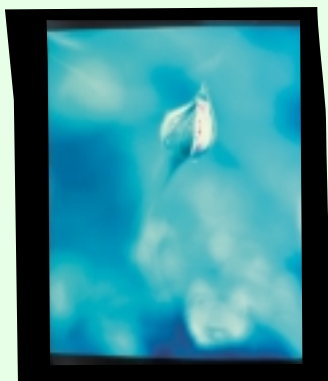


FROM QUALITY AUDIT TO QUALITY ASSESSMENT  
The New Evaluation Approach for Swedish Higher Education



Högskoleverkets rapportserie 2001:9 R

 HÖGSKOLEVERKET  
National Agency for Higher Education



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The New Evaluation Approach for Swedish Higher Education



National Agency for Higher Education 2001

*The National Agency for Higher Education is a central agency responsible for matters relating to institutions of higher education. Its tasks include quality assessments, supervision, reviews, development of higher education, research and analysis, evaluations of foreign education and provision of study information.*

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**for Swedish Higher Education**

Produced by the National Agency for Higher Education in April 2001  
Högskoleverkets rapportserie 2001:9 R  
ISSN 1400-948X  
ISRN HSV-R--01/9-SE

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**photo** Stone/Bruce Gardner **printed by** Lenanders Tryckeri AB, Kalmar, April 2001



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▶▶ HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY is a concern for a large segment of the population, it is expected to fulfil several functions and involves large and increasing costs. Therefore, there is a growing need to follow the education process and determine the outcome. Today, evaluation is a matter not only for experts. Self-evaluation has become an integral part of departmental work and most members of the staff are expected to be involved. Also, evaluation is an international phenomenon, taking on similar forms in many countries. There is extensive co-operation, not least within the European Community, and many books and articles on the subject are published.

What has brought on this development? Why is evaluation of higher education important right now? For whom is it important? Who should evaluate and how? There is an historical background to these questions, they can be viewed from different angles and there are no easy answers. This is not the place for penetrating analyses or exhaustive answers. Instead, this document is an attempt to put the National Agency's evaluations into perspective and to clarify the evaluative context at the outset of the assignment to evaluate all higher education, including postgraduate education, during the six-year period starting January 1, 2001.

## **Demands and expectations of society**

In recent years, the expectations of society on the higher education sector have increased considerably. Universities and university colleges are expected to fuel societal development and to contribute to increased affluence as international economic competition becomes more fierce.

This development helps explain the rapidly increasing demand on Swedish higher education institutions to provide high quality education to an increasing number of heterogeneous groups of people. There are several aims: to provide society with a qualified workforce, and to produce new knowledge through research and development, as well as to interact with and keep society at large informed about academic activities. The institutions are also required by law to work for improved gender equality and increased social and ethnic diversity as well as to secure greater student participation in university decision-making.

The government has assisted by allocating a large proportion of the tax revenue (1.7 per cent of the GNP in 1999) to higher education, increasingly by transferring money from other sectors of society. The higher education sector has expanded considerably, both by increasing the number of study-places in existing institutions and through the establishment of new

university colleges throughout the country. These colleges generally have limited resources for research but some of them have now grown and developed to a point where they have been given university status. As universities, they have the right to award doctors' degrees in all faculty areas.

## **Moving towards mass education**

Like many other countries, higher education in Sweden can be said to be moving towards a system of mass or majority higher education. The government has set an objective of 50 per cent or more of an age cohort having begun higher education by age 25. Compared to other countries, Swedish students are older, on average. Adult education, which is long established in Sweden and can be seen as part of life-long learning, helps explain the higher age.

