

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

By  
**Adrienn Nyircsák**

Submitted to Central European University  
Doctoral School of Political Science, Public Policy and International Relations

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in  
Political Science

Supervisor: Professor Liviu Matei

Word count (excluding bibliography): 74,883

Budapest, Hungary  
July 2022

## **Author's declaration**

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

Budapest, 7 July 2022

## **Abstract**

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

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

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

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

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

## Acknowledgements

Above everyone else, I wish to thank my parents for raising me in an environment surrounded by books and for giving me opportunities in life that have allowed me to cross this milestone. Their loving care continues to follow me to adulthood, and I owe them a debt of my gratitude for providing me with a calm place of retreat during the last few months and for rescuing my project from falling victim to technical malfunctions.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Liviu Matei for encouraging me to embark on a PhD study and for never giving up on me, even when I decided to start a different career. He has opened my eye to the possibility of hybrid careers, and has taught me and others that being an academic and a policy professional at the same time can be an authentic professional identity, that despite its many perils is deeply rewarding. As part of my Doctoral Supervisory Panel, Xymena Kurowska has helped me grow as a scholar in numerous ways, for which I cannot be thankful enough. Her comment at my prospectus defence, “this proposal needs more Bourdieu”, has led me to reorient the entire conceptual framework of my project, towards what I believe is a more productive framing of the issue. I also wish to thank her for her hands-on and student-friendly feedback and advice, which is extremely useful for any junior researcher trying to navigate a complex field of references and methodological tools. Marvin Lazerson has accompanied my project from the start, and his honest feedback encouraged me to push myself further and become a better thinker and writer. I would like to thank all three members of my doctoral supervisory panel for their attentive guidance throughout my PhD studies.

I extend my gratitude to the members of Apor Vilmos Catholic College and Uppsala University, including József Tóth, Máté Tamáska, Åsa Kettis, Camilla Maandi, and all their colleagues, without whom this work could not have materialised. They welcomed me in their communities with openness and trust, at risk of exposing their vulnerabilities. They have demonstrated that one of the ways higher education institutions can become reflexive is by subjecting themselves to be studied. I equally thank all participants in interviews, focus groups and at observed events, who contributed to this research project.

In addition to the above, I wish to thank the entire faculty of the Doctoral School and the Department (formerly School) of Public Policy at CEU, whom I had the privilege to learn from or work with. Marie-Pierre Granger, who supervised my MA thesis, helped me develop a robust multidisciplinary background in EU studies, which served as a basis

for my doctoral work. I thank colleagues at the Higher Education Research Group (HERG) and the Yehuda Elkana Center for Higher Education, for sustaining a very collegial and constructive, yet critical space for discussion, debate and experimentation at our bi-weekly meetings throughout these past years.

I would like to thank Szilvi Kardos for representing a link of continuity with the CEU community after my return from professional leave, for the friendly chats and her professionalism. The coordinators at the Doctoral School, Péter, Kriszta, Eszter and especially Monica have always been kind, helpful and understanding with all my requests and inquiries. I also appreciate the assistance of CEU library staff and the work of PhD student representatives throughout the years.

In this last phase of dissertation writing, I received invaluable support from my senior peers and friends, who helped me develop my project and grit. I consider them role models. I would like to thank specifically Olga Löblová, Kata Orosz, Zoltan Dujisin, Daniela Craciun and Erna Burai. I owe a lot to Erna, whose advice pulled me through many bouts of “blocus” and who has shown me that owning up to the emotional toll of academic work is not weakness, but is the very source of our strength.

Finally, I am fortunate to be surrounded and appreciated by a lot of kind and loving people, who ease the loneliness of dissertation writing. My family, besides my parents, Ákos, Bori and little Csege. My friends and colleagues in Hungary and Brussels, without prejudice to order and mention. Andi, Orsi and their families. My Brussels neighbours Agnès and Soquette. Flora and Hannes, who occasionally pulled me out of my cocoon and took me into nature. The “Friday night” group, who helped me stay sane and social. Special thanks to Merel and Gauthier for the help with proofreading my texts.

