

Japan-Nordic Symposium  
On the Frontier of University Evaluation  
-Making the Most of Nordic Successes-

# Keynote Speech

## How university evaluations are being innovated in Europe

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\*Slides [English] : P. 139~152



**Kato:** Now we would like to move on to the keynote address. The speaker is Dr. Christian Thune, Executive Director, EVA. He is going to talk on the topic of “How University Evaluations Are Being Innovated in Europe.”

I would like briefly to introduce Dr. Thune’s personal background. Dr. Thune completed a doctoral course at University of Copenhagen, and his area of academic specialization is history. He has held important positions in quality assurance and academic evaluation in Denmark, and has also served as a member of the Board of INQAAHE, the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education. In addition, from 2000 through 2005, he served as the President of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, ENQA and played a leading role in European higher education, which has seen dramatic changes including the Sorbonne Declaration and Bologna Process. He has also served as the Chair of the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education, NOQA. His current position as Executive Director of EVA allows him to continue his leading contribution to issues of quality assurance in higher education across Europe.

Dr. Thune, please.

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**Christian Thune:** Thank you for the presentation, and Mr. President, ambassadors, representatives of the ministries, universities and other stakeholders, I am of course honored to have been invited to speak at this highly-relevant occasion of the symposium on Nordic-Japanese experiences in evaluation of universities.

**(Slide2)**

I have been asked to cover in my presentation developments and innovations at the European, Nordic and Danish level, which certainly makes for a very comprehensive effort on my part, and part of the journey I will be taking you through during the next half an hour or so will be, more than anything, a helicopter tour a certain distance above the many highly interesting details at the ground level. But I hope I will be able to provide you with an idea of where the relevant developments and innovations are taking place these years.

So I’ll start out by presenting the European and go on to the Nordic in the formal shape of NOQA and end up with a few words on my own national’s quality assurance system in Denmark.

**(Slide3)**

As it is, and that will be the conclusion I'll be moving you forward through in terms of what have been the developments in Europe, is that they have to a remarkable degree been successful, but as we all started out in '92, we weren't that many in '92, actually, the British, the French, the Dutch and the Danes were first in place. I'm the only survivor from '92; there is an attrition rate in my business which is impressive. But as we began already at that time to discuss frameworks for cooperation, exchange of best practices, there were distinct positive indicators for the future of European cooperation.

We were as a rule all government initiated and owned. Actually I know of not one single European case where the universities were the initiators of external quality assurance; it was a government process. But we were independents as agencies in terms of our choice of methods and processes. We all applied the four-stage model, as we called it, based on independent agencies, self-evaluations on the part of the higher education institutions, site visits by experts, and finally, a public report. And that was more than anything what kept us together, this shared approach, in terms of basic methodology.

We also were all in the process of setting up regular, systematic cyclical review activities in our national systems. We were positive towards the idea of getting the most out of sharing best practices with our European colleagues. We had very strong back-up from the European Commission, not least in terms of funding of traveling and conferences, much the same function which the World Bank has taken upon itself in relation to the Asia-Pacific Quality Network. And this is important because one of the major developments was that in the mid-nineties we had the European pilot projects covering all the European Union countries, introducing the basic strategies and methodologies also in those countries where national systems were not yet in place.

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There were also negative indicators. National approaches were still fragmented, basically because in Western Europe we were improvement oriented, basically applying evaluation strategies, whereas Central and Eastern Europe, after the democratization process, oriented themselves towards more accountability accreditation processes. There was what I call a considerable variance in professional capacity-building, and behind that is that some of the agencies, especially in Western Europe, from the start became sufficiently professional in terms of having the staff necessary to develop the credibility and consistency of processes, whereas others, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, did not possess from the start that professional capacity.

We had language and terminology problems. No wonder. Even basic terms such as “evaluation” had their various associations in the different countries.

And, not to forget, basically, we all had to face in the early nineties a general skepticism and mistrust from universities towards these new strange ideas of external quality assurance.

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But as we move ten years forward to 2002, we had national agencies in place in almost every European country. My agency did a survey for ENQA and could identify at that time that there were five top approaches in terms of methodologies. Accreditation of programs, somewhat to our surprise, was the winner, but that was because the Central and Eastern European agencies all adapted accreditation methodologies. So evaluation of programs came in as a strong second, which was at that time basically the Western European and Northwestern European especially approach. And audit of institutions were beginning to come in strongly. I'll return in a while to the concept of audit and let further definition be for the moment.

