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# Quality management and quality assurance in European higher education

Methods and mechanisms

COMMISSION  
OF THE EUROPEAN  
COMMUNITIES



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## FOREWORD

*Higher education systems in the Community are growing at an unprecedented rate, in terms of student numbers and of the establishment of new faculties and even whole new educational institutions. This growth is absorbing substantial resources. At this stage it becomes legitimate to expect higher education institutions to prove their ability to offer quality programmes which meet students' aspirations and the needs of a constantly changing employment market and of society itself.*

*At the same time, developments at Community level have increased the interest paid to higher education. The adoption and implementation of directives concerning the recognition of diplomas for professional purposes have aroused considerable interest in the content and quality of teaching given in Member States. Similarly the debate during 1992 on the Commission's Memorandum on Higher Education demonstrated the increasing importance attached by Member States to obtaining and maintaining quality in education. Moreover, the Community's Erasmus, Comett and Lingua programmes have made way for the development of inter-university cooperation and a substantial degree of student mobility. As a result today's students are aware of the training opportunities which exist in Community countries, which are now genuinely accessible to them. They no longer hesitate to select, without geographic limitations, the institutions at which they will study based on their own interests and the quality of the training they can receive for their destined professions. At the same time, recent evaluations of Erasmus, Comett and Lingua have clearly demonstrated the contribution made by these programmes to improving the quality of higher education. Finally, we should mention that Article 126 of the Treaty of Maastricht authorizes the Community to contribute to the development of quality education.*

*The combination of both these factors (growth of national education systems and developments at Community level) has led to a keen interest in controlling the quality of higher education.*

*This growing interest also lies behind the Council's invitation to the Commission to undertake a comparative study of methods of evaluating the quality of higher education. The Commission has entrusted this task to the Liaison Committee of the Rectors' Conferences of Member States, who have carried it out, in collaboration with the Centre of Political Studies on Higher Education of the University of Twente.*

*I am pleased to present the results of this work. The present document presents the methods and mechanisms used in European Community Member States and the EFTA countries to manage the quality of higher education. These include both "traditional" procedures and "new" approaches introduced from the early 1980s onwards. The authors have gone to considerable trouble to analyze all these methods and mechanisms and present a summary which highlights their shared characteristics.*

*This information will be of undoubted interest to the national and regional authorities responsible for these areas, and of course to the higher education institutions themselves. The present report is the first volume of a new series of studies published by Task Force Human Resources, Education, Training and Youth. Through these studies, the Commission is looking to present to the public its activities in the areas of education, vocational training and youth, based on an analysis of the current situation and of the problems confronting those responsible for education and training systems within the European context.*

**A. Ruberti**  
Vice-President of the Commission

## Acknowledgements

This report is the result of the desire of the Commission of the European Communities to get an overview of the state of the art of quality assessment in higher education in the present twelve member countries of the European Community and of the six member states of the European Free Trade Association. The Commission asked the Committee for Higher Education in the European Community (CHEEC), to do so. The two member organizations of CHEEC, the Liaison Committee of Rectors' Conferences and the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) set up an international working group and commissioned the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies of the University of Twente (CHEPS) to write such a report.

Quality assessment in higher education is a subject of growing interest in many European countries. The growth of interest is not matched by a growth of publications on systems of quality assessment. The authors, therefore, wish to thank the representatives of the national rectors' conferences in the working group of the Liaison Committee, and the representatives of the national governments in the working group of the Commission of the European Communities, for their help in uncovering information about the situation in their countries. The same acknowledgements, for the same invaluable help, are due to our correspondents in Austria, Norway and Switzerland.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 The Increasing Focus on Quality

In many European countries the concept of quality has become one of the central foci of attention in the debates on higher education and higher education policy-making. Especially since the early 1980s quality has become a growing concern in many European higher education systems. In the United Kingdom (in 1984) Sir Keith Joseph declared that the principal objectives for higher education should be 'quality' and 'value for money'. In France in the same year the *Comité National d'Evaluation* was set up. In the Netherlands a governmental policy-paper was published in 1985 called *Higher Education: autonomy and quality*. In several other countries discussions started about the need to set up a quality assessment system.

Several factors may explain the recent increase in attention to quality in higher education. One important one is general societal concern about the increase of public expenditure in general. Given this concern, questions are being raised about the priority to be given to higher education within the list of other socially desirable activities. The simple fact that the limits of public expenditure have been reached in many countries, and that budget cuts and retrenchment operations are becoming a familiar litany, leads to questions about the relative quality of the activities that are being financed by public means.

A second factor that may explain the increase in attention to quality is related to the expansion of Western European higher education systems. The rapid growth of the student body in recent decades and the accompanying increase in the number of fields of study (especially in the social sciences), departments and even whole new institutions, have intensified discussion about the amount and direction of public expenditure for higher education.

A third factor might be the increased 'openness' in many sectors of present-day societies. Not only improved communication facilities, both nationally and internationally, but also the general concern for 'accountability' in various sectors of society, mean that higher education institutions can no longer be a 'secret garden' in which the academic oligarchy can hide from the rest of society. Higher education institutions are being challenged to explain to society at large *what* they are doing and *how well* they are doing it.

A fourth factor might be the increased international mobility of students, teachers and researchers in Europe, and the internationalisation of the European labour market. These developments lead to a growing need to understand the equivalence of qualifications, standards and credits in the various European higher education systems and thus to more attention being paid to quality assessment systems.

In the *Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community* (1991) this last factor is clearly recognisable (CEC, 1991, p. 16):

*The widening perspectives of higher education institutions in Europe would add a European dimension to the entire question of quality. Quality judgements would tend to influence institutional choices in the establishment of partnerships and participation in networks within European structures and would also be a factor in the granting of academic recognition and hence in facilitating mobility. These judgements will also come into play among students in exercising their choice of institution and course in a more open and accessible European market for higher education. Employers, too, will need to exercise quality judgements in a single European labour market in which mobility is underpinned by mutual recognition of diplomas for professional purposes.*

The factors that can explain the recent increase in attention to quality in higher education indicate that what have been called the 'extrinsic values' of higher education have become more important in Western Europe since the early 1980s. The extrinsic values of higher education are related to the services higher education institutions provide to society. The extrinsic values can be distinguished from the intrinsic qualities of higher education, which are found in the ideals of the search for truth and the pursuit of knowledge (Van Vught, 1991).

The expansion of Western European higher education systems and the increased costs of these systems are having to be ever more legitimised by clearly definable societal benefits. Higher education institutions are increasingly being confronted with the need to show their relevance, quality and accountability to society. At the same time, the further internationalisation of European higher education underlines the importance of the creation of quality assessment systems that can provide relevant information in a comparative, international context.

## 1.2 Quality as a Concept

While it may be clear that attention to the extrinsic values of higher education has grown, this does not imply that quality is a perfectly clear concept in this field. To underline this, it may be pointed out that in several recent publications on quality assessment the well-known citation is found from Robert Pirsig's book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974):

*Quality . . . you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that's self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is, they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof! There's nothing to talk about. But if you can't say what Quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists? If no one knows what it is, then for all practical purposes it doesn't exist at all. But for all practical purposes it really does exist. What else are the grades based on? Why else would people pay fortunes for some things and throw others in the trash pile? Obviously some things are better than others . . . but what's the 'betterness'? . . . So round and round you go, spinning mental wheels and nowhere finding any place to get traction. What the hell is Quality? What is it?*

Pirsig's question has been repeated regularly in publications in the field of higher education. According to several authors, quality is a concept which cannot easily be grasped in higher education (Ball, 1985; Williams, 1991). However, it may be pointed out that Pirsig comes close to an essentialist view on quality. Characteristic for the essentialist view on quality is the search for an answer to the question: what is the essence of quality? But from an essentialist point of view quality simply cannot be judged or compared. It should not be surprising that Pirsig's hero went crazy when he thought he had found the essence of quality.

Instead of an essentialist perspective on quality, a nominalist point of view could be taken as the point of departure. The nominalist approach implies an instrumentalist interpretation of the concept of quality, leaving aside the disturbing question what quality really is (Popper, 1957, 1.10; Popper, 1983, p. 262). Quality, in this sense, could be defined as 'fitness for purpose' (Ball, 1985), a definition which indicates that a notion of the quality of a phenomenon depends upon the subject's view of the purposes of that phenomenon. In discussions about quality, the subject most readily coming to mind is the customer. But in higher education, the customer cannot be identified. The one who pays for what higher education institutions do is, at least in Europe, in large measure the national government. The immediate user of the educational services of higher education institutions are students. Students, in their turn, are 'used' by employers. Broadly speaking, these subjects may all claim to be customers. Moreover, professional views on quality are powerful in higher education as well, notably those of teaching staff and the scientific or scholarly communities they belong to. To add to the complication, we may note that each of these groups may be divided into several sub-groups and that each subject at any one time may take different points of view (e.g., efficiency, breadth or depth of the programme). This implies that 'there are as many definitions

of quality in higher education as there are stakeholders (such as students, teaching staff, scientific communities, government and employers), times the number of purposes, or dimensions, these stakeholders distinguish' (Brennan *et al.* 1992, p. 13). In this report we shall take the nominalist position as a point of departure. But we shall add to that the view that from the practice of quality management in higher education some common notions can be derived that may be helpful in discussing the concept of quality in higher education. We shall come back to these common notions later on.

However, one point can already be emphasized here. Systems of mass higher education require that their higher education institutions meet a diversity of student needs and abilities, as well as their variety of demands from society. A crucial dimension of higher education quality therefore is to be found in the very diversity of a higher education system. This has consequences for the views of quality that should be developed in such a diverse higher education system.

With respect to the quality of higher education in the United States, Birnbaum (1989) has made a similar point. Birnbaum makes a distinction between three views on quality: the meritocratic, the social and the individualistic view. The meritocratic view refers to quality based on 'institutional conformity to universalistic professional and scholarly norms and uses the academic profession as a reference group'. The social view considers 'the degree to which the institution satisfies the needs of important collective constituents'. The individualistic view emphasizes 'the contribution that the institution makes to the personal growth of students'. Birnbaum formulates the following conclusion (1989, p. 33):

*When one focuses on institutions, there is a tendency to expect them all to give major attention to meritocratic values. However, given the limited resources available, such expectations inevitably require less attention to other aspects of quality, and thereby diminish the diversity of the system. It may be argued that the American system of higher education would be weakened significantly if any of these three views of quality disappeared or diminished. It is the tension between the views that provides the diversity that protects and strengthens the higher education system.*

## 1.3 Focus of the Study

### *Countries Involved*

This study is the result of a short project, commissioned by the Liaison Committee of Rectors Conferences and sponsored by the Commission of the European Communities. The objective of the project has been to provide more insight into how the quality of higher education is assessed and managed in the various Western European countries. More specifically, the desire was expressed that with the expected further integration of the European Community and its expansion with the countries of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), a broadly based overview of the mechanisms and procedures for quality management in higher education should be developed, and some indication of a set of common elements of higher education quality management should be given.

For this reason, all twelve member states of the European Community have been selected for the project, as well as the six EFTA countries. With respect to all these countries an effort was made to gather information on the actual, present-day activities (1992) regarding higher education quality management. In the *Appendix* to this study a summary is provided of the information obtained.

In principle it would be possible to order the variety of quality management practices in Western Europe using a typology in which a number of relevant concepts are included. An example of such a typology is shown in table 1. Such a typology would, perhaps, provide detailed insight but would be rather cumbersome to use. Therefore, in this project we have condensed the various dimensions of the typology into two 'ideal types' of combinations that appear to exist in the Western European practices of quality management. In chapters two and three these 'ideal types' are presented.



