Assessment Update

Progress, Trends, and Practices in Higher Education
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Assessment of Quality in Western Europe

Don F. Westerheijden, Frans A. van Vught

In many West European countries, quality has become, since the early 1980s, one of the central foci in debates on higher education and higher education policy-making. There are a number of reasons for this emphasis. First, rapid growth in student enrollment, along with increases in the numbers of fields of study, departments, and new institutions, has sparked discussions on public expenditures for higher education. Second, and closely related, societal concern about the growth of public expenditures in general has increased, and budget cutting has become a common occurrence. Third, an increased openness in government decision making has led to pressure for accountability reaching into the academic sectors. Fourth, especially in northwestern Europe, governments have

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embraced the strategy of self-regulation for higher education (van Vught, 1989; Neave and van Vught, 1991). And, finally, the internationalization of the European labor market and the European community's programs to stimulate international mobility of students and staff have enhanced the need to understand qualifications and standards equivalencies across the various higher education systems.

Traditional Means of Quality Control

There are clear differences between what has been called "traditional" quality control and the "new" approaches to quality assessment (for example, Neave, 1994). The traditional means of quality control is represented by two forms, the Continental mode and the British mode (Clark, 1983).

In the Continental mode of authority distribution in higher education—characterized by a predominance of state control (Clark, 1983)—national governments (as a rule the sole providers of funding to higher education) kept a close watch over the quantity and quality of inputs (finance, academic staff, and students), processes (national curricula), and, to some extent, outputs (graduates). Not all of these controls were applied in every Continental European state, nor did these states control all sectors of higher education in the same way. Nonetheless, the Continental experience was one of heavy state control.

In the British mode, in contrast—characterized by limited state regulation (Clark, 1983)—universities were free to develop their own forms of quality control. The most important means for the assurance of academic standards occurred through the use of external examiners (that is, academic peers), who judged whether student work in the university was of a quality comparable to that of other institutions (the "gold standard").

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New Methods of Quality Management

France. One of the clearest examples of the Continental, government-controlled system is in France. The traditional, centralized quality-control mechanisms characteristic of this system were perceived as problematic for a variety of reasons, including lack of real autonomy, uniformity, rigidity, and the bureaucratic nature of the system (Staropoli, 1991). In an effort to change this situation, the Comité National d'Évaluation (CNE) was set up in 1985. CNE is an independent government agency that reports to the president of the Republic (literally, in an annual public report) and is not under the control of any other government agency. It does, however, have close working relationships with the Ministry of National Education because CNE's reports are used in the ministry's decision-making process.

The charge of CNE is not only to assess the quality of higher education institutions (universities and grandes écoles) but also to judge the performance of these institutions in light of four-year contracts established between the Ministry of National Education and the individual institutions. These contracts cover, in principle, all types of activities related to teaching, research, and service. The contracts are specific development plans that the institutions establish, and they highlight the various institutional objectives.

The CNE quality-assessment procedure consists of two parts: institutionwide audits and disciplinary reviews. The institutionwide evaluations cover teaching, research, and institutional management. Other institutional aspects, such as the overall environment for learning and research, are also examined. Information gathered for the audits is gleaned from several sources, both from within the institution and from central government agencies. Using site visits, teams of CNE members and other experts conduct these

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Call for Contributions

The editor welcomes short articles and news items for *Assessment Update*. Guidelines follow for those who would like to contribute articles on outcomes assessment in higher education.

- **Content:** Please send an account of your experience with assessment in higher education. Include concrete examples of practice and results.
- **Audience:** *Assessment Update* readers are academic administrators, campus assessment practitioners, institutional researchers, and faculty from a variety of fields. All types of institutions are represented in the readership.
- **Style:** A report, essay, news story, or letter to the editor would be welcome. Limited references can be printed; however, tables cannot be included.
- **Format:** In addition to standard manuscripts, news may be contributed via telephone call, outline, or letter. The standard manuscript format is a 60-space line with 25 lines per page. If word processing is used, please submit a 3 1/2" diskette and three paper copies of your article. WordPerfect 5.0 or 5.1 is preferred.
- **Length:** Articles should be four to eight typed, double-spaced pages (1,000–2,000 words). Short news items for the Calendar, Events, Memos, With FIPSE Support, and Book Review sections may be 100–500 words in length. Annotations of recent publications for the Resources feature should be about 50–100 words long.
- **Copyright:** Articles shall not have been registered for copyright or published elsewhere prior to publication in *Assessment Update*.
- **Deadlines:** Each issue is typically planned four months before its publication. Future deadlines for submitting articles are June 1 (September–October 1995 issue), August 1 (November–December 1995 issue), and October 2 (January–February 1996 issue).

