

Evaluation approaches and methodologies applied in the institutional development of a quality assurance agency

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate how a public institution uses evaluation approaches and methodologies to assure the quality of its own public activities and services. The paper presents the quality assurance approach of The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) as a case.

The paper describes EVA's quality assurance system as an example of how a public evaluation institute applies both smaller evaluations and larger transverse measures for input on institutional performance. Additionally, the paper demonstrates how follow-up procedures can be integrated as part of quality assurance systems.

Finally, the paper offers concrete examples of three hands-on modes between which evaluators can choose from when they work with development and assessment of quality assurance systems.

The Danish Evaluation Institute – Mission statement in brief¹

The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) is an independent institution formed under the auspices of the Danish Ministry of Education. The institution was established in 1999 by an act of Parliament. EVA's primary task is to initiate and conduct quality assurance of education at all levels from day care institutions to post-graduate education. EVA's mandate covers public educational establishments and private institutions in receipt of state subsidy.

EVA's main objectives are:

- To develop methods for evaluating and improving the quality of teaching and learning;
- To develop and highlight quality of education and teaching through systematic evaluation;
- To advise and collaborate with educational institutions and public authorities on quality issues;
- To be the national centre of knowledge for quality assurance of education;
- To inform the general public, students and employers concerning quality of education.

EVA uses an internationally recognised evaluation model with three phases of evaluation: launch, process and completion. The launch phase involves the wording of the terms of reference and the nomination of an external evaluation panel and an internal project group. The process phase consists of self-evaluation, site visits and user surveys – the latter as a rule carried out by private consultancies. Finally, the completion phase includes the publication of the report and the follow-up.

EVA has a staff of 70. EVA's annual budget is 45.5 million DKK (app. 6 million Euro) on the debit side of which 5, 2 million DKK derives from revenue-generating activities.

¹ For further information see www.eva.dk

1 The concept and organisation of EVA's quality assurance system

Purpose and objectives

The purpose of EVA's quality work is to:

- assure and develop the quality of the central services and products which EVA provides;
- assure and develop EVA as a professional organisation and workplace.

Moreover, the quality work is meant to enable the institute to account for its activities by:

- casting light upon whether EVA's activities and results reflect the mission and general objectives of the institute;
- assessing the enterprise in EVA's strategy for the current period;
- producing data that document the quality of EVA's activities to its surroundings.

Organisation

EVA's internal system for measuring and assuring quality is anchored in the unit for methodological development and quality assurance (UMD). Originally, the UMD was established with the purpose of conducting the assessment of the cooperation with, and the material produced by private consultancies but now the unit also:

- has the responsibility for developing, assuring and qualifying the use of qualitative and quantitative research methods;
- disseminates new methodological knowledge to the evaluation officers;
- carries out revenue-generating activities.

The unit consists of the head of unit, five methodology consultants, and three student assistants. The latter work 15-20 hours a week and are typically social sciences students. We estimate that EVA's quality assurance system demands one third of a full year's work for one consultant and 1.2 years' work for one student assistant.

Main types of activities in EVA's quality work

The quality assurance system described in full detail in chapter 2 consists of two general types of activities: quality assurance studies and quality mechanisms.

Quality assurance studies

We use the term quality assurance studies about both qualitative and quantitative studies.

This quality monitoring system consists of a number of internal and external studies conducted in regular cycles as well as on an ad hoc basis. The focus here will be on the regular studies. In order to assess whether any given study-result is satisfactory, EVA uses a number of objectives for each quantitative study, and these are formulated in advance. The quality system monitors compliance with objectives and it constitutes a foundation on which decisions on alterations of policies and procedures can be made.

These quantitative quality assurance surveys also serve as an evaluation of EVA's accountability, since the surveys document our goal achievement. Each year, EVA concludes a performance contract with the Danish Ministry of Education, which describes the goals the institute should achieve during the following year within the budget of the institute. Typical examples of goals concern the full implementation of the institute's action plan (describing the types and number of evaluations which should be done during the year), the level of satisfaction of the external evaluation groups or the number of supplementary surveys among students or graduates. EVA's goal achievement is described in the annual report, and some of the data comes from the quality assurance surveys of the institutions and external evaluation groups (which will be described below).

