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Report by the OAQ on the accreditation and evaluation systems in nine European countries

(status as at December 2001)

Austria

The centrally organized education system in Austria is facing a paradigm shift: the intention is to give the universities a greater degree of autonomy in order to increase their responsibility and organizational freedom. However, autonomous universities need a more precisely defined state framework for quality assurance.

Since 2000 the independent National Accreditation Council has been accrediting educational institutions which intend to run a private university and private universities which have already been accredited and intend to offer a new study programme. The accreditation council does not evaluate the universities; its function is to check whether recommendations made to and conditions imposed on private universities have been met (quality audits). The independent National Council for Universities of Applied Science has been accrediting new study programmes at these institutions since 1994 and at the same time carries out internal and external evaluations of study programmes that have already been accredited. Here, however, the emphasis is increasingly shifting from evaluating programmes to evaluating institutions. Evaluations are carried out by the universities and by the Council for Universities of Applied Science. The establishment of a national accreditation (and evaluation) agency under the aegis of the Rectors' Conference of the Austrian Universities is currently under discussion against the background of the changes in the Austrian education system mentioned above.

Therese Steffen Gerber

Belgium

Belgium does not have a national accreditation agency, and the linguistic regions each take a different approach in this field. The Flemish government is planning to adopt a decree recognizing the accreditation organization which is about to be established in the Netherlands (NAO). This move is part of the project on European cooperation in quality assurance matters. Little is known at the moment about how this collaboration with the NAO will be implemented.

In Flanders, the accreditation of individual study programmes is linked directly to the reform of Bachelor/Master programmes. The objective of this reform is to ensure the quality, recognition and credibility of the new diplomas. The Flemish Minister for Education intends to turn existing programmes into courses of study culminating in a Bachelor or Master degree. The aim is basically to accredit the same courses under a different name. Two decrees passed by the Flemish government in 1991 and 2000 make evaluation of these programmes mandatory. The Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) and the Council of Flemish Institutions of Higher Education (VHLORA) have been responsible since 1991 and 2000 respectively for coordinating the procedure for cross-sectional evaluation of departments at universities and "Hogescholen" (universities of applied sciences). The Belgian Rectors' Council of French-speaking Universities (CREF) introduced a procedure

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for evaluating tertiary education in 1999. The evaluation processes each consist of two phases, internal evaluation (self-evaluation) and external evaluation (peer review). The primary aim of this procedure is to encourage the tertiary institutions to improve the quality of the education they offer.

Annick Weizmann

Denmark

In 1993 a new Universities Law was enacted which conferred greater autonomy on these institutions. In return, the universities were required to improve their transparency. It was against this background that the Danish Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation in Tertiary Education was founded in 1992; this body was replaced by the "Evalueringsinstitutet" (EVA), a national evaluation institute, in 1999. EVA has been responsible for evaluating all levels of education since then.

EVA is responsible for accreditation and evaluation at university level. Ex post accreditation applies only to private educational institutions, and its aim is to establish whether students at these institutions are entitled to state funding. The decision-making process used by EVA consists of three stages: self-evaluation, a study of the labour market which follows up former students to see how they are currently employed, and finally an on-site visit by EVA. The objective of ex post evaluation of study programmes is to determine whether their content complies with the mission statement ("fitness for purpose").

The evaluation process consists of self-evaluation, a survey of students, a visit from an external team of experts, and publication of the evaluation report. Follow-up is generally carried out.

Current developments include procedures designed to evaluate entire faculties and a pilot study on the international evaluation of programmes in the agricultural sciences.

Accreditation of university education in line with the Bologna Declaration could also be introduced; this is currently under consideration.

Sylvie Fasel Berger

Finland

There are 20 universities and 30 polytechnics (comparable to universities of applied sciences) in Finland. The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) was set up in 1996 and employs 14 people. Its primary objective is to improve the quality of Finland's universities. It carries out systematic institutional evaluations and individual programme evaluations as requested by an independent Quality Council. One FINHEEC employee can evaluate three to four disciplines each comprising 20 units. The majority of the external evaluators come from other countries (small country, benchmarking). The peer-review report is published uncensored. The criteria for evaluating institutions are flexible depending on the main focus of the institution in question. No minimum standards have been set. All

20 universities have been evaluated to date, and the polytechnics may also be evaluated in the future. Follow-up is carried out between three and five years after the evaluation has been concluded. An improvement in the quality of the evaluated institutions has been seen in some cases. Success stories are published immediately. There is a general trend towards more output-oriented monitoring (abilities of students who have completed their

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programmes) in Finland and a tendency for quantitative indicators to be replaced by qualitative indicators. Finland recognizes Sweden's quality audits, the self-assessment propagated by the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS), Denmark's programme evaluations and the various guidelines implemented in the UK as current "good practices".

Rolf Heusser

France

The "Quality assurance system for higher education in France" encompasses several parameters: recognition, evaluation and four-year agreements. The state has long had a monopoly on awarding university degrees. Via the Ministries of Education and Guardianship it periodically empowers the state scientific, cultural or vocational teaching institutions to award national diplomas or titles. Accreditation of the schools of engineering is largely the province of the Engineering Education Commission (CTI), which is responsible for accrediting all state or private institutions that offer leading-edge scientific or technical training. The recognition procedure carried out by the ministries is generally based on a dossier, with the CTI also making an on-site visit. There is a significant difference between the "usual" accreditation procedures and the recognition procedure since the expert evaluation carried out for the latter is not based on predetermined standards. A number of departments at the Ministry of Education or offices attached to the ministry evaluate various aspects of the university sector, although since 1985 the evaluation of the policy and overall running of the state institutions of higher education (universities, schools, etc.) has been the sole province of the National Evaluation Committee (CNE). This committee became an independent administration in 1989; the Law on university education passed in 1984 made evaluation by the CNE mandatory. This evaluation comprises an internal (self-evaluation) and an external (peer review) element from which a number of recommendations are derived. The objective of the policy of four-year agreements is to ensure that institutions of higher education are evaluated periodically, i.e. every four years, from 2002.

