

Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Denmark

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In "Global Perspectives on Quality in Higher Education", edited by David Dunkerly & Wai Sum Wong, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers, 2001, ISBN 0 7546 1829 3.

Introductory remarks.

Denmark like Hong Kong is a small country. But Denmark like Hong Kong also has strong ambitions that smallness shall be compensated by its higher education system being at the elite international level in terms of the quality of teaching and research.

The period of a formalized approach and framework for quality assurance in Denmark, however, is only a decade old. Danish Higher Education Institutions did not till the very late 1990s have any very strong tradition for giving a priority to quality assurance of teaching and learning. On the contrary especially the university level institutions were securely based in the Humboldtian idea of the university mission to be first and foremost research. Accordingly the search for established and operational internal systems of quality assurance in the universities would by 1992 have been a very futile one.

However, in 1992 the Danish government as one of the first countries in Europe decided to set up a national system for external evaluation of higher education. The Danish Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education (The Evaluation Centre) was established with the mandate to evaluate all higher education programmes at university and non-university level at a regular and systematic basis. (Thune 1994)

The establishment of the Evaluation Centre was a reflection of many and varied interests, trends and experiences. In the 1990s evaluation became a serious issue within educational policy. Evaluation came to be regarded as the natural consequence of parallel developmental trends in higher education, in Denmark as well as in many other European countries. (Thune 1997b)

The transition from elite education to mass education had changed the qualifications which students possess upon admission to higher education and called for ongoing quality assurance. At the same time national governments had concentrated more on monitoring the contents of higher educational programmes in connection with the allocation of resources. The desire to obtain "value for money" was followed, in a number of countries, by a visible decentralization process, where the state would withdraw and relinquish more and more of its competence and responsibility to the educational institutions themselves. ISO-9000 systems, TQM and other quality programmes

from the private sector made their way into the public sector, including the educational field. Finally, the internationalisation of students and studies had demanded international comparison of well-defined quality levels.

In Denmark these trends were linked to the joint efforts of the chairmen of the advisory bodies in higher education. The chairmen initiated from 1989 a series of pilot evaluations of higher education programmes and had encouraged the Minister of Education to set up an organisation to proceed with evaluations on a more formalized basis. (Chairmen of the National Advisory Boards 1992)

The Centre was set up for an initial period of seven years and on the condition that the Centre itself would be subject to an evaluation in order to decide whether the Centre should become a permanent body. This evaluation took place in 1998 and a panel with international experts concluded in favour of the procedures and methodologies applied by the Centre. (Thune & Kristoffersen 1999)

The Centre had passed the test and could have been expected to continue on a permanent basis. The Centre did become central in a major new organisation of quality assurance of Danish education, but in the completely new context of the much more comprehensive Danish Evaluation Institute. This development will be treated in detail below after a brief presentation of the organisation of Danish higher education.

An outline of the nature of higher education provision

In Denmark the system of higher education is administered centrally by the Ministry of Education's Department of Higher Education. Only certain programmes within such fields as art, architecture, librarianship and marine engineering are placed under other ministries (Danish Ministry of Education 1996). The system is mainly financed by the State and the tuition is free of charge for the students.¹

Higher education in Denmark is characterized by a binary structure, based on a separation of the non-university sector, i.e. the vocationally oriented programmes and the university sector. The non-university sector consists of mono-professional institutions, whereas the universities are poly-professional. The system is normally divided into two sectors: The non-university sector with short-cycle higher education and medium-cycle higher education, and the university sector with long-cycle higher education programmes, respectively. Each category will be further discussed below.

For a small country Denmark has succeeded in building up a remarkably complex and differentiated educational system. In higher education this is evidenced especially in the non-university sector where a large number of institutions offer study programmes of varying lengths and level: The short-cycle higher education area includes 70 institutions, the medium-cycle higher education area 112 institutions, and the long-cycle higher education institutions area includes 12 institutions. In addition, the Ministry of Cultural Affairs administers 21 schools, which are either medium-cycle or long-cycle higher education institutions.