Quality mechanisms

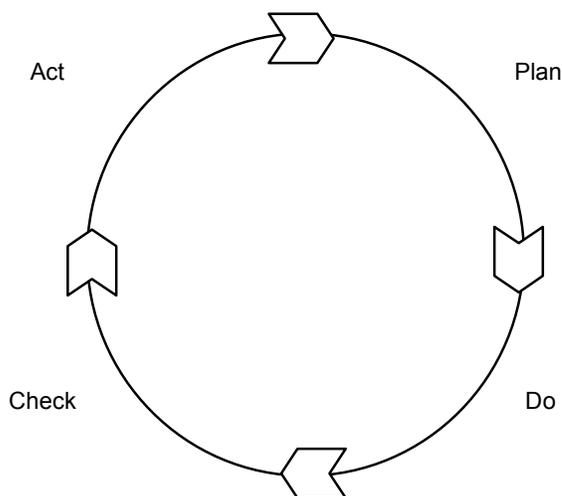
We use the term quality mechanisms to indicate the handbooks, procedures and processes which all have the purpose of assuring and improving the quality of EVA's main product: the evaluation reports. EVA has several handbooks: a handbook for the whole evaluation process, *The Evaluation Handbook* (which will be described later in this paper); a handbook on EVA's rules and guidelines for written presentation (e.g. for reports, letters, power point-slides, etc.); and a handbook for the UMD.

Other important quality mechanisms are the guidance provided by the management secretariat and the UMD. These two specialist units supplement EVA's evaluations officers which typically have a background in the educational sector. The UMD provides *methodological guidance and assurance of services provided by private consultancies*. The staff of the UMD enters into the project teams in order to assure methodological quality and correct use of the different forms of documentation in the evaluations. At the same time, the methodology consultants make sure that work done by private consultancies (i.e. user surveys, focus groups and qualitative interviews) meets the standards we have set for their work. The private consultancies contribute to EVA's evaluation reports by providing a very important part of the documentation on which the analyses and recommendations are based. The management secretariat provides *linguistic and communicative quality assurance*. Similarly to the UMD, the staff of the management secretariat enters into the project teams as specialists with a particular focus on how the evaluation reports are best communicated to the surroundings².

EVA's quality circle

As figure 2 shows, good quality work from EVA's perspective consists of a continuous process, starting with the formulation of objectives for a given activity that is subsequently carried out. Following this, the documentation on the activity is gathered, and, in the light of this, the activity is evaluated. Finally, this evaluation is followed-up by a revision of the objectives for future activities. This cyclic way of thinking can be illustrated by the quality circle.

Figure 2: EVA's quality circle



² The unit is also responsible for the press releases, the information at EVA's websites and the monthly, electronically newsletter, and for assuring a high linguistic quality of EVA's various written publications.

The quality circle shows the relations between the formulation of the objectives, the carrying out of the project, analysis and follow-up, or revision of the general practice in light of the evaluation. The idea is that these activities happen cyclically in order for experiences from finalised projects and evaluations to be involved in the formulation of a new project. The quality circle is to be perceived as an ideal, but serves in a positive way to illustrate the relations between the different stages in a quality assurance process.