Those who know me well are aware that completing this journey did not come without its hardships. I thank those who use their private and professional platforms and their positions of power to speak out against the normalisation – a breeding ground for bullying – of mental, emotional and physical strains resulting from stress and a rampancy of burnout culture in academia and other professional spheres.

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my grandparents, who, despite never having the chance to further their education, were among the most fervent supporters of my scholarly endeavours: Végh János (1923-2014), Körösi Ilona (1927-2019), id. Nyírcsák Miklós (1934-2020), B. Nagy Julianna (1935-2020).

## Table of contents

Author's declaration	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Table of contents	vii
List of figures and tables	x
List of abbreviations	xiii
<b>I. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1. The multi-level dimension of European higher education governance	5
2. Instruments and instrumentation in higher education: policy learning as an analytical gap	8
3. The European standards and guidelines for quality assurance: policy, instrument and practice	13
3.1. Policy developments in quality assurance	13
3.2. Brief history of the ESG and its 2015 revision	17
3.3. The ESG as a principled governance model? An overview of implementation literature	23
3.3.1. The ESG as a policy instrument and a governance model	23
3.3.2. The ESG "implementation paradox"	27
4. Practice: a common unit of analysis	32
5. Reflexivity: a review of selected literature	38
5.1. Reflexivity in sociology	40
5.2. Reflexivity in learning theory	43
5.3. Reflexivity in policy and governance studies	46
6. Introducing the three papers: notes on methodology	50
<b>II. Paper 1. Policy learning and reflective practice: European universities as epistemic actors in multi-level transnational peer learning</b>	<b>56</b>
1. Introduction	56
2. Policy learning in the governance of European higher education – the case of the ESG	59
3. Cases and methods	65
4. Findings: from challenges of implementation to embedding quality culture	68
4.1. Nested problematisations	68
4.2. Universities as case studies, experts and learners	71
4.3. Internal ambiguities: good practice and reflective practice	74
5. Discussion: Epistemic capacity-building or enhancing reflexivity?	77
<b>III. Paper 2: Reflexivity or routine? Quality practices and narratives in radically different higher education institutions</b>	<b>81</b>
1. Introduction	81
2. Reflexivity and routine: the practical nexus of quality work	84
2.1. Conceptualising reflective practice in quality management	84
2.2. Reflexivity, habitus and narrative identity	86
3. Situating extreme cases in changing policy contexts: Sweden and Hungary	90
3.1. Hungary	91
3.2. Sweden	92

4.	Methods and positionality _____	93
5.	Apor Vilmos Catholic College _____	95
5.1.	From compartmentalised to fragmented reflexivity: externalisation of the crisis response ____	97
5.2.	Codifying “Catholic habitus”: deflection and narrative lacunae _____	100
6.	Uppsala University _____	102
6.1.	Crisis reflexivity: narrativization, anticipation, codification _____	104
6.2.	Embracing third space, resisting third mission: a hybridisation of habitus? _____	109
7.	Conclusions _____	111
<b>IV.</b>	<b>Paper 3: Towards reflexive governance in European higher education? The role of transnational communities of practice _____</b>	<b>114</b>
1.	Introduction _____	114
2.	Reflexive governance: elements of a pragmatic framework for higher education _____	117
2.1.	What is reflexive governance? _____	117
2.2.	Transnational communities of practice in higher education: a theory of collective learning_	121
3.	Methods and data _____	126
4.	Mapping structural reflexivity in higher education governance: zooming in on communities of practice _____	129
4.1.	Transnational communities of practice in quality assurance – a case of collective learning? 130	
4.2.	A closer look at the evolution of EQAF as a community of practice _____	135
4.3.	Reflexive capacity-building: participation and reification via secondary guidance _____	140
5.	Discussion: does the institutionalisation of CoP in higher education indicate a move towards reflexive governance? _____	144
<b>V.</b>	<b>Liminality, positionality, reflexivity – an introspective account of the researcher-researched relationship _____</b>	<b>147</b>
1.	Liminality _____	149
2.	Positionality _____	160
2.1.	Participant observation at European quality assurance events and follow-up interviews (Papers 1 and 3) _____	161
2.2.	Participant observation and organisational ethnography in Sweden and Hungary (Paper 2)_	164
2.2.1.	Apor Vilmos Catholic College, Hungary _____	165
2.2.2.	Uppsala University, Sweden _____	170
2.2.3.	Negotiating access to the fieldsite _____	172
2.2.4.	Trust, taboo and trustworthiness _____	175
3.	Reflexivity _____	177
3.1.	Insider position _____	178
3.2.	Liminal position _____	185
3.3.	Outsider position _____	190
<b>VI.</b>	<b>Conclusions: Towards a meso-level theory of instrumentation in higher education governance? Instrument reflexivity and the ESG _____</b>	<b>192</b>
1.	Understanding reflexivity as instrument and practice _____	192