## **Quality assurance: a future necessity**

In recent years, demands for accountability, follow-up and evaluation of higher education have grown. The public sector, including higher education institutions, is therefore subjected to recurring quality reviews. In the early 1990s, several arguments in favour of intensified demands were given. Of these, the concern for deteriorating national finances was con-

sidered especially important. There was also concern that the results of higher education might not justify the costs. Several groups began demanding evidence of quality: politicians, tax payers and students burdened with study loans. In what may seem a paradox, trust in higher education was failing while there were expectations that higher education and research would enable Sweden to keep up with ever more intense international competition<sup>1</sup>.

Sweden is not the only country to debate higher education. Most industrial countries of the western world have had heated discussions about quality, pointing to the problems inherent in controlling the higher education sector. The attempted solutions broadly fall into one of two categories: more or less centralisation of decision-making and overall responsibility for higher education. Countries like the United Kingdom and the United States have strengthened central control from a position of decentralisation. Sweden, on the other hand, with a historically strong central control of the education system, has chosen to opposite way.

## **Decentralisation of responsibility and authority**

With the Higher Education Act and Higher Education Ordinance of 1993, Swedish higher education institutions have been given considerably increased powers and responsibilities for a number of issues. The university reform has strengthened local influence on the contents and organisation of higher education. Government by rule has been replaced by government by objectives and results. Changing strategies of governance and reform have increased local freedom of action. It is assumed that this will lead to higher academic quality through more efficient utilization of innovative ideas.

However, with decentralisation of responsibility and power comes a need for accountability. Other sectors of society as well as decision-makers in the educational system have to be informed on how resources are spent and goals are met. Demands for evaluation seem to grow whether a centralised<sup>2</sup> or decentralized<sup>3</sup> direction is chosen.

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<sup>1</sup> Report from the Ministry of Education and Science, DS 1992:1.

<sup>2</sup> Evaluation as a means to exert stronger central control of higher education was argued for in the nineties in e.g. the United Kingdom and the United States.

<sup>3</sup> In countries like Sweden, where responsibility and influence have been delegated to lower levels, the need for evaluation at different levels is stressed: centrally, there is a need for control, while locally, there is a need to supply decision-makers with the necessary basic data for development and improvement.



## Evaluation —not a new phenomenon

In Sweden, evaluation is not a feature of the nineties, education has been evaluated since the sixties and seventies<sup>4</sup>. However, the development of “the Swedish quality system” is frequently described in terms of the 1993 reform of higher education. Possibly this is because this reform is especially associated with the decentralisation of Swedish higher education, growing demands and needs for evaluation, quality assessment and quality development at different levels. At the time, the need to evaluate local activity was poorly understood in Sweden.

Around the time of the reform, an assignment to initiate evaluations and develop forms of quality assessment, was given to the Office of the Chancellor, a body preceding the National Agency for Higher Education. How the Office dealt with the assignment will be described later. However, the matter was influenced by research in the fields of education and political science. For several years, Swedish researchers in these areas had analysed and debated evaluation

from different aspects. Oversimplified and standardised models of evaluation could therefore be avoided when formulating a model of evaluation.

### **Broadly defined statistical surveys**

A large number of different forms of evaluation have now been developed. Differences are due to the object and purpose, as well as to who commissions and implements the reviews. Analyses of the approach to evaluation of the sixties and early seventies show clear signs of ideas of central control and educational technology prevalent at the time. Based on the belief that education could be rationally planned and centrally controlled, evaluations were popular with planners and others who needed to be able to answer questions on the efficiency and productivity of education<sup>5</sup>. Broadly defined surveys, often processed statistically by “neutral and objective researchers”, typify the evaluations of the era. Often, these surveys constituted reform follow-up. Comprehensive reforms of all levels of school and university education were carried out during this period. Given the social na-

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<sup>4</sup> An example is the evaluation of research performed by the National Science Council since 1976–77.