Table 1 : Example of typology of quality assessment practices

<i>Aim</i>	Improvement oriented	Accountability oriented		
<i>Scope</i>	Teaching	Research	Service to society	Management
<i>Focus</i>	Input	Process	Output	
<i>Method</i>	Objective ("Performance indicators")	Subjective ("peer review")		
<i>Time frame</i>	Ex ante	Ex post		
<i>Principal</i>	Government	Collective of higher education institutions	Individual higher education institution	External actors
<i>Agent</i>	Government or "independent" government agencies	Collective of higher education institutions	Individual higher education institutions	External actors

### Structure of the Report

Following on from the short discussion in the Introduction, the next two chapters (chapters 2 and 3) will address the *'traditional'* and the *'new'* methods of quality management in higher education. Since the *'traditional'* methods exist in almost all countries and since they are well-known, we shall only discuss them briefly here. More attention will be paid to the *'new'* methods of quality management which have evolved since the early 1980s in the various Western European higher education systems. In chapter 4 we shall present a synthesis of the findings. In this synthesis the common elements of the *'new'* methods will be emphasized.

### Limitations in Scope

Within the limits of a concise overview of the state of the art of quality assessment in higher education in Western Europe, it is not possible to deal with all relevant subjects. We have focused, therefore, on the general *systems* of quality assessment that have been developed or will be developed in the near future. On this level of information, it is possible to view the experiences in other countries as different possible principles for setting up quality assessment systems in one's own national higher education system. How *exactly* to elaborate such a principle into a working system, fitting into the national political and economic situation, into national higher education traditions and cultures, and into national legislative customs, is a much more complicated matter, which cannot be treated in any report of this kind. This is one of the side effects (which can be valued either positively or negatively) of the European richness of national histories and cultures.

By the same token, in the body of the report we shall not go into the matter of how *exactly* quality is assessed or *'measured'*: what are the precise procedures and which data or *'performance indicators'* are used? This too depends to a large extent on specific national circumstances. And it must be remarked that national circumstances tend to change: as a result, lists of performance indicators, for example, tend to change too. We shall briefly return to this matter in Appendix C.

## 2 'Traditional' Methods of Quality Management in European Higher Education

In the literature on higher education, a distinction is usually made between two clusters of traditions of higher education in Europe: the British tradition and the continental tradition (see, e.g., Clark, 1983). Since the mode of control, including quality control, in those traditions is one of the distinguishing differences, we think it useful to apply the same distinction here.

### 2.1 The Continental Tradition

Of old, higher education has been a state-controlled activity in most continental European countries: both in the German (Humboldtian) and the French (Napoleonic) traditions, this has been the case, and both traditions have acted as models for many other continental European countries. Hence we shall call these, like Clark (1983) did, the *continental traditions*. Of course, large differences exist between the Humboldtian and the Napoleonic traditions, too. An important difference is that in the Humboldtian tradition the *Lehr- und Lernfreiheit* is heavily emphasized, whereas in the Napoleonic tradition state control not only extends over the content of curricula, but also over modes of delivery and student behaviour. Nevertheless, in many respects, both continental traditions have had similar influences on the relationships between the state and higher education. In the short characterizations that follow, we shall take the shared continental traditions as a starting point for our discussion.

How did and does the continental system of state control over higher education operate in general? Its first, and probably most important, characteristic is that it operates by way of *ex ante* controls. The overarching, implicit goal is to employ higher education in the country effectively for the good of the government and the national economy. This goal follows from the fact that the government is the largest, and often sole, funder of higher education. The most important mechanisms of the traditional continental quality control are, as far as *input* into higher education is concerned:

- *institution*: yearly appropriation of the line-item budget;
- *academic staff*: civil servant status for the academic staff with concomitant quality controls (e.g., diploma requirements or competitive examinations) and special state appointment of full professors; staff remuneration is government regulated and equal for all institutions of a certain category of higher education;
- *students*: competition for student places, e.g. through entrance exams.

The *process* of education is under *ex ante* control through:

- procedures of approval of the curriculum of new study programmes or new higher education entities (faculties or whole institutions);
- sometimes detailed prescription of the curriculum and the examinations.

Moreover, *ex post* control on the application of the governmentally endorsed prescriptions regarding the educational process is effected, in some cases, through a government inspectorate.

Finally, the *output* of higher education (graduates) is controlled, in this ideal type picture of the continental higher education traditions through a mixed *ex ante* and *ex post* procedure, *viz.*:

- *ex ante* drawing up criteria for, and *ex post* application of additional exams for national degrees.

These and other forms of governmental control have assured that the level and quality of higher education in Europe is much more homogeneous than is the case in, for example, the USA even though

the organizational forms of the higher education systems are more heterogeneous. This often takes the form of the assumption that all institutions of a category of higher education are equal as regards their quality; in other words, the existence of a status hierarchy among higher education institutions or their faculties is denied for all governmental purposes.

Such quality control measures are applied in the different European countries to all or some sectors of higher education, depending on historical and political circumstances. Noticeably, some fields of knowledge or rather, some professions have been under closer state control, e.g., medicine, law, engineering and teacher training. Again, the number of fields and the degree of state control vary for the different countries.

## 2.2 The British Tradition

In the British tradition state control was much less developed than in the continental model (see Clark, 1983, pp. 125-129). Relatively more power and autonomy was given to higher education institutions through their charters. The British universities, accordingly, were free to develop their own forms of quality control. They were also traditionally free to select their own staff, according to their own criteria and on their own conditions (including salary levels), to select their students in the way they wanted (all applying to *input*), to devise their own curriculum (*process*) and to award their own degrees (quality control of *output*). As in continental Europe, the quality of university education was until recently taken for granted.

Even when government funding grew in importance, the distribution of the funds remained in the hands of the academics, through the Universities' Grants Committee (UGC). In more recent years, the UGC has been replaced by the University Funding Council (UFC), which is more closely linked to the government.

The most important mechanism for the *collective* upkeep of the academic standards of quality of the *output* have been the external examiners. External examiners are experienced academics with a high reputation in an area of knowledge related to the course to be examined, from other higher education institutions. They report on student work, judging whether it is of comparable quality standards as those applied elsewhere.

For a limited number of fields, the system of external examiners was, and still is, complemented by professional licensing or accreditation from interest groups in society (a mechanism which also exists on the continent, though in the latter case this is often supported by governmental control). Accreditation was in place for, among other subjects, engineering and accounting. In those fields, undergraduate degree courses gave exemption from certain professional examinations.

As in many continental countries, teacher training is strictly controlled both regarding numbers of students admitted and the curriculum.

During the 1980s the 'traditional' methods of quality management in European higher education, both in the continental and in the British tradition, have been supplemented by a growing number of 'new' methods. In the next chapter we shall address these newly developed approaches.

### 3 'New Methods' of Quality Management in European Higher Education

As can be seen from the appendices to this report, not many countries have a 'non-traditional' system of quality control for higher education in place, although many have plans. Therefore, an exposition of developments in quality control in the countries which do have 'new methods' of operative quality control may have an important function in providing examples (either positive or negative) to decision-makers in other higher education systems. In this chapter, accordingly, we shall concentrate on the higher education systems where 'new methods' of quality control were developed and put into practice well before 1992, and in particular those of France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

It should be pointed out that we shall not explore here the differences in the development of the quality management systems of the university and the non-university sectors in detail. Such an exploration would certainly be interesting and lessons can probably be learned from it. However, given the framework of the present study this exploration cannot be undertaken.

Another remark concerns a common aspect of the 'new methods' of quality assessment in the countries mentioned, which is difficult to point out in the mechanisms themselves. This is the general aim of these methods of not only providing a manner of state control (or social accountability), but of being directed especially towards quality *improvement* in higher education. The relative weight of the two goals of improvement and accountability differs in the practices of different countries, but in each case the explicit attention to quality improvement of education even at the highest level is an important new development.

#### 3.1 Preliminary Remark: Quality Control, Quality Assessment and Quality Management

Since the exact meaning of the terms 'quality control', 'quality assessment' and 'quality management' is partly dependent on national traditions, we shall give our definitions of these terms first. Quality control is defined in technical environments as: 'the operational techniques and activities that are used to fulfil the requirements for quality' (ISO 8402). In this report, it is also used to denote the way of operation concerning quality in higher education in the state control strategy (Van Vught (ed.) 1989), as characterized in chapter 2. Such 'traditional' quality control does not show an explicit emphasis on quality improvement, as the 'new methods' do, but is explicitly concerned with appliance to existing (bureaucratic) standards.

Quality *management* is defined as: 'that aspect of the overall management function that determines and implements the quality policy [intentions and direction of the organization]'. Quality *assurance* is: 'all those planned and systematic actions necessary to provide *adequate confidence* . . .'. This usage is in accordance with ISO 8402 (emphasis added). Quality *assessment* is not defined there, but 'quality audit' is. Parallel to 'quality audit', the term 'quality assessment' (which is more common in the field of higher education) will be taken to mean: a systematic examination to determine whether quality activities comply with planned arrangements and whether the 'product' (the educational process) is implemented effectively and is suitable for achieving objectives.

It should be noted, however, that not too much importance should be paid to definitions: in several circumstances it may even be possible to use especially 'quality control' and 'quality management' as synonyms.

### 3.2 France: The Comité National d'Évaluation

The President of the French Republic and an act of parliament brought into being the *Comité National d'Évaluation* (CNE) in 1985 as a result of the so-called *Loi Savary*. It was, accordingly, set up in a spirit of concern about the dysfunctions of the traditional, centralized, system of quality control: lack of real autonomy, uniformity, rigidity, bureaucracy, etc. (Staropoli, 1991, p. 45). Given its position in terms of constitutional law, the CNE is a government agency, but it only reports to the president, so it is independent of the prime-minister, the minister of education and other executive agencies. The CNE is the first of a new type of administrative authority. Its position is, for the same reason, also independent of the higher education institutions it assesses. This intermediate position between the state and the higher education institutions has the advantage that the CNE can work independently, hence 'objectively'. The disadvantage of such a position is that the committee lacks assured support; in particular, in some circumstances such a position may lead to difficulties in convincing higher education institutions to cooperate in assessments.

The 17 members of the CNE are appointed for four years by the President of the Republic (Cazenave, 1990). Eleven members represent the academic community, shortlisted through university and research umbrella organizations. The other six members represent high government agencies: the *Conseil économique et social* (the council of government, employers and trade unions), the *Conseil d'État* (the constitutional court) and the *Cour des Comptes* (the government accounting office).

The CNE quality assessment procedure consists of two parts, institution-wide evaluations and 'horizontal' disciplinary reviews. The evaluations are not specific down to the individual level, nor do they assess courses: these two levels are covered by the traditional mechanisms. Where necessary and possible, the CNE makes use of existing evaluations and control reports of other agencies that do examine these and other aspects, like research laboratories of the *Centre national de la Recherche scientifique* (CNRS). The tasks of the CNE are not only concerned with quality control (investigating whether higher education institutions produce sufficient quality), but also with judging, quite generally, the results of the contracts established between higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education.\* Many factual indicators are, therefore, at the basis of the CNE evaluations, including information as diverse as research and finance. Evaluation results are not used directly for making reallocations of funds, though through the contract negotiations and the annual budget negotiations, a firm link with decision-making is established.

The CNE makes institution-wide evaluations of education, research and management, the argument being that research and teaching are interdependent primary activities of higher education institutions. Also, other aspects of the higher education institution as an environment for teaching and research are examined. Evaluations are undertaken after an invitation by the higher education institution; it is a voluntary procedure, though the CNE has the right to undertake the evaluations it wants. The CNE 'tours' all institutions every eight years approximately, which means that the first round has been completed at the moment of writing this report (1992). Each audit results in a report on the institution, making recommendations to the persons responsible for institutional management. These reports are public. They are sent to, among others, the ministers responsible for the higher education institutions visited, so as to assure the roles of the reports in the negotiations mentioned above. The whole procedure, from invitation to report, takes about one year (see also Neave, 1991).

