of the Republic of Slovenia includes three public universities, one public higher education institution, two private universities and 44 private higher education institutions (MESSRS, 2016).

While all institutions of the sample come from the same country (for the benefit of easier comparison with the specificities of the country's higher education system), it should be noted that the analysed institutions are by no means interpreted as a representative sample of the Slovenian higher education system[2]. The sample is only selected so to analyse the research question posed above.

Table 1: Overview of analysed IEP reports

Higher education institution	Year of establishment	Number of students in the reporting year	IEP report date
University of Maribor	1975	20025	December 2013
University of Primorska	2003	5802	January 2015
University of Nova Gorica	2006	548	June 2015
School of Advanced Social Studies in Nova Gorica	2006	366	March 2015
Faculty of Information Studies Novo Mesto	2008	238	March 2015
Faculty of Media	2008	59	April 2015

Methodological approach to the research is a comparative qualitative analysis of IEP institutional reports, the related national legislation documents, and the strategic documents from the same period (years 2010 to 2016)[3]. In addition to the relevant national legislation in HE[4], the Republic of Slovenia adopted two key documents related to the higher education area: the Resolution on National Programme of Higher Education 2011-2020 (RENPVS, 2011), and the Research and Innovation Strategy of Slovenia 2011-2020 (RISS, 2011). These two documents address key challenges and specificities of the country, and were therefore considered so to provide a sound starting point for the analysis.

An assessment scale (see table 2) was developed to be used in a comparative analysis between national documents and IEP evaluation reports. This table defines a degree to which system-level features were addressed in IEP reports. The numerical value indicates only a summative representation of results. Next to the comparative analysis we provide the descriptive, qualitative examples of the system-level features addressed by IEP experts. This provides a reader with an additional insight into a comparative analysis. At this point it should be noted that the aim of this exercise is not to analyse the extent to which the contents of the national documents and the recommendations provided by IEP reports match. The national documents are used solely to comprehensively grasp the characteristics, specifies, and challenges of the Slovenian HE system, which is then used to check the accuracy in understanding the national characteristics by the IEP evaluation teams.

Prior to discussing the system-level features addressed in the analysed IEP reports (most of all their accuracy), one limitation of the chosen methodology needs to be mentioned,

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[2] The University of Ljubljana that covers 51 % of overall student population in Slovenia, is not included in this sample (SURS, 2016, and UL, 2016).
[3] Similar methodological approach to the proposed one has already been used on IEP data (see for instance Tavares, Rosa, & Amaral, 2010).
[4] Higher Education Act (ZVis, 2012), Professional and Academic Titles Act (ZSZN-1, 2011), Students Association Act (ZSkuS, 1994), Decree on budgetary financing of higher education institutions and other institutions, 2016, and Decree on financing of doctoral studies, 2012.

namely the distinctive feature of IEP evaluation methodology. This feature is the focus on support for institutional improvement, which means that the topics discussed in IEP reports will to a certain extent vary from one report to another, depending on the specific institutional context, priorities and developmental needs. This consequently defines which system-level features are brought up during the evaluation process and explains why not all system-level features are always discussed in the IEP reports.

Table 2: An assessment scale for defining the degree to which system-level features were addressed in IEP reports

Degree (with the numerical value)	Explanation
Not addressed (0)	Not covered at all in the evaluation report; the evaluation team does not introduce neither refer to any system-level features
Partially addressed (1)	System-level features were briefly mentioned in the evaluation report, providing some information on the state of affairs in the analysed country, or was only mentioned in a broader context
Substantially addressed (2)	System-level features were addressed in a substantial but not exhaustive manner. At least a paragraph or a part of a longer paragraph was devoted to the topic or it was mentioned in several places in the evaluation report; explanation on the current national higher education system features was shortly summarised and some interpretation followed, frequently with recommendations
Comprehensively addressed (3)	System-level features were addressed in detail, almost fully and exhaustively; the explanation of the current system-level features was given, followed by coherent interpretation of the facts and, in most cases, team's recommendations; system-level features were given a prominent place in the evaluation report and addressed intentionally.