<sup>5</sup> Given the theory that students are rational in the sense that they have specific goals and plan their studies towards a degree as efficiently as possible, the low throughput at the faculties of social sciences was seen as a considerable problem. Urban Dahllöf showed that the basis for central thinking on planning was erroneous. Students are rational but for other reasons than those imagined by central planners. Dahllöf questioned the simplified model of evaluations based on goals and results and has been the inspiration of many evaluators by his frame factor theory.

ture of the attempts to reform education, such issues as differentiation, patterns of choice and recruitment were at the focus of the evaluations<sup>6</sup>.

In the mid-seventies a lively debate on education arose. One of the points made was that many evaluations had shown a discouraging gap between the goals of the reforms and the actual result. The goals of the reforms and the reform strategies, as well as the models of evaluation, were now questioned. The latter were thought to have been limited and biased. Perhaps more elusive, important and long-term results had been overlooked? The existing evaluations had been limited to results, or to how well the results matched the goals. There was virtually no information on the process, on what happened during the course of the educational experience. There was a need for new models of evaluation that could elucidate the entire sequence, from goal to process and results.

### **From process to results**

In models of evaluation developed in the seventies, attempts were also made to describe the contents and process of education. The aim was to describe the complex reality of education. Not only was the usefulness

of quantitative versus qualitative methods debated in the seventies, but also how the evaluations should be carried out. Qualitative methods were often thought to be better at capturing this complexity.

However, after some time these methods were also criticised. They were said to be too subjective, and to be based on overly simple assumptions about the nature of education, teaching and learning. The theory-oriented approach to evaluation<sup>7</sup> was an attempt to master the subjectivity of many of the process models of the seventies as well as to raise the level of ambition of evaluations.

### **Theory-oriented approach**

The theory-oriented approach to evaluation came in response to the lack of theory that was typical of the models of evaluation of the seventies. Also, it was an attempt to understand and explain the image of education appearing in evaluations. Theory-oriented evaluation starts by the evaluator formulating a frame of reference for the object to be evaluated. The frame of reference serves two purposes. It should express the assumptions made by the evaluator himself about the phenomenon to be investigated. Also, it should serve



<sup>6</sup> Franke-Wikberg, Sigbrit & Lundgren, Ulf P., 1981. (Only available in Swedish.)

<sup>7</sup> Franke-Wikberg, Sigbrit & Lundgren, Ulf P., 1980. (Only available in Swedish.)

as a screen for the interpretation of information gathered. Theory-oriented evaluation is based on a model inspired by Dahllöf's frame factor theory and includes the components prerequisites, process and results. The evaluation must elucidate and critically analyse all three. By relating results to the preceding process and preconditions, the evaluator can help explain why things are the way they are. Without such understanding we cannot formulate possible alternative outcomes. So far, an approach aimed at understanding and explanation has mainly been found in research since the main ambition has been to generate knowledge.

The approaches to evaluation described above can also be related to the purposes served. Evaluations have two main functions: control and development. Depending on whose needs are to be met, these two functions will be expressed in different ways: the need centrally to control local activity differs from the local need for information to be used to improve operations and further development. Evaluations can also serve other purposes: e.g. to inform or to lend authority.

### **The demand for equivalence in Swedish higher education**

Increased decentralisation has not decreased central need for evaluations. Evaluations supply decision-makers with the basis for appraisal needed to improve the quality of education. There is a demand for equivalence in Swedish higher education. This is not to say that all education should be the same, only that a certain minimum standard should be upheld. When governance of education is decentralised, quality control becomes a central responsibility.

### **New forms of local evaluations**

For decentralisation to be real, new forms of local evaluation are needed. In the early nineties, Sweden had little experience of local evaluation, let alone more elaborate approaches to evaluation aiming to improve and develop local education and other activities. Inspired by peer reviews and the theory-oriented approach to evaluation, as formulated by the present Chancellor, Sigbrit Franke, new forms of local evaluation were developed<sup>8</sup>. The way evaluation and quality assessment were handled centrally was also influenced by how questions of quality were dealt with internationally.

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<sup>8</sup> Franke-Wikberg, Sigbrit 1992:4. (Only available in Swedish.)

