JUSTIFICATION AND METHODS OF UNIVERSITY EVALUATION:
A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

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Symposium
How to Evaluate a University and What for?
Hosted by the Research Institute for Economy, Trade and
Industry (RIETI)

Tokyo, 22 February 2003

HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH IN EUROPE

In the sector of Higher Education and Research, the main efforts in Europe aim at improving the competitiveness of Europe's economy, thanks to the promotion of knowledge. This effort lies on two pillars. The first pillar implies the creation of the European Higher Education area (Bologna process), whose aim is to create a higher education space without border over at least 33 countries (out of approx. 50). The means are to create a transparent system based on a bachelor – master (and PhD?) system, and to promote the mobility of students, teachers and researchers. The second pillar aims at creating a European Research Area, which is a European research space without border. The instruments of this action are a reinforcement of the European research programs, as well as the improvement of the mobility of researchers, of knowledge transfer and of research financing.

Presently, the main concerns of European Universities are the following:
- Reaffirm the central role of universities for the creation of new knowledge, the transfer of knowledge and the training of researchers,
- Contribute to the creation of the European teaching and research areas,

- Observe and if necessary try to influence the "Gatts" negotiations, as there is a fear that the public universities could be penalized,
- Improve university governance in a fast changing environment, and, last but not least
- Promote quality assurance.

WHY QUALITY?

The quality of teaching and research has become one of the most important issues at governmental as well as institution levels: why? Because the world is changing at an increasing speed and is becoming more and more competitive and uncertain. Therefore, all human institutions, even universities, are under increasing pressure to respond to the needs of society and to do it efficiently and in a fair (just) manner.

The situation of universities regarding quality is particularly complex. Centuries of experience have proven that universities best serve their community or society at large if they are autonomous, that is free from public and/or public interventions. They have also shown that universities can do things badly or fall into lethargy. Moreover, universities are very costly for the State and/or for the students.

Therefore, it is legitimate that the sponsors of universities and other stakeholders request from them that they are accountable and transparent, that they reach at least a minimum standard of quality and, finally, that they make a permanent effort to improve their quality. Obviously, this second objective should be a permanent preoccupation of the universities themselves if they want to be in a good position to compete.

HOW TO SECURE AND IMPROVE QUALITY?

Basically, university evaluation can pursue four aims:

- Check if the quality standard considered as minimal are reached. This is essentially a question of consumer protection (for ex. accreditation of private universities in Austria),
- Establish the level of quality of an institution or a program: benchmarking, ranking (this is often done by newspapers).
- Promote quality (quality assurance): encourage the development of a culture of quality (in particular, for the institution) for ex., the quality assurance program of the European Association of Universities (EUA),
- Measure performance, in particular if an institution is fulfilling its missions efficiently or effectively (some aspects of the former UK system were trying to do that).

The main objects of evaluation are:
- Institutions; that is either the University system of a country (which is done for ex. by the OCDE), or Universities and other higher education institutions (this is done for ex. by the EUA and by national or independent agencies). This can also be focused on university subdivisions, in particular departments and/or faculties (this is done by national agencies or by the universities themselves),
- Programs (degrees): this is normally done by national agencies,
- Disciplines: evaluation of the state of a discipline in a country or region (this has been done in the Netherlands in order to benchmark or rank programs in a specific discipline; the EUA is presently mapping social sciences in Europe).

These evaluation efforts concern any or all of the University missions: teaching, research, outreach, as well as the State policies or the governance of institutions.

Basically, any evaluation effort can be desired and implemented from two angles of view: The first angle of view is external. It is normally done by governments and by national or independent agencies. The aim is to control and/or to measure. It can take different forms: accreditation (control if the minimum standard is guaranteed), institutional evaluation

(quality assurance), benchmarking – ranking and the analysis of performance indicators (in the framework of budget allocation or of performance contracts).

The second angle of view is internal. This can be done by a university organization, in order to serve their members, and by universities which pay attention to quality. Internal evaluation looks at the governance and quality assurance system of an institution, as well as at the quality of teaching, of research and of any specific policy (internationalization, research management, students support). Such a process is normally articulated around a phase of self-evaluation and the visit of external peers, or the evaluation of a course or program by the students.

The experience made over the last two or three decades with these various solutions shows that university evaluation has limits and can have undesired consequences. In particular, the cost of evaluation can be extraordinary high (UK), an extensive effort will rapidly be constrained by the lack of independent experts and these processes tend to become very bureaucratic. Moreover, the most ambitious evaluation projects tend always to put too much attention to quantitative data, although it should be avoided because the contribution of higher education and research to society do not appear fully in the short run (but only in the medium and long run) and because performance indicators and ratios can be misleading, that is give wrong incentives or encourage short term strategies.

Moreover, a heavy and bureaucratic process contributes to discourage the University staff (teachers and researchers), instead of encouraging them to become more responsible and consider that any quality assurance effort is in their advantage. Finally, the good usage of evaluation results is not always clear: should a bad evaluation provoke a sanction or special measures of support?

THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ASSOCIATION AND EVALUATION

The European University Association (EUA) is by far the most important university association in Europe. It counts 630 individual members and 33 collective members (Rectors' - presidents' conferences). The association is the voice of universities on higher education and research policy issues at European level and it serves its members through many programs. In particular, EUA organizes executive seminars for new rectors (presidents), a program of institutional evaluation (80 European universities have been evaluated on a voluntary base) and different programs on quality issues (quality circles) and teaching issues (joint masters).

The EUA is presently preparing a statement on quality, which should be accepted in a university convention in Graz in Mai 2003 and proposed to a ministerial conference in Berlin in September 2003. The main arguments are that universities should be responsible for monitoring their own activities, including the quality of study programs, which should involve the students. The goals of this spontaneous effort are to promote the autonomy and accountability of the institution, to promote innovation and avoid a big bureaucracy.

The EUA believes very strongly that the external quality assurance procedures must focus on the institution as a whole and that the evaluation of programs should be part of the internal monitoring that is the responsibility of institutions. The EUA is also convinced that external quality assurance procedures should check that this internal monitoring is done effectively. However, each university should be free of choosing the quality assurance procedures and agencies from anywhere in Europe. Finally, the quality assurance procedures should promote institutional autonomy, foster innovation, enhance the cultural and organizational quality, rather than commercial quality and, last but not least, prompt institutions to develop internal quality measures.

The EUA states also that quality assurance agencies should follow transparent guidelines and should also be evaluated.

CONCLUSION: A FEW REMARKS ON THE PROMOTION OF QUALITY CULTURE IN JAPAN

It seems to me extremely important, before choosing a system, to examine rigorously the experience made in Europe and in Northern America, in particular what has been tried and done and what have been the results and consequences. The solution implemented should consider that universities are unique institutions, whose full contribution appears in the medium and long run and where quality and creativity can be evaluated, but are difficult to measure.

Probably, the main target should be to promote a quality culture within the university system as well as each institution with the aim to enhance quality while avoiding a heavy bureaucracy, as it is the cause of fatigue and wrong incentives.

In a system with autonomous institutions benefiting from a great independence from their sponsors, it is advisable to separate the allocation of funds (lumps-sums), which has to be made on the basis of a couple of output indicators and the quality audit, which should promote quality enhancement, guarantee a minimum standard of quality (accreditation) and be as light and non bureaucratic as possible

LW 11.02.2003