¹ In 1996 the universities were formally transferred from the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Research, but university education remained at the Ministry of Education. This division did not work well and in 2000 universities once became again the sole responsibility for the Ministry of Education.

The gross intake to higher education in general is of 56% of those of a year group (Ministry of Education 1999b:21). They distribute with 9% on the short-cycle, 38% on the medium-cycle and 53% on the long-cycle higher education programmes. Approximately 40% of a year group finishes with a degree (Ministry of Education 2000:30). It is the stated government policy that 50% of a year group obtains a higher education degree.

The size of the student intake is an institutional decision based on the available resources and the physical framework. The admission requirements are, however, set by the Ministry of Education. They are normally based on the examination result obtained at the end of upper secondary education, in some cases supplemented with points obtained from occupational experience etc.

The non-university sector

The short-cycle higher education programmes are most often of 2 years' duration. The sector covers a broad range of professional educations within the technical, mercantile, scientific and agrarian areas. The educations are closely tied to the labour market organisations that dominate programme committees and the school boards (Danish Ministry of Education 2000b).

A new act concerning short-cycle higher education came into force on 1 July 1998. The short-cycle higher educations now presuppose either a vocational education or a general upper secondary education programme and have the common designation of "vocational academy programmes". Access to a short-cycle higher education has become broader and more transparent, with better possibilities for the students of being awarded credits if they continue to a medium-or long-cycle higher education programme (ibid).

Medium-cycle higher education programmes last typically between 3 and 4 years. Examples of medium-cycle higher education programmes are those leading to qualifications as diploma engineer, librarian, teacher in primary school, journalist, social worker, nurse, physiotherapist etc. (ibid). Both the short-cycle higher education sector and the medium-cycle higher education sector are characterized by a large geographical dispersal of their institutions.

In May 2000 the government agreed to reform the medium-cycle higher education and to establish the so-called "Centres for Higher Education".

A Centre for Higher Education is a self-governing body characterised by common/joint management and staff-community, i.e. an organisational concentration of the educations. It consists of several institutions, mainly institutions providing medium-cycle higher educations but in certain cases also short-cycle higher educations, which have been merged. Geographically the merging institutions remain situated at their original locality and should maintain their own identity.

The stated objectives of the establishment of the centres are:

- To strengthen the non-university sector, through the establishment of educational environments oriented towards professions, which are big and broad enough to ensure a coherent professional development of the educations.

- To maintain and strengthen the regional educational supply.
- A merger between various educational institutions will increase the student number, the staff number and the programme supply, which in turn makes the institutions more competitive.
- To secure the continuation of strong educational environments outside the university sector proper.

These objectives were in plainer terms focused on solving two major problems: Firstly the proliferation of single profile institutions. For a country with 5 million inhabitants it must be termed impressive to muster 32 individual colleges for training of pedagogues primarily for the kindergarten and pre-school system.

Secondly the new centres could provide the framework for (minor) amounts of research funding thus making the distinction smaller between the medium and long-cycle higher education in terms of research based teaching and learning.

The universities had during the 90s strongly opposed any government move to allow the medium cycle programmes to confer the BA. The main argument of the universities had been that the BA degree could only maintain its credibility if it was restricted to institutions with research. This argument suffered from the defect that the systematic programme evaluations of the Evaluation Centre had made evident that in many university programmes the majority of teachers at the undergraduate level were part time employed and without research opportunity. However, the government has accepted the stand of the universities and accordingly 2000 witnessed the birth of a new degree level that of a "profession bachelor" for the medium cycle programmes. According to yet unclear criteria some of these but not all are in the coming year or two going to be allowed to offer this new degree.

The university sector

Denmark has 5 multi-faculty universities and 7 specialized university level institutions. The university institutions all offer bachelor-, master-, and Ph.D. programmes. The bachelor programmes are 3-year programmes leading to a Bachelor's degree. The admission requirement for the bachelor programmes is normally a qualification at general upper secondary level.