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Then we had two formal processes which became extremely important in achieving the results we have today in 2006. One was the Bologna Process, already mentioned by the Finnish ambassador. This became an extremely important catalyst for European developments. It started out with another governmental meeting in Bologna in '99. And I can give you the little anecdote that I was invited by the Danish government to go along because there was something about quality assurance on the agenda, but I called back and said, “Okay, just another governmental conference; you've seen one, you've seen them all.” So I actually didn't go to Bologna. That was a major misjudgment on my part certainly, because what started in Bologna was very ambitious but became eventually a process with fundamental implications for the participating European countries, of which there is, I thought it was 44, but I trust the Finnish ambassador; there are now 45.

The important themes in terms of what we are discussing here today was that from '99 there was a distinct argument that what we needed was transparency, compatibility, comparability and flexibility of European higher education, serving both the needs of stakeholders, students, employers, whoever, in being able to discern what is credible quality and to make European higher education fully adapted to the challenges of the

globalization of higher education.

As the process moved on there became obvious and increasing focus on quality assurance of higher education as a key issue, and along with that the key stakeholders, university students, teachers, employers and society in general, also became fairly acutely aware of the challenges of having a closer look on the setup of quality assurance in the participating countries.

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The other formal development was the establishment of ENQA, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, which was formally set up in '99, but based surely on the informal network in sharing of best practices that had started already in the early nineties. But by that time it became obvious that there was a need for formalization. Membership soon began to grow rather drastically. There are today 42 member agencies. I was honored by my European colleagues by being elected as the first President of ENQA until I stepped down a year ago, and part of my task was in a sense to move the corroboration from the basic and original objective of sharing and disseminating knowledge and best practice of quality assurance towards taking upon ourselves the increasingly important political role and implications of being a prominent participant in the Bologna Process, and along that, the European Union political process as well.

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And what I'm telling you here became certainly very obvious when the ministers in the Bologna Process, who meet every other year, when they met in Berlin in 2003 they invited ENQA in cooperation with institutions of higher education and the student associations, to develop an agreed set of standards and guidelines for the quality assurance of higher education as one task, and the other task, to set up an adequate review system for external quality assurance agencies. And this to you may seem simple enough as a task. I can tell you that the little term "agreed" made the next two years rather heavy in terms of added workload for me and my colleagues in the ENQA board because we had, in less than two years, till the next ministerial meeting in Bergen, to set up these standards and guidelines. But we did succeed and it's still to be regarded as quite an achievement that when the ministers met in Norway in Bergen in May 2005, ENQA could present the report on "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area." It had already been endorsed by ENQA members and the European partners, and our standards and guidelines were adopted by the European ministers. This was a highly important occasion because the

implication of course is that we now have standards and guidelines for which there is a need for all the European participants in the process to ensure that their individual national quality assurance systems comply with the highest degree possible.

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I'll try to give you an idea of the implications and content of the European standards because I'm sure that we can agree that this is, as I say, a fairly crucial state in the development of European quality assurance.

We have now agreed European standards for the internal quality assurance within the higher education institutions and for the processes adopted by the agencies. These standards will now become the common reference points for higher education institutions and their agencies. We have a system where it is obligatory that quality assurance agencies themselves are reviewed at least every five years, and we will now develop a so-called European register of quality assurance agencies. I'll return to the implications of that in a moment.

But one important point before I proceed is surely that this is not the end of a process; this is very much the beginning of a process, and to that extent not necessarily a very easy process.

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Now for a few details in terms of the standards. The standards for the higher education part I'll cover as well, as I've said, internal as well as external quality assurance, and they are applicable to all higher education institutions in the Bologna signatory states, which, by geographical implication, is a territory going from Ireland to somewhere pretty close to the Ural Mountains in the former Soviet Republic.

The purpose is to improve the higher education available to students, highly important to assist higher education institutions in managing and enhancing their own quality, and to form a background for the work of the agencies.

A few words on the standards problem, and I give you only the headings. Behind the headings is the elaborate text and the guidelines, and I'll give you in my final overhead the links which will make it possible for interested Japanese to go into the proper text of the ENQA report.

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The standards for internal quality assurance, as I say, these are the standards which

universities now should apply for their internal processes, and so they must have in place, when agencies come up through a university for a review, the university must be able to identify that they have policy and procedures for quality assurance which are evident in what you could call a quality culture in a university, and on that basis that they do, as a university, approve, monitor and review their own programs and rewards.