The second part of the CNE procedure consists, first, of self-evaluation reports provided by the institution to be visited. These reports are confidential (and include names of individuals). Second, the CNE, the institution involved and government offices collect statistical data (not necessarily performance indicators). With those two sources and its own visit to the location, an external peer committee makes qualitative judgements, resulting in a public report. The committees consist of *circa* 15-20 persons, of whom most are academics, but about 10% come from industry, and  $\pm 5\%$  are foreigners. Students are not

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\* The four-year contracts between the higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education cover, in principle, all activities carried out by the institutions: education, research, etc. The contracts are concerted development programmes, allowing the institutions to emphasize certain objectives in their development more than others.

represented in either these committees, or in the CNE itself\*. The committees work 'horizontally', reviewing all courses in a broad disciplinary area.

Every year, the CNE presents a summary report to the President. In the reports the CNE gives an overview of its institution-wide evaluations. However, no explicit rankings are made of the institutions audited. The character of the reports is sometimes judged to be descriptive rather than analytical (Guin, 1990).

### 3.3 The Netherlands: Quality Assessment coordinated by the Umbrella Organisations

Following the publication of the policy paper entitled *Higher Education: Autonomy and Quality* (1985), the relationships between the ministry of education and science and the higher education institutions in the Netherlands were restructured. In exchange for a greater degree of financial and managerial autonomy, the higher education institutions would prove to society (in fact, to the government) that they delivered quality education. (A quality assessment system for research had already been operational since the beginning of the 1980s.) Originally, the government intended this evaluation to be executed by the Inspectorate for Higher Education (IHO), in part newly-established. In subsequent discussions the umbrella organizations of the higher education institutions, the Association of Co-operating Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) for the universities and the HBO Council for non-university higher education institutions, took that responsibility on themselves. The IHO was by-passed through that compromise and was largely left with the task of 'meta-evaluation': evaluation of the evaluation, and evaluation of the *follow up* on assessment results by the higher education institutions. A pilot project was held by the VSNU in 1988. As a consequence of its evaluation (VSNU, 1988) some adjustments were made and the quality assessment procedure became operational in 1989. In 1990 the HBO Council started a procedure in the non-university sector that, although not completely similar to the VSNU approach, is based on the same principles. One of them is the separation of evaluation of teaching from evaluation of research. A system of quality assessment for research has existed in the Netherlands since 1982, and is part of a separate funding mechanism for (part of) university research. Research evaluations are included in the teaching assessment in so far as they are important for the teaching process or its environment (quality of staff, etc.). From 1994 onwards, the intention is to synchronize quality assessments of teaching and of research, so as to enable faculties to gain an overall view of themselves without merging the procedures. This is in order not to overload the peer committees.

For reasons of brevity, we shall concentrate here on the VSNU system \*\* 'owned' (and funded) by the universities collectively – a unique development. This has led to a change in emphasis as regards the aims of quality assessment: from a predominant emphasis on accountability, a shift has taken place to one on quality improvement. In other words, in practice, goals requiring formative quality judgements have come to the fore more than goals requiring summative quality judgements.

The procedure is summarized in figure 1, and its focal point is the visiting committee that reviews all study programmes in a given area of knowledge in the country. The approach is by disciplinary field, rather than institutional. In a fixed six-year cycle, all study programmes are covered, in principle, by the procedure.

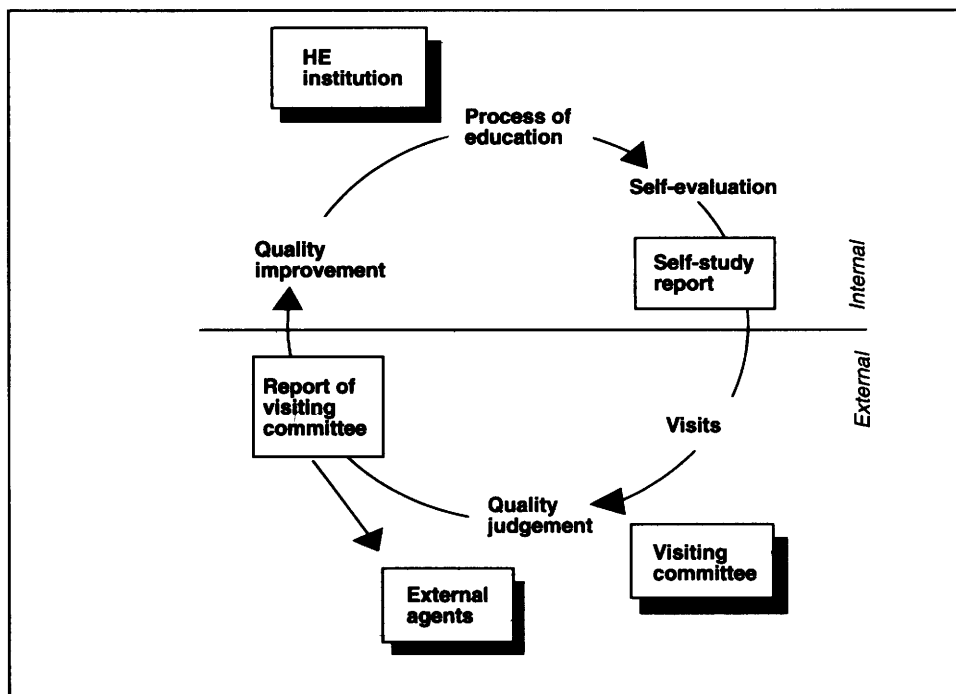
In preparation for the visiting committee, each participating study programme is required to write a self-evaluation. As the aims of the self-evaluation are not only to prepare the faculty for the visiting committee, but also to stimulate internal quality management (Vroeijenstijn & Acherman 1990, p. 88), the

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\* The fact that students do not participate in quality assessment on a systemic level is a common characteristic of all quality assessment systems mentioned in this chapter, even though students may be involved in quality assessments of teaching within the institutions.

\*\* For more information on the non-university sector see the Appendix.

content of the self-evaluation is not fixed completely. The faculties and departments to be evaluated can stress points which are important to them. However, for reasons of comparability, a fixed format is given by the VSNU checklist (VSNU, 1990) which consists of a large number of subjects that should be addressed in the self-evaluation. It is a list of factual data needed, not a list of performance indicators, and is neither quantitative nor qualitative, though some data might be interpreted in that way (e.g., student completion rates). Neither is it a list of minimum requirements: the study programme's own goals are the point of departure. The list includes, among other things, data on the academic staff and its quality, but no specific data are required on research output or research quality, or on the way research and teaching are related. The self-studies of all participating study programmes are collected by the visiting committee before it starts on its 'tour' of the country.



The visiting committees consist of some half-dozen members, including at least one foreign expert of the field (with knowledge of the Dutch language and higher education situation), and one educational expert. The other members are preferably chosen from parts of Dutch higher education other than the participating programmes and from the professional field, with an attempt to achieve an even distribution over the several sub-specialisms. In practice, special care is taken to appoint an independent chair. Experimentally, in one visiting committee a student representative has been appointed for 1991/1992.\* The members of the committee are proposed by the collective deans of the participating faculties and nominated by the board of the VSNU. The committee visits each study programme for two to two-and-a-half days. During this period the committee speaks with representatives of all interest groups in the faculty, including students. To enable non-selected voices to be heard, an 'open hour' is part of the procedure. Subjects for the talks are taken from the self-evaluation, from the committee's prior visits and other (usually considerable) knowledge of the field and the faculty, and whatever else comes up during the visit. At the end of the visit, the chair gives an oral, temporary judgement about the quality of the study programme. Based on the written version of this judgement and the (factual) comments of the study programmes, the visiting committee then writes its final report. The report usually contains a general part,

\* The role of students in the self-study may be larger in that their opinions may be asked on the programme and its constituent parts, on teachers, etc. They may take part in the drafting of the self-study, or more often in the internal discussions about the draft report. Also the visiting committee systematically talks with students, as it does with teaching staff, during every visit.

stating problems, outlooks, expectations and recommendations pertaining to whole the field, and chapters about the individual study programmes.

The recommendations in the visiting committee report supposedly lead to improvements in the study programmes, together with the measures taken based on the self-evaluations in anticipation of the visiting committee. The initial results of research into the institutional follow-up indicate that this does indeed happen to a certain extent, though not in clear linear fashion. Nor have the measures taken up to now been very drastic (IHO, 1992; Westerheijden, Weusthof & Frederiks, 1992). As shown in the figure, the visiting committee report is also read by external agents. For example, the IHO writes a yearly report about the visiting committees, its 'meta-evaluation' report. Attention in the newspapers is also usual.

As a result of the agreements of 1986, the Ministry of Education and Science has not taken any action on the basis of the visiting committees' judgements. It was thought that the introduction of the system should not be hampered by direct consequences for decision-making and funding. Direct links to funding and other aspects of government decision-making would lead only too easily to strategic behaviour on the part of the higher education institutions, which would undermine the quality assessment system completely. A way has thus been found to escape from what may be called (Westerheijden, 1990, p. 206) the *dilemma of quality assessment*:

*Without the expectation of real consequences, the incentives to organize quality assessment are lacking; with the expectation of real consequences, quality assessment will turn into a power game.*

The Ministry of Education and Science has found its way out, as said before, by abstaining from *direct* intervention, but simultaneously making it known that it *may* take action in the medium or long term. Probably out of concern that the follow-up of the recommendations arising from the first round of visits is not equally satisfactory in all institutions, the ministry has tried, in 1993, to make the universities give more feedback on their follow-up, simultaneously indicating that ministerial action might be forthcoming more gradually but sooner than previously expected.

### **3.4 The United Kingdom: Two Models and New Developments**

In the United Kingdom, two models of quality management have been developed since the enlargement of government influence over higher education in the 1960s. The first applies to the sector of non-university higher education, the polytechnics and colleges. Much later, quality control was extended to university higher education too. We shall characterize these models in their chronological order. It should be noted that following changes in the higher education system as a result of the 1991 white paper *Higher Education: A New Framework*, formalized in the *Further and Higher Education Act* of 1992, new arrangements are beginning to take shape at the time of writing. We shall turn to them at the end of this section.

It should be noted that quality assessment of research in higher education institutions takes place in a separate 'research selectivity exercise' operated by the UFC until 1992, and falling under the jurisdiction of the new funding councils since then.

#### **3.4.1 Validation and Accreditation by the Council for National Academic Awards**

Since the first half of the 1960s non-university higher education in the UK has been under the aegis of the CNAA, the Council for National Academic Awards (Brennan, 1990). As in other countries, quality in this higher education sector was also controlled by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI), which continued to exist, with its own responsibilities and methods, alongside the new CNAA. HMI judgements were fed into funding decisions by the *Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council* (PCFC). The main characterizing element of HMI procedures was classroom observation.



The CNAA, a government-initiated body, was independent, obtaining its own royal charter in 1964. It was a body which awarded degrees of a level professedly equal to that of a university bachelor's degree. The CNAA validated proposed courses in colleges and polytechnics *ex ante* and reviewed them quinquennially. For a long time the committees consisted of peers, i.e. academics working in the same area of knowledge but in other higher education institutions (colleges, polytechnics and universities) plus, if applicable, representatives of the relevant profession or industry. These committees based their visit on detailed written information regarding the structure and content of the course, ways and methods of teaching and student assessment, and available resources (research and teaching qualifications of the staff members who were expected to become involved, physical equipment, etc.). In the frequent cases of disapproval by the committee a new round, based on an amended proposal, would start. The periodic reviews were similar, though as a rule less uncertain as regards the committee's approval. Moreover, the CNAA had to approve the appointment of external examiners for the public sector institutions.