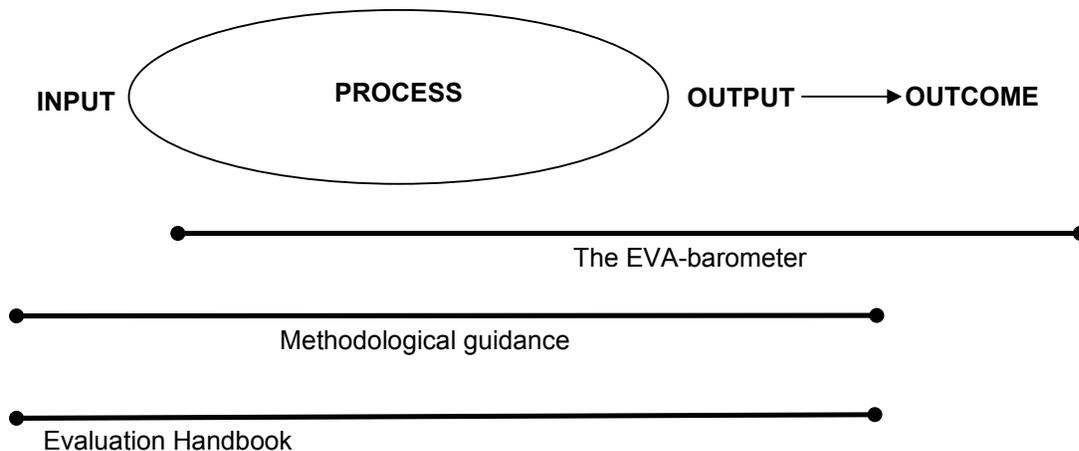
2 Stages and details in EVA's quality assurance system

This chapter describes EVA's quality assurance system as an example of how a public evaluation institute uses both smaller evaluations and larger transverse measures for measuring institutional performance. The description provides an outline of how EVA's quality assurance activities are part of the constant process of improving the services of the institute. In this way, the purpose of the chapter is not only to describe one quality assurance system, but also to inspire and give examples of how one can address quality work and development.

Figure 3 below presents a very general overview of the four stages of the production process at EVA: input, process, output and outcome. The four stages will be described before moving on to an explanation of the three transverse quality assurance activities: the EVA-barometer; methodological guidance; and the Evaluation Handbook.

The production process below is described not in its totality, but rather in a way that is adequate for the purpose of this paper.

Figure 3: Stages in EVA's production process



The input stage

Formulated simply, the input stage is defined here as the initial stage in the production process where organisational resources, in the form of people, procedures, etc., are put into the system in order to achieve a certain predefined result.

Terms of Reference and the Performance Description for Project Team

Prior to every project and activity carried out by EVA, two main documents serve as quality assurance measures: the Terms of Reference and the Performance Description for Project Team. The Terms of Reference describes the objectives and scope of the evaluation as well as purpose, organisation, methodology and follow-up. The Performance Description for Project Team serves as EVA's system

for project management. This includes the:

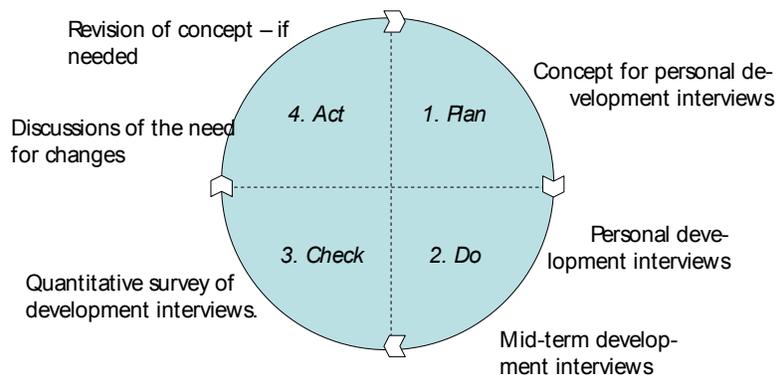
- obligations of the project team and the management to agree on, and describe the goals of the individual project
- quality demands
- expectations to the project management of the project manager, the co-operation between the members of the project team and the communication both internally and externally
- financial and human resources allocated to the project
- timeframe

The project team's ability to achieve the goals in the Performance Description for Project Team is evaluated in an internal meeting when the evaluation is completed. Hence, the Performance Description for Project Team serves a set of criteria to be used in the concluding evaluation of the project management

Staff policy and human resource development

The third quality assurance activity in the input stage concerns staff policy and human resource development. In general, human resource development is highly prioritised and plays a central role at EVA. The quality cycle for personal development interviews illustrated below is in accordance with the cyclic perspective discussed above. In this way, the quality assurance activities follow the four general stages described in the quality circle.

