Stakeholders and Quality Assurance

How are stakeholders represented in higher education institutions’ decision-making that influences the quality of education, and are their viewpoints taken into account? These were the main questions addressed in this part of the seven-country comparative study. Findings indicate that formal barriers are largely absent, that stakeholder influence has grown somewhat over recent years, but that actual influence of stakeholders can be further optimised in higher education institutions.

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1. Introduction

The ESG emphasize the role of stakeholders in internal quality assurance. The first relevant passage is found in ESG’s Part 1: European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions, standards 1.1 (emphasis added):

**Standard 1.1:** Policy and procedures for quality assurance: Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognises the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality. The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available. They should also include a role for students and other stakeholders.

Further, stakeholders such as students and employers are mentioned in the guidelines belonging to ESG 1.2, which states that periodic reviews of programmes and awards should include external panel members, while feedback from employers, labour market representatives and other relevant organizations should be solicited. It is also underlined that the participation of students in quality assurance activities should be ensured.

In looking at the implementation of Standards 1.1 and 1.2, national and institutional policies and practices related to governance of and especially stakeholder involvement in internal quality processes have been analysed. Our analysis focuses less on the formal quality assurance processes that happen once every five or more years, and more on the continuing internal arrangements that influence the quality of education on a daily basis. The article aims to highlight on the one hand drivers and barriers and on the other hand examples of good practice observed in the involving stakeholders in assuring quality across the higher education institutions studied in the IBAR project.

1.1 Research design and methods

As in the other articles making up this volume, we used a comparative case study design of 4 higher education institutions in each of the seven countries included in the IBAR project. Case findings were consolidated into national reports. Reports are publicly available in the ‘Results’ section of the project website: www.ibar-llp.eu.
mentary application of documentary analysis and semi-structured expert interviews based on a common set of research questions; the emphasis was on the institutional level, with additional data gathering through documents and if necessary interviews to paint the national frameworks and conditions.

### 1.2 Stakeholder concept

We borrow the concept of stakeholders from the management literature. We start with Freeman’s definition of stakeholder: ‘any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives’ (1984, p. 46). Based on the theory of stakeholder identification (Mitchel et al. 1997) we use a broad definition for the purposes of this project so that no stakeholders, potential or actual, are excluded from analysis a priori. However, we want to focus on a specific category of stakeholders, i.e. those that (following Brenner, 1992) have an ability to influence the university’s behaviour, direction, process or outcomes. In the case of the IBAR project the ‘stake’ means the ability of a particular actor/group to influence the university’s definition of quality of teaching and learning and the internal quality assurance processes. We will distinguish internal (with a formal, major position in the higher education institution) from external stakeholders. Moreover, we see academics as ‘producers’ of higher education; technically they are crucial internal stakeholders but in the ESG the term is used to focus on other categories besides the traditional producers. Following the ESG’s spirit, we will focus on if and how other categories rather than the incumbents are included in education quality work.

Stakeholders, from their different positions regarding the higher education system, are expected to hold different opinions of what higher education, and quality in higher education, mean for them. As we phrased it a long time ago: “there are (at least) as many definitions of quality in higher education as there are categories of stakeholders (such as students, teaching staff, scientific communities, government and employers), times the number of purposes, or dimensions, these stakeholders distinguish” (Brennan, Goedegebure, Shah, Westerheijden & Weusthof, 1992, p. 13). Stakeholders could, therefore, bring different perspectives, expectations and requirements (the latter in the case of professional organisations with some control over access of graduates to the profession) to bear on quality work in the higher education institutions. In that way, they might enrich the debate on quality in the institution. If they focus on a single dimension, however, their contribution would be less enriching; think of the archetypal (caricature of) employers focusing only on immediately usable skills, or the archetypal (caricature of) students focusing only on gaining a degree at minimum effort. But without stakeholders having guaranteed access to higher education institutions, the possibility of an enriched conception of quality being actually used ‘on the ground’ are lowered – hence the ESG’s insistence on this point.
In terms of the famous triangle of coordination (Clark, 1983), the question is if involvement of stakeholders in decision-making bodies influences the way in which decisions in higher education institutions are made: do they bring a new, more socially-oriented outlook to higher education institutions or are they mainly co-opted into a system dominated by the academic oligarchy and the state? The state usually is the main funder of higher education and thus has the power of the purse (Hood, 1983). The academic oligarchy has the power of expertise and they are in fact controlling and implementing the primary processes in higher education institutions: teaching and research. The ‘policy theory’ is that including stakeholder representatives from outside academia will lead to a more market-oriented coordination of higher education.

