



# Evaluating University Continuing Education A Danish Case

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## Introduction:

It is not easy to describe particular examples of evaluation to a broad group of people who have many different experiences from their own educational systems. One might easily end up talking about all those experiences which are unique. Such as: The political, institutional and the economic conditions of the specific country which to some extent determine the concept of quality and the specific quality model in use.

I shall instead focus on the methods and reflections made in the progress of one case of external evaluations of university adult and continuing education in Denmark.

The paper deals with the following:

1. A brief introduction to the Danish Evaluation Institute – history, purpose and methods.
2. Experiences from an ongoing evaluation of Master programmes.

“Ongoing” indicates that there are not necessarily any definite conclusions on many of the questions this paper will raise. It should, however, provide some insight into the reflections of the method- and concept developing phase.

First a couple of words on the institute and the normal procedures and methods applied in the evaluations.

### The Danish Evaluation Institute

The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) is an independent institution formed under the auspices of the Danish Ministry of Education.

The Danish Evaluation Centre had been established in 1992 and evaluated all higher education programmes in the period till 1999, when the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) was founded based on legislation passed by the Danish parliament. The Institute covers evaluation of the entire Danish system of education - from primary school and secondary education to higher education and adult and continuing education. By October 2001 the number of staff is 59.

*EVA's Purpose:*

- To develop and highlight quality of education and teaching through **systematic evaluation**
- To be the national **centre of knowledge** of national and international experience in educational evaluation.
- To develop **methods** for evaluating the quality of teaching and learning
- To advise and **collaborate** with public authorities and educational institutions on quality issues

The Danish Evaluation Institute's purpose is therefore clearly twofold:

- To initiate and **conduct evaluations** of teaching and learning
- To be the government's **centre of knowledge** for evaluation of education.

*Main principles.*

All EVA evaluations are based on the principles of improvement, transparency, professionalism and independence.

- **Improvement** - Evaluations must identify strengths and weaknesses thus promoting improvement of teaching and learning, based on the objectives of the field of education.
- **Transparency** - Evaluations must make the quality of teaching and learning visible, highlighting what is already successful and what could be improved.
- **Professionalism** - Evaluations must be based on the expertise already available within the educational sector concerned. For this reason experts familiar with the specialized field are always

invited to participate in the evaluation. Evaluation officers from EVA contribute with evaluation professionalism.

- **Autonomy and independence** – The Danish Evaluation Institute must be autonomous and independent in the choice and use of procedures and methods concerning quality evaluation from both the government and the education institutions.

I want to stress that The Danish Evaluation Institute does not consider its role to be merely that of a controller of educational quality. The Institute is firmly committed towards improvement of education rather than accountability. The methods used must express this important priority.

### **Evaluation methodology**

EVA develops and updates methods of evaluation for the entire educational sector. Evaluation methods vary and are adapted to the various educational sectors.

A given evaluation may involve an entire study programme, individual subjects/courses or an entire institution. An evaluation, however, will always be based on the national and local objectives of the course in question.

An evaluation as a general rule will include the following elements:

**A team of evaluation officers** - For each evaluation EVA appoints amongst its staff a team of evaluation officers. The team holds the practical and methodological responsibility for each evaluation including the writing of the evaluation report

**A preliminary study** - Prior to each evaluation EVA conducts a preliminary study. The preliminary study will typically take the form of a dialogue with all parties involved in the programme. It encompasses studying existing material related to the field of education, e.g. regulations, government circulars, curricula, etc.

**Terms of reference** - EVA drafts the terms of reference for each evaluation, describing the objectives and the framework of the evaluation. The board approves the terms of reference.

**Expert panel** - For each evaluation EVA appoints an expert panel. The panel is made up of individuals with expertise in the field concerned. The quality and integrity of the members are crucial. All members must be independent of the programmes/institutions evaluated. As a general rule EVA tries to recruit at least one Nordic member for each evaluation.