Source: Based on the assessment scale from Bochajczuk, 2015.

Analysing the contents of the IEP reports
System-level features discussed in IEP reports
National-level features, which are most often discussed in the analysed sample, are the principal Bologna Process features, as applied in the national context; and the fundamental purposes of HE (employability, research mindedness, democratic citizenship, personal development) (Council of Europe, 2007).

Following the focus of IEP on the institutional governance, management and quality assurance, the reports pay particular attention, on the one side, on national requirements in governance and management structures of HEIs, and, on the other side, on internal quality assurance processes that are required by the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency (NAKVIS) and the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia.

More specifically, the reports recurrently refer to economic crisis, unpredictability of state funding, current demographic trends, regional and national labour market, social benefits for student population, regional embeddedness, and regional public transport opportunities. In addition, some of the analysed reports discuss the enrolment and selection processes in HE in Slovenia, average years for concluding studies, student progression rates and drop-out rates, lifelong learning legislation, establishment and accreditation procedures for the evaluated institutions, institutional size and structure in a Slovenian and European context, reputation of institutions in a national context, financial autonomy of institutions, and specific regulations for private HEIs (such as their autonomy in financial matters, human resource management affairs, governance, and management structures).

The analysis shows, that IEP teams refer much more to the system-level features in the areas of governance and institutional decision-making, teaching and learning, and quality culture, than in the fields of research, service to society, and internationalisation (see table 3). One of possible explanations for this is a stronger national regulation in these areas (primarily of governance and institutional decision-making, and teaching and learning).

Table 3: An average degree to which system-level features are addressed in the sample

Higher education institution	IEP evaluation fields					
	Governance and inst. decision-making	Quality culture	Teaching and learning	Research	Service to society	Internationalisation
Faculty of Information Studies Novo Mesto	3	2	2	1	3	1
School of Advanced Social Studies in Nova Gorica	2	2	2	1	0	1
University of Nova Gorica	3	1	3	2	1	2
University of Primorska	2	1	1	1	0	1
University of Maribor	2	2	2	2	2	1
Faculty of Media	2	1	2	1	1	1
Average degree	2.33	1.5	2	1.33	1.17	1.17

However, while the IEP teams address the system-level challenges and issues in the reports, their approach is not always in line with national priorities. This is evident in particular when it comes to the national regulations in higher education governance structures, the quality assurance measures currently in place and the missing diversification of higher education missions.

For instance, the Resolution on National Programme of Higher Education 2011-2020 stresses the importance of lowering the overall number of study programmes in the country, yet the IEP teams express the need to offer additional, niche study programmes, which would be tailored "fit for (and of) purpose" and closely connected to the overall mission of the HEI. Similarly, the teams encourage the institutions to develop internal QA systems that are "fit for (and of) purpose" to the specific institution so to promote quality culture, rather than just comply with the national quality assurance regulations as set by NAKVIS.

In other words, by taking the mission of the institution as the starting point for the evaluations and emphasising the need for all institutional processes to be fit for serving that mission (in addition to not being constraint by the national regulations in their views), the teams come to conclusions that a domestic team, more aware of the national framework, might not come to.

Accuracy in capturing the system-level features
For most of the time, when referred to, the national system-level features are correctly interpreted by the IEP teams. Only few misunderstandings of these features could be identified and they focused on higher education financing and governance and management structures, where it could be seen that IEP teams misunderstood the national funding scheme to HE, as well as misinterpreted the level of institutional autonomy in designing the internal governance structures for non-profit private HEIs. For instance, one

of the IEP teams argued that the governance structure of the evaluated non-profit private HEI should be adjusted so to fit its size and needs, whereas the national legislation does not allow adjustments to the basic structure, as set in article 20 of the Higher Education Act (ZVis, 2014). All in all, no complete misunderstanding of any system-level features could be identified, which shows the accurate knowledge transmission of system-level features through IEP self-evaluation reports and site visits.