Figure 4: The quality cycle for personal development interviews³



Besides staff policy, policy for salary negotiations, courses and evaluations of the physical and psychological working environment, etc., personal development interviews form a central part of the human resource development. This is, therefore, also a central part of the quality assurance system, as human resources constitute one of the most important resources that go into the production process. Every staff member's qualifications and competence profile, as well as their needs for future development, are discussed once a year at the personal development interviews. The interviews have been institutionalized in order to assure a continuous development of each staff member's qualifications and competences, as well as assuring that the development of the individual staff member is in accordance with general organisational needs and strategic objectives.

³ For further information: Tue Vinther-Jørgensen & Signe Ploug Hansen (2005). *Danish Account*. Joint project in the Nordic Network of Quality Assurance Agencies, NOQA.

The concept for personal development interviews runs in a yearly cycle with three phases. Beginning with a common clarification of the competence profile of each unit at EVA, this is followed by the personal development interviews, and the cycle ends with a follow-up phase where the management decides the competence development activities at EVA for the coming year.

The process

During the process, input turns into output. The activities that take place here are the steps that EVA takes to conduct an evaluation or another form of study. In the part of the quality work that is focused on assuring the quality of the process, we assess the institute's services across themes such as project management and organisation, relations to the external evaluation group if applicable, information and application of methodologies.

To quality assure the production process, we carry out four studies on a yearly basis. Each of the studies covers both the production process and the output stage. These studies will be described in the following three paragraphs.

Three of the studies are external surveys. These include an evaluation of EVA by organisations that have requested revenue-generating studies and two evaluation related surveys: one being an evaluation of EVA by the external evaluation groups, and the other an evaluation of EVA by the evaluated institutions. The fourth study is an assessment of the cooperation with, and the material produced by private consultancies, and is an internal study. As the two evaluation-related surveys are considered to be the most important quality assurance surveys conducted by EVA, most of the attention in the next two paragraphs will be devoted to these two.

Evaluation of EVA by the external evaluation groups

The external evaluation group consists of people with a professional expert knowledge in the field of evaluation and has the professional responsibility for the evaluation and for the assessments and the re-recommendations in the report in cooperation with the project team consisting of EVA staff.

The Evaluation of EVA by the external evaluation groups consists of a survey with the purpose of uncovering the group member's assessment of the cooperation with EVA. The survey is conducted immediately after each evaluation has been completed. The members of the evaluation groups gain a thorough insight into the working processes and evaluation methodologies used at EVA, which is why their assessment of topics such as project management and organisation, application of methodologies and cooperation is vital for the continuous improvement of the services of the institute. As such, the survey is an important part of the ongoing quality assurance and development at EVA.

When the survey is concluded, the results are discussed by the project team and the management as part of the concluding evaluation of the project management (cf. the description of the Performance Description for Project Team).

Currently, EVA is working on a new concept for the survey that supplements the quantitative approach with a qualitative module. The general idea is to carry out a few focus group interviews with members of the evaluation groups. The plan is to exploit the strengths of qualitative research in casting some light onto *why* the members answer the questionnaire as (positively as) they do. The objective is also to find out whether some themes or fields in the process are underexposed. In this way, the purpose is

dual: partly to get answers to the question of *why* and partly to be explorative in the ongoing development of the quality assurance activities of EVA.

The evaluation of EVA by the evaluated institutions

The evaluation of EVA by the evaluated institutions consists of a survey carried out six months after the completion of each evaluation. The reason why we wait for six months is that the survey includes questions of the institutions' follow-up activities. As far as the process is concerned, the purpose of the survey is to identify strengths and weaknesses of EVA's cooperation with the evaluated institution(s) and get their assessment of the process and, thereby, of the methodologies applied.

Evaluation of EVA by organisations requesting revenue-generating activities

The purpose of the evaluation of EVA by organisations requesting revenue-generating activities is to assess the quality of the work we do when we conduct activities on request. The evaluation of EVA by organisations requesting revenue-generating activities consists of a survey thematized in a similar way as the two evaluation related surveys described above.