2. Findings

The findings will be reported here according to the research questions. Where possible, questions will be treated together.

2.1 National rules for representation?

The first research question concerned the national rules that govern higher education institutions’ inclusion or exclusion of stakeholders in/from decision-making or advisory bodies that have a say about quality-relevant issues. The way this research question was phrased presupposed that taking account of a stakeholders’ category’s viewpoints necessitates their physical presence in decision-making bodies through formal representation. This assumption holds for most countries but not for the UK, where the QAA Code of practice is phrased in terms of stakeholders’ requirements, not necessarily by way of representation. How stakeholders’ viewpoints are accommodated in higher education institutions’ quality assurance, is left to their autonomous decisions – though the QAA will check it during its institutional audits.

Latvian regulations mention that the composition of the Councillors’ Convent, an advisory body that all public higher education institutions must have, is to be regulated by the higher education institution (similarly in Portugal). This is a regulation that puts perhaps even more autonomy in the hands of the higher education institution than the British regulations do, but in all other cases the national authorities are more prescriptive (the latter statement includes the composition of the university senate in Latvia).

In all countries except the UK, accordingly, one category of stakeholders was included in the national regulations on quality assurance decision-making frameworks of higher education institutions: the students. In Poland and Slovakia every other stakeholder representation...
was explicitly excluded; there, academic freedom and institutional autonomy were strictly protected from all kinds of external influence in reaction to the too great influence of the political party during communism. In all other countries, external stakeholders were given a position in institutional decision-making regarding quality assurance as well.

Other stakeholders are not always specified; for instance, in Portugal the general council of public higher education institutions must have at least 30% of external members: ‘and they should be persons of recognizable merit, external to the institutions but with knowledge and experience relevant for it. These members are co-opted’. Sometimes employers are mentioned, academics from other higher education institutions, alumni, or the profession. Thus, teaching staff from other higher education institutions, according to some other countries’ reports with the role of external examiners (UK, the Netherlands), are represented in faculties’ scientific councils or programme committees (Czech Republic, the Netherlands, UK). Also in the Czech Republic, a non-exclusive list gives examples of stakeholders expected in boards of trustees: ‘in particular’ coming from public life, municipal and regional authorities and the state administration’ – it is remarkable that public sector representatives are given so much emphasis. Mostly, stakeholders are invited or co-opted individually. In some cases, though, employers’ organisations play a role in examination boards (Czech Republic).

Representation of stakeholders in all cases is organised at the level of the university as a whole. Rules applying to units within, such as faculties, are also quite generally laid down. In most countries, proportions of stakeholders are specified. Sometimes, a majority of votes for academics from within the institution is guaranteed in this way; in other cases, it is specified that students and external stakeholders together form the majority (e.g. programme committees in universities of applied science in the Netherlands).

In all countries, stakeholder representation takes place in the general, supreme democratic body, the senate (or equivalent). In more task-oriented forums, e.g. education and quality committees of the senate, programme management or examination boards, academics make up the major part of the forum and only students or fellow-academics are mentioned as stakeholders in them. Research-oriented boards, e.g. the Scientific Boards of faculties in the Czech Republic, also contain fellow-academics, from other higher education and research institutions, as stakeholders. And in Latvia national regulations state that higher education institutions must have internal regulations for stakeholder representation on other decision-making bodies.