They must identify the criteria for the assessment of students that are applied consistently at the university and are in the public domain. They must identify the procedures through which the university makes sure that the teachers of the students are themselves qualified and competent for the work that they are doing.

They must provide documentation that there are adequate and proportional resources available for the teaching and learning and the report of students. That they have, and this is one which will cost a lot of extra work in many European universities, they must be able to identify the information systems through which they collect, analyze and use information for managing their programs and rewards. I can tell in this close circle that not many European universities have at the moment that kind of information system in place.

And finally, and not least important, they must testify that in terms of public information they provide up-to-date, impartial and objective information to stakeholders on the quality and content of the programs and awards.

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The standards for the external quality assurance, these then by implication are the standards supposed to be applied by agencies as they conduct their reviews of universities. Firstly, of course, external reviews must make sure that they do in fact look into the extent and quality of the internal quality assurance mechanisms of the university. They must develop adequate external quality assurance processes. The criteria for decisions taken on quality by the agencies must be based on published criteria that are applied consistently. The processes must be fit for the specific purposes of the quality assurance. And there must be reporting on the results of quality assurance and reported in a form which is readily accessible for the public.

There must be follow-up procedures for the quality assurance results, which are predetermined, and again, applied consistently. The reviews must be periodic or systematic. And finally, agencies must on a regular basis provide more system-wide



analysis where they make reports that provide summary results of the reviews they have been doing within the higher education sector.

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As I told you, external quality agencies are themselves now supposed to be reviewed at least every fifth year. And the background is that there is a growing number of European external quality assurance agencies and, at the same time, operators from outside Europe, especially American professional agencies, such as ABET in the engineering field or some of the regional U.S. accrediting commissions. So we have as a target group those quality assurance agencies primarily that operate in one or more Bologna signatory states, and the idea of course is to make visible the professionalism, credibility and integrity of the agencies.

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The standards applied for the agencies are that a review must identify what quality assurance procedures are in place at the agency, that the agency is formally recognized by a competent public authority, that its activities are regular, that it has resources for the quality assurance work which are adequate and proportional with the task both in human and financial terms. And this again may seem easy enough but I can tell you that quite a number of the European agencies, especially in the former Soviet Republic, have distinct problems with that specific standard.

There must be a clear and public statement of the mission of the agency. And we come into the independence issue which, in terms of the necessary credibility for agencies, is a very essential one. That definition of independence applies in the standards is a pragmatic one, considering the fact that most agencies are government-funded; we have to accept that as a fact of quality assurance life. But the independence must be established in the sense that the processes and methodologies applied by the agencies is their autonomous domain and that no third party is able to interfere with the conclusions and recommendations in reports.

The criteria and processes must be published and in principle discussed with the higher education institutions before they are settled.

And finally, and not least important, quality assurance agencies must have their own accountability procedures in place, implying that they must be prepared to undertake or to undergo these external reviews, and external reviews which, by the implication of what I'm telling you, primarily will focus on the compatibility of the agencies with the

European standards. But agencies are also supposed now to have mechanisms that provide consistent and regular feedback from the universities and their experience of the quality assurance from stakeholders and other interested parties so each agency will have a running, viable feedback system in terms of the quality of its activities.

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I told you that we are going to have a European register of quality assurance agencies, and this is a difficult task to give you in a few sentences, the idea of the register, but I can give you the short version which is that in Bergen the ministers invited ENQA and partners to set up a European register as a proposal for their next meeting in London in 2007. And the idea would be that we will have a register which will provide recognition of the various agencies in terms of compliance with European standards and make it possible for higher education institutions that are looking for qualified quality assurance agencies to find the necessary information in the register. But I'll be brief on this because setting up the register is turning out to be a fairly complicated political process.

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So what are the main challenges for success in the European context: firstly, the willingness of governments, higher education institutions and the agencies to implement the European standards. At this time, one-and-a-half years after Bergen, the willingness is impressive and I am very favorably impressed by the extent to which governments, agencies and universities are taking this task very seriously in most countries.

There must be a balance between the national subsidiaries, which is the European term for the concept, that what can be done satisfactorily at a national level we do not need to move into a European level. And that's a very important balance.

We must face that there are different interests and goals between governments, agencies, institutions, students and other stakeholders, and these differences must now to a last degree be reconciled in terms of fulfilling the ambitions of the Bologna Process.

