

Guarding the Guardian: The Evaluation of the Danish Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The Danish Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation was established in 1992 by the Ministry of Education as an independent agency with the mandate to evaluate all higher education programmes at university as well as non-university level. At the same time the Ministry decided that the Centre should itself be evaluated by external experts after five years. This paper presents the process and results of the evaluation with focus on the learning experience of the Danish Centre and the decision of the Danish government on the basis of the results of the Centre and the positive evaluation to establish an evaluation institution covering the whole educational sector. The paper concludes with some suggestions on relevant procedures for future credible external evaluations of agencies.

SUMMARY

Introduction

The Danish Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education (the Centre) was established in 1992 with the mandate to evaluate all higher education programmes at university as well as non-university level at a regular and systematic basis. The Centre was set up for an initial period of five years and on the condition that the Centre itself would be subject to an evaluation after five years in order to decide if the Centre should obtain status of a permanent body.

The time schedule for the evaluation was changed in 1996, however, when the then Minister of Education and his advisers judged it to be too early to evaluate the effects of the systematic evaluations after what in reality would be four years of operation. Accordingly the evaluation was postponed but to be finalised before the end of 1998. The focus of the evaluation was also changed in the autumn of 1997 when the government launched the idea of establishing an evaluation agency not only responsible for the evaluation of higher education but of all sectors of the educational system. Accordingly, the evaluation of the Centre was redefined to concentrate on the lessons learned and to discuss methodological considerations for the future.

At an earlier stage the Danish Ministry of Education did consider to let the evaluation be undertaken by an external body independently of the Ministry. But eventually the Ministry took it upon itself to initiate and organise the evaluation. In a formal sense this was the relevant procedure in as much as the Centre is an independent

institution under the over all authority of the Ministry. In January 1998 a plan for the evaluation and the method to be used was presented.

The evaluation process consisted of the following steps which will further be discussed below:

- \$ self evaluation
- \$ site visit and report done by an external, international expert panel
- \$ an impact study carried out by external consultants
- \$ a hearing process finalised with a conference with the participation of all interested parties to discuss the results of the evaluation.

The evaluation process

The self evaluation

The Centre was asked by the Ministry to prepare a self-evaluation report with the main focus on the methodological experiences gathered. The Ministry did not set up exact guidelines but emphasised that the self-evaluation should not include organisational or financial aspects. The stated reason was that the Centre was not included in the policy process on the organisational and financial framework for the Centre itself until 1992.

The schedule for the preparation of the self-evaluation report was 6 weeks and the length indicated to be approximately 25 pages.

The Centre interpreted the task ahead primarily to provide the panel of experts with sufficient insight in the Centre and in the basis on which the methodological decisions have been made. An important part of the self-evaluation was an in depth analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the applied method. The Centre also found it necessary to include a presentation of the political context out of which the Centre was born. Both aspects have naturally had a decisive impact on the way in which the evaluations have been conducted.

The Centre organised a small self-evaluation committee, which included the director, the deputy director and two senior staff with the responsibility to organise and draft the report. One of the first steps of the committee was to define the criteria for a good self-evaluation in the context of the Centre. It was decided to apply the following principles in the drafting of the report:

- to make a status of the performance of the Centre according to all the elements of the mandate and not only to the evaluations
- to provide a thorough, self-critical, and reflective analysis of the various element of the evaluation method

- to identify strengths and weaknesses as well as suggestions as to how any shortcomings and inconveniences could be amended
- to involve the staff in the discussions of the content of the report before it was forwarded to the Ministry of Education.

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A number of annexes were added to the self-evaluation report that provided the documentation and support presentations, conclusions and recommendations in the report.

The expert panel

The Ministry of Education appointed the expert panel according to the following criteria: An international dimension should be represented, as well as expertise in the field of evaluation generally and in higher education in particular. The panel came to comprise the following members:

- Berit Askling, Professor in pedagogics at the University of Göteborg, co-chairman of the Swedish National Agency for HE
- Lars Nordskov Nielsen, former Danish Ombudsman and former professor of public law at the University of Copenhagen
- Bjørn Stensaker, Researcher at NIFU and CHEPS and former responsible for several Norwegian evaluations of higher education.

Bjørn Stensaker acted as secretary of the group. The Centre covered all expenses in connection with the work of the panel, i.e. travel expenses, subsistence and fees.

The Ministry of Education did not present the terms of reference for the evaluation to the members until the very last moment, i.e. during the week before the site visit. The stated objective was to evaluate the reliability and suitability of the methods applied by the Centre. It turned out to be a problem that apart from the self evaluation report the panel did not from the Ministry receive any further documentation previous to the visit such as the mandate of the Centre, examples of evaluation reports and the guidelines for the self evaluation used by the Centre.

After a short meeting with the Ministry of Education the panel met during a 12 day visit on 27 and 28 May 1998 at the Centre with the director and the deputy director, the project managers, the students as well as two former chairmen of expert committees. The panel was itself responsible for the organisation of the site visit. The impact study, which was carried out in connection with the evaluation, was not finalised when the site visit took place. The panel mentions in its report that it would have provided a better basis for conclusions and recommendations if the impact study had been available to them or if the time schedule had allowed the panel to meet with representatives of the HE institutions.

The panel commented on the objectives of the Centre and the impact of the initial decisions taken at the political level in connection with the establishment of the

Centre. However, the panel first and foremost focussed on the proper planning and the implementation of the evaluation process.

