
The Danish Evaluation Institute

Quality procedures in European Higher Education

An ENQA survey

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Foreword

In the Prague Communiqué of 19 May 2001, the European Ministers of Education called upon the universities, other higher education institutions, national agencies and ENQA to collaborate in establishing a common framework of reference, and to disseminate good practice. This mandate has been taken up by ENQA as a challenge to work even more actively in the process towards ensuring a credible European quality assurance environment.

A major focus in this process is the extent, to which national external quality assurance procedures may meet the Bologna requirements for European compatibility and transparency.

This focus is reflected in ENQA's decision to initiate this major survey, which was in its first phase also included in discussions with the European University Association (EUA) and the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB). The main purpose of this survey is to identify shared protocols of quality assurance among European countries. Accordingly each European agency has been asked to fill in a questionnaire detailing the evaluation practices in place in the agency.

The survey is thus able to determine which evaluation models are used in various countries and to analyse basic similarities and dissimilarities. The results of the survey demonstrate that European quality assurance has extended both in scope and type of evaluation methods since the late 1990s, and that especially the concepts of accreditation and benchmarking are gaining new ground fast. In terms similar to my concluding remarks in a Status Report from 1998 on European Evaluation of Higher Education I can state, however, that in a sense the status quo may be described as either a glass that is half full because the European evaluation procedures in place all build on the same methodological principles. Or the glass may be described as half empty because the comparative analysis of the survey demonstrates many differences between the application of the methods to the specific national and institutional contexts.

So the results of this survey stress ENQA's growing significance as a framework for sharing and developing European best practises in external quality assurance and the need for even closer cooperation both with ENQA member agencies and governments and with our partners, the EU Commission, the universities and the students.

I hope therefore that the reader will find the survey and the new information it contains useful and inspirational.

Christian Thune

Chairman

ENQA Steering Group

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1 Introduction

Since 1999, the European concept of the quality of higher education has been strongly influenced by the follow-up process of the Bologna Declaration in which the EU Ministers of Education called for more visibility, transparency and comparability of quality in higher education. Two years after the Bologna Declaration and three years after the Sorbonne Declaration, the European Ministers in charge of higher education, representing 32 signatories, met in Prague in order to review the progress so far and to set directions and priorities for the coming years. Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to the objective of establishing the European Higher Education Area by 2010.

The Prague Communiqué of 2001 challenged three organisations, the European University Association (EUA), the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB), the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and the European Commission to collaborate in establishing a common framework of reference and to disseminate best practises. The quality culture and the implementation of quality assurance need to be strengthened among the members. The definition of quality indicators is an important element in that process. Based on this mandate, ENQA took the initiative of inviting the leadership of the European University Association (EUA) and the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) to a first meeting in June 2001 in order to discuss mutual interests and possible grounds for cooperation. Accordingly, a plan for joint projects was discussed and this report is the first concrete example of this initiative. It is a survey that, for the first time, summarises in detail the various evaluation methods used in Europe.

1.1 Used method

The aim of the project is to document and analyse the methodological state-of-the-art in general terms in all ENQA member countries and associated member countries, with the emphasis on the types of evaluation used.

For this purpose, the Danish Evaluation Institute conducted a questionnaire survey in 2002. A substantial background has been *Evaluation of European Higher Education – A Status Report* of 1998 prepared by EVA's predecessor, the Danish Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation, for the European Commission, DG XXII. Other major sources of inspiration are the *European Pilot Project for Evaluating Quality in Higher Education* from 1995, and especially *the Council Recommendation of 1998*, which referred very explicitly to the European pilot projects:

“This recommendation envisages the introduction of quality assurance methods in higher education and the promotion of European cooperation in this field. It recommends to the Member States to establish transparent quality assessment and quality assurance systems, which should be based on a number of common principles. These principles have been established in earlier European pilot projects in this field and relate mainly to the autonomy of the institutions responsible for quality assurance, the respect of the autonomy of the higher education institutions, the various stages in the assessment procedure and the publication of quality assessment reports. Also, Member States are recommended to take follow up measures to enable higher education institutions to implement their plans for quality improvement, which may be the result of a quality assessment procedure.”¹

¹ The Council Recommendation (98/561/EC) and the Status Report of 1998 may both be found on the ENQA website at: www.enqa.net.

Furthermore, Malcolm Frazer's *Report on the Modalities of External Evaluation of Higher Education in Europe: 1995–1997* from 1997 and the ENQA report *Quality Assurance in the Nordic Higher Education – on Accreditation-like-practises* from 2001 have been sources of inspiration.

The questionnaire was circulated among the members of the ENQA Steering Group for consideration, resulting in comments and suggestions being incorporated in the questionnaire.

Member agencies and national agencies of the associated countries were asked to fill in the questionnaire to provide information for the report. Thirty-four quality assurance agencies in 23 countries completed and returned the questionnaire. A complete list of participants is shown in Figure 1 on page 11. Subsequently, telephone interviews were made with the agencies for validation and clarification. The preliminary results of the survey were presented at the ENQA General Assembly in Copenhagen, May 2002. The final results in the present report, presented as a comparative overview of the state-of-the-art and current trends in European quality assurance, will be followed by a database on the Internet, including country-specific reports, at the ENQA website.

In the processing of the data provided by the questionnaires, certain quantification has been help-

ful. Nevertheless, the material is too limited to really justify statistical analysis, and the subsequent interviews served to clarify the data. An overview of the core data is appended as Appendix A.

Originally the survey was supposed to be followed by an in-depth study of different quality assurance approaches in Europe. At present the value of such a study is, however, given further consideration, and the results of the survey, as presented in this report, are to be read independently.

1.2 Project organisation

Christian Thune, Executive Director of the Danish Evaluation Institute and Chairman of ENQA, was in charge of the project. A project team consisting of Evaluation Officers Tine Holm and Rikke Sørup, and Evaluation Clerk Mads Biering-Sørensen, have conducted the survey and drafted the report. Tine Holm acted as co-ordinator of the project.

The ENQA Secretariat will be responsible for the production of a database and its publication on the ENQA website. The national agencies will be invited to take upon them the responsibility for updating their country-specific descriptions.

2 Executive summary

The Council Recommendation of 24 September 1998 on European Cooperation in Quality Assurance in Higher Education suggests that member states establish quality assurance systems for higher education. The systems should be based on certain characteristics identified as common to quality assurance systems, including: The creation of an autonomous body for quality assurance, targeted utilisation of internal and/or external aspects of quality assurance, the involvement of various stakeholders, and the publication of results.

The Council Recommendation proceeds to identify these elements in the context of a process involving independent quality assurance organisations, an internal self-examination component and an external composed based by appraisal and visit by external experts and the publication of a report. This is in fact the so-called four-stage model already introduced in 1994-95 as the methodological framework of the European Pilot Projects and in the Status Report of 1998 later identified and analysed in its various national interpretations.

In 2001 ENQA in cooperation with the European Commission decided to re-examine the state of the art of the European Quality Assurance four years after the recommendation was issued and the status report published.

The aim of the resulting project is to describe the methodological state-of-the-art in general terms in all ENQA member countries and associated member countries. The project focuses on the level, scope and methods of evaluation used. The method employed is a questionnaire filled in by 34 quality assurance agencies in 23 countries. Fourteen of these agencies cover both the university and the non-university sectors, while another 14 only cover higher education at universities. The remaining 6 agencies cover only non-university higher education.

2.1 The quality assurance agencies

The results of the survey demonstrate that since 1998, European quality assurance has extended in scope and in terms of the emergence of new European agencies. In most European countries autonomous quality assurance agencies have been established on national or regional level. The phenomenon is most common in the university sector (28 agencies in this survey) but also the non-university sector is being embraced by quality assurance (20 agencies in this survey). Some agencies cover both sectors; some agencies only cover one sector or the other. This difference in organisation typically finds its explanation in the structures of the national higher educational systems.