2 In parentheses, we refer to the national research teams’ reports that mentioned this aspect particularly.
In countries where higher education institutions are not part of the state apparatus, boards of trustees or similar councils play a role in setting or guarding the strategy of higher education institutions. It is common for such boards to be lay-dominated (the Netherlands, Slovakia).

In most countries, all higher education institutions are treated similarly. The Netherlands, with its binary system, has separate expectations on universities of applied sciences: employers, the profession and alumni (sometimes people have double roles: alumni are profession members at the same time) are to be represented on programme committees. In the Czech Republic report, it is mentioned that e.g. technical universities may include representatives of key industries in the scientific boards, next to external faculty.

Private higher education
In most country reports, most attention goes to public higher education institutions – probably in line with the proportion of public higher education in the country. However, in Czech Republic and Portugal private higher education is mentioned specifically: in Czech Republic it is left to the institution (or its founder/owner) to regulate the composition of its decision-making structure, while in Portugal private foundations must have an administrative governance body fully made up of external stakeholders.

Where regulated?
The national regulations concerning stakeholders in quality-related decision-making are usually part of higher education laws (except in the UK). In some countries, the quality assurance agency’s bylaws also play a major role (mentioned in the Netherlands, UK reports) in this respect. Not much attention was given in the design of this work package to national bodies of stakeholders that influence curricula, competency requirements, access to a profession, etc., because this project is about institutional arrangements rather than national ones. Nevertheless, the importance of professional and chartered bodies in the UK in this respect ought to be mentioned, as well as the sectoral committees in the Netherlands that operate on the national level and that are important actors in defining the programme requirements, the quality framework at the institutional level and the competence profiles for each individual programme in the universities of applied science. The sectoral agreements contain guiding principles for all the institutions that provide those programmes, this is done to guarantee the ‘UAS level’. Stakeholders, e.g. from the professional field, have an important say in these committees. Institutions have some flexibility to bring in their (local) specificities, but only within this overall framework. In other countries a similar structure can be found regarding professional fields.

Recent changes in the national rules about representation of stakeholders in higher education institutions were not noted in any of the countries involved. In that sense, we could not detect any direct influence of the ESG on higher education institutions.
2.2 Institutional and lower-level rules in addition to national ones?

In the second research question, we studied if there were institutional rules that govern higher education institutions' inclusion or exclusion of stakeholders in/from decision-making or advisory bodies that have a say about quality-relevant issues [...] Do different units in the institution (faculties) or programmes have stakeholder representation on decision-making or advisory bodies that have a say about quality-relevant issues, beyond what is prescribed?

As a rule, higher education institutions apply the national rules. Additional 'openings' to stakeholders are however, far from rare. All national reports mention cases of good practices, where higher education institutions have thoughtfully considered which external stakeholders are most relevant to them, and in some cases are given seats on nationally prescribed decision-making bodies or on institution-specific councils with a role in education quality work.

Thus, in the Czech Republic, examination boards in faculties of both public and private higher education institutions mostly host some stakeholders, especially beyond first cycle degree (bachelor) levels.

Amongst other reports, the Czech Republic and Latvia reports emphasise that the selection of stakeholders may reflect the strategy and character of the higher education institution: the more it is professionally-oriented, the more representatives of the profession or business life are involved in councils and boards (Czech Republic, also the Netherlands, UK). Or the more it is in a regional location (i.e. not one of the main cities of the country), the more regional public authorities have seats on boards (Latvia).

In Latvia it is also customary that academics from other higher education institutions are involved in committees that oversee professorial appointments. Similar arrangements of academic self-regulation apply in higher education institutions in other countries as well as safeguards against 'inbreeding' and other forms of nepotism. An additional mechanism against nepotism and other forms of corruption in Latvia is also that there are students on boards involved in academic ethics: ‘2 students out of 7 members of Academic Ethics Committee, 1 student out of 6 members of Court of Arbitrage’. The (small) minority of students is meant to give the safeguard of publicity in case of necessity.

