Shifting Regulative Ideas of Education Policy and Practice: The Case of Quality Assurance in Education in Slovenia

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∽   Based on Foucault's concept of the dispositive, the paper attempts to show how societies and schools have been functioning for some time now by regulating three dispositives: juridical, disciplinary, and security. While the crises of the 1970s shifted the combination of dispositives in education in the West towards security, this shift in the rationality of education policy and practice did not occur in Slovenia until the 1990s, following the broader political transition to democracy and a market economy. The paper aims to present these shifts through the structuring of quality assurance mechanisms in education in Slovenia in the previous two decades. First, the concept of quality assurance is presented as part of a broader change in society and education. This is followed by analyses of the dynamics of the conceptualisation, implementation, and regulation of quality assurance in education in Slovenia. Complementarily, following Bourdieu's approach, seven interviews with experts from the field of quality assurance are presented, with the aim of reflecting on the past and shedding light on the current state of affairs in quality assurance in education in Slovenia.

Keywords: quality, dispositive, security, education, regulative idea

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Ugotavljanje in zagotavljanje kakovosti v šolstvu v Sloveniji: zamiki racionalnosti edukacijskih politik in praks

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∽ Izhajajoč iz Foucaultevega kategorialnega aparata, družba in šole že dlje časa delujejo na prepletu treh dispozitivov: juridičnega, disciplinskega in dispozitiva varnosti. S krizo sedemdesetih let prejšnjega stoletja zahodne družbe zaznamuje zamik dispozitivov v smer dispozitiva varnosti, medtem ko je ta zamik v edukacijskih politikah in praksah v Sloveniji mogoče zaznati šele v devetdesetih letih dvajsetega stoletja v povezavi s prehodom v demokratični politični sistem in tržno ekonomijo. Prispevek tematizira omenjene zamike na primeru vzpostavljanja mehanizmov ugotavljanja in zagotavljanja kakovosti v vzgoji in izobraževanju v Sloveniji v preteklih desetletjih. Koncept ugotavljanja in zagotavljanja kakovosti je najprej predstavljen kot del širših zamikov v družbi in polju edukacije. Sledi analiza konceptualizacij, implementacije in regulacije ugotavljanja in zagotavljanja kakovosti v vzgoji in izobraževanju v Sloveniji. Izhajajoč iz Bourdieujevega pristopa, prispevek v izhodiščno zastavitev vpenja analizo sedmih intervjujev z eksperti in ekspertinjami s področja ugotavljanja in zagotavljanja kakovosti v vzgoji in izobraževanju v Sloveniji z namenom refleksije preteklih in prihodnjih izzivov politik in praks ugotavljanja in zagotavljanja kakovosti v šolstvu v Sloveniji.

Ključne besede: kakovost, dispozitivi, varnost, vzgoja in izobraževanje, regulativne ideje

Introduction

Mechanisms of governance of the post-war state in Western society were organised around the security dispositive[2] (Foucault, 2008b, 2009), with the productive regulation of liberties, political economy and social security shaped as a series of political interventions that alleviated social problems and regulated the gap between the 'wealthy' and the 'less fortunate'. At that time, Slovenia was still embedded in the socialist rationalities of government and planning as part of a mixed disciplinary and security dispositive (cf. Foucault, 2008b, 2009).

In this light, the shift from this mix to the security dispositive in Slovenia came with a delay compared to in the West. The transitions from socialism to representative democracy and the establishment of security mechanisms took place when the post-war welfare state was in decline in the West, as it had become economically 'unsustainable'. As a result, neoliberal rationality, which criticised the regulatory ideas and mechanisms of social regulation and the political economy, presented itself as a rational and promising alternative that could correct the economic and political mistakes of the post-war era (Mirowski, 2015). Liberal markets, economic freedom, the deregulation of social and institutional systems, and the centrality of the individual became some of the regulative ideas that transformed society and education. In this light, Slovenian transitions took place on the axes of the legacy of the productive elements of socialism and the welfare state and the dominant ideas of the neoliberal rationality of the time. Centralised, state regulation was no longer an option, and various ideas emerged about how systems, institutions and individuals could or should be governed. Some of them were new, but most of them were shifted, repositioned and reshaped to fit the liberal rationality of governance (Foucault, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Popkewitz, 2002).