The bachelor programme constitutes in principle a complete programme in itself, but most students continue into a master programme. When the government introduced the bachelor level in the late 1980s it met with total rejection by the universities. The government's arguments that the bachelor level would make study structures more flexible, ease internationalisation of Danish higher education, reduce dropout rates and create new types of job opportunities were met with a counter campaign over several years from the universities. The universities dismissed potential bachelors as half or less educated compared with masters and accordingly of no value to the job market. Media as well as employers accepted almost totally this rather conservative argumentation. The result has been that only a very small number of bachelors during the last couple of years have sought and got employment on the basis of this qualification.

Master programmes are of 2 years' duration and are normally a continuation of a bachelor degree programme, i.e. a total of 5 years of studies. However, a few master programmes are still organised as one continual course without the bachelor level. The designations of the research degrees proper are the Ph.D. degree and the doctoral degree (dr. med., dr. phil., dr.scient. etc.), which is the highest academic degree (Danish Ministry of Education 2000b).

The university act of 1993

The study structure described above was consolidated through a new act (the Act on Universities etc.) for the universities and other research-based higher education institutions, which was introduced in 1993 (Danish Ministry of Education 1997). The intention of the reform was to formulate the main objectives for and framework of the higher education sector and to give university level institutions the institutional freedom and autonomy to develop within this framework.

The reform was to ensure a tightening of each institution's management structure; to secure an undisturbed work environment; to find a better balance between supply of and demand for the institutions student capacity; and, finally, to improve the quality of the programmes, so that these came up to the highest international standards. Furthermore the act meant a massive authority transferral from the Ministry of Education to the Higher Education Institutions; a preservation of the institutional democracy, but a reduction of the number of governing bodies and their members; a significantly strengthened mandate and authority of rectors and deans; a separation of management of education and of research; and an external representation in the senate and faculty councils. A final cornerstone of the reform was the introduction of a new financing system, the so-called taximeter system, based on per capita grants (cash-per-student) to the institutions

Consequently, the key words of the reform was set out by the government to be deregulation and decentralization, combined with mechanisms to ensure quality. The Minister of Education was to be responsible for the establishment of the framework for the obligatory admission requirements and the content of the different programmes, whereas the actual content of the individual programmes was to be drawn up by the institution itself - in curricula and study planning (ibid).

An important aim of the reform was that the changes caused by the reform and the pressure from a growing student population should not affect negatively the quality of programmes. Accordingly, a number of special provisions contributed to ensure continued educational quality and strengthening the central quality assurance through the Evaluation Centre and through reorganization of the system of external examiners.

Higher Education Institutions were from the outset certainly sceptical towards the reform package. The criticism focused as already stated especially on the new uniform structure of studies and on the new university act. The credibility of the intended process of de-centralization was also questioned, as was initially the new centrally based mechanisms for accountability of quality.

Specifically in the context of the stress on evaluations it could be said that on the one hand Government needed evaluations as a steering mechanism towards the modern-

ized and decentralized field of higher education. The general development and trends of higher education should be monitored through evaluations, which simultaneously controlled the level of quality in individual programmes.

On the other hand the institutions of higher education received considerable real autonomy as a consequence of the new university act. Accordingly the presidents, deans, and governing boards were now facing independent, broad, and often difficult decision-making. Systematic evaluations would provide the institutions with an insight into the quality of their own study programmes. Good evaluations, which reflected the relation between institutional goals and realities, could therefore form the basis for planning and priorities of tasks. That at least was the ambition.

The Danish Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education

Accordingly in 1992 the Ministry of Education established the Danish Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education. The Centre was in principle an independent institution in respect of the Ministry of Education as well as of the Universities and other institutions of higher education. The Mandate of the Centre was:

- To initiate evaluation processes of higher education in Denmark including the university as well as non-university sector.
- To develop appropriate methods of assessing programmes
- To inspire and guide the institutions of higher education in aspects concerning evaluation and quality
- To compile national and international experience on evaluation of the educational system and quality development

Accordingly a substantial part of the Centre's work consisted of regular and systematic evaluations of higher education programmes on a rotating basis in which almost all programmes were evaluated within a period of seven years.