Assessment of the cooperation with, and the material produced by private consultancies

The assessment of the cooperation with, and the material produced by private consultancies consists of a qualitative study in which both the project manager and the methodology consultant during the project maintain a log. This log includes experiences of contract management, communication and the data collection process. Each year in autumn we gather the assessments in all the logs and hold meetings with the individual private consultancies in order to discuss our and their experiences of the projects they have been involved in.

The output stage

Output is results. This stage is constituted by the results of the evaluations. A report is most often the result that is to be quality assured.

The output stage is the part of EVA's production process in which most quality assurance activities take place. Once a year, or on an ad hoc basis, a number of studies are carried out in order to determine how the involved or interested parties assess EVA's services. The table below provides an overview of all the activities instituted to quality assure the activities in the output stage.

Table 1: External and internal studies conducted by EVA to quality assure activities in the output stage

	External surveys		Internal study
<i>Evaluation related surveys</i>	<i>Knowledge centre related surveys</i>	<i>Revenue generating activities related surveys</i>	<i>Annual study</i>
Evaluation of EVA by the external evaluation groups	User evaluation of EVA's conferences and courses in evaluation	Evaluation of EVA by organisations requesting revenue generating activities	Assessment of the cooperation with, and material produced by private consultancies
Evaluation of EVA by the evaluated institutions	User evaluation of EVA's electronic quality assurance tools		

Note: The highlighted studies are further described in the paper.

As the previous paragraph contains the objectives and introductory descriptions of the studies highlighted in the table above, this paragraph will focus on the way these studies constitute quality assurance activities in the output stage.

The evaluation of EVA by the external evaluation groups; the evaluation of EVA by the evaluated institutions; and finally the evaluation of EVA by the organisations requesting revenue-generating activities all have the following in common: that the activities in the output stage are quality assured by asking the interested parties for their assessment of the report, including the use of documentation material, the language, structure and scope of the report, as well as EVA’s ability to disseminate the results of the evaluation or study. The purpose of the questions related to these themes is to measure the results of each evaluation both in absolute terms and in relation to the expectations that the interested parties expressed in advance.

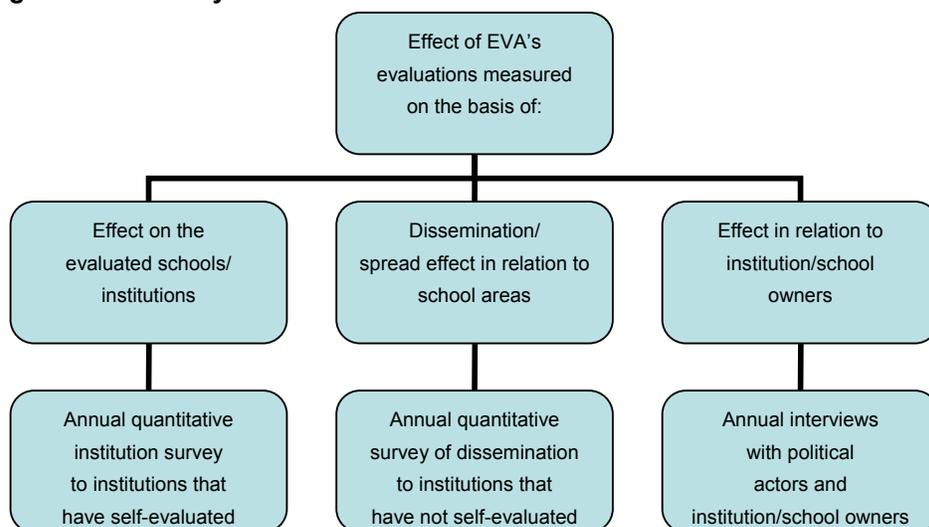
In the assessment of the cooperation with, and material produced by private consultancies, the UMD assesses the performance of the private consultancies in terms of the use of documentation material in the report and the general quality of the report.

The management secretariat’s assurance of the linguistic and communicative quality of EVA’s reports is also a quality mechanism in the output stage.