The impact study

The Ministry of Education had earlier in 1998 commissioned a major consultancy firm to report on the impact and effects of the series of evaluations and more specifically whether the evaluations had been subject to follow-up, what changes had been made on the basis of the evaluation reports, and if the evaluation process and reports constituted a relevant basis for follow-up. Furthermore, the report contained an appraisal of the evaluation method used by the Centre.

The report was based on group interviews with the chairmen of the national advisory boards on HE, and with the Centre for Evaluation and on individual interviews with presidents and vice presidents of the 12 universities. The course supervisors of all programmes which had been evaluated during the period from 1992-1997 and the deans received a questionnaire. 80% and 70% of the recipients respectively returned the questionnaires.

A number of case studies were further conducted in order to illustrate how the follow-up activities had been organised.

The hearing process

All reports prepared in connection with the evaluation process were public and after their finalisation they were sent to the relevant stakeholders for comments i.e. the HE institutions, the national advisory boards, the professional unions, and professional organisations. The whole evaluation process concluded in a conference with stakeholder representatives, the Ministry of Education, the expert panel, and the Centre, with the purpose of having an open and future oriented discussion of the experiences with the first round of external evaluation of higher education.

Main results of the evaluation

Evaluation of the Centre

It is not possible within the constraints of this paper to present all the results of the evaluation, but in general terms the outcome of the evaluation was positive. The experts concluded that the Centre had fulfilled the objectives outlined in the mandate in a thorough and systematic way, and very importantly, that the Centre had been successful in setting up evaluation procedures which combined the two objectives of control and improvement. The large majority of stakeholder's parties found that the evaluations carried out by the Centre were valuable, and that they had been carried out in a professional way and according to appropriate methods.

The impact study also testifies support for and acceptance of the evaluations and the way in which these have been carried out even though the HE institutions like to stress the fact that the self evaluation process has taken up a large amount of human and financial resources at the institutions. The large majority of institutions

¹ The rectors of the non-university institutions (app. 190) were not included in the survey.

have initiated follow-up activities but the extent of the follow-up depends of the area of evaluation. Accordingly, the evaluations have led to changes but most institutions interpret the reports as presentations of good advice and ideas and not as commands that must be obeyed.

Evaluation of the evaluation process

After five years of continuous evaluation of higher education study programmes it is an obvious procedure to take stock of the results of the efforts. The Centre did not take such an initiative itself at an earlier stage mainly because the evaluation was originally foreseen to take place after four years, which then later became six years.

The most recurrent feed back from the evaluated institutions during the last seven years has been on the value of the self-evaluation process. The experience of the Centre does not differ from the experience of institutions. It was valuable to critically analyse and discuss the various parts of the evaluation procedures and with the added perspective to create an overview of the various developments to which the method has been subject over the years. It has been a tradition since 1992 that the professional staff goes into retreat twice a year to discuss the relevance of the evaluation procedures and possible areas of improvement. However, the self-evaluation as well as the other parts of the evaluation process has been the first occasion for the Centre to get a comprehensive overview and feed back on strengths and weaknesses of its procedures.

Another positive aspect of the evaluation was the dialogue with the experts first and foremost during the site visit. All parties at the Centre enjoyed discussing their work with experts who brought to their task essential impartiality and the capacity to formulate constructive criticism and to question established procedures with a development oriented perspective.

The Centre itself took the initiative to conduct an impact study in 1996 as part of the OECD-project "Quality Management, Quality Assessment and the Decision-making Process" but this study was done at a much smaller scale compared to the survey done as part of the evaluation. This comprehensive study included the views of all interested parties at the institutions. The study thus provided the Centre, the Ministry and other interested parties with the first valuable conclusions and considerations of the effects of the evaluations and the strengths and weaknesses of the evaluation approach.

There is no doubt that the external evaluation is a valuable process as it provides an organisation with an external view on its procedures and it should be done at a regular basis. However, even if the learning experience for the Centre has been extremely valuable, follow-up has been difficult. Decisions on the organisation of future evaluation activities in the field of higher education depend on the planned evaluation institute.

Relevant procedures for external evaluation of evaluation agencies

The experience of the external evaluation of the Danish Centre provides the basis for some thoughts on relevant criteria for similar processes.

- a) There should be an early statement from the Aowner@ of the evaluation agency to the agency itself, HE institutions and stakeholders that an evaluation is planned and preferably when this will happen.
- b) It is rightly not considered good practice to be one=s own external evaluator. Accordingly the owner, whether a ministry of education or others, must either keep at a good arm=s length to the evaluation process or make sure that the evaluation does not cover conditions and processes for which the owner has a responsibility.
- c) The essential externality of the process depends on the impartiality and integrity of the experts appointed to the panel, but the experts must also be credible as professionals in the field of evaluation and higher education.
- d) Documentation must be of the highest order and apart from the obligatory analytical and self-critical self evaluation report documentation should include surveys of institutional and stakeholder attitudes towards the work of the external evaluation agency.
- e) It is important to keep in mind that the external evaluation of an agency should not replace systematic procedures for feed back from those involved in the evaluations of HE.
- f) The external evaluation of an agency should be set up with clear terms of reference including an outline of the procedures for the necessary follow-up.

In conclusion the Danish Centre appreciates the fact that it is among the first evaluation agencies to experience a clearly processed external evaluation but that the effects and learning process would have increased significantly if initiation, process and follow up had been more closely thought together.