And finally, there is, again to mention briefly, the register, the risk that this becomes a political rather than a professional instrument, and what I'm hinting at here is that the European Union has the ambition that the possibility that the register should be a very strictly European register only for European agencies compatible with the standards, whereas the original idea was for a more inclusive register which also provided

information on non-European agencies. So much about the European dimension in quality assurance.

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Now a few words on the Nordic quality assurance cooperation, which today has the formal framework of NOQA. We did meet annually since '92. Actually, I invited in the autumn of '92 Nordic colleagues to a meeting in Copenhagen. At that time only the Danish agency was formally in place, but we began to exchange ideas of how to bring about the best and most credible processes in the Nordic countries.

So by 2003 we decided that this informal cooperation should have a more formal expression, not least because we were so heavily contributing to the overall ENQA process, so we set up NOQA as a regional network under ENQA. Still the level of formalization was not very high. We have a rotating chairmanship—Sweden has the honor of being chair of NOQA for this year—but apart from that we have not made an over-bureaucratic and formalized network.

And I should add that in contrast to the European process where ENQA has had to accept a very strong linkage to the European political process, we have no substantial links to the Nordic political processes, which gives us the freedom of operation which I personally find attractive.

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So what are the indications for Nordic networking? The positive ones are that all agencies are harmonious in the sense that they are national and they are government initiated. We share the culture and tradition for Nordic cooperation. We have the added pleasure that Nordic universities are generally positive or very positive toward the concept of quality assurance. We share the language, especially the Scandinavian countries, Norway, Denmark and Sweden. We share basically a language which makes it possible to exchange experts. We have all of us a clear focus on the need to combine an accountability and improvement-oriented approach and we share basically the same methods, even in individual applications.

A negative indication is that we still, if you look closely, are remarkably different in our distinct setup in terms of agencies and the processes. A primary reason here to my mind is that when Nordic governments decide to change their quality assurance setup for higher education, there is surprisingly little consideration of in what way the similar processes are working in the Nordic countries. I think this is one of the problems we will

have to tackle in the future.

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The main methods of quality assurance, just to give you the standards, the definitions of evaluation, that's the review of the quality of a program or institution with a focus on input, output and processes. Audit is a review of the quality culture and internal quality assurance of a university. That's the definition of audit. You will I'm sure be perceptive enough to realize that the European standards for internal quality assurance are very closely linked to the audit concept.

And we have accreditation. That's the review of the extent to which an institution or a program fulfills predefined standards and resulting in a formal "yes" or "no" decision on compliance.

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The activities of NOQA, we have our annual conferences and at each annual conference we decide on a joint project, which is very important. The agencies contribute one or two staff members each to a joint project where we set up and report on a relevant theme for our mutual efforts. And as you look down the list you can see that the way in which we have handled these joint projects has been very much sort of on the forward edge of European development. Actually, the first one was on the accreditation-like practices which were at that time beginning to spread into Western Europe. We have had student involvement. We have done last year a European study on the extent to which the Nordic agencies are already compatible with European standards. And now this year we are moving into audit as a concept and a method. So no surprise.

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The third dimension of our results is that we have been able to contribute the results of what we have doing into reports for ENQA as a whole. We have had a substantial amount of staff exchanges; a Norwegian or Swedish staff member comes to Denmark and stays at my agency for a period and discusses best practices and perhaps even gets some new dimensions.

Very important is the element of consultation and clearing mechanism for external experts. In all the reviews we do in Denmark, we use in the panel of experts at least one expert from one of the other Nordic countries, sometimes two. So it's highly important that we have viable consultation and clearing mechanisms.

And finally, I can say in all modesty that the Nordic countries have been able to work

together in terms of being a very strong element in ENQA developments and policies.

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So what are the challenges? One challenge is because ENQA is moving so strongly, because the political European process is demanding for the agencies, we must strive to maintain still the Nordic dimension, and on the other hand, finding a good balance between increased Nordic cooperation and convergence in quality assurance on the one hand and the fact that we do have these national differences in policies for education and quality assurance systems on the other.

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This brings me finally to the external quality assurance in Denmark of higher education. We started out in '92 with a center only for higher education which did a full cycle of reviews and programs which became, again in all modesty, quite a success because the universities became in general acceptable of the concept we were offering.

