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How University Evaluations are being innovated in Europe

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ABSTRACT

This presentation introduces developments and form of cooperation in external quality assurance of higher education at three levels, the European, the regional Nordic, and the national Danish.

Part 1. European cooperation in quality assurance of higher education (ENQA) and the Bologna Process

The presentation provides an overview of the development since the early 1990s in European external quality assurance of higher education institutions. At that time the process began that by 2006 has established not only national quality assurance agencies in practically all the European countries, but also a highly developed formal framework for mutual cooperation between agencies.

The presentation points to the several positive elements in successful cooperation already in place by the early 1990s such as the shared formal status as government initiated and owned agencies, shared basic evaluation process approaches, positive expectations towards the rewards of European networking combined with the political support of the European Union Commission.

The negative elements were the essentially fragmented national approaches in terms of methods and goals. This was especially the case between Western Europe and recently democratized Central and Eastern Europe. Therefore the mission and profiles of the agencies differed initially between a general Western European focus on evaluations with a quality enhancement perspective on the one hand and an Eastern European focus on accreditations with an accountability perspective on the other. Further most European agencies had to begin their operations in the stressful and resource demanding context of a rather hostile university environment.

However, the positive incentives for European cooperation prevailed, helped by joint projects, such as the European Pilot Projects, informal networking and recommendations from the ministers of European Union. Success was indicated by the end of the century by two parallel formal developments: the establishment of ENQA and the Bologna process. The European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) was established on the basis of an initiative and basic funding from the EU Commission. ENQA had as its first and primary objective to share and disseminate knowledge and best practice among European agencies. But soon a more political role had to be accepted by ENQA as the network became more and more linked to the European politics of EU and the Bologna process. ENQA's transformation into a formal association in 2005 can be seen as a manifestation of this new role.

The Bologna process began in 1999 and was supported by initially 25 and now 42 European states. The process soon became an effective catalyst for further focus and cooperation on quality assurance of higher education.

In 2005 the networking impact of ENQA and the political impact of the Bologna process were brought together, when the education ministers from the 40 Bologna signatory countries met in Bergen and adopted the European Standards proposed by ENQA in cooperation with its European partners from the university and student organisations.

The European Standards are now the recognised framework for implementing the needed transparency, compatibility and comparability of European quality in higher education. The presentation's outline of the main focus and content of the standards emphasises the extent to which these serve as an improvement oriented perspective towards quality assurance of higher education institutions.

A special dimension of the Bergen decision is the invitation to ENQA and its European members and partners to set up a register for quality assurance agencies operating in Europe. Admission of an agency to the register should indicate that agency's compliance with the European Standards.

The presentation indicates the challenges for continuing success for the Bologna and ENQA processes. The crucial issue is the degree of readiness and willingness with which the national and regional governments, the higher education institutions and the quality assurance agencies will now implement the European standards and meet the Bergen expectations.

A successful outcome by the end of this decade will be identical with a European higher education area with strong, autonomous and effective higher education institutions, a keen sense of the importance of quality and standards, good peer reviews, credible quality assurance agencies, an effective register and increased co-operation with other stakeholders, such as employers.

Part 2. Cooperation between the Nordic agencies (NOQA)

The presentation introduces how cooperation between the agencies from the five Nordic countries began in 1992 and how it has developed over the years. This process has in many ways paralleled the overall European development as Nordic cooperation moved from informal networking in the early 1990s to the formal establishment in 2003 of The Nordic quality assurance network in higher education (NOQA). However, even if NOQA is formally established as a regional network under ENQA, it still has the basic characteristics of an informal network and is far from being linked to any political process of cooperation between the Nordic countries. ENQA and NOQA work therefore within very different frameworks and the result is a corresponding difference in the scope and impact of NOQA's activities.