In addition, the Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education evaluated new programmes after their establishment period, and programmes for which the Ministry of Education, consulting bodies or an institution of higher education found that there was a need for an evaluation of the quality of the programme. (The Evaluation Centre 1997)

Aims and experiences of the Evaluation Centre

With regard to the actual task of evaluating and developing quality in higher education it was of decisive importance for the Evaluation Centre that the evaluations were based on a clear and well-defined foundation. In order to achieve this objective, however, it was necessary that the evaluations of individual educational programmes were systematic and transparent as well as founded on a well-defined concept. Thus a very important part of the Centre's work during the period 1992-99 was the development of consistent and comprehensive evaluation models and methods, in part based on cooperation with other European countries.

The basic Danish approach from the outset rested on a four-stage process:

1. The self evaluation of the educational programmes based on a protocol presented by the Centre
2. Comprehensive surveys of the opinion on the quality of the programmes pronounced by users, i.e. students, graduates or employers.
3. Site visits that were an important part of the total documentation analysed by the Centre and a panel of experts.
4. The publication of a report presenting an overall analysis of the quality of the programme field at the national level as well as individual analysis of the institutional level.

At the end of the function period of the Centre it became evident that a model had been developed which a considerable majority of Higher Education Institutions could accept and which could produce useful results. Instead of the concern and sensitivity that were at the outset shown towards external evaluations, the Higher Education Institutions to an increasing extent rose to the challenge.

A number of explanations can be given for this development. First and foremost the Centre had been successful in establishing a suitable and workable division of labour between the professional staff of the Centre, the expert panel and the Higher Education Institutions. Other aspects worth mentioning are

- A relevant balance between quality improvement and accountability
- An on-going contact and dialogue between the Centre and the Higher Education Institutions.
- A compilation of comprehensive and trustworthy documentation for the evaluations
- A point of departure in the evaluation process itself, without unnecessary dependence on pre-defined criteria for success or indicators of quality.

By 1999 the Centre had fulfilled its mission. The result was 62 evaluation reports some of which ran to 200 pages and covering almost all the programmes of both higher education sectors.

The Danish Evaluation Institute: Old wine on new bottle.

In May 1999, the Danish parliament passed a law proposed by government providing the legal background for a new institution, The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA). One major inspiration for this governmental initiative was the relative success of external evaluation of teaching and learning in higher education. But probably more important was the intensifying political and media debate on the quality of the primary school system. The fuel for this debate was the relatively low Danish scores in international surveys of skills in reading and mathematics. (Thune 1999)

Accordingly the focus of this evaluation changed when the government launched the idea of establishing an evaluation agency not only responsible for the evaluation of higher education, but of all levels of the educational system from pre-schooling till masters levels and including continuing and further education. The government decided to integrate the Centre into the Danish Evaluation Institute. In practical terms the implication was that the staff and experience of the former Centre formed the basis on which the new institute was launched.

By mid 2001 the Danish Evaluation Institute has grown to a staff of more than 50 and has presented its first major evaluations of various elements of the Danish educational system.

EVA's organisational structure

The Board governs the Institute; the board has eleven members and covers the main levels and sectors of education. The Minister of Education appoints board members, but the law is very elaborate in the paragraphs that provide the board with essential independence and integrity.

The Committee of Representatives comments on EVA's annual programme and the priority of planned activities. The Committee comprises 27 members appointed by the board of the Institute, but on the recommendations of organisations of school proprietors, school associations, school boards and employers, rectors' conferences and school managers, social partners, teachers' organisations and student and pupil bodies.

EVA's objective

EVA has two main tasks: to undertake on its own initiative systematic evaluations and to act as a national centre of knowledge, information and development in the field of educational evaluation. This dual purpose of the Institute is reflected in its organisational structure and in its annual programmes of action.

Every year EVA draws up a programme for the coming year's activities. The programme identifies the various projects to be initiated within the broad mandate set up by Parliament.

In 2001 the section responsible for knowledge and information on evaluation will make a major survey on accreditation methodology and significantly strengthen the information and dissemination activities of the institute.

In the evaluation section ten major projects will be launched, including at the level of higher education evaluation of a university faculty, of programmes in information technology, and a pilot project on international evaluation covering the same programme in Denmark and two other European countries.

