

# Why QA processes in HE often (always?) result in diverse and unintended outcomes?

Martina Vukasovic, Department of Government, University of Bergen

NOQA conference, 5-6 September 2024, Lysaker

# Key message

- QA in HE as a (change) process ...
- ... characterised by several “multi’s”
  - Multi-actor
  - Multi-level
  - Multi-issue
- ... “landing” into contexts marked by
  - organisational cultures
  - disciplinary cultures
- → diverse and (often) unintended outcomes of QA in HE

# QA in HE as a (change) process (1)

- HE – a highly institutionalised activity
  - (largely) legitimate and taken-for-granted ‘ways of doing things’
  - formal and informal rules about how teaching is done
- Formal and informal rules not necessarily aligned
- *Misalignment between formal and informal → diverse and unintended outcomes*

# QA in HE as a (change) process (2)

- QA about maintaining or increasing quality of HE → QA is about doing institutional work
  - maintaining existing institutions that seem to produce good outcomes
  - disrupting ‘old’ / creating ‘new’ institutions where adjustments are deemed necessary
- “produce good outcomes” / “adjustments are necessary”
  - at what level?
  - according to whom?
  - for what purpose?

# The 3 “multi’s” (1)

- HE in general and QA of HE in particular characterized by (at least) 3 “multi’s”: multi-level, multi-actor, multi-issue
- Multi-level:
  - European ↔ individual
  - Both top-down and bottom-up dynamics, as well as feedback loops
  - Channelling, filtering or buffering?
- *Various/diverse interactions between levels → diverse and unintended outcomes*

# The 3 “multi’s” (2)

- Multi-actor:
  - Various actors that
    - are expected to maintain current ‘ways of doing things’ or change them (A)
    - have an interest in what is going on (B)
  - Who is A and who is B varies
  - Interests
    - vary across groups and may change over time
    - may not be internally consistent, e.g. due to conflicting demands / limited resources
- *Various/diverse constellations of actors and their interests → diverse and unintended outcomes*

# The 3 “multi’s” (3)

- Multi-issue:
  - QA is about education and thus about many inter-connected aspects
  - Formal and informal rules about “how we do things” concerning these interconnected aspects are not necessarily in coherence with each other
  - Changes in one aspect imply or assume changes in other aspects
- *Interaction between issues that may have different change dynamics and /or directions → diverse and unintended outcomes*

# Different «contexts» (1)

- Importance of specific cultures in which different QA initiatives land / unfold
- Organisational cultures
  - University vs. college (vs. «aspiring university» vs. ... )
  - Old vs. new
  - Big vs. small
  - Comprehensive vs. more narrow profile
  - Public vs. private
  - “Recent” merger(s) or not
  - Campus A vs. Campus B
  - “Centre” vs. “periphery”
  - ...
- *Diversity of and interaction between various organisational cultures → diverse and unintended outcomes*



# Different «contexts» (2)

- Differences in disciplinary cultures → differences in how disciplines do things with knowledge, incl. education
  - Relationship between formal and informal rules
  - Views on purposes of education and implications for study programme content, structure, implementation...
  - How initiatives coming from elsewhere are interpreted and understood, esp. in situations of ambiguity
- *Diversity of (and interaction between) various disciplinary cultures → diverse and unintended outcomes*

**Same / similar  
methodologies and mandates**



**Misalignment** between  
formal and informal “rules”

Interactions between diverse  
**actors** (and their interest)

**Organisational**  
cultures

Interaction between  
**levels** of governance

**Issue** linkages  
and interactions

**Disciplinary**  
cultures



**Diverse outcomes**  
**Unintended outcomes**

# Some questions to consider...

- Are diverse / unintended outcomes acceptable ...
  - ... if the result is QA enhancement?
  - ... if the result is framed as QA enhancement by relevant actors?
- What are the appropriate / effective QA methodologies?
  - How to take into account factors that lead to diverse / unintended outcomes?