1.1.	Ideas and discourse _____	193
1.2.	Rational-deliberative models _____	194
1.3.	Experimentalism and reflexive governance _____	195
1.4.	Epistemic communities and instrument constituencies _____	198
2.	The geography of good practice production: further insights from transnational peer learning ____	200
3.	The ESG as narrative and heuristic device for institutional reflexivity: ethnographic experiences from Sweden and Hungary _____	205
4.	Conceptualising instrument reflexivity: the ESG as a boundary object _____	212
5.	Reflexivity as practice and its “blind spots” _____	222
6.	Limitations and directions for further research _____	228
<b>Appendix I – Paper 1</b> _____		231
<b>Appendix II – Paper 2</b> _____		236
<b>Appendix III – Paper 3</b> _____		245
<b>Appendix IV – Forms and questionnaires</b> _____		262
1.	Sample consent form – focus group interview _____	262
2.	Sample interview guide _____	263
3.	European Commission – consent form _____	267
4.	Survey on reconciling liminal identities _____	270
<b>Bibliography</b> _____		273

## List of figures and tables

### *Figures*

<b>Figure 1.</b> Structure of the ESG 2015 and key changes compared to the 2005 version, based on (EQUIP project, 2016). _____	<b>22</b>
<b>Figure 2.</b> A modified staircase of ESG implementation (Part 1), indicating multi-level feedback loops, based on (Westerheijden & Kohoutek, 2014). _____	<b>30</b>
<b>Figure 3.</b> Three discourses on quality and dominant directions of frame reflection, based on the coded references of learning inputs. _____	<b>69</b>
<b>Figure 4.</b> Excerpt from “Teaching and Learning at Uppsala University”, page 10. _____	<b>108</b>
<b>Figure 5.</b> Distribution of EQAF paper formats (2006-2021). _____	<b>138</b>
<b>Figure 6.</b> Visual depiction of my memberships in multiple communities of practice. _____	<b>150</b>
<b>Figure 7.</b> Parallel timelines of research and professional activities 2015-2022. _____	<b>152</b>
<b>Figure 8:</b> Excerpt from AVCC fieldwork notes, original layout. _____	<b>179</b>

### *Tables*

<b>Table 1.</b> Overview of selected English-language articles and studies on ESG use and implementation. _	<b>32</b>
<b>Table 2.</b> Overview of practice approaches and definitions featured in the dissertation. _____	<b>35</b>
<b>Table 3.</b> Operationalisation of reflective practice in quality assurance and enhancement, with corresponding empirical examples (Paper 2). _____	<b>52</b>
<b>Table 4.</b> Overview of the three papers featured in the dissertation. _____	<b>55</b>
<b>Table 5.</b> Overview of epistemic roles across the three sites, based on (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013). _____	<b>71</b>
<b>Table 6.</b> Distribution of good practices by country presented at the observed TPL venues. _____	<b>202</b>
<b>Table 7.</b> QA related transnational projects with (potential) policy impact. _____	<b>220</b>
<b>Table 8.</b> Overview of key data of the peer learning sites. _____	<b>232</b>
<b>Table 9.</b> Overview of key results of the analysis. _____	<b>234</b>
<b>Table 10.</b> List of interviews. _____	<b>235</b>
<b>Table 11.</b> Summary of fieldwork activities at Apor Vilmos Catholic College and Uppsala University. _____	<b>236</b>
<b>Table 12.</b> List of observed meetings. _____	<b>242</b>
<b>Table 13.</b> Types of reflective practice corresponding to habitual and crisis reflexivity at Uppsala University. _____	<b>243</b>
<b>Table 14.</b> Types of reflective practice corresponding to habitual and crisis reflexivity at AVCC. _____	<b>244</b>
<b>Table 15.</b> Overview of source documents. _____	<b>248</b>
<b>Table 16.</b> Thematic analysis of country challenges in Action Plan of Bologna TPG C (2021-2024). _____	<b>251</b>
<b>Table 17.</b> Overview of EQAF topics in the light of Bologna commitments in QA (2006-2021). _____	<b>255</b>
<b>Table 18.</b> List of organisations with highest number of paper submissions at EQAF. _____	<b>256</b>