The survey shows that the quality assurance agencies still and foremost perform quality assurance and/or enhancement in the traditional sense as documented in the pilot projects from 1995, but the tasks have expanded. The vast majority of the participating agencies answer that quality assurance is both the overall main function of the agency as well as the predominant objective of the performed evaluation activities.

But the survey also points at a tendency that the agencies to an increasing degree provide expert opinions and advise to both government and higher education institutions and investigate and even decide on certain legal matters pertaining the HE institutions. This is reflected in the fact that 4/5 of the agencies mentions 'Disseminating knowledge and information' as a function of the agency, and half the agencies mentions 'accreditation' as a function of the agency.

The appearance of accreditation agencies and hence the performance of accreditation activities go

hand in hand with an increased focus on accountability as objective of the performed activities. 3/4 of the participating agencies mention it as an objective of the activities, and the same is the case with transparency. Also comparability – nationally as well as internationally – is a highly emphasised objective.

Most agencies have a board or a council, and all these have some kind of academic board members. In 2/3 of the cases the higher education institutions are represented among these academic board members. In half the cases labour market representatives are on the board, in 1/3 of the cases students are on the board and in 2/5 of the cases government is represented. The main source of funding of the evaluation activities is the government, but also the higher education institutions are in some way or another mentioned as source of funding in 1/3 of the cases.

There is a tendency that the board/council is more multifaceted in the EU/EFTA countries than in the associated countries, but the funding situation does not seem to differ much according to geography.

2.2 Types of evaluation in European quality assurance

The results of the survey show that European quality assurance can be identified as based on eight main types of evaluation. The survey also demonstrates that most agencies carry out several types of evaluation. It is shown that the principal types² of evaluation used in European quality assurance are ‘accreditation of programmes’ and ‘evaluation of programmes’. The majority of the participating agencies use both on a regular basis.

In general programmes are the most frequently chosen focus of the evaluation activities. This is especially pronounced in the field of non-university education, whereas institutions are coming more into focus in university education. This is probably due to the very strong professional emphasis of the programmes in the non-university field.

²The term ‘type of evaluation’ comprises a combination of the focus of an evaluation and the method used.

The most preferred method is still the traditional evaluation that is used in combination with different foci regularly or occasionally in 49 cases. And in contrast to earlier the tendency is that one agency very often uses evaluation on different levels, or in other words combines evaluation as a method with different foci. Nevertheless accreditation as a method comes close with 31 cases of regular or occasional use. Accreditation is most used in the associated countries and in the Dutch and German-speaking countries. There do, however seem to be very big variations in the procedures of accreditation, and the method could be a theme for further investigations.

An exception from the general statement above is ‘institutional audit’. Whereas audit is hardly used on subject and programme level, or in combination with ‘theme’ as a focus, the combination of audit and institution is the third most popular type of evaluation used. It is primarily used in the English-speaking countries.

Finally the results of the survey show that several agencies experiment with benchmarking – often combined or integrated with other methods, but as an independent method it has not really gained force.

2.3 The four-stage model

The variety in evaluation types used also causes a differentiation in the methodological elements used compared to 1998. For instance, there are examples of accreditation procedures, where self-evaluation does not take place, where external experts are not used, and where reports are not published. In general, however, the four stages mentioned in the pilot projects and reflected in the Council Recommendation are still common features in European quality assurance.

All agencies use external experts. In most cases these are experts representing the field, and very often international experts are included in the expert panel, The latter may often be from neighbouring countries or countries sharing the same language. In a few cases students are included in the

expert panel. In general the expert panels seem more multifaceted in the EU/EFTA-countries than in the associated countries.

The experts are typically appointed by the quality assurance agency, but in 1/3 of all cases higher education institutions have taken part in the nomination of the experts. The experts have varying functions and responsibilities. Their core function, however, seems to be site visits, and in half the cases they also write the reports without the assistance of the agency. In another third of all cases they draft the reports in co-operation with agency staff. The agency seems more involved in carrying out the different functions of an evaluation process in the EU/EFTA-countries than in the associated countries.

Self-evaluation is included in 94% of the evaluations, but only in 68% of the accreditation processes. Management and teaching staff are usually part of the self-evaluation group, whereas graduates rarely participate. The participation of administrative staff and students vary considerably, and for the latter there seems to be a connection to the method used: Students are usually represented in connection with evaluations, but rarely in connection with accreditation. As documentary evidence, the self-evaluations are in almost all cases supplied with statistical data, and in about half the cases also with some kind of supplementary surveys.

With the exception of two cases site visits are part of all evaluation processes in Europe. The average length of the site visits is two days, but site visits in connection with audits typically last longer. The results of the survey demonstrate a mutual agreement on the elements constituting site visits: Almost every participating agency works with interviews, tours of the facilities, with final meetings with the management, and the examination of documentary evidence. The most controversial element of the site visits seems to be classroom observations, which are used in 25% of the cases.

Reports are published in almost all cases of evaluation, but sometimes omitted in connection with accreditation. The reports typically contain conclusions and recommendations, and very often they also contain analysis, while empirical documentation is only included in 1/3 of all cases. It is com-

mon praxis to consult the evaluated institutions before the reports are published, whereas other agents are rarely consulted. In 3/4 of all cases the evaluated institutions are also responsible for follow-up of the recommendations, while the quality assurance agency and the government are responsible in a little less than half of the cases. But all respondents agree that follow-up takes place in one way or another.

2.4 Criteria and standards

In addition to the four characteristics mentioned above the results of the survey demonstrate that a fifth characteristic is emerging as a common feature, namely the use of criteria and standards.

Whereas in 1998, the terms of reference of the evaluation procedures were typically legal regulations, and the stated goals of the evaluated institutions, today almost all agencies apply some kind of criteria. This, of course, is true for accreditation procedures, where threshold criteria or minimum standards are used in order to pass judgement, but in other evaluation procedures as well, for instance when 'good practice' criteria are used. In several countries, however, the criteria used are not explicitly formulated.

The questionnaires and the attached material from the European quality assurance agencies point to the need for a number of features to be investigated further when discussing the use of criteria and standards: What is the difference between criteria and standards? When does an agency work with threshold criteria, and when does it work with best practice criteria? Is it important whether the criteria are explicitly formulated or not? Who formulates the criteria? And to what extent do agencies work with a pre-formulated set of criteria suitable for every evaluation process?

There is no doubt that standards and criteria are suitable tools in connection with transparency – nationally and internationally, but the issue is of course the extent to which they promote the continuous quality improvement at the institutions.

3 European quality assurance agencies

The Council Recommendation of 24 September 1998 on European Co-operation in Quality Assurance in Higher Education proposes that member states establish quality assurance systems for higher education. The systems should be based on certain characteristics identified as common to the quality assurance systems. The characteristics include an autonomous body for quality assurance, targeted utilisation of internal and external aspects of quality assurance, involvement of various stakeholders and publication of results.

The characteristics of the quality assurance systems, which were mentioned in the Council Recommendation, are equal to the so-called four-stage model of independent agencies, self evaluations, visits by experts and a published report that were all identified as common features of European quality assurance in the *European Pilot Project for Evaluating Quality in Higher Education* of 1995 (from now on referred to as the Pilot Projects), and in *Evaluation of European Higher Education: A Status Report* of 1998 (from now on referred to as the Status Report). Similarly Malcolm Frazer's *Report on the Modalities of External Evaluation of Higher Education in Europe: 1995–1997* of 1997 is organized around these characteristics. Since the Council Recommendation of 1998 the European quality assurance context has been influenced greatly by the Bologna process and it is therefore highly relevant for the ENQA network to examine the current state of affairs of the methodologies and procedures applied today by European quality assurance agencies.

This chapter presents the increase in the number of bodies of European quality assurance in European higher education. It examines which areas of higher education the agencies cover, the function of the agencies, and elaborates on the issue of au-

tonomy³. The following chapters examine the methods and quality assurance procedures of European quality assurance today.