**Self-assessment** - Self-assessment is a mandatory part of the Danish evaluation procedure. The evaluated unit conducts a self-assessment, describing and assessing its own strengths and weaknesses. Self-assessment reports are important parts of the documentation on which the evaluation is based. In connection with each evaluation EVA provides the programmes/institutions under evaluation with a manual for self-assessment.

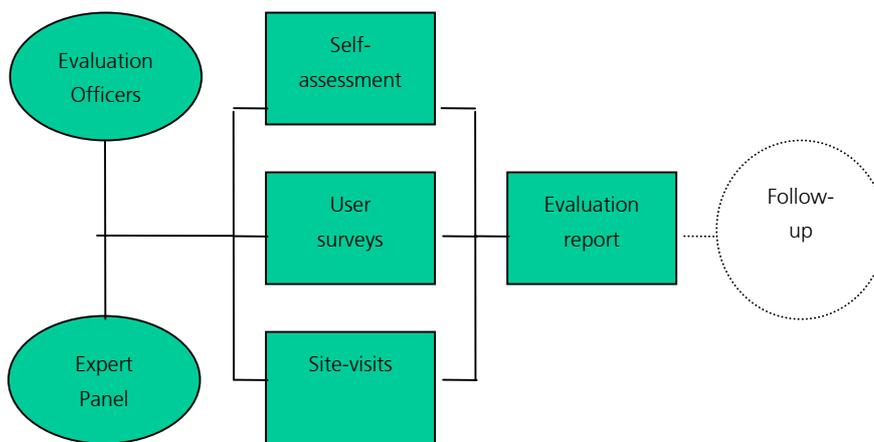
**User surveys** - In connection to each evaluation, user surveys may be conducted among students, parents, graduates, employers and other groups.

**Visits** - The expert panel and the evaluation officers may visit the educational institutions or programmes under review. The visit is planned in agreement with the individual institutions. In general the visit lasts one day per institution and involves meetings with staff, students and management

**Evaluation report** - In the concluding report the expert panel presents its analysis, assessment and recommendations for developing the quality of the programme in question. EVA evaluation officers do, however, hold the practical responsibility of writing the report. All evaluation reports are published together with the user surveys.

**Follow-up** - The follow-up procedure places the main responsibility on the institutions of education. Once an evaluation is finished the crucial phase of implementing the conclusions and recommendations begins. The aim of the evaluation process is to launch a continuous process of quality assurance within the study programmes. It is therefore crucial that the institutions themselves are committed to this follow-up.

**The evaluation model:**



**The evaluation of three Master programmes.**

**The higher education system**

Denmark has fairly recently adopted an education structure parallel to the Anglo-American in the higher education system with the introduction of the Bachelor and Ph.D.-degrees. At the moment a university programme usually consists of a 3-year Bachelor degree programme, followed by a 2-year programme leading to the Candidatus-degree (Master's level). Three years of supervised postgraduate studies after the Master's degree lead to the Ph.D.-degree.

Besides the university educations, the higher education system also has the short-cycle non-university higher education (2-years KVVU) and the medium-cycle non-university education (profession-bachelor). Higher education comprises the following categories of education:

1. short-cycle non-university higher education, i.e. 2 year further technical, commercial and agricultural education.
2. medium-cycle non-university education, i.e. 3- to 3½-year Profession-bachelor.
3. medium- and long-cycle university education, i.e. 3-year Bachelor followed by a 2-year MA.
4. post-graduate university education, i.e. Ph.D., doctorates.

### **AD 1: short-cycle non-university higher education, i.e. further technical, commercial and agricultural education**

The new short-cycle higher education programmes are typically of a two year duration. In most cases they prepare the students for middle management functions in businesses.

*Admission:* The vocational academy programmes build on vocational education and training or a general upper secondary education qualification.

### **AD 2: medium-cycle non-university education**

There is a wide range of different medium-cycle non-university higher education programmes qualifying for just as many professions. The programmes are offered by a wide range of different specialized institutions of varying size: colleges of education, schools of social work, journalism, nursing, etc.

*Admission:* The general admission requirements for all the courses are the completion of one of the qualifying examinations at upper secondary level (Studentereksamen, HF, HHX, or HTX.)