**Table 19.** Distribution of country affiliation per publication. \_\_\_\_\_ **259**

**Table 20:** Distribution of themes in coded references. \_\_\_\_\_ **261**

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

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

Nourrice, suis-je belle ?

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

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

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

Nurse, am I beautiful?

(Translation by David Lanson, 1989)

## List of abbreviations

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

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

## I. Introduction

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

---

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

on mixed socio-technical legitimacy, on the other. This conceptualisation of policy learning also permits to analyse how policy instruments which combine standard-setting, policy learning and policy guidance are applied and transformed by various actors.

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Westerheijden, 2002). It is thus important to further explore how this third, learning-based perspective influences the implementation of the ESG at various levels, especially regarding Part 1 on internal QA.

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

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

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

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

Based on this , the first research question (How are instruments transformed in and through practice?) can be further concretised for the ESG:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Drawing on discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008), Veiga and Magalhães (2019) identify the source of the paradox as an “ends-means reversal”, i.e. that the

normative ideals of the politics of quality formulated at the European level are diluted in the procedural-cognitive ideas and practices of quality assurance promoted by European actors. However, this argument is rooted in the analytical separation of the European layer of policy making as the “political” and the domestic layer of implementation as the “technical” or “instrumental”; downplaying the transnational dimension of instrument reflexivity, prevalent in multitude of commentaries, analyses and guidance on the use of the ESG produced by the E4 organisations and the European Commission.

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

Westerheijden and Kohoutek (2014) find the concept of “translation” more appropriate than implementation to describe the process involving multiple steps of interpretation. However, their “staircase of translation”, derived from the work of (Trowler, 2002), also fails to account for the feedback loops between the different levels of instrumentation. The main focus of the critique here is that ESG should not be treated analytically as a static set of principles, but rather as an evolving set of practices, which require actors to continuously produce interpretations that ultimately feed back into the recursive reformulation of the policy, as exemplified by the revision process. Due to interpretive flexibility, number of possible ESG compliant practices (and their combinations) is theoretically infinite, which makes it necessary for governments, QA

agencies and transnational actors to produce secondary guidance both for external and internal quality assurance. Over time, these interpretations may become codified in higher education systems and national policies, which makes it even more challenging to isolate effects attributable to the ESG.