Annick Weizmann

Germany

The National Accreditation Council was established in 1999 following a resolution by the Conference of German Ministers for Culture. It is an independent institution that accredits regional accreditation agencies, whose activities it also coordinates. Germany was thus the first country in western Europe to have an official national accreditation institution. At the moment, however, only new Bachelor/Master programmes are accredited. The procedure is carried out on a voluntary basis by regional and profession-specific accreditation bodies such as the Central Evaluation and Accreditation Agency in Hanover (ZEVA), the Institute of Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance (ACQUIN), and the Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (FIBAA). The basic examination schedules specific to each region (Land) determine whether or not new study programmes are introduced. The present tendency is towards accrediting not just Bachelor/Master programmes but all the programmes offered at tertiary level. The German Science Council has been accrediting private universities since 2001 - also on a voluntary basis.

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There is no national evaluation agency in Germany since the country has a federal structure. There are a number of regional agencies - ZEVA, Evaluation Agency Baden-Württemberg (EVALAG), Northern Alliance, etc. - involved in evaluation. Project Q (a quality assurance project which has been managed by the Rectors' Conference of the German Universities since 1998) networks various initiatives within and outside the tertiary education system in the different regions, promotes an exchange of experience and offers a broad platform for further development.

Therese Steffen Gerber

Netherlands

From 2003 an independent national accreditation organization (NAO) will systematically accredit all existing graduate programmes and license of new programmes at the country's public and private universities and universities of applied sciences. The accreditation system is aimed solely at the study programmes. It will continue the work done by an evaluation system that has been operating in the Netherlands for 15 years and which is considered internationally to be exemplary. This system comprises a self-evaluation report written by the university and an external evaluation (peer review). The existing evaluation agencies VSNU (Association of Universities in the Netherlands), HBO-Raad (Association of Universities of Professional Education), PAEPON (Platform for Private Institutions of Education in the Netherlands) and others will probably continue to carry out the task of evaluation (organization of self-evaluation and the peer visits, validation and scoring of results) under the new system. The NAO will acknowledge the findings of the evaluation agencies by granting accreditation and will develop validation guidelines and criteria for this purpose. Discussion is currently focusing on the amount of influence the NAO will have on the formulation of the criteria and standards that the agencies will employ in the process. From 2003 there will be a move towards a more open market when the NAO will be able to validate both national and foreign agencies.

An institution will have to be successfully accredited in order to award degrees recognized by the state and to qualify for funding of its programmes and students. The results and accreditation reports will be published. The state Inspectorate of Higher Education will be responsible for the supervision and meta-evaluation of the entire evaluation and accreditation system.

Karl Zbinden-Bärtschi

Sweden

Following the introduction of a new law on university education, the institutions operating in this sector were given greater autonomy in return for greater transparency towards the state. This was the context in which the National Universities Agency was set up in 1995, a body which has a number of functions ranging from the accreditation and evaluation of education at university level to ancillary tasks such as oversight of the country's licensing policy and the provision of general information on studies at this level.

Accreditation is carried out ex ante at the request of an institution at a lower level in the educational hierarchy and confers on this institution the right to award higher qualifications, to set up a new department or field of research, or to be classified as a university. Ex post evaluation is done in two stages: the quality audit (scrutiny of the quality assurance

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activities introduced by all institutions) is intended to support these educational institutions in their efforts to improve their own quality assurance systems. The quality assessment, introduced with a six-year cycle in 2001, acts as a quality control for all study programmes. If the results are not good enough and a repeat quality assessment fails to show an improvement, the level of funding awarded to the institution may be reduced, leading to the closure of study programmes. The aim is to eliminate the quality audits in the medium term since most of the ground they cover is also included in the quality assessments. The two processes - accreditation and evaluation - have a similar structure, consisting of self-evaluation, evaluation by a group of external experts, a report and publication of the results.

The procedures developed by the Swedish agency have a good reputation and are often cited as exemplary in terms of both their scientific basis and their suitability for their intended purpose.

Sylvie Fasel Berger

United Kingdom

Evaluation of university education in the United Kingdom has been the task of a central Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) since 1997. It undertakes subject reviews across all the universities once every six years, and at the same time produces comprehensive institutional reviews. These institutional evaluations follow the classic pattern of self-evaluation, a visit by a group of experts (peer review) and a report containing assessments and recommendations. The measures taken in response to this report are monitored. Until 2001, a score from 1 to 4 was awarded for six main criteria categories in the subject reviews. This allowed comparisons to be made between the institutions, and showed them to vary markedly in some instances. After each evaluation the agency issues its verdict on accreditation (quality approved/not approved). However, the right of an institution to award diplomas is a political decision. In some areas - among them the health service and trusteeships - professional associations accredit training programmes on the basis of evaluations carried out by the QAA.

The reports, the evaluation procedures and the detailed evaluation criteria are all published. Great attention is paid to equal opportunities, with special weighting being given to the needs of minorities and disabled students. Existing partnerships between universities in the form of franchises led the QAA to produce criteria for these special cases (collaborative provision). The procedure is currently being streamlined rigorously. The independent evaluation of programmes and institutions has drawn the universities into a kind of "control net" that the lecturers perceive as extremely intrusive. It is becoming less and less common to award a score to evaluations; this approach is being replaced by a system that seeks to promote best practices.

Isabelle Dustin

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