The major part of EVA's activities will be based on its own initiatives as presented in the annual programmes. However, EVA accepts also a number of contracts requested by the Ministry of Education, other ministries with educational responsibilities, or local authorities.

Evaluation methods – before and now

At the time of the establishment of EVA, the evaluation methodologies were not specified. From the outset of activities it was also stressed by the new institute that the aim was not a massive reproduction of the methodologies applied at the former Evaluation Centre. The Centre had applied a fairly standardised methodology thus ensuring that all study programmes were as far as possible treated in the same way, and making it possible to analyse and draw conclusions across the different evaluations.

EVA's broad mandate necessitates a move from standard methods to methodological pluralism in order that methods in any given project are relevant in the context of the educational segment under evaluation.

Evaluation methods vary, depending on the subject area. A given evaluation may involve the entire course of study, individual subjects, relationships between subjects/courses and a whole institution, relationships between Government or local authorities as owners on the one hand and colleges and institutions on the other hand. An evaluation, however, will always be based on the national and local objectives for the area in question.

However, the methodological lessons learned during the concentrated effort of the former Evaluation Centre are also a valuable inheritance for the new institute and may be recognized in the following list of elements normally included in EVA's evaluations:

- EVA conducts a *preliminary study* to each evaluation. It takes the form of a dialogue with all interested parties involved in the course of education and encompasses existing material relating to the field of education, e.g. regulations, government circulars, curricula, etc.
- EVA drafts elaborate *terms of reference* for each evaluation, presenting objectives and framework for the evaluation. The board of the Institute approves the terms of reference.
- The individual educational establishment conducts a *self-assessment*, presenting and analysing what it perceives as its own strengths and weaknesses.
- For each evaluation an *evaluation panel* is appointed. The members must have either a general or specific expertise in the field concerned.
- The evaluation panel *site visits* the educational establishments under review. The visit is planned in consultation with the individual establishments.
- In connection with each evaluation *user surveys* may be conducted among students, parents, graduates, employers or other groups.
- In its concluding and public report the evaluation panel presents its analysis, assessment and recommendations for developing the quality of the area of education in question.

The dilemma of purpose

EVA shares a principal dilemma with the former Evaluation Centre. This is the dilemma of purpose. The dilemma between an essential quality improvement related purpose and a purpose related to external accountability. (Thune 1997a)

In the 1998 evaluation report on the Centre it was one of the conclusions of the international panel that the Centre had in fact been able to combine the perspective of improvement and of accountability. In this respect EVA expects to follow closely in the footsteps of the former Centre. The result should be that in the Danish approach to evaluation the two perspectives of improvement and accountability are combined in terms of procedures, methods and goals in a dual approach with an emphasis on the improvement dimension. In the law of the Danish Evaluation Institute it is stated quite clearly in the first paragraph that the purpose of EVA is assurance and improvement of quality in higher education.

The legacy of best practices from the Evaluation Centre

Credibility of evaluations is closely linked to the extent to which careful documentation is used to form the basis for conclusions and recommendations. The study programmes must be able to accept the basic evidence on which the conclusions and recommendations of the experts rest. Further the evaluation process, including the documentation, must inspire to further and continuing internal quality assurance in the study programmes while at the same time there is a relevant basis for implementation of the evaluation.

To meet these aims the Centre had from the outset made a conscious effort to provide its own staff members with a clearly defined and broad responsibility for the evaluation. The *project leader* from the Centre was responsible for the whole process and the methodology, handled all contacts with the Higher Education Institutions, prepared all internal and external meetings, and at the end drafted the final report. Probably the most distinct legacy from the Centre is therefore that the professionalism and size of staff is the crucial premise for a sequence of successful and consistent evaluations.

Another valuable experience is that the more the *self assessment* is given priority in the process, the more the self assessment will function as training and preparing the institution or the study programme for taking over the responsibility for its own quality development - and the less the self assessment is seen merely as producing information for the expert committee.

The self-assessment is the standard against which the institution can measure itself. It provides a framework for building up a definition of quality, it helps the institution decide, how far it is achieving its strategic mission and goals, and it allows it to build an action plan for development.