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

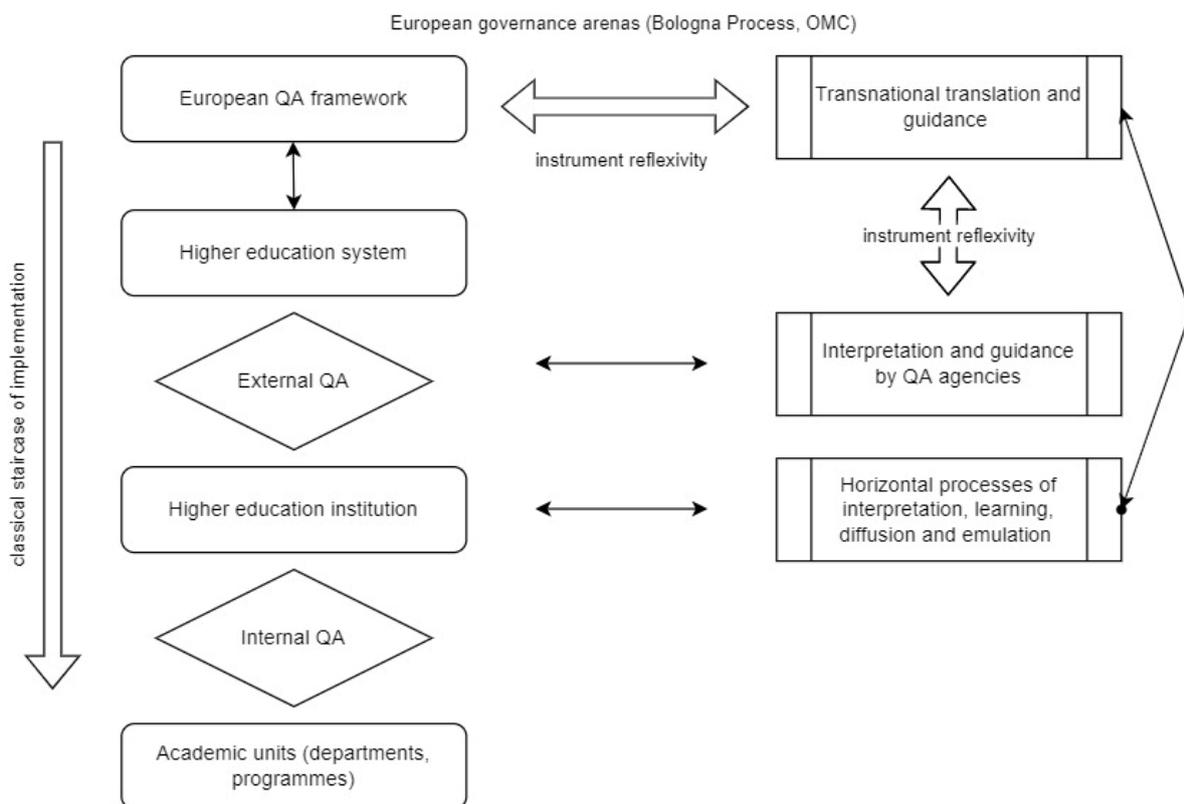


Figure 2. A modified staircase of ESG implementation (Part 1), indicating multi-level feedback loops, based on (Westerheijden & Kohoutek, 2014).

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

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

Study	Empirical focus	Methodology	Countries covered
(Stensaker et al., 2011)	ESG 2005, Part 3 External reviews of ENQA member agencies	qualitative	not specified
MAP-ESG project (ENQA, 2011)	ESG 2005 1. Purpose and scope 2. Clarity and usability 3. Implementation and impact	mixed methods	Data collected via E4 membership consultation: ESU: 27; EUA: 38; EURASHE 26 countries
(Motova & Pykkö, 2012)	ESG 2005 national QA system	qualitative	Russia

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

IBAR project (Eggins, 2014)	ESG 2005, Part 1 28 HEIs	qualitative	Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Latvia, Portugal, Poland, Slovak Republic, UK
(Kohoutek, 2014)	ESG 2005, standard 1.3. (student assessment) 12 universities	qualitative	UK, the Netherlands, Czech Republic
(Vukasovic, 2014)	ESG 2005, Part 1 2 faculties	qualitative	Croatia and Serbia
(Manatos et al., 2015)	ESG 2005, Part 1 ESG awareness among academic staff, survey	quantitative	Portugal
(Cardoso et al., 2015)	ESG 2005, Part 1 quality of academic staff 4 HEIs	qualitative	Portugal
(Tavares et al., 2016)	ESG 2005, Part 1 self-assessment and external reports of 12 HEIs	qualitative	Portugal
(Rosa et al., 2016)	ESG 2005, Part 1 factor analysis of academics' perceptions on implementation	quantitative	Portugal
(Kohoutek, 2016)	ESG 2005, Part 1 4 institutional case studies	qualitative	Czech Republic
(Alzafari & Ursin, 2019)	ESG 2015, Part 1 survey of higher education institutions and cross-country comparison	quantitative	Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland
DEQAR Study 1 (Manatos & Huisman, 2020)	ESG 2005 (1.2) and ESG 2015 (1.2 and 1.9) approval and periodic review of programmes review reports of 17 HEIs	qualitative	Croatia, Estonia, Finland and Portugal
DEQAR Study 2 (Manatos & Huisman, 2021)	ESG 2015 (1.3. and 1.4.) 15 programme reports at 9 HEIs – engineering (single QA agency)	qualitative	Cyprus, Kazakhstan, Slovenia, Spain, Indonesia

