Evaluation of European Higher Education: A Status Report

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1. **INTRODUCTION**

2. Over the last decade the focus on evaluation as a steering mechanism as well as a tool of improvement has increased remarkably. This is not only a trend in the education sector but in most fields of public administration. One of the main reasons for this trend is the "value for money" perspective of both government and taxpayers leading to demands for accountability in terms of the quality and efficiency of the public sector.

The educational field generally and higher education institutions specifically are also faced with this pressure. Furthermore over the last 25 years the conditions under which higher education institutions function have changed radically. First and foremost Western European higher education has seen a change from elite systems to mass systems of higher education with a dramatic increase in student enrolment. This has changed the teaching and learning environment and has challenged the way in which higher education is organised and implemented.
Higher education institutions have during recent years in most Western European countries experienced a process of decentralisation vis-a-vis the ministries of education leaving more central decisions with the institutions thus imposing a need for better management systems.

Europe as an open educational market is consolidating itself through an increasing number of students spending one or two semesters abroad during their studies. Consequently more transparency and information about both institutions and programmes on offer have proved to be necessary.

The changed conditions have imposed two parallel needs on the higher education institutions. On the one hand there is the need to change into development oriented organisations in the sense that institutions are able to cope with the continuously changing conditions and expectations. On the other hand there is a growing pressure from external stakeholders, i.e. governments, students, partner institutions and employers to be given the opportunity to secure a knowledge of the strategies and the priorities of the institutions.

It is this context that has stimulated the development of evaluation practices in higher education.

By the beginning of the 90’s four countries (Denmark, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) had established systematic evaluation procedures at the national level in higher education. Others were planning to set up evaluation procedures or were conducting pilot projects to gather experience with evaluation methods (e.g. Norway, Finland, Portugal) with a view to establishing appropriate national evaluation procedures.

At this stage the Council of Ministers of Education in November 1991 at the initiative of the Dutch presidency introduced the idea of a number of evaluation pilot projects at the European level. The Commission carried out firstly a study that provided an overview of the level of development of and experiences with evaluation and quality assurance in the European Union member states and the EFTA-countries. The aim was to examine the possibility of carrying out a number of evaluation pilot projects. This led to the initiation of the European Pilot Project for Evaluating Quality in Higher Education. The project was initiated in November 1994 by the European Commission, Directorate General XXII: Education, Training and Youth. The project involved 17 countries - the 15 member countries, Norway and Iceland - a total of 46 institutions. In December 1995 the project was officially concluded with the finalisation of the European report which presents the results.

Two of the most important conclusions of the project were firstly that the methodological framework in the form of the guidelines for the project was tested and received general support, and secondly that the relevance and intensity of collaboration made possible during the project was recognised by all participants and that support for further cooperation was expressed.
The support for the methodological framework was balanced by the conclusion that the interpretation of the various elements of the methodology must necessarily be adapted to the educational structures and national institutional and academic cultures in the different countries. The evaluation methodology must reflect the context in which it is being used.

For the time being evaluation procedures have been established at the national level in eleven member states. The level and scope of the evaluation procedures vary from country to country. In a few countries the evaluation procedures include both the university and the non-university sector, others have set up separate procedures for the two sectors. Italy has carried out a large pilot scheme of evaluation and has passed legislation introducing a framework for the responsibility for evaluation activities. In Iceland a department in the Ministry of Education is responsible for the initiation and the implementation of external evaluation projects both in the university and the non-university sector. In Germany the responsibility for education rests with the 16 federal states. A working group on evaluation at the auspices of the German Rectors’ Conference has been set up to promote the initiation of evaluation procedures in the states. Three states have already established evaluation institutions. Systematic evaluation has not yet been introduced in the French-speaking community in Belgium, in Greece and in Luxembourg.

In addition accreditation and evaluation procedures have been set up in a majority of Central and Eastern European countries.

In a parallel process to setting up the national procedures further external evaluation initiatives have been taken institutions themselves, by networks of institutions, professional organisations as well as inter- and non- governmental organisations, e.g. CRE, the Confederation of European Union Rectors’ Conferences and the IMHE programme under the OECD. National evaluation agencies have also cooperated across borders in regional centres both to set up evaluation procedures and to implement evaluation projects.

The European map of evaluation activities is thus quite varied and diversified. In place in the European countries is a range of evaluation activities, which are to a large extent complementary.

The following analysis focuses on the national evaluation procedures. The aim of this report is to present an overview as it was in the spring of 1998 of the state of the art of evaluation in the 15 European member states and the two EEA-countries, Norway and Iceland. Therefore the main content of the report is a presentation of the evaluation procedures in the various member states and EEA-countries as it has been provided by the organisations responsible for the evaluation activities. This presentation is preceded by a comparative analysis of the methods applied in the different countries. The report concludes with an overview of expected future developments in the field of evaluation and quality assurance in Europe.

The country contributions have been prepared by the relevant organisation in the various member countries. The aim of the contributions has been to
include in the report one comprehensive presentation, if possible, of the situation in the country in question. This has led to some differences in the responsibility for the presentations. In some countries the presentations have been drafted by the Rectors’ Conference, in some by the Ministry of Education, in others by the agencies responsible for the national evaluation activities. The presentations have prepared in either English or French.

The report has been prepared by the Danish Centre for Evaluation and Quality Assurance of Higher Education in cooperation with Comité National d’Evaluation in France at the request of the European Commission, Directorate general XXII: Education, Training and Youth.