## Evaluations made by the National Agency for Higher Education

Briefly, the 1993 reform of higher education included deregulation, e.g. decentralised decisions on such matters as establishing professorships, the organisation of programmes and courses and allocating funds. Also, higher education institutions were partly funded in relation to the results they achieved. Competition between institutions became more pronounced. Concerns were voiced that the change in governance and the introduction of a system for allocating funds for undergraduate education based on enrolment and performance would result in education of lower quality. The government demanded reports of results. In addition, all higher education institutions were required to set up a programme of quality assurance, later changed to quality development. They were also obliged to set up a programme for quality evaluation, and to report work progress of quality enhancement annually.

### The Office of the Chancellor was made responsible for evaluations

Several suggestions for evaluation models were made in the report of Högskoleutredningen (the Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education) “Frihet Ansvar Kompetens – grundutbildningens villkor i hög-

skolan (Freedom Responsibility Competence—conditions for undergraduate higher education)” 1992. The report stressed the significance of finding adequate ways to secure quality, given the increasing demand for management by objectives and results. However, the report considered quality control essentially to be a matter for the higher education institutions themselves. The students were thought to be the most important stake-holders and their interests and needs should guide priorities and quality assessments. It was the opinion of the report that undergraduate education lacked quality controls of the kind described in applications for research funds.

Follow-up of results, quality assurance and evaluation were seen as interacting parts of a cohesive quality system. Every quality evaluation should be based on a self-evaluation carried out by those locally responsible for the programme to be evaluated. This self-evaluation was supplemented by a peer review, to be used as a basis for development and change. Finally, it was argued that evaluations should lead to action in order to be considered meaningful.

To make it clear to the institutions of higher education what areas were to be evaluated on a nation-wide basis, a long-term plan for the evaluative work was suggested. It was thought to be necessary to have a body responsible for the exchange of experience, as





well as consultation and coordination. To this end, the Office of the Chancellor was established in 1993.

The Inquiry mentioned above cautioned against systems of evaluation that do not take all aspects of education into account and are insensitive to the fact that not all courses and study programmes have the same goals<sup>9</sup>. It also cautioned against the mechanical use of indicators as the basis for decisions by superior authorities<sup>10</sup>.

### **Reviews of quality management**

The Office of the Chancellor began its evaluation activities by carrying out a number of pilot studies, preceded by extensive method development. The “quality program” that started in the autumn of 1995 was implemented by the National Agency for Higher Education during the years 1995 through 1998 at which point all institutions of higher education had been audited.

A system of quality as suggested by the Commission of Inquiry was never realized. It was something of a “cultural revolution” when institutions of higher education were expected to develop their own quality

evaluation systems. To step up the development of quality work, the assessment was aimed at the top level, i.e. the institutional leadership.

Evaluative work was considered a learning process both for the individual university or university college and for the National Agency and its auditors. The mottoes “evaluation for improvement” and “quality is a journey, not a destination” marked the thrust and level of ambition. The intention was not to evaluate quality as judged by set criteria. Instead, the intention was to focus the specific conditions in each case and to assess the strategies, goals, approaches, plans, systems, methods, and the organisation used to secure and develop overall quality. Auditors were given a frame of reference including a number of aspects denoting “excellence in the higher education institution”. Qualities that typify such excellence were said to be: self-regulation and learning, long-range planning, an international perspective, incisive leadership, interaction with stake-holders, equality and focusing on the student.

The procedure of the audit was the following: a self-evaluation made by the institution of higher

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<sup>9</sup> A reference was made to the research of Urban Dahllöf on current trends in OECD countries regarding evaluation of higher education (IMHE study group on evaluations in higher education).