Education was among the many areas that underwent these transitions. As part of the transitions, school reform was based on the consensus that Slovenia needed a quality education system comparable to developed Western European education systems. This meant a shift towards Western normativity, with a view to implementing the pillars of a sustainable, long-term system. This paper presents one of the possible reflections of the structuring and positioning of quality assurance in education in Slovenia[3] and its shifts taking place as part

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2   Political discussions, especially after the Second World War, had a strong moral focus, as high unemployment, inflation and an unstable price market (Judt, 2010) posed a serious threat to fragile democracy. Fear of extremist and revolutionary ideas had become part of the collective memory, and economic regulation had taken over the central role in ensuring the ethical and moral wellbeing of society.

3   Up to tertiary education.

of the wider political, economic and social transitions. (e.g., Razdevšek Pučko, 1992; Zgaga, 1997)

Based on reviewing existing documents and materials produced over the previous two decades,[4] seven interviews were conducted in November 2020, using Bourdieu's approach of reflective sociology (1989, 1999). The interviews were with experts from six public institutions[5] who have been and remain involved in the processes of structuring quality assurance in education in terms of its content and systemic changes. The objective was to analyse reflections concerning the past and current challenges related to quality assurance in education in Slovenia.

Regulative ideas of quality assurance in education

The concepts of Foucault (2008a, 2008b, 2009) enable us to understand the way education has become a contemporary security mechanism in modern societies. Following Foucault, societies, at least since the 18th century, have functioned as shifting relations of three dispositives: the juridical, the disciplinary, and the security dispositive (Ibid.), which shape the rationalities, regulative ideas, and mechanisms of dealing with different aspects of insecurity in individual and collective life.

Shifts can be observed in education from the late 1970s onwards. Central regulation, which prescribes and controls the aims and goals of education for schools and teachers, and deregulation have shifted towards ideas of individual and group evaluation and self-regulation. Here again, however, the momentum of the juridical dispositive (the government prescribes the content of education) and the disciplinary dispositive (the government controls and supervises practices) has not disappeared, nor has the need for social security and social welfare. The neoliberal 'new' and the political economy and welfare state 'old' in education have been repositioned in different ways depending on national and global agendas.

This shift towards the security dispositive in Slovenian education was outlined in the first *White Paper on Education* (Krek, 1995), which aimed at open education connected with the rest of Europe in terms of language learning, comparability with international knowledge standards, intercultural

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4   Some explicitly referred in the text, others analysed in previous work in the monograph of Gaber & Kos K., 2011).

5   The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, the National Institute for Education, the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training, the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education, the National School for Leadership in Education, and the National Examinations Centre.

education, and similar. In addition, the common belief was that kindergartens and schools should provide education for all members of society based on common values. The educational goals focused on the education of the individual as an autonomous being and the formation of an enlightened citizen. The basic principle of equal opportunity for school achievement was also defined as taking into account the differences among children and their right to choose and be different. The principles of broad accessibility, quality and fairness had to be incorporated into the relevant legislation. The *White Paper* (Ibid.) served as the basis for far-reaching reforms, which were reflected in the adoption of a series of laws on the organisation and financing of education and aspects of the different levels of education. With the school reform of the 1990s, Slovenia was on its way to creating an internationally comparable education system that could provide social stability and security.

Given the immense scope of the impending reform, experts and policymakers realised at the time that the systems could not cope with such extensive reforms very often. The aim was to embed a mechanism in the system that would allow it to change and adapt the sector and its sub-sectors to the changing needs of society. One of the internationally prevalent ideas of the time was the idea of quality assurance in education, but this had its own internal tensions (Krek, 1995; Lapajne, 1993).

The basic elements of a system that would ensure quality and comparable skills and performance included stable financial resources, which would allow for supportive material conditions for schools, and adequate teacher salaries, which would provide teachers with a secure environment for teaching and professional development. At the same time, curricula were reformed, and legislation was adapted to the changes.