So by '99 we were almost overwhelmed by our own success because the parliament decided that we were going to become a new institution the Danish Evaluation Institute, (EVA) with a mandate covering the whole educational system from pre-schooling to universities. So EVA has been faced with a very comprehensive and demanding task.

We are independent, and independence more than anything is significant because we have the right of initiative. No one, for example neither the ministry nor universities, can tell us what reviews we are going to do and in which order.

**(Slide24)**

Our tasks, as you can see from the overheads if you read fast enough because I won't give you much time, is to make sure we are actually conducting external quality assurance and having a dimension which has a research implication, development of methodologies, collecting on national and international experience. This has been a highly relevant part of our mandate, which again is based in the law, and has given us the possibilities for also taking upon us a fairly extensive international role.

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In the first phase from 2000, it was in a sense the experimental phase. We had follow-up on our program reviews from the nineties. We did thematic review, drop-out rates, career counseling in universities. We used our mandate to follow specific subjects through the whole educational system, for instance, teaching and training in English from primary school to universities. We have been doing cross-national reviews. The last one finished this week is cooperation with the British Quality Assurance Agency for

Higher Education (QAA) on chemistry where the Danish departments have been reviewed together with a number of British departments and the results from the two national contexts combined in and compared in one report.

We do international bench markings, audits, accreditation, and we have a substantial amount of revenue-generating activities.

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So this adds up to a second phase where we have now a system which is a combination of audits at the university level of the 12 Danish university-level institutions. We are moving there from national/Nordic panels into international panels. The implication of this is interesting: the audits are being conducted in English and the universities have accepted to provide the documentation in English, which adds substantially to their work effort. And we have moved from a fairly open format of audit into basing the audit, no surprise, on the European standards.

We have selective criteria-based reviews of university programs where we take on these programs where we perceive there may be a quality problem. And finally, 50 percent of higher education, which is the medium cycle on non-university higher education, the professional training programs, there we systematically certificate all programs.

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So what are the key challenges for Danish success? Firstly, I would mention that we should be very careful in how we manage our very comprehensive mandate. And we do have a coverage problem because I can tell you when we got the daycare institutions, there are 6,000 even in a small country like Denmark, so we are going to look very carefully into the methodologies which give credible coverage.

We have to continue to find a good balance between the original improvement focus of our activities and the strong element of accountability coming into the life of most European agencies, also the Nordic agencies, and certainly the Danes, because governments have begun to become very fond of quality assurance procedures that have a distinct accountability focus. By implication, accreditation is moving in stronger.

We must find a good balance between the institutional and the program level. You cannot concentrate your activities, neither on looking at the whole of a university, ignoring the quality of the partial elements, that's the programs, nor can you on the other hand only look at the programs and ignore the quality of the university as a

whole.

We have, as I've said, a distinct acceleration in our profit-generating activities, that is, quality assurance reviews which are paid for by ministries, universities, local authorities and which we take on alongside the activities funded by the taxpayers. This puts a strain on the organization in the sense that I have to expand my staff accordingly, but basically on the fragile basis of our position in a market for this kind of activity.

I put in the information strategy toward the media, the authorities and the educational institutions because it is so important. We give a distinct priority to make the results of our activities known to the public, who in their shape of taxpayers basically fund the Danish institute, but we have the problem of course that the way to the public is through the media. What is relevant for the media in terms of quality assurance processes? The sad bad stories of no quality, which gives us a problem because what leads to follow-up in the universities? Reports which are fair and do not create a trench mentality in those universities. So that is a continuing effort to achieve the right balance with the media.

And of course finally the compliance with European standards. This is an extremely important issue. We had our external review in 2005 by the Swedish agency and it has now been recognized by the ENQA board as making the Danish agency compatible with European standards, so we have been one of the first agencies to take the path which all the other 40-plus European agencies must now take, and it has been for us a very rewarding and developing experience.

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So this is what I would like to give you today as an idea of development and innovation at these three European levels. You'll have the overheads and my abstract which will give a little more detail. Apart from that, I invite you to go into the links for the three levels: the ENQA link, the NOQA link and the EVA link for the Danish case. And as I'll use some of the time given me by the president and the Icelandic ambassador, I'm sure there is time available if any of you wish to pose a question to me in relation to what I have been telling you, then you are very welcome. Thank you for your attention.

**Kato:** Dr. Thune, thank you very much. There will probably be some questions for you during the course of subsequent proceedings, and we may need to call on you again then. Thank you.