3.1 Quality assurance agencies in the future concept of the European Higher Education

In order to investigate the current status of European quality assurance, a questionnaire was sent to quality assurance agencies in all EU member states, associated countries and EFTA-countries. In countries lacking formal, established quality assurance agencies, the questionnaire was sent to the authority in charge of quality assurance. The survey report is based on 36 responses from 34 European quality assurance agencies in 23 European countries⁴.

As shown in Figure 1, it can be concluded that the Council Recommendation for establishing national quality assurance systems has been followed by almost all member states. A picture of a well-established European system of quality assurance in higher education begins to emerge. Since the European Pilot Project, almost all EU member states and associated countries have established an evaluation agency responsible for promoting quality assurance in the higher education sector.

³ The report does not indicate to what extent the individual agencies meet the Council recommendation. The competence and responsibility for that rests solely with the ENQA General Assembly. The report does, however, elaborate on the extent to which the common features identified in the 1998 report can still be found in European quality assurance in 2001.

⁴ The number of questionnaires exceeded the number of agencies. An agency may cover different sectors (e.g. universities and non-universities). If the methods used vary according to the sectors covered, the agency was asked to fill in a questionnaire for each sector.

Figure 1: European Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education and their Scope⁵

Name of Agency	Country	Scope
European University Association (EUA)		University
Fachhochschulrat (FH-Council)	Austria	Non-university
Österreichischer Akkreditierungsrat (Austrian Accreditation Council, AAC)	Austria	University
Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad	Belgium	University
Vlaamse Hogescholenraad (VLHORA)	Belgium	Non-university
Conseil des Recteurs (CRef)	Belgium	University
National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency at the Council of Ministers (NEAA)	Bulgaria	Both
Council of Educational Evaluation-Accreditation	Cyprus	Non-university
Accreditation Commission of the Czech Republic	Czech Republic	Both
The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA), non-university	Denmark	University
The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA), university	Denmark	Non-university
Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Center	Estonia	Both
Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council	Finland	Both
Comité Nationale d'Évaluation	France	University
Akkreditierungsrat	Germany	Both
Zentrale Evaluations- und Akkreditierungsagentur Hannover (ZEVA)	Germany, Niedersachsen	University
Evaluation Agency of Baden-Württemberg	Germany	Both
Hungarian Accreditation Committee	Hungary	Both
Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Division of Evaluation and Supervision	Iceland	University
Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC)	Ireland	Non-university
Higher Education Authority	Ireland	University
National Qualification Authority of Ireland	Ireland	Non-university
Comitato Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Universitario (CNSVU)	Italy	University
Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre	Latvia	Both
Lithuanian Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education	Lithuania	Both
Inspectorate of Higher Education	The Netherlands	Both
VSNU Department of Quality assurance	The Netherlands	University
Netherlands Association of Universities of Professional Education (HBO-raad)	The Netherlands	Non-university
Network Norway Council	Norway	Both
State Commission for Accreditation	Poland	Both
National Institute for Accreditation of Teacher Education (INAFOP), university	Portugal	University
National Institute for Accreditation of Teacher Education (INAFOP), non-university	Portugal	Non-university
Agència per la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari a Catalunya (AQU)	Spain,	University
National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket)	Sweden	University
The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)	United Kingdom	University
National Council for Academic Assessment and Accreditation	Romania	University

⁵ Names of the agencies in Figure 1 and in the report in general refer to the questionnaires. Therefore it may differ whether the agencies are named by their national names or by an English name.

The stated scope of any single agency in the column above should be seen in the context of the national educational system, as reflecting the national distinctions between university and non-university education. With this reservation in mind, the diagram above shows that 14 of the quality assurance agencies cover both the university and the non-university sectors, while 14 agencies cover only university higher education, and lastly 6 agencies cover only non-university higher education⁶.

In the questionnaire, agencies were asked to state, whether they evaluate either university or non-university education, or both. It is a very difficult task to find a common definition of university and non-university education. Some countries have one-tier systems, whereas some others have two-tier systems wherein the non-university and the university sectors are clearly separate, e.g. Denmark and the Netherlands. Furthermore, some of the associated countries make a distinction between public universities – which are considered ‘real’ universities – and private universities.

The survey can, however, give an idea of the scope the agencies cover. Moreover, it explains why some countries have only one national quality assurance agency for higher education, while some have more than one. For example, the Netherlands has a two-tier higher education system, a quality assurance agency for non-university education, one for university education, and a meta-accreditation body. By contrast, the UK is an example of a country where the higher education sector is structured as a one-tier system. This is reflected in the UK quality assurance model where one quality assurance agency covers all higher education.

However, other national characteristics may influence the way a country organizes its quality assurance. A good example is the German organisation of quality assurance. There is one main accreditation council, which formulates the overall evalu-

ation procedures. The practical evaluation activities, however, are mainly performed by regional evaluation agencies. Finally, Denmark has one quality assurance agency for all educational levels from primary school to university education.

National traditions, changing trends in national policy and in national policy structures can have an impact on the choice of system. However, this is an issue that requires an in-depth study of each national educational system and politics.

3.2 Functions of the European quality assurance agencies

With the Council Recommendation of 1998, member states were encouraged to establish quality assurance systems with the following aims:

- To safeguard the quality of higher education within the economic, social and cultural contexts of their countries, while taking into account the European dimension, and the rapidly changing world.
- To encourage and help higher education institutions to use appropriate measures, particularly quality assurance, as a means of improving the quality of teaching and learning, and also training in research, which is another important function.
- To stimulate a mutual exchange of information on quality and quality assurance at Community and global levels, and to encourage co-operation between higher education institutions in this area.

One of the objectives of this project is to examine how quality assurance agencies in Europe fulfil the above-mentioned aims. In this connection, the agencies were asked to state their functions.

The survey shows that three main functions of European quality assurance agencies can be identified:

- 1) Quality improvement, quality assurance in a traditional sense
- 2) Disseminating knowledge and information
- 3) Accreditation

⁶ The differentiation used in the questionnaire between university sector and non-university sector is somewhat ambiguous, as the basic terminology to designate different sectors in the higher education system are not identical in all the participating countries. In respect of the higher education structure of each member state, the scope is therefore defined by the responding agencies themselves.

The first function mentioned by the European quality assurance agencies is quality improvement. It can be defined as a function, whereby higher education institutions are encouraged and helped to improve the quality of their education through evaluation. This is the most common function of European quality assurance agencies, involving 86% of the agencies.

Another important role that the European quality assurance agencies fulfil is to function as knowledge and information centres on quality assurance in higher education. 78% of the agencies collect and disseminate information on quality assurance in higher education.

Not only from a higher education institution viewpoint, but also from a student perspective, it is positive to observe that the European quality assurance agencies take their role in quality enhancement, collection and dissemination of information on quality assurance very seriously. Higher education characterised by quality and transparency is an essential condition for good employment prospects and international competitiveness of individuals.

As the boundaries between quality assurance and recognition of academic or professional qualifications are merging, transparent quality of higher education is becoming essential. This development is also evident in the recent agreement on further cooperation between ENIC/NARIC networks and ENQA.

The last one of the frequently mentioned functions of the European quality assurance agencies is accreditation. It can be seen as both a method and a function of an agency, as it includes approval decisions. In this context, it should be seen as the latter.⁷ An agency can therefore both have the function of quality assurance and approval of higher education. Half of the agencies mention accreditation as one of their functions.

In 17% of the cases some of the agencies have other functions than quality assurance or enhancement, collecting and disseminating information, or accreditation. In these cases the agencies have the authority to recognize and license providers of

higher education. In addition, three agencies have the qualification framework⁸ as a task, and a single agency, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (Ireland), has the recognition of national diplomas as a function.