Nevertheless, compared to Western societies, the structuring of quality assurance (QA) in Slovenia came with a delay.

What and who is QA for?

The logic of QA in Slovenia was structured at a crossroads where increasing enrolment in education, increased public spending, the greater role of knowledge in society, the economic crisis of the 1970s, and the withdrawal of the welfare state intersected.

In light of the increasing importance of expert knowledge in education, teachers were given more autonomy and more responsibility. Teacher education and training became a university course, giving teachers a new professional status and a legitimised claim for autonomy. Among the first demands on the

part of teachers was the demand for knowledge standards and educational performance. Rising enrolment rates in secondary and tertiary education made it necessary to address the problem of the devaluation of knowledge and degrees (e.g., Lapajne, 1993; Razdevšek Pučko, 1992; Šebart Kovač, 1995; Zgaga, 1997)

The second demand was from the economy and the needs of the labour market: the demand for a competent workforce with 'applicable' knowledge and a correspondingly qualified population, accompanied by the demand for lower taxes.

The third demand came from the state, which was under pressure from the economy and the public to ensure the quality and security of education, in parallel to the pressure of the tax burden and the rational use of public finances (Gaber & Kos, 2011, p. 13).

The logic of QA, therefore, emerged as a complex, sometimes contradictory process on the axes of various issues regarding the governance of education. For example, the issues of the growing population enrolled in education, increased public investment, the growing role of knowledge, the increased expectations of the efficiency and effectiveness of public services, and similar issues have all been characterised by the decentralisation and minimisation of the role of the state government. Nonetheless, the need for ensuring comprehensive quality was irreversibly embedded in institutions as a specifically neoliberal conceptualisation of an older and productive security dispositive. Schools were expected to play their part in providing security in times of constant change, risk and uncertainty. While it was no longer possible to provide the population with securities based on full-time employment and decent pay, schools and education could offer lifelong learning and the idea of (continuous) improvement (Ibid., pp. 11–12).

The period of transition in Slovenia was full of expectations and hopes regarding education. Quality education was seen as the promise of a better future for individuals, families and the nation.

The structuring of QA in education in Slovenia

Some elements and practices of QA were present in Slovenia before the concept of quality itself developed. These were evident in various school practices during the socialist period, including annual plans and the evaluation of them, strategies for inclusive schools, monitoring gender ratios, and similar. Furthermore, there were organisational changes in the mid-1970s with the introduction of self-governance[6] in education and other areas of socialist

6   In Slovenian: *samoupravljanje.*

interest, which heralded shifts from disciplinary/control mechanisms to security mechanisms.

However, the 1990s broke away from socialist 'planning enthusiasm' and instead placed high expectations on the individual and his/her opportunities, on an abstract ideal of success and opportunity, on the alignment of school conditions, and on quality.

The quality system in Slovenia was introduced gradually and not without problems. The basic elements were outlined at the end of the 1990s, but it took more than two decades to develop a structure resembling a QA system in education. In the following section, we outline the basic elements of quality in education from the 1990s until today, keeping in mind that some of the elements of QA introduced in the 1990s have changed, while other elements have been added (Ibid., pp. 16–23)

Educational achievements and external evaluation[7]

In light of the reform activities of the 1990s, the need for the external evaluation of students' performance gained support from teachers and schools, as well as some parents and experts. It thus became one of the first elements of QA. International research on the importance of national examinations provided the necessary evidence for the evaluation and comparison of educational outcomes, even in countries without such a tradition.

In 1993, the National Examinations Centre was established, assuming responsibility for the external[8] evaluation and assessment of student performance. The first trial Matura (ZMat, 2007) examination was successfully implemented in 1995. External evaluation of achievements was also introduced in primary schools (ZOŠ, 1996; Regulations on the National Testing, 2013).