The relevance of IEP international experts' findings from the national perspective

The most frequent characteristic of the sampled IEP reports is the provision of a European-level perspective into the evaluation processes. IEP teams tend to *refer* to the European framework policies and practices rather than discuss the national higher education context, or its system-level features. Their recommendations are usually based on the European documents, such as the ESG for quality assurance, the Salzburg Principles (EUA, 2005) for broadening the PhD graduate competences, and other documents related to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Union policies.

Moreover, when the system-level features are relevant for the provision of institutional recommendations, IEP teams *compare* them to the European policies. For instance, in discussing the opportunities for lifelong learning activities, one of the reports reads: "…[the institution] advises that legislation prevents the utilisation of these [lifelong learning] approaches. However, these approaches have an increasingly high profile at the European level and it can be anticipated that steps to encourage these further are imminent." IEP experts are not bound by the national regulations, nor to the national accountability measures, which gives them a liberty of taking a different approach to quality assurance. Such approach tends to provide the recommendations in the light of benchmarking the current institutional activities to the European discussions, while leaving aside the national regulations on quality assurance.

The analysis also shows that IEP teams tend to *consider* the features of a specific HE system (in this case Slovenian) *simultaneously* for different fields[5] of HEI. For instance, a specific system-level feature that would be usually discussed only within internationalisation (such as the position of HEI within region), is often addressed also in other fields of HEI, such as research, teaching and learning, and even governance and institutional decision making. With such approach, IEP experts tend to analyse an overall impact of the specific system-level feature on a higher education institution. The scope of this study did not allow us to look further into this aspect and to analyse, to what extent this would be applicable also to the other external audits carried out by national experts.

Next, IEP evaluations also *provide* examples of practice from other European HE systems that could be of use for the evaluated higher education institution. For instance, in discussing the governance structure at one of the analysed institutions, the final report proposes the representatives of administrative staff to be included in the governance bodies, even if this practice is not very common in the Slovenian HE system.

In contrast to the positive attributes arising from the international IEP teams, some risks could also be identified, most visible being the ability to accurately interpret the system-level features. As discussed above, these cases are few in the sample reports. However, there were few occasions where it was clear to a reader that the team had hesitations

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[5] The term "fields" refer to the six key elements of higher education institution as defined by IEP: governance and institutional decision making, quality culture, teaching and learning, research, service to society, and internationalisation (IEP, 2015).

about the correctness of their interpretation related to the national context in which the institution in question functions. In these occasions, the teams resorted to briefly referring to the national legislation or trends while making it clear through the diction used that they were referring to a second-hand information. The examples of such formulations are: "the team was informed"; "the self-evaluation report explains"; "during the site visit the interviewees told the team".

Secondly, despite of all beneficial aspects of IEP teams frequently referring to the European frameworks and policies, it cannot be denied that these recommendations are in some cases not applicable to a context in which the institution operates. For instance, the analysed reports sometimes include recommendations that cannot be brought to life due to non-legislative, system-level features, such as the societal attributes of a nation (e.g. the national culture, norms and values, perception of public good, etc.). For instance, one of the reports suggests the evaluated institution to diversity its funding sources with the lifelong learning activities, whereas these types of activities are in the case study country largely perceived as free-of-charge activities, and more importantly in decline since 2010 (SURS, 2015). Consequently, it may lead a reader who is familiar with the national context to question the relevancy of these recommendations, even if such practices are generally accepted and practiced in EHEA.