One Latvian university was reported to have stakeholders represented on its Advisory committee on quality, which evaluates both new study programmes and the ones to be accredited, after the Faculty Board has given its consent and before they are submitted to the Senate. Stakeholders involved in this case are students, experts on quality of education, employers, and social partners.
At the level of institutional regulations and practices, often more clarity is gained about criteria for external stakeholders to become eligible: social partners must be ‘significant’ (Slovakia) or ‘qualified professionals’ (Latvia), have ‘recognizable merit’ or ‘knowledge and experience relevant for the higher education institution’ (Portugal). Similarly, external academics should be ‘senior’ (Czech Republic) or have ‘recognizable scientific competencies’ (Portugal).

In the Slovak report, the usefulness of Alumni Clubs for gaining feedback on curricula was emphasised.

One of the Latvian higher education institutions showed a good practice of reaching out to gain better feeling of regional labour market needs, by engaging actively in the regional employers’ union. This practice started because the institution was one of the main employers in the region, but the central management appreciated the chance to establish strong links with other employers for the benefit of practical placements, for graduate employment and for getting direct feedback on enhancement of quality of curricula and graduates. The university’s involvement is fully institutionalized, and although the rector participates in formal gatherings most often, the involvement of particular persons is dependent on the agenda.

Another good practice case was shown in a case in Poland, where a higher education institution has wide-ranging engagement with its working field for graduates: ‘The cooperation takes place at three levels: general school level, field of research level and chair level – at the general school level there are 9 organisational units entirely or partly focused on cooperation or stakeholder relations. A significant growth in the activities of these units has been observed over the last 2 – 3 years’.

2.3 Actual stakeholder influence, in particular on curriculum and standards

To find out if stakeholder representation meant more than ‘token’ presence, we asked about nominal and real stakeholder’s representation in institutional decision-making bodies? […] To what extent are stakeholder’s views (and from which stakeholders?) taken into account?

Requirements of accreditation organisations play a steering role in the answers to this research question. Regularly, quality assurance agencies demand that higher education institutions take stakeholders’ points of view into account in regular quality assurance processes (all countries), or during curriculum design or revisions (the Netherlands, Poland, UK) even if they do not specify that stakeholders should hold positions on councils or decision-making bodies. Clearly then, quality assurance and curriculum review are major occasions for stakeholder influence.
Stakeholders from the business world also have ‘some influence on thesis foci and course content, especially through their involvement in teaching activities’ (Czech Republic) – as intended, of course, by appointing professionals as part-time teaching staff to make student learning more immediately relevant. Similar types and levels of modest influence on student learning were mentioned in all country reports; channels of influence included the traditional ones (e.g. guest lectures by persons from the professional field, excursions and field trips), internships and projects or final theses in the field, etc. This type of influence often involves informal contacts between external parties and teaching staff, who reflect on the points of view of externals, and use the ideas in their individual and collective decisions regarding course content, teaching methods (including involvement of external teachers or internships), etc. As a consequence, this type of influence is hard to trace except through time-intensive research methods such as participant observation, which were beyond the means of our study.

On a system-wide level, organisations of professions (e.g. medical association, bar association, but also trade unions) play a role in external quality assurance (mentioned for e.g. the UK and the Netherlands in the previous section), but also through contacts with ministries which in their turn influence arrangements in ‘their’ higher education institutions – the latter practice is reported from Czech Republic, Latvia, Slovakia.