In the qualitative context the self-assessment should be used to put more stress on inviting the study programmes to analyse their mission, values, goals and strengths and weaknesses respectively. Therefore the second and perhaps even more important purpose of the self-assessment is to provide the institution and the study programme with a commitment and a valid procedure and method to continue a process of quality assurance. It is very important to stress that the long time perspective of the effort vested in the self-assessments is less delivering the material for a control process, but much more to contribute towards local quality improvement.

The members of the *expert panel* have the professional responsibility for the external part of an evaluation. Accordingly the selection process is crucial. The experts

must possess a solid knowledge and understanding of the object of the evaluation while at the same time being independent of the programmes and institutions involved. In this context it is a well-known small state problem that it can be very difficult within the narrow confines of a small higher education system to find the necessary independent and unbiased experts. The Danish solution has been to recruit a large number of experts from the other Nordic countries. The Nordic experts have the necessary distance to their Danish colleagues and just as important they are able to read the documentation in Danish.

Another distinctive Danish practice has been to have a more open category of expert. In most other countries expert panels are comprised principally of "peers", i.e. professional experts in the field concerned and with a background in university research. The Danish practice has been, on the other hand, to have expert panels consist of both professional experts in the traditional sense and representation of the users or customers of higher education.

This practice reflects a general and longstanding Danish tradition for *focusing on users* in planning of higher education. The attitudes of all three groups, the students, the recent graduates or the employers are surveyed intensively as part of the procedure of the individual evaluation. Furthermore representatives of employers are prominent in the evaluation panels.

The focus is not to deploy evaluation as a means of steering the higher education institutions more in the direction of the labour market. The dialogue between consumers and institutions should be balanced in such a way that the integrity and independence of the institutions are not in question. The role of the consumer is to give information and advice, not to take over the institutions, to dictate the content of the educations or to control the production. This balance is necessary, because the consumers do not have the knowledge and professional basis, on which educations must be built. If the consumers took this role, there would be an obvious risk that the educations became fit for the society of yesterday and not for the society of tomorrow.

The *evaluation reports* contain recommendations targeted at the Higher Education Institutions themselves as well as at the Ministry of Education as the owner. In fact the majority of recommendations asks for implementation by the Higher Education Institutions. The evaluation panels are instructed to focus on recommendations that are operational, constructive and realistic within the given conditions for the discipline area in question. Further, there should be a clear priority of recommendations, and preferably it should be evident which recommendations are essential in the short and which in the longer term. Finally it should be clear who must carry the responsibility for follow up or implementation.

The report is presented to the Higher Education Institutions involved before publication. A *final conference* brings together all involved i.e. on the one hand the expert panel and the project team and on the other hand deans, course leaders and others from the study programmes evaluated. The latter have the opportunity for an open discussion with the former of the premises for the conclusions and recommendations of the report - which eventually may be redrafted in light of points raised during the conference. The conferences as a rule produce very fruitful discussions and have a distinct potential as safety valves for the proceedings.

The follow-up procedure places the prime responsibility within the education institutions. Once an evaluation is finished the crucial phase of implementation of the conclusions and recommendations begins. As the aim of the evaluation process is the launching of a continuous process of quality assurance within the study programmes it is essential that the institutions themselves are committed to this follow-up. It is the firm belief of the Institute, however, that the institutions' incentive to initiate follow-up procedures are closely tied to the success of the self-assessment process and the openness of the self-assessment on the one hand and the operability of the recommendations in the evaluation report on the other. (Højbjerg & Kristoffersen 1998)

The improvement perspective is certainly helped in two dimensions. Firstly the law on the Danish Evaluation Institute states explicitly that colleges and institutions must not be ranked in connection with the evaluations. Secondly there is no linkage between results of evaluations and funding of higher education. In many countries it is a much commented and controversial issue whether government's allocation of budgets to universities should wholly or in part be based on the results of systematic evaluations. In Denmark the fact that funding and evaluation have explicitly been de-linked has been a marked positive factor.