It can be concluded that the European quality assurance agencies still perform the main functions mentioned in the 1998 Recommendation, but the tasks have expanded and the agencies also perform a wide range of additional functions, including giving expert opinions on proposals for a qualification framework, and on professorial appointments, advising government on applications for authority to award degrees, assisting universities to review their procedures in favour of quality assurance and quality improvement, investigating and deciding on certain legal matters pertaining to HE institutions, and lastly, to be the guarantee for accountability in higher education by benchmarking⁹.

3.3 Objectives of evaluations

As seen in the previous section, the function of a European quality assurance agency is predominantly quality assurance in the traditional sense. One can therefore presume that the objectives of evaluations are closely linked to the purpose and function the agencies have within higher education in

⁸ Fachhochschule Council (Austria), Akkreditierungsrat (Germany) and National Qualification Authority of Ireland.

⁹ The answers under the 'other' category were: "Giving opinion on drafts of qualification framework and giving opinion on professorial appointments." (Hungarian Accreditation Committee – Hungary), "Assisting universities reviewing procedures in place for Q.A./Q.I." (Higher Education Authority – Ireland), "Evaluation of institutions, programmes, research and projects." (Comitato Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Universitario – Italy) "Accountability and benchmarking." (VSNU Department of Quality Assurance – the Netherlands), "Promotion of the necessary studies to its performance, global analyses of the accreditation and certification processes, as well as the debate and exchange of ideas and practices in the field of teacher education" (National Institute for Accreditation of Teacher Education – Portugal), "Information on HE to students, investigation and decision in certain legal matters pertaining to HE institutions, research and statistics and accreditation of Masters degree in certain cases" (National Agency for Higher Education – Högskoleverket, Sweden) and, lastly, "Advising government on applications for degree awarding powers" (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education – United Kingdom).

⁷ In section 4 accreditation' will be dealt with as a method.

their respective countries.

Also when dealing with the objectives of the performed evaluation procedures quality improvement is the predominant objective. It is mentioned as an objective in 92% of all cases, which emphasizes that agencies see their role in safeguarding the quality of higher education in a rapidly changing world, and in encouraging and assisting higher education institutions to improve the quality of their education.

Accountability is mentioned as an objective in 75% of all cases and in accreditation procedures it is even an objective in 86% of all cases. This does not come as a major surprise as accreditation is often directly linked to a decision of renewal of an operating licence depending on the outcome of the accreditation.

However, accountability is also an objective of the other methods, including evaluation. Malcolm Frazer argued in his survey of 1997 that for institutions, to be accountable¹⁰ was an absolute condition for being autonomous. The institutions must show accountability towards stakeholders, the governments who finance them, the students who choose them and use their services, and the labour market, which wants a labour force of high quality.

Like accountability transparency is also mentioned in 75% of all cases, and national and international comparability are mentioned as an objective in 59% and 41% of all cases. Ranking, however, is only mentioned as an objective in two cases (3%) In a European context, it is interesting that transparency and national and international comparability play important roles in most of the evaluation types. Especially in the light that some of the recent European multinational projects, i.e. the Tuning project¹¹ and TEEP¹², emphasise these aspects in order to encourage and facilitate student mobility.

3.4 Organisation and funding

In the 1998 Council Recommendation, the question of autonomy and independence from government and institutions is connected to the choice of procedures and methods. Another indicator of independence could be organisation and funding. This survey shows that almost all countries have an agency co-ordinating quality assurance, and that the agency is by nature an independent organisation with a steering body. However, institutions and government may be represented on the board of the quality assurance agency, or contribute to the funding of the agency or evaluations.

Furthermore, other educational stakeholders, such as students, teaching staff, professional organisations, and employers, may also be represented at this level. This section examines therefore, who are represented on the board of the quality assurance agencies, and who finances the agencies and their activities.

3.4.1 Composition of the board / council

The survey shows that institutions, industry, and representatives of the labour market and government are the most common board members in European quality assurance. It is interesting to observe that students are also in several cases represented on boards.

Institutions are represented on the board or council in 62% of the cases. All the agencies with a board or council have some kind of academic board members, either directly representing the institutions of higher education, or in their personal capacity.¹³ It seems to be fairly uncommon that the board members only come from the higher education system: Only four agencies have boards solely comprised of representatives of higher education institutions, associations of universities, or a principals' conference.¹⁴

¹⁰ In Malcolm Frazer's survey, accountability is stated as the main purpose of external evaluation. Frazer does, however, not distinguish between the purposes of the different methods as this study does, so the results are difficult to compare.

¹¹ For more information see <http://www.relint.deusto.es/TUNINGProject/index.htm>

¹² For more information see http://www.ensp.fr/ISA_2003/anglais/Acc_files/ENQA_TEEPmanual_EN.pdf

¹³ A single exception is perhaps the State Commission for Accreditation (Poland), which has stated that apart from government representatives, the agency itself elects a number of members to its board. What background these members have is not stated.

¹⁴ European University Association (EUA), Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad (Belgium), Netherlands Association of Universities of Professional Education (The Netherlands) and National Council for Academic Assessment and Accreditation (Romania).

Industry and labour market representatives are board members in 44% of the cases. In those cases, there are also always representatives of the higher education institutions, of principals' conferences, of associations of universities or other personal representation by academics. Government is represented in 39% of the cases, and students in a third of all cases. A vast majority of the cases (92%) of student representation on the board cover EU or EFTA countries. The one exception from the rule is the Hungarian Accreditation Committee. The same applies to the inclusion of representatives of industry or labour market: 94% of the cases cover the EU countries (with EFTA), the only exception being the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre.

3.4.2 Funding

The way funding is organised depends largely on different historical backgrounds and specific national education systems. In almost all the participating countries the initiative to set up evaluation procedures has either been taken by, or promoted by the government. The high priority status that governments give quality assurance is also reflected in the funding of the agencies. Governments have obviously perceived external quality assurance as a necessity or at least as a relevant means to enhance quality of higher education.

The questionnaire suggested central and regional government, institutions of higher education, and associations of universities and rectors' conferences as possible sources of funding the agencies. Roughly speaking, it can be said that there are two main funders of evaluations: governments and institutions of higher education. This is hardly surprising, as they have politically the greatest need to show accountability. On the one hand, the government needs to ensure that educational financing leads to high-quality education. On the other hand, institutions need to prove to national stakeholders such as government, students, labour market and other institutions that they provide high-quality education, and also to show the international community that they are competitive. Furthermore, as Malcom Frazer argued in his survey of 1997, to be accountable is

an absolute condition for being autonomous.

All the same, government is the main source of funding, 67% of the respondents stated that central government, and 8% stated that regional government is funding the agency. It is followed by institutions of higher education, which are the second most common source of funding at 28% of all cases, while associations of universities and principals' conference are only funding one agency (8%).

The agencies not funded by government are almost always funded one way or another by the evaluated institutions. Such agencies exist in Belgium (three agencies), France, Latvia, Romania, and the VSNU in the Netherlands. VSNU's Department for Quality Assurance was funded by an association of universities. The three agencies in Belgium are funded by an association of universities and Principals' Conference (Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad), higher education institutions (Vlaamse Hogescholenraad (VLHORA), and lastly, the association of universities alone (Conseil des Recteurs (CRef). The Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre (Latvia), and the National Council for Academic Assessment and Accreditation (Romania) are both funded by institutions of higher education. Comité Nationale d'Évaluation (France) is funded by the National Assembly and could perhaps be included in the category funded by central or regional government.

In Germany, the responsibility for culture and education is delegated to the federal states (Länder), including the higher education policy. The agencies are therefore funded jointly by the regional government (Evaluation Agency of Baden-Württemberg), a combination of regional government and higher education institutions (Zentrale Evaluations- und Akkreditierungsagentur Hannover (ZEVA) and by donations (Akkreditierungsrat). The same is the case with the participating Spanish agency (Agència per la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari a Catalunya (AQU), which is also funded by the regional government.

