

“TOTAL EVALUATION” – INTRODUCTION OF A NEW CONCEPT¹

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Introduction

“Quality maintenance” – “quality control” – “quality assurance” – “quality development” – these are words that are becoming more and more frequent in the academic setting. The quality issue in higher education has come to the forefront almost all over the world during the last decade.

There are several reasons for this, which in short can be summarised thus (Vroeijenstijn 1995):

- *“Massification”* of higher education: Increasing student numbers creates a pressure on national budgets – which leads to decreasing public expenditure per student. At the same time governments need to assure the public that quality is not affected.
- *Accountability*: Governments want ‘value for money’; students want ‘value for time’.
- *The labour market situation*: Society is becoming much more interested in higher education. Does higher education ‘produce’ the right types of graduates, in the right number? Is university education relevant for graduates’ future work?
- *Also for institutions themselves*, quality is becoming a more important issue: is it still possible to maintain quality with increasing student numbers and continuous decrease in financial support from the state?
- *Internationalisation*: Student exchange programmes mean that partner institutions must be able to prove their quality.
- *Government decentralisation and deregulation* (more local autonomy) is accompanied by increasing demands for quality assurance.

The former Chancellor of the Swedish Universities, Stig Hagström, summarised these external demands for quality assurance in the following way (Hagström 1996):

“For the individual higher education institution, responsibility for quality entails an obligation and responsibility to demonstrate to the Government and Parliament, and ultimately to the citizenry at large, how it is developing and assuring quality in its operations.”

¹ This plan for introducing ‘total evaluation’ at my institution (Lund University, Sweden) is largely a hypothetical exercise; I have had to disregard that the university has already taken part in such an evaluation during 1997.

But the issue of quality assurance in institutions of higher education is not only a question of external accountability. External demands on institutions to demonstrate an acceptable level of quality may be important as a lever for starting to work with quality issues – until recently, quality was usually taken for granted in universities – but for this to become a real commitment, it must be felt as a substantial contribution to the improvement of academic work.

A total evaluation project should consequently build upon a concept of improvement: the main rationale for starting such a project should be to draw conclusions for the development and improvement of the university itself. An evaluation that is primarily aimed at satisfying external demands will always run the risk of becoming a ritual exercise which does not affect the real life of the institution.

At the same time, external demands for accountability of higher education institutions are, of course, perfectly justified. The question is: are these two approaches to evaluation compatible? Can they both be accomplished at the same time?

In the literature on evaluation, it is sometimes implied that these approaches are mutually exclusive, and that the control aspect of evaluation for accountability always tends to distort the improvement aspect.² On the other hand, as international experiences demonstrate, claims for increased accountability are inevitable consequences of government decentralisation and deregulation of higher education.

Kells & Nilsson (1995) point out that in a decentralised and goal-oriented system of higher education several types of activities are needed:

Examination of overall results and a national system of quality control

Quality assurance of courses and programmes

Evaluation for quality enhancement

The total quality evaluation that we are about to start should primarily be regarded as aimed at quality enhancement in our own institution. The main foci of interest for the evaluation are to be defined by the university itself, not by any external body. At the same time, when choosing these foci the university should take into account the interests of external stakeholders to be informed about quality issues within the university - thereby adopting the idea of “the self-regulating university” (Kells 1992, Kells & Stenqvist 1995).

The term “total evaluation” implies that all aspects of the university should be considered, in contrast to evaluation of research projects or teaching programmes. Also, this time the evaluation concerns quality assessment of a whole institution, which means that it has to

² A prominent advocate of this perspective in Sweden is Sigbrit Franke, professor of education and now Chancellor of the Swedish universities (Franke-Wikberg 1989). A much more balanced view is put forward by Ton Vroeijerstijn, who points out that quality assessment has as its purpose both quality improvement and accountability - and to fulfil these two purposes is like navigating between the two extremes of Scylla and Charybdis (Vroeijerstijn 1995).

concentrate more on studying processes for quality assurance than measuring quality outcomes.

Scope of the evaluation

The next question to be considered is the scope of the evaluation: what should be evaluated? Kells & Nilsson (1995) depict an evaluation model where fourteen different aspects of an institution's activities are analysed. They also give examples of how to deal with these aspects in an evaluation project.