### **AD 3: medium- and long-cycle university education**

This area of higher education covers programmes conducted by the 5 traditional universities and by 6 higher education institutions with university status. Common to these 11 institutions is that they must all carry out research and offer higher education until the highest academic level within their subject-areas.

*Admission:* The general admission requirements for all the courses are the completion of one of the qualifying examinations at upper secondary level (Studentereksamen, HF, HHX, or HTX.). Admission to the master-level requires the completion of a 3-year bachelor-programme usually in the subject concerned.

### **AD 4: Post-graduate university education (i.e. Ph.D., doctorates)**

The Danish doctoral degree is awarded in recognition of the fact that the person awarded the degree possesses considerable scientific insight and maturity and has with his or her dissertation contributed substantially to the scientific area concerned. The award of the doctoral degree is made on the basis of a dissertation, which is defended orally. The PhD- programmes take place at the traditional universities and at higher education institutions with university status.

*Admission:* Enrolment requires the completion of a 5-year candidatus-programme in the subject concerned or in a closely related subject or corresponding qualifications acquired in another way. Enrolment as a PhD-student takes place upon application. Emphasis is laid on the applicant's subject-specific qualifications, the nature of the research project, including the way in which it may form part of the research plans of the subject environment concerned.

## **The Adult and Continuing Education System.**

There is a strong interest in life-long learning for the benefit of the individual, the society and the labor market. The Danish Ministry of Education adopted a new reform of the adult and continuing education system In May 2000. The reform came into force in January 2001.

The reform package comprises a new system of adult education and continuing training and new grant allocation schemes for institutions offering adult and continuing education. The grant system endorsed the initiation of programmes in the new system.

In the new adult and continuing education system, the courses are structured so they in principle can be compared to levels in the ordinary system. The credit award system is extended, and at the same time the courses at all levels must take their point of departure in the occupational experience of the adult learners.

The system may be defined as professional, vocational and practice-oriented courses for adults in employment and the courses are normally taken as part-time studies. The programmes in the adult and continuing education system are not as the ordinary educational system for free. The cost of the programmes varies greatly.

The adult and continuing education system comprises basic education for adults (GVU), which makes it possible for adults with a low level of educational attainment to take a vocationally qualifying upper secondary education programme, and an advanced education system for adults, which offers development of competences for adults, who have already taken a course of education which qualifies for further studies or for occupational employment. The advanced programmes are established at three levels: advanced education for adults (VVU), diploma education, and Master education.

I will focus on the advanced programmes.

### **Advanced programmes**

An advanced programme in the adult and continuing education system must be an independent well-defined course of education. The programme must be completed by a final project which documents that the qualification level for the programme concerned has been attained.

The teaching may be organized as

a) regulated courses in the form of part-time education in the participants' spare time; or

b) flexible courses, where the educational institution in cooperation with the applicant draws up a personal education plan which is to describe the overall course of education taken by the applicant. The flexible courses consist of educational elements from existing programmes, including educational elements, which have already been completed, and they may consist of educational elements from courses at educational institutions abroad.

### **Advanced education for adults (VVU):**

*Admission:* The applicant must have a relevant qualification at upper secondary level or a basic education qualification for adults. A minimum of two years of relevant occupational experience is required.

*Educational level:* The programme is carried through at a level which corresponds to a short-cycle higher education programme.

### **The diploma education:**

*Admission:* The applicant must have completed a relevant short-cycle higher education programme, a further education programme for adults completed as a regulated course or a special entrance course for the diploma programme. A minimum of two years of relevant occupational experience is required.