The presentation lists the positive indications for Nordic networking such as the fact that all agencies are national and government initiated and owned; that there is a strong shared culture and long established tradition for Nordic cooperation in political and cultural dimensions; and that the university environment has generally been positive towards external quality assurance. English is the working language of NOQA, but the relative ease with which Danes, Norwegians and Swedes understand each other's languages has in itself been an important dimension. Finally the

Nordic agencies have shared basic interpretations of the need to balance accountability and improvement and they have oriented their methodological development in the same directions of evaluation, audit and accreditation.

However, the presentation also notes the problem that the Nordic governments tend still to adopt very individual national strategies towards the mandates and organisation of agencies.

The presentation points to the annual conference as the key activity, where each year a joint project is agreed on for the period leading to the next conference. These projects result in NOQA reports that may be published as ENQA reports, an indication of the relatively strong impact of the Nordic agencies on ENQA developments and policies. Other essential successes of NOQA are the many cases of staff exchange plus the mutual consultations on and clearings of experts for review panels.

Finally the presentation points to the key challenges for future success which are firstly to maintain a Nordic dimension in the context of the increasing focus on European cooperation. Secondly to find the proper balance between aims of increased Nordic cooperation and convergence on the one hand and recognition of national differences in policies for educational and quality assurance systems on the other hand.

Part 3. Quality assurance of higher education in Denmark (EVA)

The presentation moves finally to the national level of an individual Nordic agency, the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA).

Denmark was one of the first countries in Europe to set up a national system for the systematic, external evaluation of higher education. The Danish Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education was established in 1992 and until 1999 fulfilled its mandate to evaluate all higher education programmes at university as well as at non-university level at a regular and systematic basis.

However, in 1999 the Danish Parliament passed an act that established an evaluation agency responsible for the systematic evaluation of all levels of the educational system. The former Centre was integrated into the new institute, which could therefore base itself on the staff, knowledge and experience of the Centre. The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) is now an independent institution under the auspices of the Danish Ministry of Education.

EVA's primary task is to initiate and conduct quality assurance of education at all levels – from day care institutions, over primary school and youth education to higher education and further and adult education. EVA's mandate covers public educational establishments and also private institutions in receipt of state subsidy. EVA's main objectives are:

- To develop methods for evaluating and improving the quality of teaching and learning
- To develop and highlight quality of education and teaching through systematic evaluation
- To advise and collaborate with educational institutions and public authorities on quality issues
- To be the national centre of knowledge of quality assurance of education

- To participate actively in international and European cooperation among external quality assurance agencies
- To inform the general public, students and employers on quality of education.

The presentation illustrates the diversification of methods and themes applied by EVA on quality assurance of higher education during its first years of operations such as thematic reviews, cross-sector reviews, cross-national reviews, international bench-markings, audits and accreditations. Further EVA from the beginning gave a priority to building a strong platform for profit generating activities.

By 2006 EVA has three priorities on the quality assurance of higher education. Firstly the priority is on audits at university level including all 12 university institutions. The Danish University Act of 2002 gave the universities more autonomy and the responsibility for assuring their own quality. EVA pointed the attention of the universities towards audit as the means for focusing on improvement of internal quality of universities. In 2004 EVA could therefore accept the invitation of the Danish University Rectors' Conference to launch a cycle of university audits. Secondly the priority is on selective, criteria based reviews of university programmes including international benchmarking. Thirdly the priority is on accreditation of medium-cycle higher education. This latter activity partly covers the programme level which includes 35 programmes at 130 providers and partly the level of 17 university colleges.

The presentation points to the key challenges for further Danish success: The comprehensive mandate must be managed and managed with the right priorities. The optimal balance must be struck between improvement and accountability strategies. EVA must fulfil expectations of higher education institutions that the quality of institutional and programme levels continue to be in focus. EVA must base further expansion of the institute on its efforts to increase the volume of profit generating activities, because these provide the basis for increased review coverage of the educational system and corresponding innovation of review methods. Very important is also the fact that the future of EVA's mandate on quality assurance of universities is for the moment pending on the results of bureaucratic infighting between the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Science.

Finally EVA must keep its place in European cooperation by securing that it continues to be in compliance with the European Standards.