In addition to national external evaluations, at that time, experts and decision-makers also supported participation in various international comparative assessments, such as TIMSS, PISA, and similar. These studies, in particular, were and remain the focus of interest of the research community, policymakers, and the general public. Secondary studies carried out by the Educational Research Institute provide a detailed insight into the dynamics of the systemic opportunities for policymakers.

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7   In addition to national and international assessments of student achievements and school inspection, part of the external evaluation with regard to the initial accreditation of educational institutions is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. This will not be addressed in this paper (Pravilnik o vodenju razvida).

8   External evaluation is compulsory at the end of the ninth grade of primary school (it is optional in the sixth and third grades) and at the end of secondary school as general or vocational baccalaureate, Matura. (ZMat, 2007; ZOŠ, 1996; RIC, n.d.).

With the reform, the School Inspectorate (ZSOll, 2005) remained part of the system, but its role was shifted from control to guiding and monitoring legislative compliance, and assessing possible misconduct in terms of organisation, the use of financial resources, and the protection of students' rights.

Performance data on student achievement offered a promise and a means of evaluating the whole system in terms of assessment and diagnosis (Eurydice, 2009).

Internal evaluation

In parallel with external evaluation, an internal evaluation approach was established by the first two projects, *Ogledalo [Mirror] (1999)* and *Modro Oko [Wise eye] (2001),* which were designed and supported by the National Institute of Education. External evaluation was seen as complementary to internal school evaluations. On the one hand, the limitations of external monitoring and control were recognised; on the other hand, internal evaluation – particularly self-evaluation, which was gaining popularity internationally – was recognised as a mechanism for enhancing the capacity of schools and teachers to reflect on, improve and strengthen quality in areas where external mechanisms were unproductive or were seen as challenging the autonomy of schools (MacBeath, 2004).

The juridical basis for self-evaluation was outlined by *Organisation and Financing of Education Act* (ZOFVI, 2007, 2008). Articles 48 and 49 assign the responsibility for the internal evaluation of quality in the form of self-evaluation to school principals, who are responsible for preparing annual self-evaluation reports for their schools. This self-evaluation report must then be discussed and approved at the level of the school council.[9]

However, the process of self-evaluation, and thus the structuring of the system of QA and education as a whole, was not regulated at the system level. This means that self-evaluation at the school level and the development of the concept of self-evaluation and its instruments was and still is financially supported and developed through various projects led by different, mainly public institutions responsible for different aspects and levels of education.

The first two projects were followed by other projects led by other public institutions, usually at least partially tailored to specific levels of education. This had a significant impact on the milieu of self-evaluation practices. In addition

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9   The council is composed of three representatives of the entity financially responsible for schools, five representatives of the staff, and three representatives of parents. For detailed information on the organization of the school council, please see, Organisation and Financing of Education Act, art 46.

to the two aforementioned projects, other projects such as *Ponudimo odraslim kakovostno izobraževanje – POKI* [Offering Quality Education to Adults], which was under the leadership of the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education, and *Kakovost vzgojno izobraževalnih organizacij, Zasnova in uvedba ugotavljanja in zagotavljanja kakovosti* [The Quality of Educational Organisations, The Design and Implementation of Quality Assessment and Assurance], which was led by the National School for Leadership in Education, have left their mark on self-evaluation. The National Institute for Vocational Education also leads projects supporting and developing the quality and evaluation of vocational education and training.

Attempts to find a common framework

Looking back at the development of quality in education, it seems that the national assessment of student performance was introduced with the greatest consensus and consideration at the level of policy and juridical regulation, in practice, and stable funding. However, the debates on the external evaluation of student performance were accompanied by criticism from those who considered external evaluations, including international comparative evaluation (such as PISA and TIMSS etc.), as part of neoliberal attempts to subject education to competitiveness, school ranking, and economic rationality. Some of the criticism came from a section of teachers who saw the potential for excessive intervention in education. Over the previous two decades, various actors have tried to reshape the way in which national performance evaluation is organised at the system level. There have, for example, been attempts to make the results of school performance public and thus make rankings possible (Dnevnik, 2017), to redesign the place of national performance assessment at the end of primary school in relation to the selection criteria (Ibid., 2015), and, most recently, to modify the dynamics around Matura examinations (24ur, 2020), among others. External assessment of achievement was nonetheless structured and introduced as part of the QA mechanism in education, together with the redefinition of the role of the school inspectorate (ZSoll, 1996). Despite these changes,[10] external evaluation and assessment have remained a more or less stable element of QA.