<sup>10</sup> Another reference was made to the present Chancellor Sigbrit Franke who cautioned against the uncritical acceptance of evaluation models from countries with different education systems.

education, a visit to the institution by external auditors, and a follow-up meeting to discuss the findings of the auditors. It was the auditors' job to initiate discussions, encourage reflection and contribute with a basis for problem solving. The consultative roll of the auditors was stressed. The follow-up meeting was held at the institution, one year after the publication of the report, with the former Chancellor attending.

The National Agency's quality audits received considerable attention within as well as outside of the Swedish academic world, which contributed to these audits being perceived to be the only form of evaluation of higher education. Internationally, also, Sweden was thought only to perform evaluations in the form of quality audits at the institutional level. However, simultaneously a considerable number of assessments of the right to award degrees, including an assessment of educational quality, were also made at the request of the institution wishing to award the degree. These assessments have constituted a large part of the work of the National Agency, from its inception in 1995, but started at the time of the Office of the Chancellor.

### **Assessments of the right to award degrees**

An assessment of the right to award a degree is a form of evaluation made at the request of an institution of higher education. The right is not granted permanent-

ly. Even universities and university colleges with the right to award doctorates can have the right to award a specific degree revoked.

The assessment/evaluation takes the form of an "accreditation", with a peer group assessing the quality of the programme according to certain criteria and making a recommendation to the National Agency. Depending on the type of programme, different criteria can be stressed. The criteria are continually developed and checked with teachers and scientists active in the field and are an interpretation of the Higher Education Act and Ordinance. The qualitative level is determined by all the criteria in conjunction. The criteria are: teacher competence and competence development, research activity, educational content and organisation, subject depth and breadth, the possibility to go on to post graduate studies, evaluation and quality assurance, student participation, equality, internationalisation, quality and availability of library and other sources of information, premises and equipment, eligibility and enrolment, finances and governance, long-term stability and a critical and creative environment.

Assessing the right to award degrees serves two functions: to control and to lend authority. Also, it clear that it has contributed to the development of small and medium-sized university colleges. This is



evidenced by the successive increase in rights, from awarding individual degrees to establishing areas of research, or even, in a few cases, reaching university status.

In its assessment, the National Agency checks that a university college applying for e.g. the right to award a “magister” degree (corresponding to a minimum of four years of study, half of which are spent on a major subject) has what is needed to teach at the level in question. It is a check of the required “minimum standard”. If the application is approved, confidence in the programme should be strong. The high standard required is demonstrated by the fact that the National Agency has recently withdrawn a few rights and that a large proportion of applications fail when first assessed.

### **National evaluations**

In the evaluative work starting in 1993 the assumption was that the institutions of higher education were primarily responsible for the development and assurance of quality. When there were specific reasons, but not otherwise, a national evaluation of subjects, subject areas or entire education programmes was initiated. Therefore, national evaluations were not a priority before 1995, but have since successively increased in

number. Often, the programmes considered in need of evaluation have been those offering professional training, because either the scientific level or the relevance to society or profession has been questioned.

### **Assessment of quality instead of quality management**

Starting in 1998, the thrust of the National Agency’s evaluations is assessment of quality rather than of quality management. The promotive function of evaluations is toned down in favour of a different approach: control and development are seen as two sides of a coin. More, and more varied, types of national evaluations are initiated and carried out.

This change of action can be seen in the light of external demands as well as internal experience. An increased demand for quality assessments came from the government, students, future employers, the media, and not least from the academic world itself<sup>11</sup>.

One of the findings when the National Agency’s quality audits were subjected to external evaluation was that universities and university colleges have had difficulties making quality management a normal part of their work. Also, teachers and students saw quality management as something abstract and far removed

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<sup>11</sup> The National Agency was perceived as either not making any assessments of quality or, if such assessments were in fact made, they were too few and lacked adequate information on educational quality.

from everyday work. No clear examples that these assessments had led to higher quality could be shown<sup>12</sup>. There were, however, signs of a developing culture of quality.