The peer review of courses was complemented by a review (usually quinquennial) of the institution's own operational mechanisms as opposed to those planned to assure the level of its courses. Then, after 1988, the CNAA *accredited* a number of polytechnics to validate their own courses (undergraduate and postgraduate degree level) by monitoring the institutional quality management procedures, including annual internal monitoring systems and public performance indicators.

Based on this tradition of government-independent quality assessment, the CNAA and the funding organization of the public sector higher education institutions, the *Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council* (PCFC), tried to liberalize the evaluation culture developing in the 1980s, which was becoming more and more 'continental' in its government-centred approach by taking account of the institution's goals (Kogan, 1991).

With the end of the binary divide in 1992, the CNAA ceased to exist at the beginning of 1993, while most of its activities were wound up in the academic year 1991/92.

### 3.4.2 Quality Audit by the Academic Audit Unit

The turning points in quality management for British universities were two reports in the mid-1980s: the Reynolds report to the Universities' Grants Committee (UGC) and the Jarratt report to the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP). In the Reynolds report, criteria were laid down for internal quality management systems which all universities would be required to introduce in the following years. The Jarratt report was the focal point for the discussion of performance indicators and their role in quality-based funding.

The Academic Audit Unit (AAU) was introduced in 1990/91 by the umbrella organization of the universities, the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), reputedly to counter the threat of Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) to extend its control to the universities as well (Kogan, 1991; Young, 1990). Previously, as explained in the section on the UK tradition in chapter 3, each university individually took care of its quality control. The external, comparative aspect in this system consisted of the external examiners. Views on their effectiveness in terms of quality assessment differ. However, this approach was judged to be an insufficient mechanism for providing accountability towards society in general and to the government in particular. The AAU had to fill this gap.

The background to the AAU's methods was threefold comprising CNAA procedures, financial audits and total quality management. The CNAA has been discussed in the previous section. Financial, external audits provide a check for the outside world that the organization's bookkeeping systems are in order and look at some examples to see how they operate. Likewise, the AAU *quality audit* checked whether the university's quality management systems were sufficient and, through 'tracing' some examples, how they really operated. AAU activities were, therefore, a form of 'meta-evaluation' targeted not at the quality of higher education, but the quality of the institution's evaluation methods. From the total quality management (TQM) movement the AAU borrowed *inter alia* the ideas of the crucial role of customer

(student and employer) satisfaction, staff training and development for quality, and the idea that the quality of higher education is dependent on the totality of an institution's activities.

The core of the AAU quality assessment procedure consisted of an on-site visit by an *audit team*. The teams usually consisted of two or three academics. The choice of institutions to visit was the result of a 'negotiated invitation'. In preparation for its visit (usually three days), the audit team received written information from the university on the quality assessment systems it had plus, if requested, a small number of examples of the application of these systems. The AAU had a checklist based on good practice against which to assess an institution's quality assessment mechanisms. The checklist included topics like curriculum data (organization and planning processes), teaching methods, staff quality data, reports or opinions from external examiners and from students, etc. From this documentation, together with the information gathered during the on-site visit, the audit team drafted a short report for the university as a whole and, if necessary, confidential reports on 'sensitive issues' to the Vice-Chancellor. Following the institution's comments on this draft, a final version of the official report was written. The AAU did not itself publish the report but the university was encouraged to do so.

### 3.4.3 Quality Audit and Quality Assessment since 1992

The changes following the 1991 white paper have led to profound changes in the organizational structure of the intermediate level (between the individual institutions and the department of education). New procedures for these organizations have been drawn up.

Organizationally, the changes include the following. First, the collective body of heads of higher education institutions established the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) with a Division of Quality Audit, under which the AAU has been subsumed. The work of the CNAA in supporting and enhancing quality will also be developed for the whole of higher education by this Council. Second, the former funding councils (UFC and PCFC) have been transformed into three new funding councils, one for England, one for Wales and one for Scotland. These have set up Quality Assessment Committees to assist them in making funding decisions based on the quality of teaching in the separate institutions.

The white paper has also led to the introduction of very specific meanings for the following terms in the British context:

- quality control: 'mechanisms within institutions for maintaining and enhancing the quality of their provisions';
- quality audit: 'external scrutiny aimed at providing guarantees that institutions have suitable quality control mechanisms in place' (this is the responsibility of the HEQC);
- quality assessment: 'external review of, and judgements about, the quality of teaching and learning in institutions' (this is the responsibility of the funding councils).

In this way higher education institutions will be audited by one agency, and assessed by another. The quality audits by the HEQC resemble the basic principles of the AAU: an investigation of the quality control mechanisms and policies present in the individual institutions by a small team of external experts, including *in loco* audit trails to examine the practice of quality control.

A joint working group of the English funding council, the umbrella organizations of the higher education institutions and the now defunct HMI designed pilot assessments to develop and evaluate a (new) method for quality assessment in the new meaning: evaluation of standards of learning in specific areas to inform the funding councils about the *relative* quality of work in different higher education institutions 'in order to inform funding decisions' (HMI, 1991, p. 4). The seven-person assessment team (four 'peers', two HMI and a non-higher education chair) made one-week visits 'to see most of the accommodation and resources in use, a selection of lecturers at work, and a representative cross-section of students' work' (HMI, 1991, p. 5). This was a cross-breed of a thorough visiting committee and the HMI

approach. As a consequence of the slightly unsatisfactory results of these pilot assessments, further test assessments with an adapted procedure were carried out in England in the autumn of 1992, with subsequent publication of a consultative document on the final method. The Scottish Higher Education Funding Council also issued a consultative document in the autumn of 1992, which proposed to place considerable weight on institutions' own internal systems of quality management. Although on a more detailed level, differences can be found between the English and the Scottish approaches (the Scottish funding council takes a slightly more explicitly developmental and quality improvement oriented stance than the English one), on a general level they are fairly similar. Basically, the faculties are asked to provide information about themselves, in writing, on a limited number of indicators, and on their programme, resulting in a claim for 'excellent' or 'satisfactory' quality of teaching. The funding councils will compose small visiting committees from a pool of experts (primarily disciplinary peers) to assess and visit all institutions claiming excellence, all those where weaknesses (based on information available to the funding council) may be encountered, and to examine a sample of other institutions. Each visiting committee is selected to visit one institution and no effort is made to set up a nation-wide system of comparisons. The committees' judgements are summarized as 'excellent', 'satisfactory' or 'unsatisfactory'. In what way, through which 'formula' (if any), the judgements will inform the funding decisions is not yet completely clear.

To what extent the practices of quality audit and quality assessment amount to the same thing in practice is also as yet unknown. For example, some fear that, an audit trail into the practice of quality control in a faculty will closely resemble the quality assessment of that same faculty.

### **3.5 Final Remark**

At the moment of writing this report, changes abound in the field of quality management in higher education in Europe. Countries other than the three mentioned here are quickly developing quality assessment systems of their own, adapting the role models they find around them to national circumstances and needs. Yet these role models, mostly found in the recent French, Dutch and British innovations in the approaches of quality management in higher education, provide an interesting list of items that might be of help for a discussion, and possibly for a design of a 'new' *European* approach to higher education quality management. In chapter 4 some elements of such a European dimension will be presented.

## 4 Towards a European Dimension in Higher Education Quality Management?

### 4.1 Introduction

In this study it has become clear that in many West European countries new procedures and mechanisms for quality management are being developed (see appendices). In many countries discussions about these new approaches are still ongoing. In some, 'new' quality management systems appear to be in operation. The first experiences with these systems have been presented in chapter 3 of this study. In this chapter we shall concentrate on a comparative exploration, at systemic level, of the quality management systems that are or have been in operation in Western Europe. We shall present, in particular, an inventory of the common elements of these systems, focusing on the evaluation of teaching.

On examining experience with new quality management systems in several Western European countries, it can be argued that they display a number of similar elements. The national quality management systems that have either recently been introduced or are still being developed of course all have their own specific characteristics. It may be expected that these national idiosyncrasies will continue to exist in the future. In particular the role of the state, as the *major* funder of higher education, and in many countries the initiator of quality assessment systems, seems to be more pronounced in emerging systems in, *inter alia*, several Mediterranean and Nordic countries. But the systems already in operation also show similar elements, which offer us an opportunity to present an overview of the common elements in the quality management systems in Western Europe. To a large extent, these elements may be deduced from similarities in the systems of France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. It is in these countries that the 'new' methods and procedures of quality management have so far been implemented most widely. It is from their experience that we can learn most about the positive and negative effects of the new systems.

### 4.2 Common Elements of the 'New Methods' of Quality Management in European Higher Education

In terms of the dimensions distinguished in chapter 1, the common elements to be presented here, do certainly not encompass all aspects of quality management in higher education. Most importantly, the *scope* of the presentation is on teaching, not on research or institutional management. In some countries, notably France, the integration of these elements is heavily emphasized. The *focus* is on the process. And the *aims* behind the elements are both institutional quality improvement and accountability towards society. In our opinion, this does not imply that other aspects are unimportant. What it does imply is that we regard the elements presented here to have priority, particularly in the light of the experience being accumulated in European countries at present.

The experiences of the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and France seem to point towards a set of common elements in quality management. Recent approaches used by the CNAA and the CVCP's Academic Audit Unit, in the United Kingdom, by the Association of Universities in the Netherlands and by the French *Comité National d'Evaluation* appear to be rather similar. What then are these common elements?

A first element has to do with the managing agent (or agents) of the quality management system. Such an agent should be independent and have the responsibility of managing the system at a *meta-level*. The meta-level agent should be the coordinator of the system, acting independently from government

politics and policies and not having to impose upon the institutions an approach that the government deems necessary. The meta-level agent should preferably have some legal basis. Its coordinating task should imply (after consultation with the institutions) the formulation of procedures and formats that can be used by the institutions. In these procedures and formats consistent statistical information can be indicated as highly relevant. The experiences in the various countries of Western Europe show that this meta-level role is of great importance in obtaining acceptance of the system. The Academic Audit Unit (AAU) in the United Kingdom neither inspected courses nor programmes, nor did it validate courses. The AAU only monitored and commented on the mechanisms by which the institutions themselves assured the quality of the programmes they offer (CVCP, 1991). Similarly, in the procedures used by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) since 1985, the institutions were encouraged to undertake their own quality review processes. While the CNAA kept its responsibility for the final approval of the courses leading to its awards, the quality management mechanism had above all to do with an institution's capacity to identify its strengths and weaknesses and to improve its quality. In the new British systems, two meta-level agents exist, namely the Higher Education Quality Council, 'owned' by the collective universities, and the funding councils, which are tied more closely to the governmental services. The Association of Co-operating Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) follows a strategy similar to that of the CNAA and the CVCP. In the quality management system in the Netherlands emphasis is put on the institution's self-evaluation and the visit by peers. The Association itself only operates as the coordinator of the system.

A second common element in the 'new' quality management systems is the mechanism of *self-evaluation* (or self-study, self-assessment). It is often argued in the literature on higher education that, for academics to accept and implement changes, they must trust and 'own' the process in which problems are defined and solutions designed. This is certainly also the case in quality management. Only if the academics accept quality management as their own activity will the system be successful. Self-evaluation is a crucial mechanism for them to accept a quality management system. Moreover, in a self-evaluation process (or in any set of activities in a higher education institution with a focus on internal quality assessment) consulting processes with outside actors (employers, alumni) are of great importance. Moreover, the self-evaluation activities should be guided by the general procedures and formats that were discussed with the meta-level agent. The evaluation of the first six-year round of the experiences in the Netherlands with the new quality management system (in which self-evaluation plays a crucial role) confirms this insight. The faculties (departments) indicated that they felt their self-studies to be perhaps the most relevant and useful part of the procedure. They also indicated that the self-studies appear to be important incentives for adapting existing programmes and routines (Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). Although perhaps less elaborated, the idea of self-evaluation seems to be important also in the French and the British systems. The *Comité National d'Evaluation* has indicated that it assumes that information on and from a higher education institution is available when an evaluation is carried out. The Academic Audit Unit and its successor body in the HEQC advise the institutions to produce several 'briefing documents', the purpose of which is to ensure that the auditing team forms a clear view of the quality assurance systems in operation. In the new funding councils' quality assessments the faculties are required to evaluate themselves to the point of being able to state whether their programmes are 'excellent' or not.