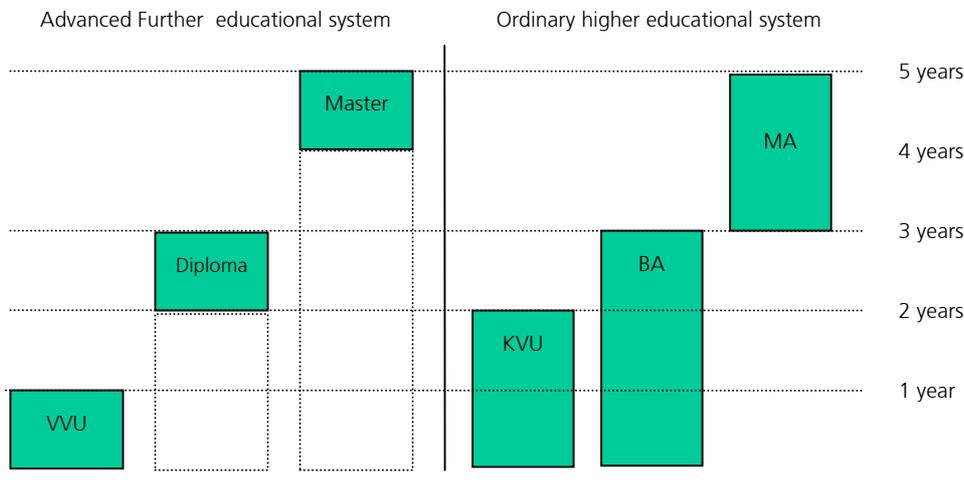
*Educational level:* The programmes are carried out at a level which corresponds to a medium-cycle higher education programme or a Bachelor-programme.

### **The Master education:**

*Admission:* The applicant must have completed a relevant medium-cycle higher education programme, a Bachelor programme or a diploma programme completed as a regulated course. A minimum of two years of relevant occupational experience is required.

*Educational level:* The programme is carried out at a level which corresponds to a long-cycle higher education programme.

## The Danish Higher Education system



## The differences between MA and Master.

It is then clear that there are two different educational degrees which both are called Masters. One in the normal higher education system (from now on called MA) and one in the further education system (from now on Master). Both the MA and the Master are provided by universities and are at the same educational level but are different in length (the 2-year MA and the 1-year Master) and in content.

The purpose and structure of the Master is meant to take the work and life experiences of adults into consideration and as a mid-career education to be structured so that the work life continues along with the education on a part-time basis.

Many Masters contain a high degree of interaction between academic theoretical elements and practical vocationally orientated elements. The students' work experiences can thus be used as a foundation for learning.

It is a legislative demand that the specific master programme is able to identify what exact part of the labor market that is targeted by the programme. The implication of this is that the programme must relate to the relevant labor market in such a way that it can realistically operate in the market of fee paying education. This need is further enhanced by the fact that the fees are normally so high that recruitment of students is dependent on the willingness of employers to pay the fees. This is very much the case in the master programmes now being evaluated.

Because students have obtained occupational experience besides having a medium-cycle higher education or equivalent, the students might be seen as more mature and demanding than the average students in the ordinary educational system.

Does that make special demands on the pedagogical communication of knowledge and competences to the students? What pedagogical priorities are made to assure that the practical aspects are functionally integrated in the teaching at a university course?

Furthermore, it should be considered if and how the paying employees and students could be seen as agents of quality assurance of the programme in relation to labour market needs and the increase in value that the specific student experiences.

## **The growth of Master programmes**

The 1-year Master is a relatively new educational element in Denmark.

The number of available masters is rapidly increasing, and at the same time there is an increase in the demand of new types of master programmes.<sup>1</sup>

The growing market requires a high degree of transparency so that the quality and purpose of the masters are in accordance with the intentions concerning educational level and the vocational orientation. This brings the interaction between academic theory and vocational practices into focus.

As a result of the growth in the number of conferred masters and because of the increasingly complexity of the very broad field of very different master programmes, the Ministry of Education is trying to develop basic approval-procedures with explicit criteria and systematical evaluation. The aim is to increase the transparency in the field of master programmes and clarify according to which criteria the programmes will be evaluated, 5-6 years after their initiation.

Before this process was initiated by the Ministry of Education, the Danish Evaluation Institute had decided to evaluate three Master programmes. It was evident that the evaluation would take place even while the new approval procedures were initiated and tested.