When a second cycle of quality audits was started in 1998, the procedure was modified. This time, the assessment is in the form of a follow-up of the results of the first assessment. The focus is thus on changes made and other results of quality management. Also, the higher education institution can decline a visit from an audit team. These changes in procedure are consistent with the view that quality management is primarily the responsibility of the university or university college itself, to handle according to its needs, once the second cycle is finished. As a consequence, quality audits will be less extensive.

### **Evaluation of different aspects of quality**

Obviously, the thrust of the evaluations was influenced by the fact that Sigbrit Franke became Chancellor and head of the National Agency in 1999. New forms for national evaluation were now initiated, e.g. of specific aspects of quality and of important reforms, whose consequences for the education system as a whole were thought to be important to elucidate.

An evaluation of equality, student participation and social and ethnic diversity as aspects of quality, was concluded in 2000. There were several reasons why it was initiated. One was an attempt to refute a simplified ranking of Swedish institutions of higher education, made by the journal *Moderna Tider* (Modern Times). Another reason was to develop quality management assessments to allow certain comparisons, something that had not been possible before, when a different audit team was used each time. This time, therefore, the same auditors were used throughout the country. The development perspective was still important and was demonstrated by good examples of how the institutions worked with these aspects of quality. These examples were compiled in an anthology.

In recent years, existing rights to award degrees have been re-examined, which has resulted in a number of rights being revoked in 1999 and 2000. This attracted a lot of attention, not least in the media. However, the examination and re-examination for degree-awarding rights primarily applied to university colleges. Universities were subject to examination to a far lesser degree. This policy was questioned, however. It did not seem fair that the examination and re-examination should apply almost exclusively to university

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<sup>12</sup> Nilsson, Karl-Axel & Wahlén, Staffan, 2000.

colleges, that, unlike universities, had already been extensively assessed. In a government bill, presented in 2000, the policy is changed.

## **2001—a new system for quality assessment is introduced**

In January 2001, a new system for quality assessment is introduced, new in the sense that the object of evaluation is shifted to subjects and programmes<sup>13</sup>. There are another two new features: evaluations will be periodically recurring and will comprise post graduate studies as well as undergraduate education. Educational quality and results of quality management are in focus. Student participation has been included in the Higher Education Act, strengthening student influence. All studies that lead to general or professional degrees will be evaluated every six years.

In the new programme, the connection between quality and the right to award degrees is made clearer. If serious quality flaws are noted by the National Agency, the university or university college should be aware that the right to award a degree can be revoked if no action is taken within a year. If the flaws remain in a follow-up assessment, the right is revoked<sup>14</sup>.

## **A question of legitimacy**

In introducing a comprehensive system of evaluation, the government stresses the importance of national and international trust in Swedish education. That quality assurance and quality development is a local responsibility is an important aspect of the bill. Also, the independence of the National Agency as an assessing body is safe-guarded. Regardless of where they study, students are entitled to an education of equivalent and high quality. There are other reasons also for the bill: the importance of education for society, employment, economic growth, social and cultural development as well as the deepening of democracy. Increased enrolment and the long-term goal that a larger proportion of students should go on to higher education immediately after their upper secondary studies, call for improved pedagogy and didactics at universities and university colleges. Improved teaching and learning can also help counteract social imbalances in recruitment to higher education.

## **Minimum quality examined**

Ensuring equivalent quality is not enforcing uniformity. Instead, “equivalent” should be understood as being of a “minimum standard”. All evaluations will therefore

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<sup>13</sup> Government bill 1999/2000:28, committee report 1999/2000:UbU12.

<sup>14</sup> Government bill 2000/2001:1. Expense category 16.

make sure that the minimum requirements for the right to award degrees are met. Control, as just described, and development are the two main purposes of the National Agency's evaluations. Therefore, it is very important that evaluations capture the multitude of new and exciting ideas, attempted at many institutions of higher education, so that they can make a constructive contribution to improvement and development. In the manual describing the self-evaluation, therefore, departments are encouraged to emphasize unique aspects as well as interesting innovations<sup>15</sup>. In addition, information obtained in evaluations will be made easily accessible to students and may be the basis of certain comparisons.