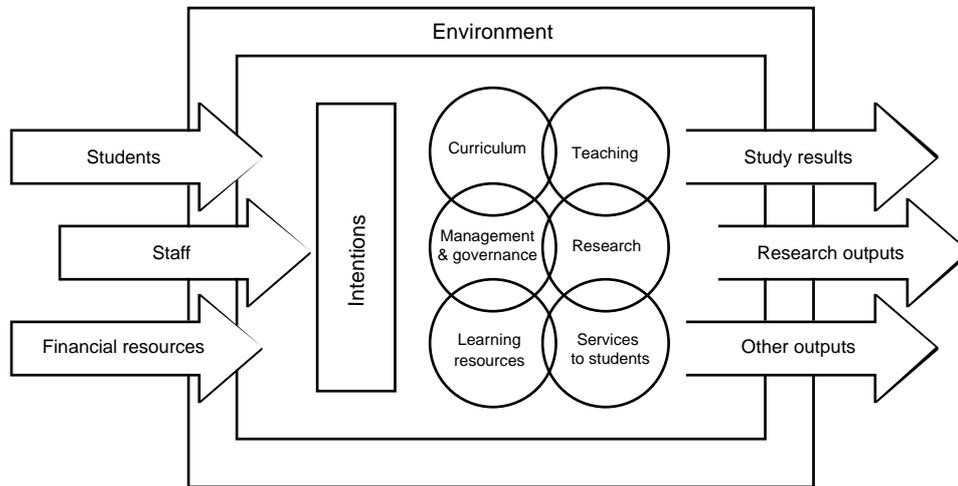


Figure 1: Possible aspects for evaluation (source: Kells & Nilsson 1995)

As far as possible, our total evaluation project should try to cover all these aspects. However, it is inevitable that the main attention will be focused on the university's primary tasks - education and research.

With regard to research several quality control and quality assurance systems are in operation. University research is exposed to quality control continuously or at regular intervals. Applications for research funding are usually subject to a rigorous quality monitoring, and when research results are published they normally have to compete on an international level. Promotion of academics implies a thorough qualitative scrutiny of research qualifications (while teaching qualifications most often are disregarded). In PhD studies there is a built-in quality control in the use of an external examiner of the thesis, and a separate examination committee. Finally, besides these forms of continuous quality control there are general evaluations of research in certain discipline areas, mainly through the research councils.

When it comes to teaching and learning on the undergraduate level, there are traditionally no corresponding quality assurance mechanisms in the Swedish university system. *It is therefore recommended that the current evaluation project be focused primarily on the university's educational mission on the undergraduate level - without, however, disregarding the aspects of the university's activities.*

At the same time, the decentralised structure of the university implies that there must be considerable space for various interpretations on the department and faculty levels. Each

faculty should be allowed to emphasise the aspects that they feel are most relevant in their particular situation.

Method

A fundamental element in all quality assessment procedures in higher education is a self-evaluation of the unit in question (van Vught 1996, Vroeijenstijn 1995, Kells & Nilsson 1995). Without a thorough self-evaluation, any evaluation process will run the risk of being reduced to a rather superficial exercise, without identifying the crucial points that need to be amended.

The second essential element in the evaluation process is an external review, most often conducted by a team of colleagues or experts in the field concerned. The external review should then be followed up by the institution itself with a critical analysis of the review and a plan for the implementation of changes suggested by the review.

However, the process should start with collecting basic data necessary for the evaluation. As far as possible, existing data should be used, for example data already collected for the annual reports for the past few years. These data should be sufficient for estimating trends or significant changes concerning

- inputs (students, staff, resources)
- processes (teaching, policies, procedures, services, leadership, research)
- outputs (learning, graduates, completed projects or services).

Data to be analysed include the following (from Kells & Nilsson p. 31):

- Recruitment of students
- Utilisation of student places
- Student enrolment and graduation per programme/subject area
- Teaching staff and other personnel data
- Research statistics
- Teacher/student ratios and contact hours
- Costs per student (FTE/graduates)
- Student achievement

For the evaluation, qualitative information is also necessary. To obtain such information, we need to assemble the opinions of staff, students and clients on the issues that are included in the evaluation. Hence, we need to plan for surveys and interviews of these groups (or at least a sample of them).

Self-evaluation

Virtually all levels in the university organisation will be involved in the self-evaluation process. Each faculty and - if the faculty so decides - each department will have to prepare their own self-evaluation. It is therefore necessary to minimise the efforts that departments and faculties have to put into this exercise. It is suggested that the guidelines for the self-evaluation should recommend a so-called SWOT analysis, i.e. an approach where each unit

tries to locate its own strengths and weaknesses and to identify opportunities and threats for the future. On the basis of such an analysis proposals for measures to be taken can be formed, e.g. as a development plan for the next few years.