Four of the participating agencies state that their funding come from other than the proposed categories. Two of them have already been mentioned: France, where the National Assembly funded the

Comité Nationale d'Évaluation, and the Akkreditierungsrat in Germany whose funding is based on donations. The two others are the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) in Ireland, and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the United Kingdom, both being funded by central government, higher education institutions, students (HETAC), and the national higher education funding councils (QAA). The last-mentioned are the bodies that provide financial support to most institutions in England, Scotland and Wales. These funding councils have statutory responsibility to assure that public money is not wasted on unsatisfactory programmes.

Finally, the survey shows that there is little difference between the agency's source of financing and its specific evaluation activity. The same two main financing sources emerge: Government and institutions. In addition, in 20% of the cases the quality assurance agency financed the activity.

3.5 Summary

The results of the survey demonstrate that since 1998, European quality assurance has extended in scope and in terms of the emergence of new European agencies. In most European countries autonomous quality assurance agencies have been established on national or regional level. The phenomenon is most common in the university sector (28 agencies in this survey) but also the non-university sector is being embraced by quality assurance (20 agencies in this survey). Some agencies cover both sectors; some agencies only cover one sector or the other. This difference in organisation typically finds its explanation in the structures of the national higher educational systems.

The survey shows that the quality assurance agencies still and foremost perform quality assurance and/or enhancement in the traditional sense dem-

onstrated in the pilot projects from 1995, but the tasks have expanded. The vast majority of the participating agencies answer that quality assurance is both the overall main function of the agency as well as the predominant objective of the performed evaluation activities.

But the surveys also points at a tendency that the agencies to an increasing degree give expert opinions and advises to both government and the institutions and investigate and even decide on certain legal matters pertaining to the HE institutions. This is reflected in the fact that 4/5 of the agencies mention 'Disseminating knowledge and information' as a function of the agency, and half the agencies mention 'accreditation' as a function of the agency.

The appearance of accreditation agencies and hence the performance of accreditation activities go hand in hand with an increased focus on accountability as objective of the performed activities. 3/4 of the participating agencies mention it as an objective of the activities, and the same is the case with transparency. Also comparability – nationally as well as internationally – is a highly emphasised objective.

Most agencies have a board or a council, and all these have some kind of academic board members. In 2/3 of the cases the higher education institutions are represented among these academic board members. In half the cases labour market representatives are in the board, in 1/3 of the cases students are in the board and in 2/5 of the cases government is represented. The main source of funding of the evaluation activities is the government, but also the higher education institutions are in some way or another mentioned as source of funding in 1/3 of the cases.

There is a tendency that the board/council is more multifaceted in the EU/EFTA countries than in the associated countries, but the funding situation does not seem to differ much according to geography.

4 Types of evaluation in European quality assurance

In the 1998 Status Report on the state of quality assurance in member states, it was already clear that there was a diversity of methods used in quality assurance at the national level in Europe. In the 1998 study covering 18 countries, five main evaluation types are identified: Subject evaluation, programme evaluation, institutional evaluation, audit and accreditation.

An overall aim of this project is therefore to investigate the current status of the types of evaluation used in European quality assurance – after Prague and before Berlin in the year 2003. In other words, to produce a broad review of the types of evaluation, and to describe the methodological developments in European quality assurance, in order to stimulate further the mutual exchange of information on quality and quality assurance at Community level. Furthermore, to examine, whether there is still consensus on what constitutes good practice in European quality procedures, in the form of common elements, as identified in the 1998 Commission study and stated in the Annex of the Council Recommendation.

Hence, this section starts out with an overview of the types of evaluation used provided by the present survey, and afterwards, in the subsections 4.2–4.5 the different types and methods are investigated a bit further.

4.1 The evaluation landscape

One of the major questions put to the agencies in the survey was therefore: ‘How often do you use the different types of evaluation?’ in order to get a picture of the entire range of various types of evaluation used by European quality assurance agencies. Type of evaluation is defined as a method: evaluation, accreditation, auditing and benchmarking combined with one of the following categories of focus: subject, programme, institution or theme. The

combination of the element-based method and focus resulted in 16 different types of evaluation¹⁵, as shown in Figure 2¹⁶.

Figure 2: Types of evaluations

	Eval- uation	Accredit- ation	Audit	Bench- marking
Subject	6	1	1	6
Programme	21	20	5	7
Institution	12	10	14	4
Theme	10	0	1	4

Quality assurance institutes were asked to tick the methods they use ‘regularly’, ‘occasionally’, ‘rarely’ or ‘not at the moment’.¹⁷ The figures in the above table show the number of agencies carrying out the listed types of evaluation regularly or occasionally.¹⁸

The very small numbers in some of the boxes may indicate that some combinations of method and focus are of a very analytical kind. When looking solely at the combinations including ‘regular use’, the entire range of combinations used can be reduced further as ‘evaluation, accreditation, audit and benchmarking of a theme’ are used on a regular basis

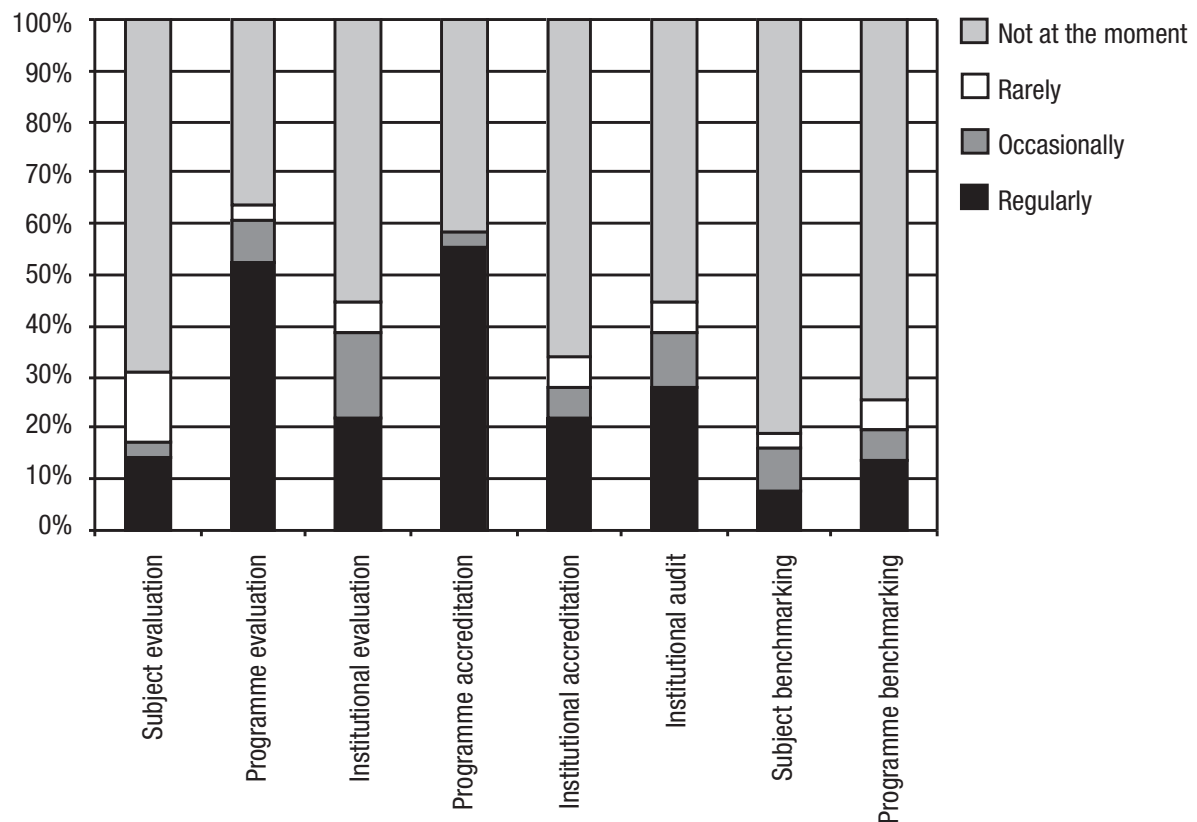
¹⁵ For definitions see Appendix B.