The outcome stage

Outcome is the effects of the evaluations for the evaluated institutions or other users. EVA measures the outcome of its evaluations in three separate surveys:

Figure 5: The study of the effect of EVA’s evaluations.



The outcome at the evaluated institutions is measured in the annual evaluation of EVA by the evaluated institutions. Six months after the evaluation, the institutions answer questions about the implications of having been part of the evaluation process. For instance, to what extent the evaluation

has caused them to implement specific initiatives, and to what extent these initiatives, the different elements of the evaluation (the self-evaluation, user surveys, site visits, and the evaluation report) and the evaluation as a whole have entailed developmental processes within the institution. In this survey, EVA uses objectives formulated in advance to monitor the development in the assessments. One example of such an objective is that at least 60% of the evaluated institutions must give a positive assessment of the evaluation's contribution to internal development at the institution.

Another quantitative survey which EVA uses to measure the outcome of its evaluations is a survey among schools which were not selected to be part of an EVA-evaluation – but which could have been. For instance, in 2004 EVA evaluated the measures to enhance pupils' reading skills. Six schools were part of the evaluation (these carried out a self-evaluation and hosted a site visit from EVA and the evaluation group). In this survey we ask the institutions that did not participate in the evaluation if they know of the evaluation report and whether they have changed their practice after reading it. So this survey provides us with information about the spread of our evaluation results and the impact they might have on institutions other than the ones which took part in the evaluation.

The third element in EVA's evaluation of outcome is an assessment of the effect made by relevant political agents, and agents of the school administrative system: the Danish Ministry of Education and the local authorities⁴. These qualitative interviews are now conducted by an independent consultancy – the first time being this autumn. The purpose of the interviews is to identify the extent to which the school authorities know about EVA's evaluations, how they view the evaluations' contribution to development, and how they have reacted to the recommendations in the reports. These interviews will be conducted once a year.

Transverse quality assurance activities

Some of EVA's central quality assurance mechanisms and surveys do not fit into the model in figure 3, since they cover two or more of the elements in the model. The most important ones are the EVA-barometer, the methodological guidance and the Evaluation Handbook. These will be introduced below.

The EVA-barometer

The EVA-barometer is an overall expression for the satisfaction with the institute's evaluation process, output and products based on the results from the main quality assurance surveys. The unit for methodology has identified six dimensions across the surveys. They are described below. Following each description, the phase in which the dimension in question belongs to is noted (process, output or outcome):

- Information. The respondents' assessment of the quality of the information they receive from EVA before and during the project, including EVA's language usage, the amount of material and its clarity. *PROCESS*
- Cooperation. The respondents' assessment of the relations between EVA, the collaborators and buyers. *PROCESS*
- Organisation. The respondents' assessment of how a process is organised, including timeframe, duration of meetings, planning of site visits, weighting of the different elements in the courses, distribution of responsibility between the parties including the collaborators' opportunities for

⁴ Local authorities are the counties and the municipalities: In Denmark the counties administer the upper secondary schools, and the municipalities administer the primary and lower secondary school for 7-16 year-olds (the "folkeskole").

influence. Also the respondents' assessment of how the external evaluation groups are assembled by EVA and their level of knowledge about the specific topic of the evaluation. *PROCESS*

- Methods. The respondents' assessment of the reliability and validity of the chosen methods, of EVA's level of knowledge about the method, and of the use of the different elements in the evaluation process as a whole. *PROCESS and OUTPUT*
- Outcome. The respondents' assessment of the overall outcome of having been a part of an EVA-activity, as well as the respondents' assessment of the outcome of the various elements in the evaluation, e.g. the self-evaluation, user surveys, meetings, and site visits. *OUTCOME*
- Communication. The respondents' assessment of EVA's ability to communicate the results of the final report including the language usage, structure, and scope of the report. *OUTPUT*.

As the presentation of the dimensions show, the barometer contains an overall measurement of process, output, and outcome. The barometer will be referred to later in this paper, as it also serves as a means of improving our quality assurance surveys.