In some countries, where evaluation procedures have been established, the issue of *openness* has been controversial. The standard argument in favour of confidential proceedings has concerned the self-assessment. The argument runs that confidentiality should encourage the authors of the self-evaluation to be more honest and critical. In Denmark openness is viewed as a cardinal point in regard to the overall target of making evaluations the platform for qualified knowledge of the merits of various study - programmes. All reports are therefore published or available.

The problem is of course the remarkable interest of the media and the politicians. Newsworthiness and political interest seem to be focused too much on the negative points of evaluation reports than on the more positive. EVA has set up its own information unit staffed by professionals. It is an important task of this unit to make sure that evaluations are presented to the public in a balanced manner that prevents the results from being misrepresented or misinterpreted.

The role of the institutions

After a period of initial scepticism towards quality assurance mechanisms and especially any external element the feedback from the institutions has over the last three or four years been increasingly affirmative. Two developments have acted as catalysts in this context.

First, the cycle of programme evaluations have had their effect and mostly positive. At the conferences during the final phase of the evaluation the institutional representatives have had their moment to speak their mind very freely in terms of their experiences of strengths and weaknesses of the process. Not least the experience of the self-assessment phase is generally considered in quite positive terms.

In connection with the external evaluation in 1998 of the Evaluation Centre itself a consultancy firm was commissioned by the Ministry of Education to do a so-called impact

study of the evaluations of the Centre. This study mainly took the form of a large number of interviews with university presidents, deans and programme leaders. The majority of these gave evidence of support for and acceptance of the evaluations and the way in which these have been carried out even though the Higher Education 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 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.

University performance contracts

The other catalyst is the introduction in 1999 of University Performance Contracts as part of a reform of the Danish University Act from 1993. With this initiative contracts are now offered to the universities with the purpose of strengthening the development of institutional quality assurance in higher education. The primary aim of the reform is to "put the main stress in governance on the individual university's goals and results" instead of on resource consumption, budgetary ties and general regulation. This would give each university the possibility of organising itself in accordance with its situation (Danish Ministry of Information, Technology and Research 1999:1).

A university performance contract is a declaration of intent between the university and the Ministry of Education. The contracts are intended to raise the universities' level of ambition, stimulate their inventiveness and improve their work in their core areas (ibid). They are based on a large degree of autonomy, with each university formulating its own standard and goals in a performance contract. Thus, the reform implies new values such as dialogue and agreement instead of control and top-down regulation.

Ten Danish universities have so far entered into agreement with the Ministry of Education (Danish Ministry of Information, Technology and Research 2000:4).

Some of the main principles of the contracts are: The number of goals and criteria in the individual contracts should be kept at a low level. In this way the contracts are clear and help to focus on the goals regarded as absolutely essential by the university and the ministry. The university and the ministry should further select a few key areas in which it is essential to set specific goals and include these in the contract.

The goals set up must be more than broad declarations. However, in those cases in which there are special and serious problems at an institution - indicated, for example, through an educational evaluation - the contract form could be used as the basis for more detailed agreements between the university and the ministry on how the problems in question are to be solved.

(Danish Ministry of Information, Technology and Research 1999:8-9).

The overall focus of the ten newly signed contracts is on developing the framework conditions that are a prerequisite for assuring the quality of research, teaching and other activities. Conditions such as organisational development and quality management mechanisms are thus of central importance. More specifically, the contracts reveal a diversity of goals, which reflect the different challenges and context of each uni-

versity. Thus, the concrete goals set in the contracts vary greatly, with some universities adhering to overall goals and others to detailed and extended action plans.

This description fits even the various plans for increased internal quality assurance. Most universities have chosen rather vague declarations of future intentions that do not seem entirely credible in the light of past efforts in this direction. Not least in this context it is going to be interesting to see whether the Ministry of Education will try to evolve more consistent and transparent criteria for the follow up on the contracts.

Denmark in Europe and the World.