IEP international team of evaluators: lessons learnt and implications for future
In response to the research question posed in the beginning of this paper, this study shows that when referred to, the IEP's international experts for most of the time correctly capture and interpret the national system-level features. More importantly, it identifies the additional value (or, in terms of ESG "a further dimension") international experts bring to institutional evaluations by incorporating the European perspective to the challenges the evaluated institutions are facing with. Most frequently, IEP experts tend to refer to the European framework policies and practices rather than discussing the national higher education context. Furthermore, if relevant for the evaluation, IEP experts compare the national system-level features to the European policies, and provide examples of practice from other European higher education systems. Last but not least, the research shows that IEP experts tend to consider the system-level features comprehensively for all activities of HEIs. All in all, the presented "further dimension" of international experts concurs with the expectations of institutions signing up to the IEP evaluations. The post-evaluation surveys, filled in by institutions that have undergone an IEP evaluation, show that having an evaluation with a European perspective is one of the main motivations for participating in IEP.

Secondly, in addition to the listed advantages, the research identifies some risks, associated with the composition of evaluation teams of only international experts. The most visible risk relates to the occasional misinterpretation of system-level features. Due to this finding, an additional support of IEP secretariat could be considered as a manner to minimise such risk. IEP is an independent service by the European University Association (EUA), an umbrella organisation of about 850 universities in 47 countries, which allows the IEP pool of experts to benefit from regular updates about major trends in higher education, and a continual flow of information in the area, generated through the Association's other activities (projects, research studies, events etc.). The IEP secretariat could use these valuable resources and provide more actively the factual background information[6] about

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[6] This suggestion is proposed in addition to the existing annual seminar for all IEP experts, where participants are provided with the information on latest developments in EHEA and in case of coordinated evaluations with the information about a higher education system in question. Moreover, an introduction into the higher education system of an evaluated institution is typically included in a self-evaluation report as expected by the IEP Guidelines

national system-level features to the experts, in collaboration with the evaluated institution.

The third lesson learnt from this research refers to the fact that not all IEP evaluation fields (governance and institutional decision-making, quality culture, teaching and learning, research, service to society, and internationalisation) equally refer to the system-level features. As shown in table 3, an average degree to which system-level features are addressed in our case-study, is higher in governance and institutional decision-making, and teaching and learning, than in other evaluation fields. Whereas the national legislation in these fields may lead the team to have a natural reference point, in the other fields the IEP experts could increase the relevance of their findings and recommendations by investing efforts in understanding the non-legislative aspects that may play an important role in framing the approach of the institution in the field, may they be geographical, cultural or other societal aspects. For example, a HEI that is a remote or poorly accessible by public transport will be hampered by these conditions and a team needs to take this into account when formulating the recommendations and suggesting goals in the field of internationalisation.

Conclusion

This paper aims to contribute to the on-going discussions on whether the solely international teams of experts are able to correctly grasp the national system-level features when evaluating the higher education institutions. As higher education systems are, generally, very diverse across EHEA, previous research on IEP emphasises the need for "evaluation teams [to] acquire adequate information on the country and its higher education system, which may be a high demand placed on the limited resources of the IEP secretariat" (Rovio-Johansson et. al., 2008, p. 53). However, this study shows that international experts accurately capture the system-level features. Even more, they bring an additional value to the institutions by referring to the European framework policies and practices, and by addressing the feasibility of these policies and practices for the individual institution. Our case study has shown, that IEP teams not only correctly understand, but also comprehensively apply their understanding of the system-level features on a case by case situation.

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for institutions. Last but not least, when the evaluation reports are being finalised, the IEP secretariat liaises with the team coordinator and the evaluated institution to ensure that there are no factual misunderstandings in these reports.

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Discussion questions:

For QA Agencies:

How is your team of evaluators composed?

What additional value do you see in international experts that are part of your team? Why do you engage them in the first place?

How do you familiarise your international experts with the national system-level features?

According to your experience, do international teams of experts correctly capture the relevant system-level features for the evaluation purposes?

Would you consider having a team of only international experts? Why yes/not?

For institutions:

Have you even undergo a voluntary (international) external evaluation? What do you expect from it?

Do you choose the (international) external evaluation according to the structure of experts it provides?