The self-evaluation is a very extensive exercise, and needs to be thoroughly planned. On the central level we need a coordinating committee, which can draw up a timetable, devise guidelines for faculties and departments, and oversee the whole procedure. This committee would also be responsible for drafting the final self-evaluation report for the university as a whole.

At Lund University, this task should be entrusted to the Quality Council, where all faculties are represented, often through their deans or vice-deans, and where student representatives also have their seats. In this way, the participation of the faculties may be ensured. On the administrative level, the coordination of the whole project will be a task of the Office of Evaluation.

Each *faculty board* should then be responsible for organising the self-evaluation within the faculty. Faculties may choose different forms of organisation, in some cases by creating a separate committee for this purpose, in other cases by utilising existing bodies, like the quality committees that several faculties have established.

Not all *departments* should probably have to prepare their own self-evaluation reports. In faculties where departments are independently responsible for study programmes (science, social science, humanities) they will; but in cases like medicine, where courses and programmes are planned and managed by curriculum committees rather than departments, the faculty may decide not to require such reports from all departments. In other cases, like law and theology, department and faculty are congruent and will only prepare one self-evaluation.

The self-evaluation exercise should ideally be both a top-down and a bottom-up process. General guidelines concerning areas to concentrate on should come from the centre - but this top-down approach must be complemented by a bottom-up strategy, where the centre is prepared to react upon demands on the basic level.

The process should be centrally initiated, and the design of the whole project should be worked out in the Quality Council. Parallel with the self-evaluation at department and faculty level, the Quality Council and the Office of Evaluation will have to prepare parts of the self-evaluation report that cover areas where the university has taken some general initiatives - e.g. concerning internationalisation of studies, ICT in teaching and learning, pedagogical training for teaching staff, etc.

But the final self-evaluation must build upon the faculty reports, and a considerable part of it must cover issues that are taken up in the faculty reports, issues where weaknesses or threats in one or more faculties need to be addressed by the centre. Also, issues that are important on the institutional level but missing in one or several faculty self-evaluations may need to be taken up in the university's self-evaluation.

In the self-evaluation exercise, several ideas and recommendations for improvement and change of study programmes, organisational arrangements, administrative practices, etc. may be brought forward. They should also be reflected in the evaluation report.

Thus, the report will be both descriptive and analytical, with a balance towards the analytical and prospective dimensions.

External review

When, as in this case, the evaluation is initiated by the university itself, the external visiting committee should be nominated by the university.³ This procedure is often figuratively called “peer review” although the “peers” in the case of quality reviews may sometimes be people from outside the academic profession (cf van Vught 1996).

The task of the visiting committee will be to try to form an opinion of the quality assurance system of the university as a whole. It is an institutional review, not a faculty review or programme review, and consequently the members of the visiting committee must act as informed observers rather than discipline experts. Thus, their discipline background is not decisive. Important is that they can be accepted as trustworthy by the academic community. The committee cannot be too small, considering the size and breadth of the university - it should have at least five members, among them at least one senior academic from outside Sweden. It may also be appropriate to include one representative from industry and commerce in the committee. Finally, considering the status of students in Swedish university life, the visiting committee should also include a student.

The site visit by the external review committee will take place 2--3 months after the self-evaluation report is finalised; thus giving the committee a reasonable time for preparation. Of course, the committee should also be acquainted with the faculty and department reports, as well as all relevant background material.

The schedule for the site visit must give enough time for the committee to visit all faculties - and some departments - as well as the central management and representatives of some committees with a university-wide mission. Four days visit seems to be a suitable length of the visit.

The review committee will compile a report covering its more important observations and recommendations. We expect the report to include a description of the strengths and weaknesses observed from the self-evaluation material and during the site visit. But it should also include an expression of opinion on improvement recommendations resulting from the self-evaluation and outlined in the report.

³ For this assignment, I have presumed that the “total evaluation”, although characterised as a national pilot project, is being managed by the universities themselves and not by a national agency of some sort.

Follow-up and implementation

The report of the external evaluation committee should deserve to be thoroughly studied by the university. Comments by the evaluators on weak points - generally or in certain places - must be analysed and measures for improvement discussed.