Throughout the year 2000, the National Agency made various preparations for the coming evaluations, by establishing a preliminary timetable for the six-year period and by formulating a suggested general form and content of the work with the new evaluations. General criteria have been formulated in collaboration with the institutions of higher education. These can best be described as a synthesis of existing assessments of the right to award degrees and existing evaluations

of subjects and programmes. The inspiration in developing criteria comes from the theory-oriented approach to evaluations. The assessments will be based on an interpretation of the goals set out in the Higher Education Act and Ordinance as well as on individual conditions and goals.

To provide a background, information is gathered on prerequisites, processes/implementations and results of the education to be studied. prerequisites include the previous knowledge, understanding and motivation of students, teacher competence, educational goals, contents and organisation, quality and availability of library and other sources of information as well as premises and equipment. Process/implementation includes work conditions for students and teachers as well as how studies are organised i.e. how well they correspond to current research and whether theoretical and applied knowledge are integrated, what examination forms are used and whether the environment is critical and creative. Results can be described from the view-point of students, teachers, and other stake-holders. Results can also be described in terms of throughput.

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<sup>15</sup> National Agency of Higher Education Report 2001:11 R: Bergseth, Brita et al.

## An international outlook

Most states in the European Union now have national systems for the evaluation of quality of higher education (Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, the United Kingdom and Austria, besides Sweden)<sup>16</sup>. Remaining states have begun setting up systems of quality assessment. Of the Nordic countries, Denmark has so far had the most comprehensive system, with a clear stakeholder perspective. With the establishment of the so called Evalueringscentret (Evaluation centre), evaluating primary, secondary, and higher education, the situation in Denmark is changing. Quality assessments in Finland have resembled those in Sweden in being primarily aimed at the level of an entire university or university college, only making occasional evaluations of subjects or programmes. Unlike Sweden, however, Finnish evaluations include almost exclusively foreign auditors and all reports are in English. Norway has been in a build-up phase in the last few years. A Norway Network Council has been set up, with professional teachers/researchers who have begun institutional reviews after studying the quality systems of other countries.

## A mutual confidence in quality

The European Commission wishes to advance mutual understanding of the different education systems in member states and to promote free movement for students and professionals. Therefore, quality matters have become important in the European Union. The Community legislation on the free movement of persons, especially the general directives for the recognition of higher education diplomas, requires a mutual respect and confidence in the educational systems of member states. According to the Council of the European Union, systems for quality assurance can contribute to a mutual recognition of academic or professional qualifications. The intention is to make the entire European job market available to anyone holding a degree from a membership state.

In the early nineties, ministers of education from the member states and from the European Free Trade Association met to discuss matters relating to evaluation projects at the international level. An experience drawn from these discussions was that cooperation on quality issues should continue although the methodology can vary from one country to another. The Commission recommended member states to

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<sup>16</sup> Evaluation of European Higher Education: A Status Report, 1998.

develop systems of quality assurance that take into account the specific history and educational structure of the individual state, while at the same time considering the European dimension as well as the demands placed on higher education by a changing society.

### **International quality evaluations**

Obviously, there are also international evaluations of quality organised by networks between institutions of higher education in different countries or by international organisations such as the OECD, the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation in Paris and UNESCO. International conferences on quality are arranged by e.g. the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente and by networks like the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education as well as by the European Network for Quality Assurance.

Systems of quality evaluation are being built up in many other countries across the world. The tradition of evaluation in the United States is extensive and lengthy and has influenced other countries to a large extent. Self-evaluations, voluntary accreditation and ranking by various journals are results of decentralisation, market orientation, and autonomy of institutions of higher education.