A third common element in the 'new' systems certainly appears to be the mechanism of *peer review*, and especially one or more *site visits* by external experts. It is crucial that these experts should be accepted by the institution to be visited as unbiased specialists in the field. They can come from many constituencies (including employers' organisations, industry and professional bodies) and, depending on the nature of the visit (review of content and level of a specific study programme, or management audit at institutional level), they will need to have established professional backgrounds (academic expertise, managerial experience, etc.). The external visitors should visit the institution (or faculty/department) for a period of a few days, during which they can discuss the self-evaluation report and the plans for future innovations with the faculty. The visitors could also take the opportunity to interview staff, students, administrators and (if possible) alumni. This element appears to be used successfully in several Western European quality management systems. In the UK, the CNAA always emphasized the visit by a committee of peers. The Academic Audit Unit sees the visit as an intense and concentrated activity (Williams, 1991, pp. 7,8):

*During three days the audit team will talk to probably more than a hundred people in some twenty or so sessions, ranging from the Vice-Chancellor to first-year students. Each session will have a different purpose, but all will be informed by the team's need not only to satisfy itself that it understands what is supposed to happen, and the extent to which it actually does so, but also the extent to which the mechanisms and structures in place are adequate and appropriate to meet the quality assurance needs of the institution in terms of its own stated aims and objectives*

The procedures developed since the changes in British higher education in 1992 continue this emphasis. Although for reasons of economy the funding councils abstain from visits to all faculties, all those whose quality is claimed or expected to deviate from the average will be visited, plus a sample of the 'satisfactory' ones. In France the *Comité National d'Evaluation* organises at least two visits to each university being reviewed. In the Netherlands a team of external experts visits each programme site of a specific discipline. By doing so the peer review process takes the form of a comparative analysis of strengths and weaknesses, although the purpose certainly does not include uni-dimensional ranking of the individual programme sites. The idea behind the comparative analysis is to help the external visitors to get a good impression of the state of the art in the discipline. A crucial aspect to be emphasized in a quality management system with a European dimension is the inclusion in the review committees of international experts. They in particular can pay attention to the European aspects of programmes and institutions.

A fourth element in the 'new methods' of quality management in European higher education concerns the *reporting* of the results of and experience with these methods. Regarding this element some form of reporting the conclusions of the peer review team is very useful. However, such a report should not have the function of judging or ranking the institutions or programmes that have been visited. Instead, its main aim should be to help the institutions and study programmes to improve their levels of quality. A crucial phase in the reporting process therefore concerns providing the opportunity to the institutions and units that have been visited to comment on a draft version of the report and to formulate counter-arguments if necessary. Also, in the final version of the report higher education institutions should be able to indicate possible disagreements with the peer review team. Reporting the results of the quality assessment processes is an important mechanism in providing accountability to external constituencies. However, there appear to be various ways of offering such a report and each has its specific advantages and disadvantages. For the IMHE working group on performance indicators of the OECD too the matter of publication was 'a vexed question' and 'of greatest concern' (Kells (ed.) 1990, p. 7; also Kells 1992, p. 135). If a final solution is not presented below, one should therefore perhaps not be surprised.

One way is to publish the complete report and, by so doing, offer it to all those who might be interested. The advantage of such an approach is that each constituency can immediately and clearly find out what the outcomes of an assessment have been and how these outcomes relate to their norms and criteria. A disadvantage of this approach is that it may severely limit the commitment of those who are visited to engage in open discussions with the peer review team, simply because they fear the effects of their frankness when the results of the review are published. A second way to report on the results of the peer review is to offer the detailed individual reports only to the institutions visited and to guarantee confidentiality. To the external constituencies (and to society at large) a general summary of the report can be presented, which may be used as a mechanism for providing accountability. The advantage of this approach is that the commitment of those who are visited will be high. The disadvantage is that some external constituencies might not be satisfied with only a summary of the report, out of fear that information is being withheld from them.

Regarding this element of quality management, the approaches in the various countries differ. The French CNE publishes its reports on the institutions. The institutional self-evaluations are kept confidential, while the report by the external experts is public. Although in the pilot phase in the Netherlands, the reports on the individual study programmes of the external visitors were kept confidential, the final reports, including the 'local reports', have been made public since the system has been fully implemented. The argument for doing so is the accountability objective. The negative effects, which are becoming visible, are that the reports become rather general and cautiously phrased and that academics who have been visited pay less attention to the written reports than to the outcomes of the visits (Westerheijden, Weusthof & Frederiks 1992). Reporting practices may indeed change during the second

round of VSNU evaluations from 1994 onwards. In the procedures of the British Academic Audit Unit, the audit report was intended to provide an accurate account of an institution's quality assurance mechanisms. The report thus drew attention to good and bad practice. Reports were above all written for the institutions and the Academic Audit Unit itself did not publish them. It was for the institution to decide what publicity to give to them, although it was assumed that a report 'finds its way into the public domain accompanied by a commentary prepared by the university' (Williams, 1991, p. 10).

A final common element in the 'new' approaches to quality management concerns the possible relationship between the outcomes of a quality review system and (governmental) decisions about the funding of higher education activities. Based on the experience of quality management in Western Europe so far, we can argue that a *direct, rigid* relationship between quality review reports and funding decisions should not be established. By a direct, rigid relationship we mean that the quality judgements are the only input into the funding process which is a simple function (e.g. linear) of the judgement. For example, 'good' education means an amount of  $x$  in extra money, and 'bad' education means  $x$  less. Such an 'automatic' direct relationship will probably harm the operation of a quality management system, all the more so as funding decisions at present tend to be cutbacks (negative sanctions) rather than incentives (positive sanctions). The danger of this is that it may lead to a compliance culture, the only aim of which will be to appear to meet the criteria formulated, irrespective of whether they are appropriate in the context of specific institutions or not. In such a rigid relationship, academics and institutions will distrust the external review teams and will produce self-evaluation studies in compliance with perceived criteria but with little real interest. Relating a system of rigid and direct rewards and sanctions to the delicate mechanisms of quality management may have a very negative effect on the operation of the system. Equally, on the subject of performance indicators, it is reported elsewhere (Kells 1992, p. 136) that: '[t]he use of indicators, by government, to influence the funding level of or within institutions, is perhaps the most uniformly negative reaction across the OECD workgroup countries' [italics from the original].

In France, the *Comité National d'Evaluation* has understood these dangers. Its evaluations do not have a direct impact on state subventions to the institutions. The new procedures for quality assessment in the United Kingdom also do not imply a *direct* relationship between quality management and funding on a large scale. Moreover, the amounts of money involved in the funding councils' judgements seem to be fairly marginal for the moment, thereby mitigating any possible negative effect. Also, the quality audits of the new quality council for higher education, continuing the role of the AAU, have no *direct* link to funding either, making the relationship between quality judgements and funding as complicated for British higher education institutions as it is in other European countries.

The above does *not* imply that an *indirect*, non-automatic relationship between quality management and funding decisions should also be rejected. On the contrary, as the new approaches in, for instance France and the United Kingdom show, such an indirect relationship, where quality judgements are an input, but not the only input, into the policy processes leading to funding decisions, could very well be part of the set of common elements presented here.

An indirect relationship would imply that the various national governments (which, in Western European higher education, are the central funding organisations) will only provide the necessary financial means to higher education institutions if these institutions (and the various units within them) can show that they have submitted themselves to at least one external judgement as an accepted part of the general quality management system. Only if higher education institutions can show that they have offered their educational programmes for external review, should these institutions be eligible for governmental funding. Whether the funds provided by government are used to reward programmes that have been judged to be of good quality or to help programmes that received a negative qualification by an external review team, should be the decision of the higher education institution itself. It should be left to the discretion of institutions as to how they react to the outcomes of the quality management system. The decision to fund or not to fund an institution (or certain programmes within an institution) should, in this approach, only depend upon the willingness to submit institutional activities to outside review.

The common elements presented in this section (touching upon the meta-level role of managing agent(s), upon self-evaluation, upon peer review and site visits, upon the degree of confidentiality of

reporting, and upon the relationship between quality review outcomes and funding) together form the core of what could be distilled from the 'new methods' of quality management in European higher education. As has been stated above, several options are possible on each of these core elements. These elements should be explored further when the experiences with and effects of higher education quality management are being discussed on a European scale. It may also be in these elements that the European dimension of higher education quality management can be found.



**Appendix A**  
**European Community**

## Belgium

In Belgium many responsibilities regarding higher education have been decentralised to the lower levels of government since the Belgian state reform of 1988. Therefore, in this section the Flemish and the French communities will be described separately.

### *Flemish community*

#### *Flemish Universities*

Quality assessment both of teaching and of research has been an issue in Flemish higher education since about 1985, leading to conferences to stimulate attention and to exchange experiences, etc. Since 1986, the Flemish Inter-University Council (VLIR), organizes regular evaluations of the Flemish International Courses Programmes in the framework of development cooperation. Following these initiatives, and the involvement of Flemish academics in Dutch visiting committees, the Flemish universities started, in 1990, to participate in the Dutch quality assessment procedure of university education organized by the VSNU (see the section on the Netherlands, pp. VII-VIII). The decision to cooperate with the VSNU is based on a conscious process of preparation both at the level of courses and of institutional management. Also, the fact that many Flemish experts contributed to the VSNU visiting committees (as Dutch speaking, international peers) has had some influence on the decision to cooperate. In Flanders, the Flemish Inter-University Council (VLIR) and the VSNU together coordinate the process.

The same emphasis on the goal of institutional quality improvement, more than just accountability towards the government or society, applies in both cases. The cooperation started with the visiting committee for Geological Sciences, and has been formalized in an agreement between the Flemish Inter-University Council (VLIR) and the VSNU, concluded in 1992. According to this 'general agreement', which will become operative during 1993/94, *joint reviews* (visiting Flemish and Dutch universities equally) will be organized, as well as *separate reviews* (organized simultaneously but separately). All reviews will apply the VSNU protocol. The reports drawn up by the visiting committee are intended in the first place for the participating institutions, but are published too. In the next round the disciplines of pharmacy, dentistry and chemistry will be addressed.

A decree of 1991 obliges Flemish universities to assess their work regularly. It also empowers the Flemish Executive to nominate its own visiting committees, the results of which may have financial consequences for the study programmes. However, unless the government publishes an order to implement the relevant articles of the enactment, no change will occur in the present situation.

#### *Flemish Non-university Higher Education*

Short and long types of non-university higher education exist in Flanders. Both types are developing a quality assessment system. For the longer type this will involve peer reviews by external experts. In the short type for courses the government's inspectorate will make the assessments.

### *French community*

#### *University and Non-university Higher Education*

The French community has no general quality assessment system in higher education (see also Neave 1991), though the issue is being discussed at present. Universities should produce a report on research activities every five years, but this is not always done, nor is any action taken following on from these data. Some individual institutions have taken initiatives to develop and implement assessment procedures, but there is as yet no general system established in the French-speaking community.

