

Review of the Doctoral thesis “Long Night’s Journey into Day: Implementation of Czech Policy on Higher Education Quality Assurance” by Jan Kohoutek

The thesis addresses and analyse the implementation of various policy initiatives in quality assurance in Czech higher education. The area of quality assurance is in general an important topic in higher education, and may be of particular importance for the further Czech policy development in this area. Hence, the relevance and importance of the research conducted is high.

The thesis is an exploratory study of the functioning and effect of different policy instruments in Czech higher education over a twenty year period from 1990 onwards. By combining qualitative and quantitative data and methods, the candidate has addressed various stakeholders and experts on their views on the policy initiatives taken – both concerning past relevance and future potential.

When reviewing the thesis, one should first consider its strengths. Here, it should be mentioned that the thesis is built upon a very impressive documentary and literature analysis allowing the candidate to explore various aspects of the policy instruments selected for analysis. The use of mixed methods and addressing various stakeholders and experts has provided the candidate with rich information, and multifaceted views on the problems and prospects of the quality assurance initiatives in the country. The handling of the technical analysis of the data should also be considered as strength of the thesis, although the fundamental choices behind the analysis are not particularly elaborated (see below).

A second strength of the thesis lies in its broad and concise coverage of existing theories and research in both higher education in general, and quality assurance and implementation research in particular. Here, the candidate demonstrates good knowledge of the literature in the field, and manage to combine various insights in developing an analytical framework that is very relevant for the topic of the thesis. Although implementation research is not among the most popular areas in current higher education research, the candidate should be commended for going beyond the standard approaches in searching for the ideas and models that fits the research problem. That the consequence of this search for a comprehensive analytical framework also has resulted in a very complex analytical scheme is perhaps not surprising (see below).

Finally, the thesis is written in a clear and consistent style, demonstrating a candidate that is mature and confident as a researcher. Research questions are precisely formulated based on an informed discussion on the challenges facing Czech higher education, and the data which later are collected fits well with the research questions stated. The thesis also contains critical discussions on the findings, and the conclusions drawn seem very relevant and adequate. In an international perspective, the thesis is well integrated, with good progress making it easy to follow the research process as it unfolds.

However, the thesis also suffers from some weaknesses. First, and most serious, the methodological choices underlying the thesis are poorly elaborated and explained. In general it is very unusual for a PhD thesis not to have a separate chapter dealing with issues concerning data and methodology. Even if one – more implicitly – can understand the challenges and choices facing the candidate, this reviewer is disappointed that methodological issues are not dealt with in a more integrated way. How experts were selected, why certain

analytical techniques were preferred before others (e.g., why Principal-Component analysis?), and how questionnaires were developed more in detail, would have been interesting to learn more about. Although many of the decisions made indeed do make sense, they are not so clear-cut that a critical discussion of the choices available is irrelevant.

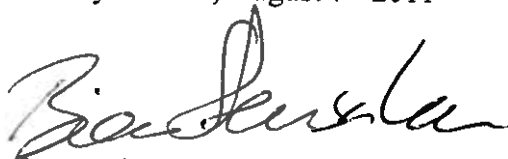
Secondly, while the analytical framework developed indeed seems relevant for the research problems identified, this reviewer still misses exactly how the “three elements identified” (see p. 56) was combined in practise. While this reviewer does accept the relevance of the different elements, making them into a coherent framework is another matter. The analytical framework seems well fitted to the empirical reality to which it is tested. That the reality often is characterised by “muddling through” (see p. 190) still makes it a challenge to predict/identify insights in a more generalised way. The figure illustrating the conceptual framework provides some indications of this as it is not easy to grasp exactly how goal formulations, instrument choices and actor capabilities and constellations are linked.

Finally, in discussing implications of the thesis in an international perspective, the reader also misses a contextualisation of the finding that the “stick-carrot-sermon instrument set-up” is as truly unique as the author claims. It might be that I misunderstand what is meant, but I would argue that the “instrument-mix” is not unusual at all within Europe – although it might be that the balancing of instruments is not perfect in the region as a whole. This is still a minor criticism, and an issue the candidate perhaps can research more in-depth in the future.

Based on a thorough reading of the thesis this reviewer would argue that the thesis is clearly above standards with respect to the literature review, the independence and the mature way in which the theoretical framework is developed, and in the technicalities related to the methodological analysis. With respect to scope and depth of the research, the thesis covers much ground, and the candidate demonstrates creativity in the way the framework is designed. As far as I can see, there are no irregularities associated with the presented thesis, or in the handling of ethical issues.

Concerning the quality, this issue clearly relates to both the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis. However, my conclusion is still that the strengths of the thesis clearly outweigh the weaknesses, and that the thesis has a quality compared to international standards. On this basis, this reviewer recommend that the candidate is allowed to defend the thesis.

University of Oslo, August 7th 2011



Professor Bjørn Stensaker