### **Similar purposes**

Without discussing further the quality systems of different countries it can be said that the reasons given for evaluations are similar, regardless of who coordinates and performs the evaluations. The reasons are control, accountability, accreditation, information, and development—although, obviously, the focus can vary. Evaluations may be aimed at the overall level of a university or university college, or include programmes and subjects. In most cases, evaluations are performed in six-year cycles. In most countries the state or the government commissions the evaluations, while the ownership may vary. In Sweden and the United Kingdom, the National Agency and the Quality Assurance Agency, respectively, are the owners, while in e.g. the Netherlands, evaluations are the property of organisations owned by the institutions of higher education. In the latter case, the institutions to be evaluated finance the evaluations whereas the state initiates and finances meta-evaluations.

### **Characteristics of the Swedish quality system**

To a large extent, countries seem to agree on choice of approach to quality evaluation. Evaluations, albeit varying in composition and implementation, normally include self-evaluations and external audit teams. The

Swedish quality system, however, has certain characteristics. Obviously, scope is one: all higher education, including post graduate training, will be evaluated. Evaluation of post graduate studies is usually separated from undergraduate education and performed by other bodies. Considering the desirability of a close link between undergraduate and post graduate education, the experience should prove relevant as well as interesting. It should also promote efficiency.

Another characteristic of the Swedish system is the importance placed on students as “experts” when it comes to their education. To make certain that the students’ views are safe-guarded, the audit teams include students. Also, those in charge are always asked to what extent students can participate and share responsibility. Yet another characteristic is the choice of a critical theory-oriented approach. Furthermore, the Swedish approach is characterised by stressing the importance of follow-up of evaluations. There is, however, a growing realisation elsewhere that follow-up is important.

## **Evaluation for improvement/ development**

Comprehensive systems of evaluation are always associated with problems and risks, especially the risk that they may lead to uniformity and resistance to

change. How can one ensure that the development perspective is prominent in a system that includes both control in the form of accreditation and development? These issues were discussed with Professor Martin Trow, University of Berkeley, who has made an in-depth study of the form and content of the Swedish quality system. Professor Trow specifically pointed out that the characteristics of each programme studied must be taken into account. The National Agency has taken this advice to heart. Issues that may prove difficult will be discussed with the parties involved at the outset of each evaluation. Also, these matters are dealt with in the above-mentioned manual prepared for the self-evaluations.

For improvement and development truly to be the main aims of the quality system, implemented from 2001, it is important that the work of the National Agency itself be characterised by stringency and development. Therefore, the National Agency has established an international Advisory Board, to give advice and support in the process to come. The National Agency will also initiate an external meta-evaluation. The purpose of this evaluation is critically to examine and explain the conditions, implementation/process and to clarify the results, intended or not, of the National Agency’s work. Thus, the work of the National Agency makes it possible to draw attention to sub-standard conditions in order to make needed changes.

## Some examples of further reading

Bauer, Marianne & Askling, Berit & Gerard-Martón, Susan & Marton, Ference 1999: Transforming Universities—Changing Patterns of Governance, Structure and Learning in Swedish Higher Education. Jessica Kingsley Publishers 1999. Higher Education Policy Series 8.

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Dahllöf, Urban 1979: Evaluation, recurrent education and higher education reform in Sweden. Department of Education, University of Uppsala.

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Nilsson, Karl-Axel & Wahlén, Staffan 2000: Institutional Response to the Swedish Model of Quality Assurance. Quality in Higher Education Vol. 6. No 1.

Quality Assurance as Support for Processes of Innovation. The Swedish Model in a Comparative Perspective. National Agency for Higher Education 1997:1 S.

Talerud, Bo 2001: Implementation of a New National Strategy for Quality Assurance in Sweden. Paper presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). Bangalore, India 19–22 March 2001.

Trow, Martin 1995: Two Essays on Quality in Higher Education. Reports from the Office of the Chancellor 1995:2.