During the 1990's systems of external evaluation of higher education have been established in almost all European countries. First the Evaluation Centre and now EVA have played a major role in advancing cooperation between national systems. These have despite their differences a common methodological core and have provided a focus on quality, transparency and accountability of higher education in Europe. An important step forward was the European Pilot Project; a large scale quality assurance exercise initiated by the EU commission and conducted in 1994-95 in 18 European countries. The Evaluation Centre in cooperation with the French agency, CNE, was responsible for the project and could in a later report conclude that the various national systems had each their individual character reflecting national tradition and culture of higher education, but at the same time they shared the same basic methodological approach. All national systems based thus their evaluations on self-evaluations, site visits by panels of experts and public reports. (Thune & Staropoli 1997)

However, the last few years have shown that there is a need for change and convergence of the systems of European quality assurance. The need for change is to a large extent related to internationalisation. The international changes affecting higher education are a growing international market for higher education, transactional education and a need for recognition of degrees due to graduate mobility (Campbell and van der Wende 2000). The Bologna-declaration can be viewed as a European response to these developments. In relation to quality assurance all the countries, which have signed the Bologna-declaration of June 1999 commit themselves to "the promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies".

In several European countries including Denmark a distinct debate has taken place after Bologna. The declaration is the expression of a serious attempt to harmonise the national systems of higher education. Briefly expressed the aim of the declaration is to stimulate a European system of further and higher education that in the terms of quality assurance solves the challenges of transparency, compatibility, flexibility, comparability, and protection.

The Bologna process has turned out thus to be a remarkable catalyst for a faster development in the European debate on internationalisation of higher education and quality assurance. Thus a number of investigations and mappings of this problem area is under way. One important framework is the established European Network of Quality Assurance (ENQA). The idea for ENQA was born out of the common experience of the European Pilot Project, which demonstrated the value of sharing and developing ex-

perience in the area of quality assurance across the member states of the Union and beyond. (Enqa Newsletter 2000:1)) The idea was given momentum by the Recommendation of the Council of Ministers that followed publication of the Project's final report, and which has provided the opportunity for the Network venture to be brought to its present state. However, it is not least remarkable that European universities and especially their organisations have taken upon themselves a very active role in relation to the Bologna process. This active role is no doubt more than anything fuelled by the recognition of many universities that they are in a market place of higher education and that market value is linked to stamps of recognition, certification and accreditation.

The problem with the Bologna process, however, may well be that it propels the Danish and other European governments towards a common solution in formal terms for which there may be little basis in the realities of national strategies towards quality assurance. One of these realities may be linked to the remarkable growth in recent years in the fields of transnational education and of what is termed new means of delivery: Distance education programmes, branch campuses, franchises and more.

The identification of relevant strategies is going to be a challenge in the near future. A list of possible scenarios could include:

- *National strategies* with an emphasis on regulation of importers or exporters of education.
- *International or regional strategies* based either on supra national quality assurance or on meta recognition of established national agencies.
- *Multi-accreditation* implying either international recognition of national evaluation organisations and education structures or national recognition of a foreign organisation as accreditors

One very important perspective for Denmark is that the existing well-established system of external quality assurance must now be reinterpreted in the light of the trend towards accreditation procedures. It is of course possible to argue that accreditation is a process that in methodological terms equals that of evaluations and quality assurance as practiced by most European systems. However this misses the point that accreditation is basically a process based on clear and predefined standards or criteria and that at the end of the process a yes or no given to whether quality meets these standards. In that specific sense there has been in Denmark as in the other Nordic countries little previous experience.

In 1997 many Ministers of Education in Western European countries received a letter from the chairman of the National Committee on Foreign Medical Education and Accreditation in the US: The letter said that the medical programmes in these countries could not be recognised by the US because of a lack of an accreditation system. The Evaluation Centre drafted a reply to the Americans presenting the Danish evaluation system. The US reaction was a dismissal of the Danish efforts as not compatible with accreditation as understood in the US sense. The issue was eventually solved after more transatlantic exchanges. But the example illustrates that in the age of internationalisation of higher education the pressure on small countries such as Denmark and Hong Kong is strong to make their quality assurance systems visible and compatible in a wider regional

and global context. Certainly this constitutes the major challenge for the Danes in the coming years.

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