¹⁶ The agencies were also given the opportunity to add further types under the category ‘Other’. An example of this category is ‘research evaluation’.

¹⁷ Appendix A shows, which types of evaluation various agencies do.

¹⁸ In the question 12 of the questionnaire we asked how often any of the 16 different types of evaluation was used. The agencies were allowed to tick several methods, and to tick if a method was carried out regularly, occasionally, rarely or never. We thereby left the agency itself to decide on how to interpret the frequency, and does not make it depend on the number of evaluations carried out, as that may differ between small and large agencies. The category ‘never’ was later changed to “not at the moment” as the agencies stated in the subsequent telephone interviews that this category seems too definitive to choose, as they may consider implementing the method in the future.

Figure 3: Frequency of the types of evaluation used on a regular basis¹⁹



by less than two agencies. This also counts for institutional benchmarking, accreditation of a theme, and audit at subject level. Hence the results of the survey show that European quality assurance can be identified as resting on eight main types of evaluations that are used on a regular basis.

Figure 3 above illustrates that accreditation and evaluation of programmes are the two types of evaluation used most regularly in European quality assurance, followed, in order of diminishing frequency, by institutional audit, institutional accreditation, institutional evaluation, subject evaluation, programme benchmarking and subject benchmarking.

4.2 Evaluation

‘Evaluation’ is often used as a general term for the procedure of quality assurance. However, this survey defines ‘evaluation’ as a method parallel to other

methods, such as audit etc. and uses the term ‘evaluation type’ as an umbrella definition. ‘Evaluation’ in this context is therefore combined with different focal points, such as subject, programme, institutions, and theme, defined as a type of evaluation.

- *The evaluation of a subject*¹⁹ focuses on the quality of one specific subject, typically in all the programmes in which this subject is taught.
- *The evaluation of a programme* focuses on the activities within a study programme, which in this context is defined as studies leading to a formal degree.
- *The evaluation of an institution* examines the quality of all activities within an institution, i.e. organisation, financial matters, management, facilities, teaching and research.
- *The evaluation of a theme* examines the quality or practice of a specific theme within education e.g. ICT or student counselling.

In the member states that participated in the pilot project, programme and institutional evaluations were the basic ways of evaluating higher educa-

¹⁹ A subject is for example the subject ‘chemistry’ within the study programme of medicine.

tion. These kinds of evaluations are still widely used. According to Figure 3 ‘evaluation of programme’ is among the most frequently used evaluation types in European quality assurance as 53% of the agencies do this type of evaluation on a regular basis. Institutional evaluation is less widespread, as only 22% of the agencies are using it regularly.

Evaluation of programmes²⁰ is a type of method mainly used by the Nordic, Dutch or English-speaking agencies. Comparing the use of the methods in the university and non-university sector, there is more focus on programmes than on institutions in the non-university sector. This is probably due to the very strong vocational or professional emphasis of the programmes in the non-university field. The non-university sector also has a tradition of private, professional accreditation of programmes, e.g. in engineering.

Evaluation of institutions examines the quality of all activities within an institution, i.e. organisation, financial matters, management, facilities, teaching and research. According to the European University Association and the French CNE, for example, 55% of the agencies are not using this method at present.

Subject evaluation focuses on the quality of a specific subject, typically in all the programmes in which this subject is taught. This type of evaluation is used regularly by 14% or occasionally by 3% of the agencies respectively²¹. 14% of the respondents stated that they use rarely and 69% not at the moment this type of evaluation. However, due to the ambiguous nature of the term ‘subject’ there is some degree of error in these statistics.

In the 1998 Status Report it was concluded that in an historical perspective, the first national evaluation procedures had a single focus, whereas the agencies in the following cycles expanded their fo-

cus of evaluation activities. This development can also be observed in this study. In the evaluation of university education, the emphasis has moved from programme-oriented in the 1990s to a broader focus on the subject, programme, and institutional level. Several agencies now combined several focal points in their evaluations; for example, an agency that traditionally used to evaluate programmes may now also evaluate institutions.

4.3 Accreditation

Accreditation is another widely used method in European quality assurance. It is especially common in the associated countries, where this method has been a traditional way of assuring the quality of higher education. Moreover, countries such as Germany, Norway, and the Netherlands have since the completion of the survey decided that this should be the main type of quality assurance of higher education.

This study shows that accreditation of programmes is used on a regular basis by 56% of the respondents²². It is an evaluation type primarily used by the German-speaking agencies, by agencies in the associated countries, by the Dutch agencies, but also by Nordic and southern agencies. Accreditation of institutions is done on a regular basis by 22% of the agencies, e.g. by German, Austrian and some in the associated countries, although not used at present by 67%.

Hence, the term accreditation is ambiguous. When looking at the accreditation process, accreditation is usually mixed with evaluation. As it is elaborated further in Chapter 5, evaluation and accreditation include the same methodological element, the so-called four-stage model. It is, however, important to note that accreditation is not the same as evaluation. In the above-mentioned 2001 ENQA report on *accreditation-like practices*, accreditation was defined as having the following characteristics:

²⁰ In this context the distinction between ‘programme’ and ‘subject’ was ambiguous. In the survey we defined ‘programme’ as ‘studies leading to a degree’ whereas ‘subject’ would be ‘an element of the programme’ e.g. the subject chemistry within the programme of medicine. However, the terminology ‘subject’ seems to be too narrow in the meaning of ‘part of a programme’. In countries such as Sweden and Germany the entire field/subject is under scrutiny as one particular programme within a field is only a small part of many options.

²¹ Three % is equal to one case.

²² N=36 cases, 19 out of 36 doing it on a regular basis, 3 (8%) occasionally, 1 (3%) rarely and 13 (36%) not at the moment.

- Accreditation recognizes (or not) that a higher education course, programme or institution meets a certain standard, which may be either a minimum standard, or a standard of excellence.
- Accreditation therefore always involves a benchmarking assessment.
- Accreditation findings are based on quality criteria, never on political considerations.
- Accreditation findings include a binary element, being always either yes or no.

Furthermore, the 2001 Report states that whereas accreditation always refers to a standard, evaluations may or may not do so, or do so only to some extent. In the survey, a difference is made between the accrediting process that precedes the launching of a new programme (*ex ante*), and the accreditation control applied to established ones. The accreditation procedures in associated countries involved both an accreditation of existing programmes and of pending or planned programmes. Therefore some of the associated countries make a clear distinction between *ex-ante* and *ex-post* accreditation. The accreditation process is seen as a dual process, whereby one body of the agency evaluates and makes an assessment according to pre-defined standards, and another body (e.g. accreditation commission) takes the final decision whether to approve the programme or not. Many agencies in the associated countries also accredit institutions, when an institution must be approved before it can establish or offer new programmes.

In Germany, newly introduced programmes are accredited. The practice is introduced as a means to control the quality of new degrees, allowing the institutions flexibility in creating new programmes. The existing national framework was considered to be an obstacle to development of new and innovative programmes. The Germans make a clear distinction between the functions of evaluation and accreditation, as they serve different purposes.

Accreditation can be directed at other levels than programme and institution – also agencies themselves can be the objects of the accreditation procedure. One of the main tasks of the German Akkredi-

tierungsrat is to accredit other agencies. However, they are also allowed to undertake accreditation of programmes at the request of the Länder. Another similar development can be observed in other parts of Europe. Very recently, a National Accreditation Organisation (NAO) has been established in the Netherlands. Its mandate is to verify and validate external assessments performed by QA agencies.