The dynamics of self-evaluation are more complex and fragmented. As mentioned above, various public education institutions have developed approaches to self-evaluation, usually with specific objectives for different levels

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10 We recognise that these could be a separate part of analytical insights, but at the moment such insights are beyond the scope and possibilities of this paper.

of education and financed by project activities. This means that project activities are gradually discontinued as soon as the funding runs out.

The need for a common national framework at the system level was raised by the professional and expert institutions and schools themselves. The need for quality protocols and common indicators was outlined, as well as the need for tools, a database that schools could use, and appropriate training for teachers and school management.

The first attempt at a common framework took place between 2009 and 2014 as part of a project led by the National School for Leadership in Education, entitled *Zasnova in uvedba ugotavljanja in zagotavljanja kakovosti* [The Design and Implementation of Quality Assessment and Assurance]. One of the goals of the project was to propose a common framework that could provide guidelines for a national framework for quality in education. The project involved the co-operation of experts from public institutions in the field of education.[11] Among other activities and results of the project, a monograph entitled *Kakovost v šolstvu v Sloveniji* [Quality in Education in Slovenia, 2011] (Kos & Gaber, 2011) was prepared, which included an overview of quality at different levels of education (except tertiary education), a common proposal and guidelines for policymakers, as well as some theoretical contributions by international authors.

This monograph served as a starting point for the *National Framework for Quality Assessment and Quality Assurance in Education,* which was adopted by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport in 2017. The *National Framework* made it possible to finance the second project with the aim of further developing a common model for assessing and ensuring quality in education: *Vzpostavitev, dopolnitev in pilotni preizkus modela ugotavljanja in zagotavljanja kakovosti na področju vzgoje in izobraževanja* [The Establishment, Supplementation and Pilot Testing of a Model for Quality Assessment and Assurance in the Field of Education, 2016–2018]. The project was again a consortium partnership.[12] Guidelines and materials for teaching and learning about quality in education were developed with four sub-areas: student performance and achievements in child development and learning; professional development of teachers; safe and encouraging learning environment; school climate and culture. In addition, standards and indicators for the areas of kindergarten, school management, and indicators for the area of quality management, as well as a quality team competence profile were

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11 The University of Ljubljana, the Faculty of Education, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, the National Institute for Education, the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training, the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education, the National School for Leadership in Education, and the National Examinations Centre.

12 The National School for Leadership in Education, the National Institute for Education, the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training, the Education and National Examinations Centre, and in cooperation with 32 development and pilot schools.

developed. An extension of the project was planned in order to obtain additional funding for its implementation and dissemination.[13]

In the monograph, *Kakovost v šolstvu v Sloveniji* [Quality in Education in Slovenia], evaluations of the system were also recommended. The elements established can be found in the *National Framework for Quality Assessment and Quality Assurance in Education*. One part contains an assessment and evaluation of data such as demographic trends, investment in education, student performance, and similar., as well as an evaluation of schools' self-evaluation reports. In addition, external evaluations, national evaluation studies and research projects are planned in order to provide additional insight into the quality of the system.

Reflections on the past and present

In addition to an overview of milestones drawing on the analysed documents and processes outlined above, seven semi-structured interviews were prepared and conducted in November 2020 to reflect the current and future challenges in QA in education in Slovenia, building on continuities and discontinuities of the last two decades

Experts interviewed have all been, and some still are, personally involved in the structuring of the QA system; the interviewees are also all experts from public institutions in the field of education: the National Institute of Education, the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training, the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education, the National School for Leadership in Education, the National Examinations Centre, and the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport.