## Federal Republic of Germany

### *Universities and Fachhochschulen*

There is no quality assessment system in German higher education as defined in this report. Discussions about quality assessment, which are ongoing since approximately 1990, started from the point of view of the problems of high drop-out rates and the long time taken to complete studies in higher education (Westerheijden & Maassen, 1991; Goedegebuure *et al.*, 1992).<sup>\*</sup> Notwithstanding earlier initiatives by coordinating bodies made up of governmental and higher education representatives (e.g. BLK, 1988; KMK, 1988; *Wissenschaftsrat*, 1988), the real thrust to the discussion came only when, at the end of 1989, the weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* published a ranking of universities according to study conditions, including duration of study. From the same point of view, action programmes have also been set up in many *Bundesländer* and in individual higher education institutions. Quality of education is the topic of those measures, and its assessment, if included at all, is only one of several measures in those programmes. Most other measures relate to the structure of curricula and examinations. The problems, and partly also the programmes in answer to the problems, apply equally to universities and non-university higher education institutions (*Fachhochschulen*).

Since 1990 many initiatives, taken by many different interested parties, have sprung up. Partly owing to the complex federal, decentralized structure of the higher education system in Germany, it is not easy to obtain an overview of all initiatives, let alone the way in which they are coordinated (see HIS, 1992; Richter, 1992).

What is remarkable about some of the German quality assessment measures is the important role of students, in imitation of the *Spiegel* procedure. Quality assessment is interpreted in action programmes in North-Rhine-Westfalia, Baden-Württemberg and Hamburg as exclusively assessment of lectures, seminars, and of teaching staff by the students.<sup>\*\*</sup>

## Denmark

### *Universities*

The policy issues in Danish higher education derive principally from the problem of accommodating the large numbers of secondary school leavers wishing to enter higher education, as in Germany. As in Germany also, this leads to a growing student/staff ratio,<sup>\*\*\*</sup> with the publically expressed fear that quality standards may drop. Traditionally, there is a system of external examiners in Denmark, and there is *ex post* state control in the form of regular visits to major centres of knowledge and an evaluation of new study programmes after five years' experience (Chairmanship of the National Advisory Boards on Higher Education, 1992).

Quality *management* was and is a university responsibility, but the government has decided to start a quality *assessment* initiative with the establishment of the Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education (*Evalueringcenteret*) in June 1992, in connection with a four-year plan for higher education. In this plan, regular external assessment is one of the key issues and the *Evalueringcenteret* is the agent responsible for it. The Chairmanship of the National Advisory Boards on Higher Education has been working on setting up this Centre (publication in 1992). Moreover, experimental disciplinary evaluations have taken place (as in chemistry an experiment with an adapted form of the 'Dutch model' 1989, and business economics and accounting, 1990), or are taking place in 1992 (humanities, geology) under the aegis of the same Chairmanship of the National Advisory Boards on Higher Education. Also, a number of small-scale evaluations (of one or a few closely-related study programmes) have been

<sup>\*</sup> The most important reasons why German students study for so long are: 1. living conditions for students (off campus); 2. badly organized curricula; 3. insufficient equipment, facilities, high student staff ratios, etc.; 4. academic culture (research oriented instead of teaching oriented) (BLK, 1988 cited from Richter, 1992).

implemented. It was further decided that the already existing system of external examiners will be upgraded and elaborated.

The 'new' quality assessment system has been set up making use of experiences in other countries, especially the Netherlands, and also those in Great Britain. The system comprises all sectors of higher education, i.e., the university and the non-university sectors. The coordinator of the quality assessment system is the Evaluation Centre, which, although government-funded, is autonomous, not unlike the CNE in France (see page 14). The board of the Evaluation Centre consists at least temporarily of the chairs of the National Advisory Boards on higher education. For different purposes, different procedures have been developed: inter-institutional evaluations of a certain discipline should be performed in a different manner from evaluations of one whole institution. Disciplinary evaluations are the 'corner stone in the quality development work' (Chairmanship ..., 1992, p. 9). Apart from stating a priority of disciplinary over institutional points of view, this suggests that quality development, or quality improvement, is the primary goal, rather than accountability. The core of the quality assessment system may well be 'large-scale' evaluations on the Dutch VSNU model. 'Small scale', *ad hoc* evaluations of single study programmes will then be undertaken when necessary (e.g. evaluations of experimental programmes). The visiting committees in large scale evaluations will consist of Danish and international, primarily Nordic, peers. The Evaluation Centre expects that it may need to undertake special studies, like labour market studies, to underpin the work of these visiting committees (Chairmanship ..., 1992, p. 18).

### *Non-university Higher Education: Colleges*

The colleges are mostly small specialized institutions offering medium-term (3-4 years) higher education (Goedegebuure *et al.*, 1992). They will be included in the new quality assessment system on an equal footing with the universities, as mentioned above.

## **Spain**

### *Universities*

Quality assessment systems exist in Spain for academic staff at individual level. At the moment, such systems are being set up for institutions, both for education and for research. Quality assessment in Spain is still rather new. Although the University Reform Law dates from 1983, the decrees regulating assessment activities were issued in 1989 and 1990. This brings the Spanish experience well in line with that in other European countries.

Quality assessment is organized in the first instance internally by the university. Since 1989, it has been in effect in practically all universities at all (three) degree levels. The assessments take place at the level of the individual academic staff members ('profesorado'). Both their teaching and their research performances are involved, and the aim is improvement of efficiency in their work. Methods indicated as appropriate are information from staff members themselves, from students, from university agents, and from external agents. This individual quality assessment is intended to be formative *and* summative. It is going to be a cyclical procedure that will take place every five years. There are clear consequences for the salaries of the staff members, with possible changes of up to circa +50%. Figures for possible negative changes are not given.

Some institutional evaluation is organized by the *Agencia Nacional de Evaluación y Prospectiva* (ANEP). This organization belongs to an inter-ministerial committee on science and technology R&D. ANEP started institutional evaluations from the point of view of research. In itself these quality assessments are not important for our purpose here, but the methodological findings (on the use of peer review) may have consequences for the development of more general institutional evaluations, including the educational aspects.

Plans exist at the moment for more evaluation activity (see Miguel, Mora & Rodriguez (eds.), 1991). A working group of the universities' council proposed in the autumn of 1992 to start a pilot project. As in the UK and the Netherlands, the Spanish ministry of education is observing this development with much interest, and with the more or less explicit intention of developing a higher education inspectorate if this university initiative does not operate sufficiently well. The experimental programme is improvement-oriented rather than control-oriented, and is based on the principle of institutional evaluation (Consejo de universidades, 1993), comprising an overall evaluation including teaching, research and services to society. Self-evaluation is the base of the procedure, complemented by external peer reviews informed by (quantitative) 'quality indicators' in the self-evaluations. The experimental evaluation project will be coordinated by the Council of Universities.

### *Non-university Higher Education*

Compared to some other European countries the non-university sector is less well developed in several Mediterranean countries, including Spain. A 'new' quality assessment system does not yet exist in this sector in Spain.

## **France**

### *Universities and Grandes Ecoles*

These two types of higher education in France are (voluntarily) subject to evaluation by the *Comité National d'Evaluation* (CNE), as described in chapter 3. As part of the universities, though with separate, vocationally oriented study programmes, there are *Instituts Universitaires de Technologie* which are subject to the same quality assessment procedures as the rest of the universities.

### *Other Non-university Higher Education*

In the very diversified French higher education system, there are in general three types of non-university institutions (see *inter alia* Staropoli, 1991; Westerheijden & Maassen, 1991). The first type, the *Grandes Ecoles*, are high-prestige schools, usually offering five-year courses (including preparatory classes) mainly in engineering and business. They are included in the domain of the CNE as already mentioned. Second, since shortly after World War II, there has existed the *Section Technicien Supérieur* (STS) of first-cycle (two-year) vocational courses, originally often housed in secondary schools. Third, public and private vocational colleges exist, especially in the sectors of nursing and social work. The STS and college type institutions are not included in the remit of the CNE and are still controlled in the traditional fashion.

## **Greece**

There is at present no quality assessment system as defined in this report, in Greek higher education. Moves to develop one, however, began in August 1992 with the adoption of a new law on universities by the parliament. Under this law, a national coordinating council for evaluation of university teaching, research and management will be set up. This council, not unlike the French CNE, will consist of nine members, five of whom will be nominated by the liaison committee of rectors, while the remainder will be nominated by the ministry of education and will be Greek university professors, from within or outside Greece, with experience relevant to evaluation of quality.

As in the 'French model', this evaluation body will be concerned with quality assessment, with the goal of improvement, for teaching, research and management in higher education institutions. By which

methods the assessments will be made, was not decided at the time of writing. The government will use the assessment results as one of the inputs for its funding decisions.

## Ireland

### *Universities*

Since 1971 the Higher Education Authority (HEA) has coordinated the planning and funding of universities in Ireland. The HEA has not performed a role in relation to quality assessment as defined in this report. Traditionally, however, Irish universities have external examiners, as in the United Kingdom, and external assessors for theses. These external forms of quality assessment often involve foreign experts, mostly British academics and experts from other EC member states.

The Irish government published a green paper, *Education for a changing world*, in June 1992. It includes a wide range of reforming measures at all levels of education. As regards quality assessment in universities, the introduction of more formalised methods is proposed, including regular peer review of departments, the development and appropriate use of performance indicators, and an overall monitoring role for the Higher Education Authority through a proposed Academic Audit Unit. The green paper proposals were subject to detailed discussions and consultation at the beginning of 1993.

Another cluster of measures proposed in the green paper regarding quality of higher education concerns guidance and assistance of students (especially first-year students) and staff development.

### *Non-university Higher Education*

The non-university sector of Irish higher education includes 11 Regional Technical Colleges, the Dublin Institute of Technology and a number of other colleges. This sector has had formal quality assessment procedures since 1972, under the National Council for Academic Awards (NCEA), which functions not unlike the CNAAs in the UK (see the section on the British polytechnics, page VIII). The NCEA, which grants awards up to doctorate level, operates quinquennial institutional reviews and quinquennial programmatic reviews in each institution, as well as detailed prior evaluation of each new course proposed. The NCEA also appoints the external examiners for each course.

The 1992 green paper suggests that quality assurance mechanisms similar to those in the university sector should be adopted in the Regional Technical Colleges and in the Dublin Institute of Technology.

## Italy

### *Universities*

The most important problem for higher education in Italy is the low completion rate (over 65% of students who enter drop out), together with the large number of students. Centralized policies were not successful in improving this situation (Allulli, 1992). The country is, for this reason and other more general reasons, planning a quality assessment system. A bill on university autonomy was under discussion in the former parliament. According to this bill, three measures relating to quality management will be introduced. First, a national committee for evaluation will be set up (on the 'French model' of the CNE). Secondly, a set of performance indicators on university effectiveness will be proposed. Thirdly, each university will be required to establish its own assessment unit to assure its quality of teaching. Research is

monitored under a separate procedure at the moment. A new bill is expected soon (situation as of end of 1992).

Some individual universities are already taking action in the direction of quality management. These include the institutional use of management information (performance indicators), assessment units like those proposed in the bill, and student assessment of teaching (Allulli, 1992). An impetus towards this movement has been given by the Italian Rectors' Conference, which is taking action to establish a common list of indicators for institutional management information systems and also to establish institutional assessment units. An experiment on five universities has been carried out and will be extended to all universities in 1992/93.

### *Non-university Higher Education*

There is a small non-university sector of higher education in Italy, consisting mostly of academies of art. Such institutions occupy a special place in many countries. They are not involved in the plans for higher education quality assessment mentioned above.

## **Luxembourg**

Luxembourg's *Centre Universitaire* with its first-year university education, and the small number of non-university higher education courses are not a large enough higher education system to merit setting up a formal quality assessment system. A discussion on quality assessment might start if the *Centre Universitaire* developed into a full-scale university.

## **The Netherlands**

### *Universities*

The 13 Dutch universities have a quality assessment system since 1988. Owned by their umbrella organization, the Association of Cooperating Dutch Universities (VSNU), it consists of a cycle of discipline-wide visiting committees, preceded and prepared by faculties' self-evaluations. For a more detailed description see chapter 3.