Nevertheless, in Portugal’s report there were clear signs that respondents in the higher education institutions were not all in agreement. Some said that external stakeholders had no influence and lack of knowledge as source of authority was given as a reason: ‘External stakeholders may not have sufficient knowledge about the specificities of a higher education institution’. This view was mirrored in the UK report, where it said that in the case higher education institutions some data were perceived as “unhelpful” because of “lack of understanding” amongst some stakeholders.

The UK report also pointed to another reason for external stakeholders not always being seen as influential: consultations can feel “tokenistic”. This suggests, in other words, that in some cases stakeholder consultation rules are complied with, but that they do not affect the ‘inner life’ of higher education institutions; this phenomenon has been called an (unhealthy) ‘culture of compliance’ (van Vught, 1994). A similar (internationally present) attitude trying to limit the influence of stakeholders is exemplified in the Portugal report, where it refers to academics who want to limit students’ involvement to pedagogic matters.

Other respondents in the Portuguese cases asserted that if external stakeholders had influence, it was on strategy and finance rather than on the primary process. Besides focusing on the subjective experience
that is behind many of the responses that we received (that is why we engaged in case studies), this passage also gives a healthy reminder of the fact that institutional design matters: fellow academics or professionals from the field, engaged in feedback for curriculum review will influence higher education institutions differently than businessmen on a board of trustees or a general, university-wide advisory council – and both types of feedback may be useful to the higher education institution.

3. Conclusions

In summary of the comparative analysis, we may say that throughout all countries and higher education institutions studied, stakeholders are included in education quality work. National regulations seem to form the most important ‘filter’ in this regard: higher education institutions comply with the national regulations and do not often develop internal regulations going much beyond the national frameworks. To a certain degree, then, governments and quality assurance agencies have been successful in establishing ESG-conform practices regarding the involvement of stakeholders in higher education institutions’ processes around quality of education.

Saying this, it has to be noted at the same time that according to the national reports, there had been very few changes in regulations in recent years. In that sense, there seems to be little influence of ESG on higher education institutions – or perhaps the ESG codified what had already become practice through earlier quality assurance schemes (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004). However it is also possible that the main effects of the ESG with regard to stakeholders have been on external quality assurance, making a common practice out of representation of students and international (external, that is!) peers on quality assurance agencies’ boards, evaluation committees, etc.

Notwithstanding the relative stability of regulations, actual practices of involving stakeholders in education quality work in higher education institutions have changed in recent years: the translations of regulations into organisational practices have changed. Thus the Slovakia report maintained that ‘Even though the changes over last 5 years in regard of influence of stakeholders on internal QA didn’t take place on level of policy documents, Slovak HEIs increase ad-hoc involvement of external professionals in evaluation of their pedagogical processes and internal processes of QA’.

In internal as well as external quality assurance, students appear in all national reports of this work package as the most prominent group of stakeholders. A ‘health warning’ from the UK report in this regard is worth stressing: overseas students and part-time students remain widely
under-represented. Student representatives hail mainly from the relatively privileged group of young, full-time students studying in their home country.

Academic self-regulations remains strong even though it includes ‘stakeholder’ colleagues: ‘The higher education institution research samples showed that more than 50 % of external stakeholders come from other higher education institutions (Slovak as well as foreign ones)’ (Slovakia). Yet in most country reports, the evidence of increasing involvement of non-academic external stakeholders is so strong that it is almost impossible that, in Clark’s (1983) terms, the coordination mechanism has not inched a bit towards the market. Quality assurance agencies’ requirements of stakeholders opinions being consulted in curriculum review processes may well be an important avenue for the actual movement towards market influence. Although the previously quoted remark that some stakeholder involvement may be mainly ‘tokenistic’ should warn against too great expectations of change.

It is remarkable that especially in some of the Central European countries involved in this study, state and regional public authorities are seen as stakeholders (Czech Republic, Latvian, Slovakian reports). This contrasts with the more prominent position of private sector representatives in the West European country cases. Whether this situation in Central Europe is to be interpreted as a smart step of higher education institutions to enlist public authority support in a regional strategy, or an attempt of public authorities to regain control relinquished in official higher education policies, cannot be decided on the basis of the current studies – in the former interpretation, Western universities might learn from this practice.