The methodology used for the interviews follows the Bourdieu approach (Bourdieu, 1989, 1999) to reflect on the processes of QA in education in the light of the rationality of the field and institutional practices and its agents. The presented section of the interviews is based on the parts of the interviews that contribute to the understanding of the common, current challenges for QA in Slovenia. The interviewees[14] were asked to share their expert experience on the beginnings of QA, its development, and its current state of affairs. The interviews highlighted four complementary problems that can help us to understand the drawbacks of QA in Slovenia today: governance of quality at the system level, the financing of quality, the issues of quality theory and research

13   Funding has so far been held back due to the current priority of managing the consequences of COVID-19.

14   The interviewees answers will be presented anonymously, using the alphabetical order of the interviews as they were performed, from interviewee A to G.

in relation to policymaking, and the aspect of collaboration. These will be presented in the next sections as possible axes of current or future attempts to regulate the QA in education in Slovenia.

Regulating quality at the system level

The general consensus among the respondents is that quality in education must be regulated at the level of the system, or as interviewee C put it: 'Concern for quality should be seen as the quality of the functioning of the system itself.' (C)

There seems to be a lack of common stirring, which includes defining quality and aligning the existing mechanism into a functional whole. Consequently, a number of interrelated aspects of the problem occur. The first problem is twofold and concerns the role of both expertise and coordination. With regard to expert knowledge, expert A summarises: 'We are full of words about quality and equity, but we systematically avoid formally defining how we understand quality, what it is and should be; we have avoided defining it for twenty years, as it is difficult to measure and define.' (A)

With regard to coordination, different but similar concerns were expressed; for example, interviewee C points out: 'We are dealing with quality at different levels of education. In schools, we still need a broader framework, otherwise we are just shifting the emphasis without a specific direction or goal.' (C) Similarly, expert B reflects: 'At the level of public institutions or individuals, we cannot do much for the system. It should be a joint commitment, but we do not have the power to do it, we cannot do it.' (B) Expert D adds the necessity of communication: 'The various activities in schools are not coordinated because we simply do not have adequate communication with each other. Regular communication and cooperation should be the Ministry's concern, as they are the ones who should govern the system, not us.' (D)

The experts feel that without systemic recognition of the work being done by schools and public institutions, their efforts are not validated. The dissatisfaction is expressed by expert E: 'The quality system has been in place for some time, but lacks adequate appropriation and recognition by the Ministry. After the last project was completed, the Ministry again failed to anchor the project results at the system level, which meant that the necessary changes in legislation had to be adopted, the results approved by the Quality Council, etc. In this way, the results would receive recognition.' (E)

Due to the longstanding lack of steering, there is an emerging discrepancy between legislation and what goes on at schools. One of the statements

summarises the problem: 'Legislation is not adapted to what goes on in schools.' (E)

The more critical statements concern governance and policy, and go beyond the issues of QA. Expert A expresses the frustrations: 'This is bad policy. There is no continuity. There is a lack of understanding of the need for long-term education policy plans that are not exclusively linked to this or that government.' (A)

Similarly, expert F comments: 'With no government on the side of the Ministry and a lack of communication and communication between public institutions, quality is seen as a partial concept, not as a whole.' (F)

Looking back and assessing which periods have been productive for developing QA, some of the interviewees believe that success is too closely linked to politics. Interviewee F, for example, sees this not only as the problem of specific persons in positions but the way the system works: 'The leaders of public institutions have too much room to pursue their own interests.' (F). Nevertheless, as interviewee G explains: 'Politics has an important role to play. When Dr Makovec Brenčič was minister, we had progress but quality was part of the coalition agreement of that government.' (G)

Financing of quality in education

In terms of financial regulation, mechanisms for regulating QA in education are seen as problematic.