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

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

In order to analyse the reflexive appropriation of the ESG, that is, its interpretation and transformation in *practice*; it is necessary to introduce practice as an epistemological

category. All three papers featured in this dissertation consider practice as the basic unit of analysis, although they each adopt a slightly different understanding of the concept (see [section 6](#)) and reinterpret it in the light of the findings. Approaches to practice theory and praxiographic methods are diverse, thus it is impossible to provide a comprehensive review here. This section aims to give a succinct presentation of the authors and approaches which inspired conceptualisations of practice in the three studies.

The focus on practices is part of a broader movement in social and cultural theorising (Reckwitz, 2002), labelled as the *practice turn*, originating in social theory (Schatzki et al., 2001), and influencing praxiographic agendas in international relations (Adler & Pouliot, 2011), studies of the European Union (Adler-Nissen, 2016), organisational research (Nicolini, 2016) and education studies (Higgs et al., 2012). Among others, the works of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Giddens and Foucault have served as philosophical inspirations for the contemporary practice theories (Reckwitz, 2002). One of the most recognised practice theorists is Pierre Bourdieu, whose work has been particularly influential in the development of thinking about practice in the various disciplines (Bourdieu, 1977, 2006). Bourdieu's notion of practice can be best reproduced in relation to his other emblematic concepts, *habitus*, *field* and *capital*; which together constitute a coherent theoretical system. Habitus is a set of unconscious "motivating" principles governing routine action, through a "system of lasting, transposable dispositions" which function as "a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions" (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 82–83). Individuals develop habitus through education and socialisation, and it enables them to tread seamlessly within a specific field, understood as an "autonomous social microcosm" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 96). Fields exist as a network of social relations in which actors strive to accumulate capital, or different forms of power (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu further contends that

researchers (in his reference group, primarily anthropologists) need to move from merely describing practices that they observe, towards reconstructing the theory of practice in the given community, i.e. the underlying principles and values that govern how people act habitually (Bourdieu, 1977).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- (1) *Cognitive*: self-aware, critical, purposeful action or state of mind (often opposing the pragmatic, tacit or habitual);
- (2) *Directional*: indicates mutuality, circularity or degree/ profoundness of change (e.g. reflexive learning as double-loop or deep learning);
- (3) *Normative*: associated with a superior social paradigm (for example, reflexive governance as a vehicle for democratisation and sustainable transition);
- (4) *Transformative*: relates to identity, associated with conflictual, dynamic and world or self-altering and identity-building properties (in studies building on reflexive modernization/ learning);
- (5) *Epistemic*: reflexivity as a mode of scientific inquiry in Bourdieu’s sense, which involves acquiring an understanding of the limitations of our scientific understanding through self and participant objectivation (see [Chapter V](#)).

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

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

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

Perhaps the most influential conceptualisations of reflexivity originate in the field of sociology. In his inventory work, Ashmore classifies conceptualisations of reflexivity in the sociology of scientific knowledge into categories of *self-reference*, *self-awareness* and “*the constitutive circularity of accounts or texts*” (Ashmore, 1989). Reflexivity as *self-reference* in society as a system of circular communications, which recursively creates and alters itself (autopoiesis), has been theorised by Luhmann (1985), who has

---

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

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

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

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

Other notable approaches include historically specific forms of reflexivity (Mouzelis, 2008), also referred to as the “extended reflexivity thesis” in sociology (Adams, 2006). The extended reflexivity thesis views reflexivity as pervading social life and identity in late modernity, elaborated in the works of Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, and Scott Lash. Giddens puts forward the notion of *institutional reflexivity*, which implies that “social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character”