Methodological guidance

The above mentioned guidance on the use of methods in the evaluations can be seen as a quality mechanism touching both input, process, and output. *Input* because the guidance is concerned with the process of writing the terms of reference in which the overall design for the evaluation is committed to paper. *Process* because the methodology consultants provide quality assurance of the data collection process – EVA's own (in the form of self evaluations and site visits) and the data collected by private consultancies. *Output* because the methodology consultants read the first draft of the evaluation report with particular reference to the use of the empirical material.

The Evaluation Handbook

The Evaluation Handbook is a collection of documents which describes in full detail the procedures that EVA has developed and implemented to ensure the quality of its evaluations. As such, the Evaluation Handbook describes what to do and how to do it for each of the evaluation phases. Best-practice procedures and routines are thoroughly described in order to ensure consistency, goal achievement, effectiveness, systematisation and, last but certainly not least, a high level of quality in the services and products of the institute.

3 Procedures for follow-up

Quality assurance data should be used to improve the quality of the activities of the institution – not just be gathered and analysed. EVA is aware of the challenges that exist in this phase in the quality circle –among other reasons because our audits⁵ of four Danish universities (or parts of them) have shown how difficult it can be for an institution to use the results of its quality assurance studies in the planning of future activities. Additionally, we have also experienced these challenges ourselves. Hence, over the past year, EVA has put particular effort into implementing follow-up procedures to ensure that the results from our quality assurance studies are used in the planning of EVA's activities. After having designed and built up the system for collecting the quality data (i.e. having drawn up the goals for our quality assurance system and analyzed how to achieve them) and having refined this stage, it is now time to focus on completing the circle. We have been doing so by changing the way we report the results.

Each quality assurance survey is being reported in writing. The results of the larger quality assurance surveys are also being presented and discussed at internal meetings for all the staff at EVA. Besides these two forms of reporting in the UMD, we also provide EVA's management with a specific suggestion of how to act on the information gathered through the quality assurance surveys: which initiatives can solve the problem shown in the survey, or how can practice which has proven itself successful in the surveys be implemented as general practice at EVA?

We also suggest to the management in which internal forum the decision should be discussed – and if there is a need to discuss the implementation outside the management. The principle of an efficient follow-up on the quality assurance surveys is that it takes place in already existing forums: the weekly meetings of the management, and the meetings of the staff-management committee. Another way of implementing changes is by editing the Evaluation Handbook.

An example is the follow-up on a result from the survey among members of the external evaluation groups:

Figure 6: Example of a suggestion to EVA's management for follow-up on a quality assurance survey

Survey	Responsible person(s) or group(s)	Results from the survey which require follow-up actions	Suggestions for solutions (from the UMD)	Suggestions for actions (from the UMD)	Suggestion for deadline for the completion of the follow-up actions	Management's comments
Survey among members of the evaluation groups	The management and the project teams	14% of the respondents find EVA's information about the workload (predominantly) insufficient (the equivalent from last year is 3%).	We ought to ensure that the members of the evaluation groups are adequately informed about the workload in the evaluation process.	This should be added to the Evaluation handbook in order to make sure that the recommendations are given priority when starting-up new projects.	This must happen when the projects on the 2006 action plan are being planned and carried out.	-

⁵ An audit is an evaluation of a quality assurance system.

The survey showed that 14% of the group members considered EVA's information about the time needed for the work in the evaluation group to be insufficient or predominantly insufficient. Though the percentage is quite small, the previous year it was 3%, and we therefore wanted to stop this negative trend. The UMD recommended to the management that it should ensure that all members of evaluation groups were properly informed about the work load associated with membership of the group. This should be taken into account in the planning and at the beginning of new evaluation projects at the institute.

4 Development and assessment of EVA's quality assurance system

The purpose of this fourth chapter in the paper is, firstly, to sum up the weaknesses that this description of EVA's quality assurance system has shown. Secondly, we will introduce the reader to three different modes of further developing quality assurance systems (validation process with the EVA-barometer; benchmarking study with the standards of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) as criteria; and external evaluations).

It seems clear from the previous chapters that EVA has a relatively coherent and comprehensive quality assurance system. Although the current version of the system is the result of a long development process, there is always room for improvement, and this is of course also the case here.