QA in education is mainly financed via various projects. Not only the way in which the project outputs are used, but also the inability to assure stable, regular financing of QA development and activities is a problem shared by the experts interviewed. Expert E assesses the situation as follows: 'The quality depends on European Social Fund (ESF) funding. When projects come to an end, we usually have a funding gap of at least a year, during which time not much can happen. This has happened at least two or three times so far.' (E)

Expert B shares similar concerns: 'There are advantages and disadvantages of ESF project funding. It looks as if it will stop again, but it should continue. What effect will this have on schools? In another project, we did something and then again nothing. The message is not good.' (B)

The consequences are reflected in a similar way: 'Symptomatic of this seems to be that actions are postponed, even stopped. This current project proposal should already have been approved by the Ministry's cohesion department, but instead, it has been there for several months. We have no information, but it does not look good. Once again, actions are postponed, stopped ...' (B), expert B adds.

Expert F goes a step further and offers a possible solution to the problems of recognition of work and accounting for the use of project financing beyond the project's lifetime: 'The impact and outcome of projects should be evaluated, monitored and upgraded. It is a question of long-term education policy.' (F)

Some of the experts believe that the way politics and finances are regulated for QA is irresponsible. 'I do not want to sound too critical, but how many projects have there been in the last two decades? How much money has been spent under the quality agenda? Every time a new minister comes, they talk about quality and possible new projects, but you can see that some people who have been working in this area for longer than the minister's new cabinet have grim smiles on their faces. You know how the story ends.' (A)

While all of the experts recognise that stable funding is necessary and is the responsibility of the Ministry, they also recognise that some attempts have been made to ensure more stable funding: 'There have been attempts to ensure regular and stable funding at the level of the system, but they have not got through Parliament. The public institutions involved opted to recruit new staff and did not think that QA could be entrusted to the existing staff. In the end, it involved too much money.' (G) One of the experts also sees another possibility: 'If not through the ESF, we must try to embed quality in the annual work plans of public institutions. This is a fair way to stabilise the area.' (B)

Theory and research in QA

Another aspect of QA problems in education concerns experts and expert knowledge. Some of the experts share the opinion that part of the reason why politics has too much influence on the development of QA is the lack of engagement of researchers and experts in the field of QA. One of the statements sums up part of the topic: 'I am critical of education experts and politicians. Quality is not framed conceptually. This step has not yet been taken. It is clear to me that pedagogy, educational science, is different from other fields, but still these extreme deviations cannot exist. The government changes, and we have a completely new concept. This is due to a lack of consensus and cooperation among experts, and then a new minister comes in or a new interest is put forward on behalf of a particular group. I think that this does not happen in this way in other areas.' (A)

Expert D shares this opinion: 'We need consensus at the societal level and at the level of education experts, and we lack the cooperation of researchers, universities and policymakers at the system level.' (B)

Expert knowledge is seen as important at various levels and in all of the institutions involved. Some of the experts believe that part of the problem is that we need more knowledge on all sides: 'Coordination by the Ministry is necessary, but not sufficient. We need people who understand the issues to move things forward.' (G) Instead of expert knowledge, we have managers and bureaucrats, Expert F believes: 'We have this bureaucratic discourse that determines QA, there is no knowledge about education, quality in terms of content. Then non-experts, bureaucrats decide what is important, necessary, good. Education experts do not have the appropriate place.' (F)

However, some of the experts interviewed have different emphases and views on expert knowledge about QA in education and its use, from emphasising management to various ideas on where and how data should be used regarding the content of QA discourse:

One expert believes: 'Quality must be a rationality of management; it must be embedded in the way we do things. The results should be used to adapt the way we manage things. We do not have a long-term plan, and reforms are overdue. Here and there is a document, for example, a White Paper. Nobody takes it seriously, it is not properly discussed, we do not talk about it ...' (D)

There is also a need for data that could bring an additional dimension to the way quality is assured. While none of the experts deny the productivity of data, only a few recognise the importance of the need to use data. Expert D states: 'We need data, we need research. Without data, you cannot govern the system, and then you can combine with qualitative data to develop knowledge and understanding and make informed decisions.' The same interviewee goes on to add: 'There is this perception that data, statistics lie, that quality cannot be measured. If that were true, why do countries with a developed and stable system collect data? Databases are necessary.' (D)

Some of the experts also detected shifts taking place internationally in the discourse on QA. 'Having attended international conferences and events for some time, I can see a shift in focus from discussions on employability and efficiency to more general educational issues.' (E)