(Giddens, 1997, p. 38). Institutional reflexivity is also linked to the increase reliance on expert systems in everyday life (Giddens, 1997). Beck's notion of *reflexive modernization* is elaborated in the context of the transition from the industrial society to the "risk society" (Beck et al., 1994). Somewhat counter-intuitively, he understands reflexivity as self-confrontation, the opposite of calculated reflection, and describes this process as an reflex-like, automatic, self-destructive force (Beck et al., 1994). Lash differentiates between *structural reflexivity* and *self-reflexivity*: the former is about reflection on the "agency's social conditions of existence", while the latter is a form of self-monitoring (Beck et al., 1994, pp. 115–116).

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

These approaches which highlight the increasing importance of reflexivity for social theory are considered clearly oppositional to Bourdieu's epistemic reflexivity, which he defines in relation to the habitus as "the systematic exploration of the unthought categories of thought" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 40). Such reflexivity cannot be

achieved by simply looking inwards, but by via participant objectivation, or directing the tools of scientific inquiry to examine one's own "academic unconscious", i.e. "the pre-reflexive social and academic experiences of the social world that he tends to project unconsciously onto ordinary social agent" (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 281).

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

### **5.2. *Reflexivity in learning theory***

As the debates within the sociological tradition show, the concept of reflexivity is intrinsically linked to theorisations of identity. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century psychologists Lev Vygotsky and George Herbert Mead are considered seminal theorists of reflexivity, influencing contemporary sociocultural and constructivist approaches to the theory of learning (Jaramillo, 1996). Mead sees "reflexiveness", or self-awareness, as an essential

condition for the development of the mind. Defined as “the turning-back of the experience of the individual upon himself” (Mead, 1985, p. 134), reflexivity allows the individual to “take the attitude of the other toward himself” (Mead, 1985, p. 134). Mead argues that the sense of self is formed in social interactions and that this objectification occurs in particular cultural contexts, reflexive consciousness thus cannot transcend the culture in which it develops (Adams, 2003). Both Vygotsky (1981) and Mead (1985) understand learning as a fundamentally social process, and as a consequence, reflexivity occurs primarily through signs and language which leads to the idea of acquiring an understanding the self as a symbol (Wiley, 2021).

Building on the sociocultural thesis of cognitive development, theories of reflective learning have been further developed in the field of adult education. Mezirow’s theory of “transformative learning” espouses a Habermasian approach to domains and modes of knowledge, and posits that deep learning involves “perspective transformation” (Mezirow, 1981), which is achieved via critical reflection “on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7). Adult learning is self-reflexive, as it happens in relation to past (childhood) knowledge and experiences, including of the self: it is a process of recognising “culturally induced dependency roles and relationships” (Mezirow, 1981, pp. 6–7) or questioning our own habits and ways of thinking. In the theory of transformative learning, the emphasis is on the *critical* nature of reflection. Reflection itself can be performed uncritically, within professional routines, without questioning underlying power relations and frames of reference (Brookfield, 2000). Thus, transformative learning as a theory of adult learning brings an additional layer of understanding by decoupling self-awareness (reflection) from self-critique (reflexivity).

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

Overall, sociocultural and organisational learning theories see reflexivity as a process of identity-building and transformation, individual and collective, relying on a

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

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

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

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

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

- (1) as *rational deliberation* that results in the change of individual policy preferences (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013) (individual reflexivity associated with outcome-based predictors);