### *Non-university Higher Education*

Approximately 80 so-called Higher Vocational Institutions (HBO) have their own umbrella organization, the HBO Council which has developed its own quality assessment procedure. First experiments in the 1980s were with institution-wide quality management approaches, but they were not successful, probably because the HBO institutions had just gone through an intensive process of mergers (Goedegebuure, 1992). Since 1990, the HBO Council has rearranged its quality assessment system along the lines of study programmes, more or less like the VSNU system (HBO Council, 1989, 1990). Some differences are:

- In the HBO sector, the self-evaluations carried out in preparation for the visiting committee *may* be preceded by a national *exploration committee*, organized by the HBO Council. Such a committee can chart current developments in the field, note common problems the study programmes have to solve, etc. The instrument of exploration committees, which has been used only rarely up to now, can be brought into action in fields with special problems, and in fields where an overview of the general problem situation is absent.

- The checklist used by the HBO Council for its visiting committees emphasizes labour market aspects to a somewhat greater extent than happens in the university sector.
- With the larger number of institutions to be visited, in some cases the visiting committee splits up into two sub-committees, each of which then 'tours' half of the study programmes.

## Portugal

### *Universities*

Portugal is at present developing and introducing a quality assessment system for its universities. In 1992, the discussion had not gone much beyond governmental policy-making circles, although a policy discussion paper was prepared, as was a bill to be discussed in parliament. Inspiration for the Portuguese developments has come from France, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. In 1993 Dutch expertise has been called in to assist in setting up the quality assessment system. Some individual universities were taking their own measures towards quality assessment already before the developments at national level took off.

### *Non-university Higher Education: Polytechnics*

The polytechnics will probably not be included in the quality assessment system being developed for the university sector of higher education.

## United Kingdom

### *Universities and former Polytechnics*

The situation in British higher education has changed rapidly over the last decade: 'once one of the most liberal, [the British higher education system] has become one of the most evaluated and prescribed' (Kogan, 1991). Moreover, the process by which this change came about was a heavily politicised process which influenced the relationships among the higher education actors to a high degree.

The most recent changes resulted from the white paper entitled *Higher Education: A New Framework* (1991). The former 'binary divide' ceased to exist and all former polytechnics can now be called universities. The previously existing separate quality assessment systems have developed into two new systems, as described in section 3.4.3.

### *Non-university Higher Education: Colleges*

The colleges in British higher education are the third part of British post-secondary education. Some colleges are empowered to award their own degrees, like the universities. They participate in the procedures of the higher education funding councils and take part in the Higher Education Quality Council.

The colleges of further education provide education below degree level and much vocational education. They are subject to different control mechanisms from higher education institutions. Some of the colleges, under contract with degree-awarding institutions, also do some higher education work.



**Appendix B**  
**European Free Trade Association**

## Austria

### *Universities*

The structure and problem situation of Austrian universities resemble those of their German neighbours: student overload in the higher education institutions, the long completion time and high drop out rate (Pechar, 1991). The question of quality assessment is addressed from this perspective. The issue has proceeded to the stage that the university organization act has been amended so as to oblige the federal minister for education and science to guarantee periodic institutional evaluations. However, apart from an evaluation of physics *research* (1991), no large-scale initiatives seem to have been taken while, at the institutional level, distrust of the government's intentions seems to hamper wide-spread adoption of self-evaluation procedures.

### *Non-university Higher Education*

Austria has a heterogeneous non-university sector which is rather small, partly because many vocational courses that are part of higher education in many countries are part of secondary education there, and managed in the same state-controlled manner (Horvat & Pechar, 1990; Gruber, 1991). There is no mention of introducing quality assessment as defined in this report for the non-university higher education sector.

## Finland

### *Universities*

The universities in Finland have been developing a quality assessment system since 1990. The initiative has been taken by the Finnish ministry of education. Development activities, in line with the tradition in Finnish higher education, take the form of pilot projects in a few institutions and areas. Inspired *inter alia* by the Dutch VSNU model, two committees have been established to develop methods for evaluating natural sciences and humanities respectively. Meanwhile, in two universities, those of Jyväskylä and Oulu, experiments have started with institutional evaluations. In the case of Oulu especially, the methods used in the experiment have been taken from the work of Prof. Kells (1983).

### *Non-university Higher Education*

A large-scale experiment to develop a sector of non-university higher education on a basis comparable to the German *Fachhochschulen* is currently under way (the *ammattikorkeakoulukokeilu* project). A quality assessment system is not yet being discussed in any definitive form.

## Iceland

Iceland has no formal quality assessment system.

## Norway

### *Universities and Non-university Higher Education institutions*

A quality assessment system for Norwegian higher education institutions is currently under development. For several years, the independent Institute for Studies in Research and Higher Education (NAFV) has been attached to the Norwegian research council. Beginning in 1992/93, the NAFV department for education will start a quality assessment system for all types of institutions of higher education (including the private ones). An experimental review of economics and business studies has already started. This field is predominantly non-university, while the next field, sociology, is almost entirely a university one.

The system is inspired by, among others, the Dutch VSNU system of quality assessment. The methods used are, therefore, self-evaluations complemented with external peer reviews. And statistical data will be used as background information only, not as independent performance indicators.

## Sweden

### *Högskola*

Swedish higher education has, at present, no quality assessment system as defined in this report. The paramount issue since the 1950s has been access. It is widely felt that a higher proportion of the population (not only secondary school leavers) should enrol in higher education, with a more even regional distribution than previously. This endeavour culminated in the 1977 reforms. Only in the last few years has the matter of quality taken a more preeminent position. Together with the decentralization of the Swedish government apparatus, this has led to a thorough changing of the policy landscape. The UHÄ, the National Board for universities and other higher education institutions (all institutions are treated equally), has been active in the field of higher education quality for many years. With the recent decentralization of the Swedish government, the UHÄ was abolished in August 1992. It is not yet quite clear how quality assessment will be organized from now on.

A Higher Education Commission was installed in 1989, and reported in 1992 (Swedish Higher Education Commission, 1992). It focused on the quality of undergraduate higher education. Most of the measures the committee proposes supposedly have effects for the quality of higher education, but do not currently include a system of quality assessment. Rather, they are focused on educational *ex ante* measures such as requiring better teaching qualifications at the time of appointment and better relationships between research and teaching. Yet, the committee recognizes the need for quality assessment. As in other countries, it sees it primarily as an institutional responsibility, whose method should be based on self-evaluation, complemented with external peer review. One of the cornerstones of evaluation should be student evaluation of individual course elements. On the other hand, as in other countries, the need for some over-arching, national evaluation is recognized too. It is felt that there should be a long-term (five-year) programme of national evaluations with an international perspective, to which the self-evaluations should be geared. Finally, a national body should be (re-)established for the exchange of evaluation experience, consultation and cooperation (Swedish Higher Education Commission, 1992, pp. 16-20). In conjunction with legislation to become operative in 1993, the government proposes to establish an independent national secretariat for evaluation (Nilsson, 1992, p. 4).

Individual Swedish higher education institutions have, as elsewhere, already taken initiatives for quality assessment. One important cluster of experiments is based on a voluntary application of the Dutch VSNU model (Nilsson, 1992, pp. 4, 6). These initiatives also included an international comparative evaluation of business studies programmes (UHÄ, 1992).

## Switzerland

### *Universities*

Even more than in Germany, the sub-national governments (cantons) are responsible for education, including higher education. Therefore, one can speak of *the* Swiss higher education system only to a limited extent (Goedegebuure *et al.*, 1992, pp. 217-218). Federally uniform curricula exist only for a limited number of controlled courses, namely medicine, dentistry and pharmacy. Federal control consists of requirements for degrees/diploma. In recent policy documents issued by the federal science council (1989) and the 'higher education institution conference' (1990), quality assessment was not an important issue. However, a first three-day seminar on quality assessment was held in 1992, thereby starting the discussion on introduction of one in Switzerland as well. In this seminar, both the approaches of the French CNE and of the Dutch VSNU were discussed. The planning committee of the Swiss *Hochschulkonferenz* has decided to build up a nation-wide system of quality evaluation, which has started developing a data base (the Swiss Higher Education Evaluation and Information System, SEVIS).

Institutional initiatives with evaluation of teaching and related issues have been in existence for a longer period, as in other countries.

### *Non-university Higher Education*

The *Höhere Fachschulen* form a relatively large and quite heterogeneous non-university sector in Swiss higher education. State control exists, *ex ante*, through minimum requirements for federal recognition of (some) diploma. A reform of the sector is at present carried out but *ex post* 'new' quality assessment does not yet exist.

## **Appendix C**

### **A Note on Performance Indicators**

## Data for Judgements

As stated in the introduction, we shall not go into the matter of how *exactly* quality is assessed or 'measured' in the countries of Europe. For details of quality assessment procedures depend largely on the context in which they take place, and they change with changes in that context. Yet as a principle we can say that quality judgements of course are based on data, be these data subjective, as in peer review, or objective, as with performance indicators. In the following section, some general notions on strengths and weaknesses of peer review and performance indicators will be set out. Then, the situation regarding performance indicators in some European countries will be sketched. It will appear that the relationship between collection of data and quality judgements is usually not very clear, indicating what must be anything but a rigid, mechanistic relationship. Objective data are used practically everywhere, but apparently they are used to underpin judgements, not to replace judgements.

Readers interested in more detailed information on the 'what and how' of performance indicators are referred to the extensive literature on this subject, among others resulting *inter alia* from the British Leverhulme project and the work of the international programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education of the OECD. We should like to mention CVCP (1985 and 1987), CVCP & UGC (1987 and 1989), Cave *et al.* (1988), Dochy *et al.* (1990) and *idem* (eds.) (1990), Findlay (1990), Kells (ed.) (1990), Johnes & Taylor (1990), Sizer (1990), Yorke (1990), Sizer, Spee & Bormans (1992), De Jager & Goedhart (1993), while the IMHE journal, *Higher Education Management*, devoted most of an issue to this topic as recently as 1992, nr. 2: Kells (1992), Spee & Bormans (1992), Sizer (1992), Middaugh & Hollowell (1992), Stolte-Heiskanen (1992), Linke (1992) and Lucier (1992).

## Performance Indicators and Peer Review as Methods

### *The Terms*

When speaking of performance indicators one is tempted to think in the first place of quantitative measures. Qualitative performance indicators exist too, however. An authoritative definition of performance indicators does not exist. Many aspects and categories of performance indicators can be distinguished (Cave *et al.*, 1988, 17 *ff.*), but for the present purpose it is enough to differentiate between performance indicators and peer review, so a relatively general definition will suffice. Performance indicators are empirical, quantitative or qualitative data that point to an institution's goal achievement (Segers, Dochy & Wijnen, 1989, pp. 2-3.). The qualification that performance indicators are data *that point to an institution's goal achievement* is important in that not all data are *performance* data. Stressing some other aspects, the OECD workgroup on performance indicators developed as definitions of performance indicators (Kells, 1992, p. 133):

*Indicators are signals derived from data bases or from opinion data that indicate the need to explore deviation from either normative or other pre-selected levels of activity or performance.*

or:

*Indicators monitor developments of performance, signal the need for further examination of issues or conditions, or assist in assessing quality.*

The emphasis in the OECD workgroup definitions is on the signalling function. Performance indicators in themselves do not judge on performances or qualities. An input, external to the indicators *per se*, is needed to define satisfactory levels of performances or to make quality assessments.