Thus, the above descriptions and analyses have shown that the system is underdeveloped in terms of the outcome stage. However, the above mentioned outcome study will hopefully fill this gap already by the end of this year.

Validation process – the EVA barometer

As the EVA barometer has already been described, the referral in this paragraph will focus exclusively on the way that the validation process of the barometer serves as a mode for the development of the quality assurance system.

The methodology behind the validation process is factor analysis, as this is a relevant methodological strategy for empirical validation of the questions in the barometer. In this way, we are able to assess whether the questions actually measure the dimension to which they are conceptually connected.

The validation process consists of three phases.

Firstly, we choose the surveys which are suitable for inclusion. Surveys included in the barometer must, as a minimum, be carried out once a year and contain questions that are repeated survey after survey, and year after year, contributing to one or more of the dimensions in the barometer. The gain from this initial selection process is the securement of a homogeneous data-foundation for the barometer.

The second phase includes an analytical classification of questions in the barometer. The strategy is that two methodology consultants make an assessment of which questions contribute to the single dimensions. At the same time, it is assessed whether the answer categories are comparable.

The third phase is the empirical validation of the questions in the barometer; the barometer being, as mentioned, conducted with the use of factor analysis.

On the basis of the results collected through the three phases we deduce eventual recommendations regarding problematical questions in the single surveys. The recommendations serve as a basis for a revision of the survey and must therefore be communicated to the consultant responsible for the respective survey. Thus, the validation process contributes to a refinement of the quality assurance system by validating the questions in the surveys and, at the same time, by enhancing the reliability and credibility of the barometer.

Benchmarking study with the ENQA-standards as criteria

In 2005 the Ministers of Education from the Bologna signatory states adopted the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area. Some of these standards and guidelines concern external quality assurance agencies and are suitable as criteria in a benchmark study, as was exactly carried out in this year's joint project in the Nordic Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (NOQA)⁶.

The Nordic project included discussions and reflections on the standards, under the following headings:

- Activities
- Resources
- Mission statement
- Independence
- External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies
- Accountability procedures.

By benchmarking a quality assurance system against international standards and other institutions, it is possible to get a measure of organisational performance and practices against others in the same, or different branches. In doing so, a good insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the quality assurance system can be gained.

External evaluations

All of the above quality assurance activities have been conducted by EVA staff alone, without external assistance. But sometimes, development can arise from seeing things from a different perspective to the usual one.

In spring 2005, Högskoleverket (the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education) conducted an external evaluation of EVA⁷.

The brief was to evaluate the totality of the activities of EVA in three central areas: evaluation, knowledge centre activities and revenue-generating activities. The strategic considerations of the institute have been examined as well as the processes and methods chosen. The management and internal organisation of the institute have also been analysed. The external framework and conditions that apply to the work of the institute have been considered in the assessment.

The above evaluation is a continuation of the extensive quality assurance efforts carried out by EVA since the establishment of the institute. Another aim has been to qualify the institute for inclusion in the register of quality assurance agencies active in Europe, which is now being developed within the framework of The Bologna Process.

The external evaluation has helped us to see our processes, procedures, routines, etc., from a different perspective, while helping us to progress in our ongoing development.

⁶ For further information: Tue Vinther-Jørgensen & Signe Ploug Hansen (2005). *Danish Account*. Joint project in the Nordic Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (NOQA).

⁷ For further information and an English summary of the report go to:

http://www.eva.dk/About_EVA/Quality_assurance_at_EVA/External_evaluation_of_EVA.aspx

5 Concluding remarks

This paper has hopefully made a convincing argument that EVA's priority on quality assurance mechanisms and studies is substantial in relation to the size of the institute.

The purpose of EVA's quality assurance system is to guarantee that in terms of credibility and consistency EVA meets the high expectations and demands of government, stakeholders, educational institutions, and other users of EVA's reports. The quality assurance system is a means to better services and products and to a high uniform quality standard. Thus, the quality assurance system is not an end in itself, but one means to achieve the end of a quality standard second to none.