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

As a theory of policy learning through socialisation, reflexive learning implies that “the objectives of learning are dynamic and endogenous to the process of social interaction”, resulting in policy which is “produced in the act of learning” (Radaelli and Dunlop, 2013, p.608). Dunlop and Radaelli (2013) understand reflexive learning as open and rational deliberation between social and political equals, and contrast it to other, more restricted forms of policy learning: epistemic learning, learning through bargaining and learning in the shadow of hierarchy. In their typology, reflexivity appears as “pure” learning, or “enlightenment for its own sake” (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013, p. 608), free of external constraints and predefined teacher-learner dynamics. Studies which depart from such a conceptualisation of reflexivity often examine under what conditions learning becomes dysfunctional, sub-optimal or blocked by exogenous factors (Dunlop et al., 2018), as opposed to analysing instrumental contexts which create conditions for reflexivity in the first place (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2020). This approach is rooted in methodological individualism and is based on the assumption that reflexive learning occurs spontaneously when certain macro-level scope conditions are met. Scholars in the environmental field have suggested relaxing some of the assumptions of this ideal type, in order to accommodate more common forms of “constrained” reflexivity which are found in policy networks (McNutt & Rayner, 2018).

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

Finally, the third level of reflexivity as a characteristic of pluralist governance systems, is discussed in this dissertation as a generic mode of organisation of multi-level relations, attached to normative claims concerning efficiency and legitimacy at the system level. Experimentalist governance is theorised as a dynamic process of policy-making, involving the reciprocal redefinition of ends and means through an iterated, deliberative, multi-level cycle of provisional goal-setting and revision, thereby giving structure to apparently fluid practices of “network governance” (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012). Sabel and Zeitlin (2008, 2010, 2012) establish strategic uncertainty and multi-polar or polyarchic distribution of power as scope conditions for experimentalist governance, both of which are met in European higher education governance. By definition, the OMC itself is considered an experimentalist structure or organizational form. Normatively, experimentalist governance presupposes a possible democratisation effect in domestic arenas, due to peer-based scrutiny and the subversion of principal-agent relations, which

engenders dynamic accountability (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012). In this context, reflexivity is understood in pragmatic terms, as a cyclical process of rule revision, based on different implementation experiences. Another underlying mechanism of the model is iterative policy learning (Harmsen, 2015, p. 788) which transforms governance into a “machine for learning from diversity” (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012, p. 176), based on the continuous feedback stream of solutions developed at the level of sub-units in response to similar challenges.

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

Reflexivity in this scholarly tradition is defined as the “internalisation’ of the conditions of learning” (De Schutter & Lenoble, 2010, p. XXX), which enables “to overcome structurally embedded ignorance of specialized organizations and institutions with regard to the external effects of their own operations” (Feindt & Weiland, 2018, p. 655). The governance perspective on reflexivity is particularly useful for the study of

instrument reflexivity, as it enables moving beyond reflexivity as a fundamentally human, often sub-conscious operation towards conceptualising it as a problem for policy-making which can be tackled through systemic interventions. The dissertation aims to test the applicability of existing approaches to reflexivity in policy learning and governance theory, to conceptualise instrument reflexivity in the context of the ESG. In other words, the question is how can peer learning, deliberations and transnational governance arrangements which concern the genesis, revision, and application of the instrument be best explained at the level of individual, policy or system reflexivity?

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

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

Across the three papers, the focus of the analysis is the practice of reflexivity in different contexts and at different levels of instrumentation. Therefore, the common methodological approach is *praxiography*, or the study of practice. Praxiography may be associated with a broad range of possible epistemological orientations and methods, which nevertheless share two commonalities: a strong empirical anchoring (Bueger & Gadinger, 2018a) and the development of praxiographic sensibility in analysis and writing (Nicolini, 2017; Sedlačko, 2017). Since the goal of praxiography is to understand socially meaningful patterns of practice in their context, data collection often involves observational methods (Bueger & Gadinger, 2018a), such as participant observation, shadowing or action research. However, in some instances, direct observation may not be possible (Pouliot, 2014), in which case alternative methods of data collection may be mobilised. Praxiographic research can be time consuming, costly and difficult to access

for a PhD student. Therefore, the dissertation combines a range of different (predominantly qualitative) methods to grasp instrument reflexivity. [Paper 1](#) and [Paper 2](#) build on primarily observational data, while [Paper 3](#) combines qualitative interviews with mixed methods analysis of texts. [Chapter V](#) provides an in-depth discussion of observational methods, issues of access, positionality, reflexivity and ethics.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

in institutional quality practice.

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

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

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

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