Please address all contributions to Trudy W. Banta, Editor, *Assessment Update*, Rm. 140 Administration Bldg., 355 N. Lansing St., Indianapolis, IN 46202-2896. ■

Western Europe

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institutional audits. Each audit culminates in a public report on the institution.

The disciplinary reviews, conducted under the auspices of CNE, are based on self-evaluations in the departments or units under review. Centrally elicited data are also used by visiting external review teams. These review teams are composed mainly of French academics, but foreign peers and representatives from industry and the professions are also included. The disciplinary reviews, which focus on assessing the quality of teaching and research in units, are perceived by faculty as the most useful and valid aspects of the quality-assessment process.

The Netherlands. Even though France and the Netherlands began their quality-assessment procedures for teaching at roughly the same time, the two national systems have taken very different paths. The most notable difference is that self-regulation in the Netherlands has been allowed to develop more fully. The basic thrust has been to decrease government regulations, thereby giving higher education institutions more managerial and academic autonomy. In exchange, institutions are held accountable by the government for the quality of their teaching and research. Each higher

As of 1994, all programs of study in the Netherlands had been subjected to this assessment procedure. The second cycle is now under way, though the procedure has been modified in a number of ways (Vroeijenstijn, 1994). For example, although the mission and goals of the faculties are still an important consideration, more emphasis will be given to comparison of assessment findings across institutions. This means that ratings of dimensions of quality of teaching in all faculties involved will be part of the visiting committees' national public reports. The intent is not to derive overall rankings of universities or faculties but instead to provide prospective students with information that will enable them to "vote with their feet."

United Kingdom. In France and the Netherlands, an increase in self-regulation has been the main focus of policy development concerning quality in higher education. In contrast, "value for money" has been the main driving force in the United Kingdom. Whereas the Continental approaches have been characterized by broad and comprehensive policies on quality, the British approach has been more disjointed and incremental.

The rise to power of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom signaled a period of focused efforts to raise the output of higher education (in terms of research and

land, the climate remains more antagonistic and politicized, with site visits limited to only a few faculties, mainly those claiming to be excellent or those suspected of being unsatisfactory.

The institutional aspect of quality has been addressed, since 1992, by the Higher Education Quality Council. This umbrella organization of the universities performs audits in order to assess the quality-management provisions in place at institutions to ensure excellence in teaching and research.

Common Characteristics

The first common element characteristic of European quality-assessment systems is the method of coordination. In general, coordination is vested in the hands of a specialized agent (or agents) with the responsibility to manage the system at a meta-level (that is, coordinating the procedures without actually making the assessments). These agents typically have a great deal of autonomy as defined by law.

Second, the procedure is built on the cornerstones of self-evaluation and external peer review, including site visits. These are necessary conditions for quality assessment to be accepted as legitimate by academics, and important elements in stimulating continuous quality improvement.

Third, quality-assessment results are publicly communicated. Without a public report, accountability and assurance of quality are impossible. Practices differ across national systems as to what information is made public. Disclosure ranges from full, detailed opinions rendered by the external reviewers to simple summary reports.

Finally, some link to decision-making processes has been established. Whether the information should be used only by internal institutional decision makers, or whether it should be applied more broadly to government funding decisions, remains an issue of great debate.

Spreading the Word

Since 1990, other countries in Western Europe have initiated new quality-assessment procedures as well, making use of the same common characteristics while adapting them to national traditions, circumstances, and policy goals. The Danish system, for example, utilizes a govern-

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education institution, with coordination from a university-owned umbrella organization, is responsible for its own assessment of teaching. A government inspectorate also has some responsibility, though its charge is limited to making meta-evaluations of the self and peer reviews and monitoring the institution's follow-up.

Since a separate procedure to partially assess quality of outputs with respect to research was already in place, the new focus was on developing a system to evaluate the quality of teaching. With the North American experience in program review as its model, the evaluation system emphasizes self-evaluation by the units under review, and on-site visits by external teams of peer reviewers.

number of graduates) while diminishing government expenditures. The most important new development, however, has been the introduction of quality assessment by the newly established funding councils. To provide guidance for funding decisions, these government-controlled councils have begun to rate the quality of teaching in summative terms using a 3- or 4-point scale ranging from excellent to unsatisfactory. Faculty monetary rewards have been tied to these ratings.

Even within the United Kingdom, variation exists. In Scotland, the assessment procedure negotiated between the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council and the institutions includes self-evaluations and site visits by expert committees. In Eng-