A new element was, therefore added to the evaluation making it a pilot project in the use of explicit criteria. The aim was to develop new knowledge and gain experiences of the application of predefined and explicit criteria to illuminate the methodic implications. As in every other Quality Assurance model, the use of explicit criteria has potentials and drawbacks. This will be discussed in the context of identification of the purpose of the evaluation.

When a common frame for the master programmes and clear procedures for the follow-up evaluation are developed, the Ministry of Education has decided to bestow the power of approval to the Rectors' Conference.

Let us first have a look at the objects of evaluation.

## **The Specific Master programmes**

- Master of Public Administration (MPA), Copenhagen Business School.
- Master of Public Policy (MPP), Roskilde University,
- Master of Public Management (MPM), University of Southern Denmark.

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<sup>1</sup> In *April 2000* only 12 master programmes were approved. *Today* 34 Master programmes are approved and 29 Master programmes are under development. To give some examples of the diversity in master programmes the following could be named: Master of Business Administration, Master in Fire Security, Master of Information Technology, Master in Gender and Culture, Master of Technology Management, Master in Arctic Technology, Master in Institutional Ethics and Practical Analysis and Master of Public Management.

The chosen programmes share some common traits. They all focus on political science and public administration. Although the three programmes are relatively new they are some of the most established masters in Denmark and all of them have produced graduates.

This makes it possible to evaluate the whole course and the connection between the programme and the labour market. None of the programmes have been evaluated before.

Since the subject is relatively homogenous, it is not necessary to stretch the professional profiles of the expert panel too far.

Even though there are differences, the programmes are similar in many aspects, which makes it possible to compare the profile, experiences, strengths and weaknesses of the programmes.

## **The Purpose of the Master evaluation**

The purpose of the evaluation is twofold:

1. To answer the question whether the three master programmes generally fulfill their purposes and objectives?
2. To get practical experience with perspectives that are relevant for an evaluation based on explicit criteria?

### **AD 1. To answer the question whether the master programmes generally satisfy their purpose and objectives?**

The evaluation shall examine the academic level and the fulfillment of the objectives of the master programmes, through an estimate of essential aspects and central conditions.

The evaluation shall as a result bring forth conclusions and recommendations, point out weaknesses and strengths of the programmes and lastly bring forth proposals on how the quality of the programme can be enhanced.

Because of the specific intentions with the master programme an important question is how does the programme handle the interaction between the teaching in a programme in a research environment and the students' occupational experiences and practical competences?

How does the programme fulfill on the one hand the need for a high level of teaching and learning in the academic context and on the other hand the need for a relevant practical and vocational orientation of the programmes? In other words, how do the programmes manage to balance between firstly fulfilling the academic educational goals of university based programmes, secondly the recruitment of experienced and demanding students and lastly tying on to a relevant labor market with employers willing to pay the fees.

### **AD 2. To get practical experience with perspectives that are relevant for an evaluation based on explicit criteria.**

The aim is to develop new knowledge and gain experiences of the application of predefined and explicit criteria to illuminate the methodical implications. As stated earlier, every Quality Assurance model has potentials and drawbacks. The use of explicit criteria furthermore demands that one reflects on the consequences.

## What can be gained by the use of explicit criteria?

The idea is that the application of explicit criteria on a specific field of education like the master could make it possible to attain visibility, transparency and comparability in that field of education. In this way the external and internal quality assurance element could be enhanced:

- Let criteria, which are relevant for the development of the quality in the programmes, become visible and operational and thereby strengthen the internal quality assurance.
- The possibility to plan according to externally and internally approved criteria for evaluation. That way the programmes are becoming aware of the external thoughts on quality in relation to the programme.
- Establish a space for reflection on quality issues at the specific institution. Perhaps making it possible, internally in the programme, to highlight the weaknesses and strengths and find solutions to how the quality in the programme can be enhanced.
- Develop a more transparent educational system and perhaps making it possible to compare the similarities and differences between the programme in question and other closely related ones.

Many people associate explicit criteria with the quality assurance system called accreditation. It is important to make clear the difference between evaluation, accreditation and explicit criteria to avoid misunderstandings.