A caveat is of course that changes are always driven by a number of coinciding factors, and it is difficult to point out which changes exactly have been caused by the implementation and translation of the ESG.

On the whole, the findings in the case studies are fairly positive regarding the lack of barriers: stakeholders were included in decision-making structures and processes relevant to education quality work in all countries. There were, however, different interpretations of which categories of stakeholders – beyond students – should be involved, at which levels (institution, faculty, study programme) and in which committees or procedures. Diversity of stakeholders seems to be too low in some cases: alumni, profession, regional public partners, regional or national private sector partners (employers), etc. Similarly, diversity of levels and committees/procedures where stakeholder opinions are input into institutional decision-making seems to need further broadening in some cases as well.
Actual barriers inside higher education institutions

There were a few signs in the findings, though, of stakeholder involvement not always influencing decisions in higher education institutions, but being ‘tokenistic’, leading to superficial compliance. The barrier in such cases would seem to be the local academic culture, which is inward looking. The argument that external stakeholders lack knowledge and understanding about the higher education institution may be true, yet it may also be a way to deny legitimacy to outsiders’ points of view.

The warning from the UK report about under-representation of non-traditional students (adult, part-time, international) points to a barrier for them to become actively involved within higher education institutions’ education quality work: they lack time to attend meetings, or access to student unions that are the main avenues to being appointed or elected into student representative positions.

Recruitment and SMEs

Recruitment of external stakeholders often works through either personal networks of higher education institutions’ staff (teaching staff and/or management), in which case research connections to companies may play a role, or alumni networks. Alternatively, recruitment may go through formal organisations. These all are examples of co-optation, which seems to be a more important method of recruitment than election – probably because it is a more efficient way to find persons who are knowledgeable as well as interested enough to spend time. Whether through individual networks or through formal organisations, establishing connections to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) may be a weak link. It should be noted that SMEs have proven to be very important for innovation and for job creation, yet a telling counterexample of current practice is given in the Poland report about one of the universities: ‘The group of external stakeholders of individual faculties includes, above all, large and medium size businesses, e.g. Philips, ABB, and other companies of comparable size’.

Lack of incentives as a barrier

The Portuguese report pointed out that it is unreasonable to count on stakeholders devoting much time and effort to involvement in higher education’s quality purely for intrinsic reasons: the report noted a lack of incentives – financial as well as reputational – for external stakeholders. Such a situation, which we know to exist also in the other countries in our study, may lead to low or intermittent participation by external stakeholders. The argument of lacking incentives applies also to teaching and research staff from other higher education institutions, but applies most forcefully to representatives from the private sector (employers, professions).

Students’ response rates to questionnaires, which are often the main instrument to gather their feedback on teaching, are often deplored as being low, but the higher education institutions are not very good at organising incentives for students’ contributing to questionnaires. Or they are constrained in their options, being public organisations under
strict budget rules. Yet, even without additional means, it ought to be possible to give student prompt feedback about actions taken on the basis of their evaluations. Prompt feedback, showing students that their opinions are taken seriously, is a sort of incentive and could thus help to improve student involvement in quality assurance.

By way of final remarks, let us give some suggestions for improved handling of stakeholders to go against the barriers.

- At the European level, there might be room for more showcasing of good practices of genuinely involving diverse categories of stakeholders, in different roles and for different purposes (from curriculum feedback in self-evaluation processes, to strategy setting in a board of trustees). Such good practices should be searched especially at the institutional level, to counteract possible negative local cultures.