Concerning problems of government – or lack of government – as well as the lack of a functioning system of QA, the basic problems of teachers' positions, adequate teaching materials, and similar have become an issue related to QA. Some of the experts are concerned that without elementary inputs at the level of schools, teaching, and learning, QA is an empty promise. Expert F, explains: 'There seems to be a need to rethink the basic elements of school

education in terms of quality, such as curricula, textbooks, and so on. These are all elements of quality teaching and learning.' (F)

Collaboration

Collaboration is a much-discussed topic among the experts interviewed, and it is recognised as an important aspect in the development of QA. All of the experts agree on the need for more collaboration, not just amongst teachers and schools, but also between public institutions, universities and the ministry.

For example: 'We need collaboration in order to efficiently combine everything we have produced over the last twenty years.' (B) Moreover: 'We need to build institutional collaboration to ensure quality in an appropriate manner.' (D) 'Communication is essential, and we must believe in the idea – we must show that it works.' (C) 'Collaboration is the only way to build trust.' (E)

Various examples and suggestions for improving collaboration were also mentioned in the interviews. As an example of good practice, QA activities at the EU level were mentioned:

'The EU is a different story, a different way of communicating. We discuss things a lot, share experiences, think about future developments. We have to report and not just tick numbers and boxes, but be very detailed in terms of content. (D)

'We need events to meet, to discuss things. Separately for the existing schools and for the system issues. These are two different issues.' (D)

'You cannot address questions of the system in the same way as questions concerning schools. Schools can, of course, make a contribution, but the focus must be separate.' (E)

Old problems persist

While most of the problems have been identified in previous attempts to structure QA (Gaber et al., 2011, p. 52–61; The National Framework for Quality Assessment and Quality Assurance in Education, 2017), there seems to be little progress. Governing QA appears to be part of broader problems in terms of how governance is understood. In terms of the security dispositive (Foucault, 2008b, 2009), it looks as if we have reached the limits of the extremes inherent in neoliberal regulative ideas of instrumental interest and the lack of value-based commitments in education (Biesta, 2010, 2013). This is reflected in the way policy is made and is related to an issue that goes beyond the scope of the present paper (Štremfel, 2016). Nevertheless, the problem concerns the

way education policy and QA policy is made and managed, concerning which the problems of individuals in decision-making positions are only part of the problem. This is reflected in both the substantive development of QA and the financial aspect of governance. However, both aspects have the same common claim: the need for collaboration and long-term planning of aims and goals in education that provide stability and security of the system at all levels. In this light, research and expertise should have a proper place concerning political and managerial or bureaucratic agendas. The latter are criticised as problematic as they offer a false sense of security while problems within education and its place in changing societies are left on the sidelines (Alvesson, 2014; Biesta, 2010, 2013; Wallerstein et al., 2013). For Slovenia, this, in turn, means the likelihood of lagging behind in comparison to Western education systems.

While struggling with the old problems, the potential of the QA mechanism itself is being undervalued in terms of its productive abilities to meet the educational needs of the present and the future.

Concluding remarks

Despite the gaps and sometimes pessimistic views on the current state of affairs in QA in education, it seems that the regulative notion of quality has been embedded in the rationality of institutions and individuals in education. Also, the problems put forth in the interviewees seem to support the idea and the need for the development of quality in education (in the past as well as in the future) and emphasise the need for collaboration on different levels. This is also seen in the light of the future challenges in education and society during the COVID-19 pandemic; it seems that collaboration is an emerging rationality of security in education and society. Collaboration and collective commitments are recognised for their productive contribution to the stability and security of societies, education, and individuals even by international players such as the OECD (e.g., PISA, 2018), while extreme competition and individualism is no longer the only rational and possible option. (e.g., Castells, 2012; Rifkin, 2007, 2015; Wallerstein et al., 2013). The problematic put forth thorough developments of QA in Slovenia, and those emphasised by the experts interviewed, seem to be a part of much-needed discussions aimed at examining and building new educational realities, taking into account the lessons learned.

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