A traditional example of peer review is the referee system of scientific journals. An anonymous output of scientific activity (a manuscript) is judged by a few anonymous fellow scientists (peers) who are reputed to possess sufficient expertise on the questions addressed in the article. The norms and criteria

they use in their judgement are the canons of the methods and subject matters of 'good science' or 'good scholarship', sometimes even called 'good craftsmanship' (see also Becher, 1989), that dominate in the particular discipline or field of inquiry. These norms are not, as a rule, explicit. Even less can they be made into inter-subjective data. It is this (as far as we know inevitable) subjectivity that forms the defining characteristic of peer review.

In the context of quality assessment in higher education, the concept of peer review is often used somewhat loosely. All methods where human judgement is involved are then called peer review. The judgements may or may not be informed by more or less objective data bases (among them performance indicators), and the judges may or may not be peers. What are peers is not clear, either. Peer review, as it is known in the sociology of science, involves scientists from the discipline under consideration who have a high reputation in their field. Sometimes it is maintained, however, that peers should not differ too much in reputation from the persons whose quality they are to assess. This makes the circle of peers much smaller and makes it very difficult to produce a discipline-wide assessment, given the existence within a discipline of institutional groups with highly different reputations. The definition of peers is sometimes broadened, on the other hand, to include not just scholars or scientists, but also representatives of other stakeholders, such as members of industry, employers, or professionals.

Many performance indicators, notably those of research, are based on peer review procedures. For example, only when the peer referee process of a top journal has been successfully completed can a researcher 'score' on the publication counting performance indicators. Citation performance indicators develop this theme some steps further because, for citations to occur, not only does a publication have to be made, but other researchers (peers) have to judge it worth citing, while their own publications must appear in (refereed) top journals (other journals are not covered by the *(Social) Science Citation Index* which often is the base for citation scores). Another example, also based on peer judgements of quality, is success in obtaining research grants from research councils.

There is a lack of performance indicators pointing directly to quality of education (Kells, 1992, p. 135). If any performance indicators are suggested for education, they are proxies that are often farther removed from the concept they intent to gauge than performance indicators for research are from research. Most performance indicators for education used in practice are concerned with efficiency (such as staff/student ratios, costs per student) or effectiveness (such as the number or proportion of graduations, or (un-)employment figures). The difficulty of the subject resulted in a decline of the use and almost a halt in further development of performance indicators for education in recent years in the UK (Bourke, 1986; Cave *et al.*, 1988, pp. 57-78). One of the reasons for this may be that not enough knowledge exists about the actual processes of teaching and how to influence the outcome, namely student learning (see also Barnett, 1989). Internationally, a lack of development of performance indicators for teaching has been noted as well in that quality control measures used to be geared to the individual level (Dahllöf, 1990, p. 142) and did not often make use of objective indicators. If indicators were used, research performance was often an important part of them.

### *Advantages and Disadvantages*

The greatest advantage of performance indicators is their inter-subjectivity which offers a possibility to compare institutions and disciplines, etc. They also provide a relatively firm base for decision-making when compared to the subjectivity of peer review procedures.

Disadvantages of performance indicators are known too. First is the question of relevance. 'Standards of quality have focused on those aspects that are easiest to count. But these measures do not reveal what colleges and universities actually do' (E. Boyer, cited in De Weert, 1990, p. 64). Performance indicators are partial 'operationalizations' of quality that do not cover all dimensions of the concept, each of them producing a distorted picture. Alternatively, objective data exist only for phenomena that are hard to connect to quality, as is the case for education (see above). Second, there are practical problems. Institutional and governmental databases are not very reliable, or incomparable. Third, performance indicators invite behaviour that 'scores', instead of behaviour geared to higher quality (De Weert, 1990,

pp. 65-66.) unless the indicator necessarily correlates *perfectly* with the quality concept it intends to measure which, as it is a partial measure, is a utopian ideal. Finally, to the extent that performance indicators of research are to a large extent based on peer review, their objectivity can be disputed, and comparisons across entities then become precarious. Such problems reducing the content validity of indicators are always present when designing objective measurement.

Traditional assessment processes in the various disciplines were peer review processes geared exclusively to 'intrinsic' research goals, namely scientific quality and progress. The new evaluation processes, however, not only cover both research and education, but are also geared to other, 'extrinsic' goals, such as social relevance and accountability towards the funding organizations. This makes its application less than straightforward: does the 'new' use require other procedures, other definitions of peers, and/or other (implicit) criteria for judging?

The advantage of peer review lies in its high content validity. It is the only way to assess quality directly, without proxy indicators. Moreover peer review is a flexible method that can be adjusted to traditions in all disciplines.

The most important disadvantage of peer review is its subjectivity. The judgements always result from unverifiable mental processes in the judges. The peer review process therefore remains something of a black box. Sociological research into the actual operation of the traditional peer review processes has discovered another, associated, disadvantage, namely that factors other than scientific quality influence the judgements of peers. Intellectual bias, social bias, and random error may all occur. Despite its high content validity, the reliability of peer review is therefore low (see also Westerheijden, 1991).

## **The Use of Performance Indicators in 'New' Quality Assessment**

The development of performance indicators in, for example, the IMHE project of the OECD used to be geared towards their use in intra-institutional management. Performance indicators and management statistics should enable universities to operate more strategically in their ever-faster changing environment. Since the 1980s, however, national governments have become more interested in the use of indicators for reasons of selectively steering the higher education system in their country. It is this type of use that is of interest in this section.

The conventional, and apparently logical, consequence of the situation depicted in the previous section is that, in practice, quality assessment procedures in higher education make use of written data (quantitative and qualitative) to obtain an objective basis, and peer review to ensure 'intelligent use' of the objective data. How does this work in the three countries taken as examples in this report?

### *France*

The CNE monitors and evaluates the contracts between the French government and the universities. In this procedure, use is made of written information, including performance indicators, and of external peer reviews. Written information is obtained from the institutions, from the Ministry of National Education, and from the major research agencies. Because of the lack of (comparable) data bases in the institutions, the CNE has produced a list of criteria and indicators to be included in such data bases, in consultation with the institutions. But: 'The method of evaluation is pragmatic . . . In evaluation pride of place falls to the qualitative approach, to peer review' (Cazenave, 1990, p. 58). One reason for this is the lack of comparable data until institutional data bases have reached full development, but another and more important reason is the following: data and indicators need to be interpreted to obtain meaning, and human judgement is the way to make such interpretations. The CNE emphasizes the importance of this process (Cazenave, 1990, pp. 58-59).



Since 1991, another body has been set up to gather comparable data on costs of higher education institutions. One of the purposes of this *Observatoire des coûts des établissements d'enseignement supérieur* is to enable a new funding system for higher education, based on actual student costs, instead of normatively established figures. The development of comparable data bases has also attracted much attention in Finland, in particular the so-called KOTA data base (see *inter alia* the chapter in Kells (ed.), 1990) in Switzerland (see Appendix B), in Denmark and in Norway (Kells, 1992, p. 134).

## *The United Kingdom*

### *The Situation before the End of the Binary Divide*

With the drive for economy, efficiency and effectiveness in British higher education in the 1980s (Sizer, 1990), universities were required to develop strategic plans for their internal decision-making on resource allocation for their academic processes. The extensive performance indicators needed for such plans can also serve the purpose of accountability of institutions to the funding agents (in those years, UFC and PCFC) and, through them, to the government.

From 1985 to 1989, several working groups developed long lists of performance indicators (see CVCP/UGC, 1987, 1989). The initial CVCP/UGC list contained 39 indicators and expanded to 54 a year later. They were concentrated upon input and process indicators, with no more than two output or outcome measures (for an overview of the 1988 list, see also Sizer, 1990, pp. 162-163).

The use of management statistics and performance indicators within institutions appeared to be almost as complicated as their use in national bodies. In both cases, the academics and departmental managers tended to feel them as constraints rather than as management tools for themselves. The use of the indicators was geared to accountability rather than to management. Consequently, there was no 'ownership' of the indicators at the levels where they could best be used (Sizer, 1990, p. 167). The UK government was warned that it was running '... the risk that both individuals and institutions may be treated unfairly, primarily because of a mechanical or otherwise unsensitive use of unsophisticated performance indicators' (Dahllöf, 1990, p. 140).

In quality judgements by bodies like CNAAP and AAU, performance indicators, or rather objective data, were no more than the first layer, the information the human judges could make use of. In the adjacent field of research selectivity, where the United Kingdom also has extensive experience, the Universities' Funding Council found that typical performance indicators for research (citation analysis and publication counts) were either too expensive or not informative enough. Peer review proved to be the most important method there too (Sizer, 1990, p. 177). This can be extended to the 1992 research selectivity exercise, where the amount of data was reduced, while the role of peer review has become perhaps even more central (UFC, 1992).

### *Notes on Developments in the Funding Councils since 1991*

In the new procedures for quality assessment of the English and Scottish funding councils, a common base seems to be not to rely too much on performance indicators. Instead of the several tens of indicators as developed by the CVCP/UGC working groups, we now hear of about six indicators in the consultative document of the English funding council (HEFCE, 1992):

- entry qualifications,
- applications,
- expenditure per student,
- progression and completion rates,
- student attainment,
- employment.

Equally important, however, is the provision of a self-assessment by the institution, focusing *inter alia* on mission, course aims and achievements, its view on quality, locus of responsibility for quality, plans for maintaining and improving quality, internally used quality indicators, and finally the summary judgement on the programme's quality (on the three-point scale 'excellent', 'satisfactory', 'unsatisfactory').

While ending up with the same three-point summary judgement, the Scottish funding council does not even seem to use the words 'performance indicators'. It starts explicitly from the institution's or study programme's own aims and mission. These form the points of reference for the assessment of the programme's quality (SHEFC, 1992a). The 'framework' provided by the Scottish funding council for the institutional self-assessment it too requires, focuses on the following points (SHEFC, 1992b):

- aims and curricula,
- curriculum design and review,
- teaching and learning environment,
- staff resources,
- learning resources,
- course organization,
- practice of teaching and learning,
- student support facilities and procedures,
- assessment and monitoring of students,
- student work,
- output, outcomes and quality control.

This is a checklist of subjects to be addressed in the self-assessment, rather than a list of performance indicators. Hardly any of these points would be found in the lists of performance indicators in the 1980s, which clearly have been left behind after the changes in British higher education.

### *The Netherlands*

The quality assessment procedure in the Dutch universities in its first round shows many similarities to the new developments in quality assessment in England and, even more, in Scotland. A debate on performance indicators has been held in the Netherlands, starting with the Ministry of Education and Science's wish to establish a more objective information base alongside the quality assessment procedure organized by the universities. A research group developed a list of performance indicators, ascertaining through an extensive consultation project that the set finally proposed was legitimized as much as possible in the eyes of the users, including academics (Dochy, Segers & Wijnen, 1990). Nevertheless, performance indicators have as yet not been introduced in the steering of higher education by the government (Spee & Bormans, 1992, p. 139). For their earlier developed purpose of intra-institutional management, some universities have taken or are taking their own initiatives, several of which include use of management statistics and performance indicators.

In the quality assessment procedure of teaching, a checklist for the subjects to be included in the self-evaluations by the study programmes is issued by the coordinating body (VSNU, 1990). Faculties can emphasize the points of the list relevant to them, and they may add other subjects. Like the subjects mentioned by the Scottish funding council, the subjects in the VSNU checklist are only partly quantitative, and for less still can they be interpreted as performance indicators. The checklist includes:

- organizational setting of the study programme,
- student 'input' numbers and characteristics,
- aims and curriculum,
- assessment methods,
- teaching and learning environment,
- study load, student progress and completion rates,
- student counselling arrangements,
- graduates and employment,

- educational policy,
- personnel policy,
- internal quality control.

Summarizing the experiences in the three countries mentioned, we can say that quality judgements are made through what can broadly be defined as peer review, informed by objective data, including performance indicators whose role in quality judgement procedures is, therefore, important but indirect.

# **NOTES**

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