As a result of the evaluation, development plans should be drawn up both on the central level and in each faculty. Such plans should include actions to be taken, with a realistic timetable for their implementation, and sources of any funds to be employed.

The main role of the external review will be to test and refine the ideas presented in the self-evaluation through a dialogue with autonomous external advisers. The evaluation report will serve as a corroboration of - or it will falsify - the university's own conclusions in the self-evaluation. In cases where the visiting committee's judgement coincides with the university's, this confirmation is likely to lend substance to the plan, and create confidence in the measures proposed within the university, and also among external stakeholders. This does not, of course, preclude the possibility of disregarding some of the external evaluators' viewpoints.

Resistance within the university

The introduction of new administrative practices in a university will usually encounter some resistance. This is, of course, true also for quality evaluation.

Quality is often taken for granted in academia. This is not unjustified - after all there are, as Martin Trow (1994) has pointed out, a plethora of quality mechanisms in the traditional university. Nevertheless, the notion of accountability and systematic quality assurance is new to the academic setting.

A "total evaluation" project in an institution where this kind of scheme has never before been tested will inevitably face resisting forces. At our university we may have to count with resistance of the following kinds:

Faculty level:

- Deans will fear external interference in their internal affairs.
- They will question whether this new evaluation concept will take the "real quality" into account.

Departments:

- At many departments, people will regard such an initiative as an interference with established academic freedom.
- They will also emphasise the risk of being subjected to new administrative burdens, which takes time and resources away from teaching and research and other important academic tasks.

Generally, however, the risks for such consequences in our university are not overwhelming. The experience from the work with preparing and discussing the Strategic Plan of the

university in 1994--1995 has prepared the organisation for such general strategic exercises (Näslund 1997).

An important condition for overcoming resistance of this kind is, of course, a strong commitment on the part of the central management, particularly the Rector (Vice-Chancellor).

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Appendix: Institutional consequences of a total evaluation project⁴

The notion of organising a “total evaluation” project would hardly have been possible a couple of decades ago. It is closely connected to the ongoing decentralisation and deregulation of higher education systems in Europe, accompanied by increased demands on quality assurance and accountability.

An effect of this is that the university - for the first time ever - has been forced to function as one organisational unit with common goals for its activities. This has not been any great problem for the newly organised university colleges without any traditional faculty organisation

But for the traditional university the notion of a common, unified leadership, with a responsibility for the university as a whole, was an alien idea. It is only a slight exaggeration to maintain that the traditional university organisation was designed to prevent change and preserve status quo. The collegial mode of governance, since the middle ages organised in faculties where academics alone decide about their own affairs, implies decisions based on consensus. It is easy to find historical examples where this kind of governance has blocked or prevented changes that afterwards have turned out to be inevitable.

In an analysis of the latest Swedish reforms of higher education, Martin Trow⁵ has observed that the kind of decentralisation that we have experienced puts completely new demands on the leadership of universities. A force outside the collegial structure is needed, which can initiate changes when necessary. Trow concludes that the reformed Swedish university needs a strong “chief executive”. In our present organisation this responsibility lies with the Rector (Vice-Chancellor).

Some conclusions can be drawn from the changes in the university’s environmental conditions during the 1990s:

- The increased autonomy of the university involves increased demands on accountability. This in turn means that the university must be able to function as one unified organisation towards the state as well as in relation to other institutions and the surrounding world at large.
- Established universities, building on the European university tradition, have greater problems adapting to these new conditions of leadership than new institutions without such traditions.

⁴ The text of this appendix to my assignment is partly based upon a presentation at the the conference “Quality and Improvement”, organised by the National Agency for Higher Education, Uppsala January 1997.

⁵ M. Trow (1993). *Reflections on higher education reforms in the 1990s: The case of Sweden*. Stockholm: Council for Studies of Higher Education (Studies of Higher Education and Research 1993:4.)

- In the traditional university change is not seen as something normal: status quo and balance of power between different internal stakeholders is the - at least implicit - ideal. Both the organisation and the tradition tend to counteract innovation and change - in spite of the fact that research and teaching presuppose a high degree of creativity and innovation.
- A necessary prerequisite for successful leadership in a university is that the central management is able to stick to a long-term vision and can convince the colleagues in the academic system that changes - sometimes unpopular - are necessary.
- A final necessary condition is also that the institutional goals and objectives are firmly rooted in the organisation, and that leaders of sub-units are involved in and feel a responsibility for change processes.