In contrast with evaluation in general accreditation has two main characteristics. It presupposes an evaluation based on explicit criteria and it is an award of a status and signals approval. In this way accreditation is primarily an outcome of evaluation. It is possible to have evaluation with explicit criteria that is not an accreditation, but it is not possible to have an accreditation that does not build on an evaluation with explicit criteria.

Following the CRE project "Towards accreditation schemes for higher education in Europe?" accreditation can be defined as "a formal, published statement regarding the quality of an institution or a programme, following a cyclical evaluation based on agreed standards".

The European standard organization (CEN) makes the term accreditation even distinct than this. CEN makes a further distinction between accreditation and certification, where the first but not the latter involves a formal consequence, such as losing the right to grant degrees or to public funding (stop/go verdict).

Whereas the accreditation element has a very limited objective – the yes/no verdict or in the CEN definition a stop/go verdict – evaluations normally have a very broad set of purposes, such as: goal oriented, fitness for purpose, quality enhancement, organizational learning, strategic recommendations etc.

### **Explicit criteria can be an obstacle to development:**

As mentioned above it is possible to have evaluation with explicit criteria that is not an accreditation and that maintain a strong focus on development.

But there are some potential problems with explicit criteria that should still be highlighted because they could be obstacles to development whether or not the use of criteria is linked to accreditation:

- If the explicit criteria are not relevant for the educational level or type of the programme.
- If an innovative programme or institution have problems fulfilling the standards.
- If the explicit criteria have an unintended harmonizing function between programmes

- If the explicit criteria end up being a conservative system because the establishment of criteria underpins a conservative understanding of quality.

The task is then to avoid these obstacles and with the use of explicit criteria still to attain visibility, transparency and comparability

### A possible solution

An important demand for the experiment with explicit criteria is that it shall be realistic and possible within the framework of the evaluation methods normally used by the Danish Evaluation Institute, i.e. with a focus on both improvement and accountability.

The implication is several different objectives to the criteria. The set of criteria must be formulated so that the objectives of the individual master programme, the legislative foundation, and the expert panel's professional priorities and estimates can be incorporated. Furthermore the set of criteria must be related to the master programme as educational level and be formulated as frame criteria with a broad relevance for the master level.

All these reflections resulted in the following demands on the criteria:

- **Uniformity:** Establishment of a uniform set of criteria with validity for all of the master programmes. This would assure the highest level of transparency in the evaluation since the estimates of the programmes are practiced on a uniform basis.
- **Relevance of level:** To be able to work with one set of criteria, it must focus on the master programmes as a level.
- **Scope:** The uniform set of criteria must not prevent diversity. This can be fulfilled in two ways: *Firstly* by a core of criteria which are supplemented with specific criteria with relevance to the specific programme. *Secondly* by a uniform set of criteria with a 'fitness for purpose' perspective integrated where the objectives and their fulfillment of the specific programme are considered.
- **Precision:** The criteria must be precise enough in order to make a real estimate possible.
- **Focus on practice:** The set of criteria must not only be focused on the intentions, visions and conditions but also on the elaboration in the content and whole practice of the programme. Does the programme satisfy the intentions and demands?
- **Consistence:** The set of criteria must be externally consistent with the formal regulations of the field and internally consistent with each other.

To secure these demands it is clear that a thorough debate is necessary with professionals on the three master programmes and external experts with an insight in the specific programmes and broadly in higher adult and continuing education system.

A solution would be to let the expert panel develop the criteria and then let the institutions of the three master programmes comment on the draft before the final set of criteria is concluded. Hence the use of explicit criteria will be rooted in the specific educational level and cleared from a professional perspective and from the educational environment. The choice and the formulation of the set of criteria is in that way a part of the evaluation process. Furthermore, to make sure that development is an important aspect in the evaluation, a 'fitness for purpose' aspect should be added in the wording of the criteria.

This should assure that the specific programme is appreciated and not just pulled through a formal quantitative checklist.