4.4 Audit

An audit can be defined as a method for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the quality assurance mechanisms, adopted by an institution for its own use in order to continuously monitor and improve the activities and services of a subject, a programme, the whole institution, or a theme. As the ENQA report *Institutional Evaluations in Europe* of 2001 emphasises, the fundamental issue in quality auditing is how does an institution know that the standards and objectives it has set for itself are being met?

The present study shows that the most common type of audit is ‘institutional audit’, with a 28% regular usage ratio. Audit also comes third among the methods used on a regular basis in European quality assurance. Institutional audit is used regularly by all the Irish and British agencies, for example, and some of the agencies in Nordic and associated countries. 11% of the agencies use institutional auditing occasionally, while 56% does not use it. Auditing of programmes, subjects and themes is not very common in European quality assurance.

4.5 Benchmarking

In the same way as the term ‘accreditation’, benchmarking may be discussed as a method or an element of evaluation. In the present study, benchmarking is defined as a method, whereby a comparison of results between subjects, programmes, institutions or themes leads to an exchange of experiences of best practice.

The ‘best practice’ element common to most definitions of benchmarking implies that whereas accreditation procedures are typically based on minimum standards or threshold criteria, benchmarking procedures are typically based on excellence criteria.²³ It is, however, possible to do benchmarking without any explicit criteria at all. It should be noted that the term ‘benchmark’ may cause some confusion, as the ‘subject benchmarks’ employed, for instance, by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK are a set of criteria used as a frame of reference in connection with any evaluation procedure, which does not necessarily include any comparative element.

This study shows that several agencies do experiment with benchmarking in some way or another, but it is probably too early to conclude anything about common procedures.

The results are that the most common form of benchmarking is ‘programme benchmarking’ which in 14% of the cases are used on a regular a basis, whereas in 75% of the cases it is not used at all as a method. Subject benchmarking is employed by the responding agencies regularly or occasionally by 9%, while it is not applied in 80% of the cases. Benchmarking of institutions and of themes are rare. Furthermore, it should be noted that none of the agencies carried out benchmarking as their primary activity, and only one agency, the Netherlands Association of Universities of Professional Education, mentioned benchmarking (of programmes) as their second most used type of evaluation

4.6 Variety of evaluation types in European quality assurance

One of the major conclusions of this study must be that at a national level the European quality assurance agencies use a variety of evaluation types. Where the 1998 study showed that evaluation agencies were sticking to the evaluation type (combination of method and focus) that they had tradition-

ally used, the picture today is very different.

Not only do agencies seem to have extended their focus of evaluations. Agencies also tend to combine different types of evaluation, such as institutional auditing, with programme evaluation. The diagram in Appendix A shows that the majority of the agencies used normally more than one method on a regular basis. The agencies also tend to be committed to one or two methods, which are then used systematically throughout an area of higher education.

However, on the basis of the questionnaire responses it is not possible to deduce, when a certain evaluation type is used. This is definitely an interesting question to examine more closely, but it calls for a qualitative in-depth study of the evaluation history in various countries.

It has often been discussed in the ENQA context that many of the European quality assurance agencies have been through a ‘playing or testing’ phase and that many of them are now changing their evaluation regimes by going into the second establishment phase. This hypothesis is difficult to confirm on the basis of the questionnaire. However, in the qualitative responses to the questionnaire, concerning the future strategies of the agencies, it became clear that some of the agencies are at a turning point in their history. This is the case in the Netherlands and Norway, for example, where the governments have decided on new evaluation strategies that have had organisational consequences for the agencies. The UK is a further example of this, as a new evaluation regime is being implemented. Other countries, including Denmark, are preparing and implementing new evaluation strategies.

Parallel to this development among older quality assurance agencies there is a similar trend in other parts of Europe where new quality assurance structures and agencies are established. This is especially true in the German-speaking part of Europe, with more regional quality assurance agencies being established in Germany, and a Swiss agency having recently been established.

²³ See section 6, Criteria.

4.7 Summary

The survey shows that European quality assurance can be identified as based on eight main types of evaluation. The survey also demonstrates that most agencies carried out several types of evaluation. It is shown that the principal types²⁴ of evaluation used in European Quality Assurance are ‘accreditation of programmes’ and ‘evaluation of programmes’. The majority of the participating agencies use both on a regular basis.

In general programmes are the most chosen focus of the evaluation activities. This is especially characteristic for the field of non-university education, whereas institutions are coming more into focus in university education. This is probably due to the very strong professional emphasis of the programmes in the non-university field.

The most chosen method is still the traditional evaluation that is used in combination with different foci regularly or occasionally in 49 cases. And in contrast to earlier the tendency is that one agency very often uses evaluation on different levels, or in other words combines evaluation as a method with different foci.²⁵ Nevertheless, accreditation as a

method comes close with 31 cases of regular or occasional use. Accreditation is most used in the associated countries and in the Dutch and German-speaking countries. There does, however, seem to be very big variations in the procedures of accreditation, and the method could be a theme for further investigations.

‘Institutional audit’ forms an exception. Audit is hardly ever used on subject and programme level, or in combination with ‘theme’ as a focus. On the other hand, the combination of audit and institution is the third most popular type of evaluation used and it is applied primarily in the English-speaking countries.

Finally the survey shows that several agencies experiment with benchmarking – often combined or integrated with other methods, but as an independent method it has not really come through yet.

²⁴ The term ‘type of evaluation’ comprises a combination of the focus of an evaluation and the method used.

²⁵ Hence the number of 49 that refers to evaluations is only interesting compared to other numbers from the same figure, as each agency may have ticked ‘evaluation’ up to four times in combination with different foci.

5 The Four-Stage Model

In this chapter practical and methodological issues connected to European evaluation procedures will be dealt with. The structuring principle will be the four-stage model, applied in connection with the pilot projects:

- Autonomy and independence in terms of procedures and methods concerning quality evaluation both from government and from institutions of higher education,
- Self-assessment,
- External assessment by a peer-review group and site visits, and
- Publication of a report.²⁶

The four-stage model is today generally accepted as the shared foundation of European quality assurance and it has a prominent place in as well the Council Recommendation of 1998, as in the criteria for ENQA membership²⁷.

The autonomy and independence of an agency, as dealt with in section 3.3 above, is a complex issue. One indicator of independence that has not been dealt with yet comprises the procedures for appointing members of a peer-review group. In the strict sense of the term, peers are academic professionals representing the academic field being evaluated. The Status Report of 1998 states that *“most often they are involved in the evaluation when the self-evaluation reports are delivered”*.

The results of the present survey, however, give reason to believe that the concept of peers has been extended in scope in at least two ways. Firstly, several countries have adopted a multi-professional peer concept instead of the single professional concept presented above. Therefore, the term ‘expert panel’ is used in this report. Secondly, in some countries the experts do much more than conduct site

visits. Hence, the experts are dealt with separately in sub-sections 4.1 and 4.2 before the methodological aspects of the four stages, i.e. self-assessment and the practical circumstances related to site visits are assessed.

These two elements typically form the documentation in external evaluation procedures. Thus almost all agencies participating in Frazer’s survey of 1997 answered that self-evaluation and site visits were part of an external evaluation procedure, and in the Status Report self-evaluation is called “a key piece of evidence”.

The Status Report also mentioned that additional user surveys are carried out in some countries, e.g. Denmark and Finland, and actually the present survey suggests that not only surveys, but also various kinds of statistics are used as documentation of evaluation procedures in several countries. Consequently, four sources of documentation are dealt with: Self-evaluation (5.3), site visits (5.6), surveys (5.5) and statistical data (5.4). Finally, in sub-section 4.7 the results of the last stage are presented: The publication of a report, and also added here are comments on the follow-up of the evaluation procedures.

The form and content of these elements, and not least their mutual relation, vary considerably. This variation has mainly to do with the national educational systems being evaluated. This point was identified already in the pilot project of 1995, and confirmed in the Status Report. The type of evaluation procedure (method and focus as described above), is another parameter that may cause variety. From an overall perspective, however, the choice of evaluation procedure does not seem to influence the methodological elements fundamentally, and hence the type of evaluation procedure will not be a struc-

²⁶ The wording is from the European Pilot Project. The wording may differ in other representations of the model.

