

New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 5

Evaluation and Self-Evaluation in European Universities

Context of the Research

Since the 1980s all European countries have been experiencing major changes in higher education largely characterised by a transition from an “élite” university system to one of “mass” higher education. This has produced a dramatic growth in higher education provision evidenced by an increase in the number of institutions, number of students and consequently number of teaching staff. This trend has been amplified and strengthened by changes in the diffusion of knowledge, and in disciplinary differentiation and fragmentation over the last century. These latter changes became exponential in the 1980s and 90s and have resulted in the enlargement of academic fields and structures.

This study was conducted in eight countries - Germany, Spain, Finland, France, Italy, Norway, Portugal and the United-Kingdom in the context of the rapid growth in the higher education sector, an increasing interest from government in the societal importance of universities, and a relatively new interest within EU countries of the systematic evaluation of teaching and learning.

Key Conclusions

The following conclusions were made: -

1. Three distinct types of university were identified: -
 - a) General universities.
 - b) Professional/vocational universities.
 - c) Local universities.
2. Therefore, a single mode of evaluation is insufficient to meet the diverse needs of institutions.
3. External evaluation, made by public bodies in all the countries of the study, is a relatively recent phenomenon, but it is one that is here to stay.
4. Universities appear to accept the primary driver of accountability for public funding as a reasonable rationale for systematic evaluation.

5. In addition to external evaluation, universities are continuing to develop internal evaluation. External and internal evaluation interact to inform the development of strategies within universities to improve the quality and performance of teaching and research, and to provide improved levels of service to users, as well as ensuring best use of financial resources.
6. The reasons for the development of effective evaluation were identified as: -
 - a) External evaluation ensures that universities adhere to the requirements of the public authorities that fund them.
 - b) Universities are relatively autonomous institutions and are evaluated, and evaluate themselves partly as a means of establishing their credibility in order to attract funding from sources outside of the public funding regime.
 - c) Evaluation can be used by universities to manage tensions in strategy and direction such as those between the demands of traditional teaching, profession-oriented teaching, and continuous training. In research there are tensions between fundamental and applied research, and there are also tensions between the demands to increase the participation rate in higher education and participation in cultural and economic local development.
7. External evaluation is able to provide a basis for change if it finds support with senior management and a strong university governing body makes use of evaluation and is strengthened by it.
8. A significant number of universities have developed a new government model – presidential-managerial – to replace the traditional model - collegiate and/or bureaucratic.

Key Recommendations

The study made the following recommendations: -

1. Improve “objective and results” based evaluation tools as there is a trend to link funding to objectives and results through internal contractualisation between universities and government and within university organisational units that can generate new modes of funding.
2. Find ways of improving the “quality assurance procedures and methods” of administrative and support services as most innovative practices relate to the quality of services delivered to users (teachers, students, and external agencies).

3. Develop effective “computerised information systems” that enable the measurement and realisation of improvements.
4. In the context of a contractualisation with public authorities, encourage across EU institutions, partnership with other universities that develop mechanisms for “teaching and organisational” evaluation.
5. Develop a new model of evaluation that is: -
 - a) Pluralistic - recognises a range of local, national, and intentional factors.
 - b) Contextual - the specific university environment.
 - c) Dynamic - takes account of the university objectives and history.
 - d) Integral - makes use of links between all university activities.

Further Information

Full title of study - “EVALUE - Evaluation and Self-Evaluation of Universities in Europe” (July 1998)

[Full report](#), [Abstract](#), [Summary](#) [Partner details](#)

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