These aspects are integrated into the Danish master evaluation

## Framework of themes for the criteria

The work on the criteria is still in progress. At this time there can be described a preliminary framework for the further work with the criteria. The list below should therefore not be seen as exhaustive. However, it does give a picture of the starting point for assessing the level, the fulfillment of goals and the quality of the master educations.

### 1. The subject profile, the mission and the stated goals of the programme.

- Are the objectives clearly stated so the student searching for a programme can make a solid choice based on sound information?
- Is it clear which competences and qualifications the students will achieve with the programme?

### 2. The structure and the content of the programme.

- **The structure** – Is the structure in accordance with the stated objectives and the legal framework for the master programmes? Is the structure thoroughly described and available to the public?
- **The content** – Is the content in accordance with the stated objectives? Are there descriptions of the different elements constituting the programme, the academic progression in the programme and the academic integration of the elements? Furthermore are there descriptions on how the programme is meant to integrate life and work experiences of the adults?
- **The academic perspective of the programme** – Is the academic core of the programme defined and in accordance with the stated objectives? Are the compulsory elements which constitute the programmes identity defined?
- **The academic level** – Is the academic level documented and corresponding with the expected level of master programmes?
- **Curriculum** – Are the proportions and level of the used material in accordance with the stated objectives and the academic level of the programme?

### 3. The organization and facilities of the programme.

- **Organization** – Is the academic and administrative responsibility clearly placed? Is there a technical and administrative support function which is adequate for the tasks of the programme?
- **Economically resources** – Is the economical foundation of the programme stable and transparent?
- **The facilities of the programme** – Are the necessary facilities for the programme like library, IT etc. available?
- **Student environment** – What has been done to create the frames for a good student environment?

### 4. The teaching and the teachers.

- **The forms of learning** – How does the programme in practice communicate the knowledge and competences to the students? How are the practical aspects integrated in the teaching? What pedagogical priorities are made to assure the highest degree of transmission?
- **The relation to research** – Is the programme situated in a research environment? How many of the teachers are researching in the subjects of the programme?
- **The qualifications and competences of the teachers** – What academic background do the teachers on the programme have? How is the distribution of the permanently employed and not permanently employed teachers? Are there guidelines for the pedagogical level of the teachers?

### 5. The students.

- **Completion of the course** – Are considerations of completions thought into the programme's structure? Has an acceptable minimum percentage of students who must complete the course on determined time been decided?

- **Admission** – Have criteria for the admission been established that explicitly state the relevant educational and occupational background the students are required to have?

## 6. Exams and test.

- **The level, number and placement of exams** – Is there a clear priority of how and why the exams are placed as they are?
- **Forms of the exams** - Is there an academic and pedagogic argumentation for the specific exam in relation to the subject?

## 7. Quality assurance and development.

- **Systematic Quality assurance:** Are systematic procedures that gather information from all of the relevant participating parties established, so that a solid foundation for quality estimation is established. The following aspects are obvious for quality assurance:
  1. Quality assurance in relation to the **programme as a whole**.
  2. Quality assurance in relation to **elements of the programme**.
  3. Quality assurance in relation to the **teaching proficiency**.
  4. Quality assurance in relation to **exams**.

## 8. Value added.

- **Measures to evaluate the value added:** The students as adults and with a lot of experience could be viewed as important indicators for quality. Is there a space for reflection and information gathering where it is possible to determine whether the students are experiencing the value added in competences and working qualifications?

## Perspectives for the future work with explicit criteria.

The evaluation is still only in the primary phase and it is too early to arrive at any conclusions.

As mentioned before it is our experience that the educational system in Denmark is too heterogeneous to establish one single set of criteria. In using one set of criteria we would risk ending up with many of the things which should be avoided. The first experiments must examine if it is even possible to establish a set of criteria for an educational level in the Danish educational system.

In the future it is not improbable that the Danish Evaluation Institute, depending on the result of this first test evaluation, will try the same procedure on the other educational levels in Denmark.

In that way the Danish Evaluation Institute will try to be an active player together with the educational institutions in the attempt to develop still better external and internal quality procedures and systems.