- Attention might be given to the different roles for fellow academics and social partners from the public and private sectors. The former might conceivably concentrate on maintaining academic standards (against nepotism) and keeping curricula up to date with developments in the field. The role of social partners seems to be divided into two: on the one hand employers and members of the profession (partly alumni) can act usefully in committees or ad hoc processes to give feedback about curriculum, student learning, etc. and to provide learning opportunities (guest lectures, internships; part-time teaching staff). On the other hand, social partners may act as strategic partners in a board of trustees or similar councils, to connect the higher education institution and its (quality) strategy to its regional environment.

- Obviously, the mix of external stakeholders should reflect the character of the individual higher education institutions: some benefit more from feedback by teaching or researching colleagues (e.g. if the institution has a more academic orientation), others more from feedback by employers and professionals (e.g. if the institution has a more professional orientation). Usually, regulations for different sectors of higher education adapt to such differences. However, in current views on the role of higher education, each higher education institution ought to benefit from feedback by both categories. National regulations should therefore leave room for a mix fitting the individual institution’s specifics – though perhaps with minimum quota for both employers/professionals and fellow teachers/researchers. At the same time, the issue of organising sufficient incentives (financial and/or reputational) for external stakeholders’ participation ought to be given attention.
References


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Biographies:

**Dr Don F. Westerheijden** has 25 years of experience as senior research associate at the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS), University of Twente, Enschede, the Netherlands. His main interests are research on quality assurance, Bologna Process/EHEA and university rankings. He led the Independent Assessment of the Bologna Process for the Budapest/Vienna conference announcing the EHEA. He co-designed the EUA (then CRE) Institutional Evaluation Programme. Currently, he is involved in classification (U-Map) and ranking (U-Multirank) amongst other projects.

**Contact:** d.f.westerheijden@utwente.nl

**Elisabeth Epping**, MSc works as a researcher and consultant on various topics in the field of higher education and innovation policy at the Institute of Innovation and Technology (iit) of the VDI/VDE-IT in Berlin, Germany. Elisabeth holds a masters degree (cum Laude) in public administration with special emphasis on higher education policy from the University of Twente, the Netherlands. Before joining VDI/VDE-IT, Elisabeth worked as a research associate at the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) at the University of Twente. Her research areas include quality assurance in (cross-border) higher education and the internationalization of higher education. She also intensively worked on projects regarding continuing higher education, the ranking, classification and profiling of higher education institutions and was involved in the coordination of the U-Multirank und U-Map projects.

**Contact:** epping@iit-berlin.de

**Dr Marike Faber** currently holds the position of researcher at Saxion, University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands, with the lectorate ‘Innovative and Effective Education’; higher education is her field of expertise. Before joining Saxion, Marike was a research associate at CHEPS, the Center for Higher Education Policy at the University of Twente, The Netherlands. Marike has participated in a wide variety of research projects on higher education policy, both as expert and coordinator, including projects regarding the profiling of higher education institutions, quality assurance of both research and education, higher education reforms in particular with respect to the Bologna Process and continuing higher education.

**Contact:** m.faber.01@saxion.nl

**Dr Liudvika Leisyte**, is Professor of Higher Education at the Center for Higher Education Studies at the Technical University of Dortmund in Germany. She holds a doctoral degree from Twente University and has extensive experience in studying academic work, higher education and research governance as well as transformation of universities. Her interest in quality enhancement in higher education is witnessed through more than ten years involvement in the EUA IEP programme as team coordinator. Liudvika further has been the coordinator of the IBAR Dutch project team in 2010 – 2013 at CHEPS, University of Twente, studying institutional quality enhancement mechanisms in seven European countries. Liudvika is a member of the Editorial Board of Higher Education Policy.

**Contact:** liudvika.leisyte@tu-dortmund.de

**Dr Egbert de Weert** was senior research associate at the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS), University of Twente, Enschede, the Netherlands. Focus on higher education and employment, curricular development in academic and professional education, and the changing academic profession. Retired since April 2013, he continues to be affiliated with CHEPS. Place of work: Utrecht, NL.

**Contact:** e.deweert@utwente.nl