²⁷ See also section 3.3.

turing principle for the presentation of methodological elements, and they will be dealt with, if relevant.²⁸

5.1 Composition and appointment of the expert panel

The procedures for appointing experts could be one indicator (among others) of independence. If, for instance, the evaluated institutions themselves influence the appointment of experts there would be reason to doubt the independence of the QA agency from the higher education institutions. But it follows from this that there is an essential distinction between the right to propose or nominate experts on one hand and the right to finally decide who are chosen. Nomination and appointment are therefore both elements of the survey.

The respondents were allowed to tick more than one answer, in case more agents are involved in the nomination or appointment. That is primarily the case in connection with the nomination of experts (on average 1.4 ticks per case), whereas one agent (1.1 ticks per case), typically the QA agency, is responsible for the final appointment.

The overall picture is that nomination and appointment of experts go very much hand in hand, and that the QA agency is the main agent in connection with the nomination, and also plays a ma-

job role in the appointment of experts. From an ‘independence-point-of-view’ this is of course positive.

The differences between nomination and appointment are primarily reflected in the role of the institutions of higher education, who nominated experts in 29% of all cases, whereas they do not take part in the final appointment. Their role in the nomination process is more prominent in the EU/EFTA-countries than in the associated countries, where the Lithuania Centre for Quality Assessment is the only instance of HE institutions nominating experts.

It should be taken into consideration that some agencies may not distinguish between QA staff and experts. Experts may be employed at QA agency, and/or QA staff may conduct the evaluation procedure without external assistance. The latter may be the case of the Inspectorate of Higher Education in the Netherlands.²⁹

When asked directly if QA staff are members of the expert panel, the Accreditation Committee of the Czech Republic is the only agency from the associated countries that answers yes, whereas half the agencies from EU/EFTA-countries ticked QA staff as members of the expert panel.³⁰

The table on the next page (Figure 5) is a comprehensive presentation of the experts used in relation to the methods employed.

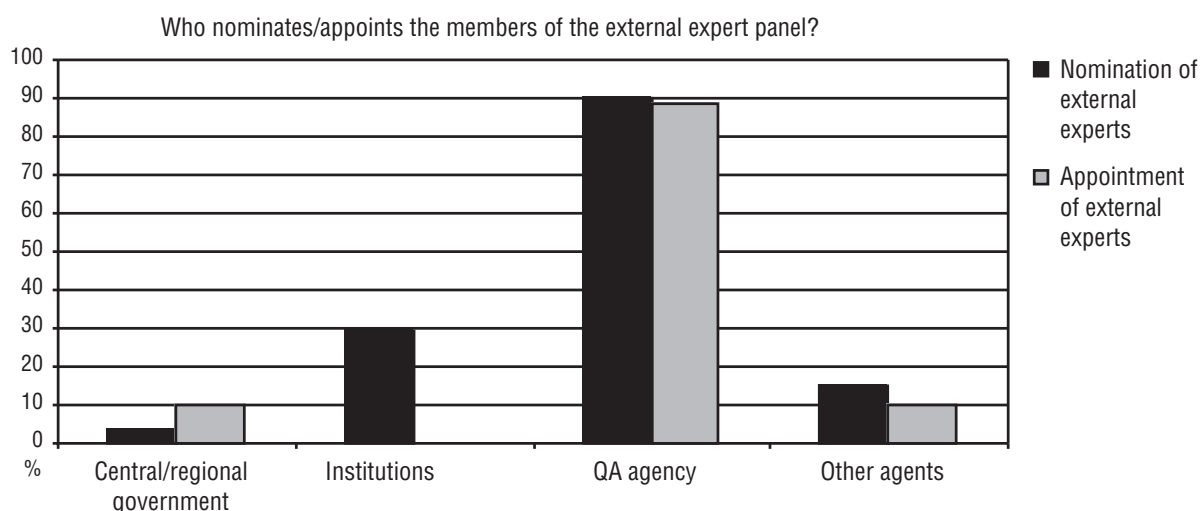
The table, of course, says nothing about the typical composition of an expert group, nor about its size, which may differ from agency to agency and from one evaluation type to another. The impression from the follow-up conversations with the agencies is that expert groups are typically smaller and more homogeneous when conducting accreditation. This impression is reinforced by the fact that each agency ticked on average 3.3 categories in connection with evaluation, but only 2.3 categories related to accreditation.

²⁸ The methods are derived from the question in the questionnaire concerning the primary and secondary functions of the agencies. In 10 of the 36 cases, the agency has only one function. Hence the complete number of methods involved in the statistics is 62. The distribution of methods was: Evaluation: 31 cases, accreditation: 22 cases; audits: 6 cases, benchmarking: 1 case, and ‘other’: 2 cases.

The method is part of the type of evaluation procedure. The figures would be much too small if divided according to focus as well. Thus evaluation, accreditation, and audit may concern a subject, a programme, an institution or a theme. Benchmarking is not presented, as only one agency, The Netherlands Association of Universities in Holland carry out benchmarking (of programmes) as their secondary function. No agency has benchmarking as a primary function. VSNU Department of Quality Assurance in Holland and Conseil des Recteurs in Belgium do ‘other activities’ that were not included in the statistics. Consequently the column ‘total’ in the following diagrams do not add up to the sum of the three present methods.

²⁹ This is the interpretation of the fact that the Inspectorate of Higher Education in the Netherlands only ticked one answer: ‘QA staff’ to the question ‘Who are the members of the external expert panel?’

³⁰ This may be due to QA staff fulfilling very different functions in the expert panel, as discussed in sub-section 4.2.

Figure 4: Nomination and appointment of experts³¹Figure 5: Composition of the expert panel combined with the method used³²

Who are the members of the external expert panel?	Evaluation	Accreditation	Audit	Total
National experts representing areas of focus	87%	62%	75%	77%
National experts representing institutions	13%	29%	100%	17%
International experts	81%	52%	100%	73%
Students	23%	14%	25%	22%
Graduates	13%	0%	0%	7%
Employers	45%	19%	50%	37%
Staff members of the QA agency	39%	33%	75%	40%
Professional organisations	19%	5%	0%	13%
N=	31	21	4	60

Parallel to this, agencies in the EU countries tend to tick a greater variety of categories than those in the associated countries. In practice, this means that the EU countries are more used to having students (25%) and employers (43%) as members of their expert panels than the associated countries are (13% and 19% respectively). The general picture is that

whereas students to a large degree participate in self-assessment and are being interviewed at the site visits³³, their participation in expert panels is still rather limited.³⁴

Another interesting aspect of the table above is the frequent participation of international experts – most of all in evaluations, but also in general. It is interesting to note that no less than 18 agencies that used international experts also answered that the experts write the final reports and that the reports

³¹ 'Other Agents' mentioned in connection with the nomination of experts are: Rector's Conference (Norway Network Council), professional Organizations (Lithuanian Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education and HBO-raad in the Netherlands), other experts in the field (Council of Educational Evaluation-Accreditation in Cyprus), previous chairmen of committees (HBO-raad in the Netherlands) and 'self-nomination' (Quality Assurance Agency in United Kingdom). 'Other agents' involved in the appointment of experts were the Accreditation Commission and Higher Education Council (Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre).

³² At present, The Nordic Network is conducting a project on student participation in evaluation procedures.

³³ As the respondents were given the opportunity to tick several answers to each question, a vertical calculation will not add up to 100%.

³⁴ See sub-sections 4.3 and 4.4.

are typically written in the national language. There may, of course, be several explanations to this. One of them may be that international experts typically come from the neighbouring countries or from countries with a common national language. The use of international experts needs probably further study.

5.2 Functions and responsibilities of the expert panel

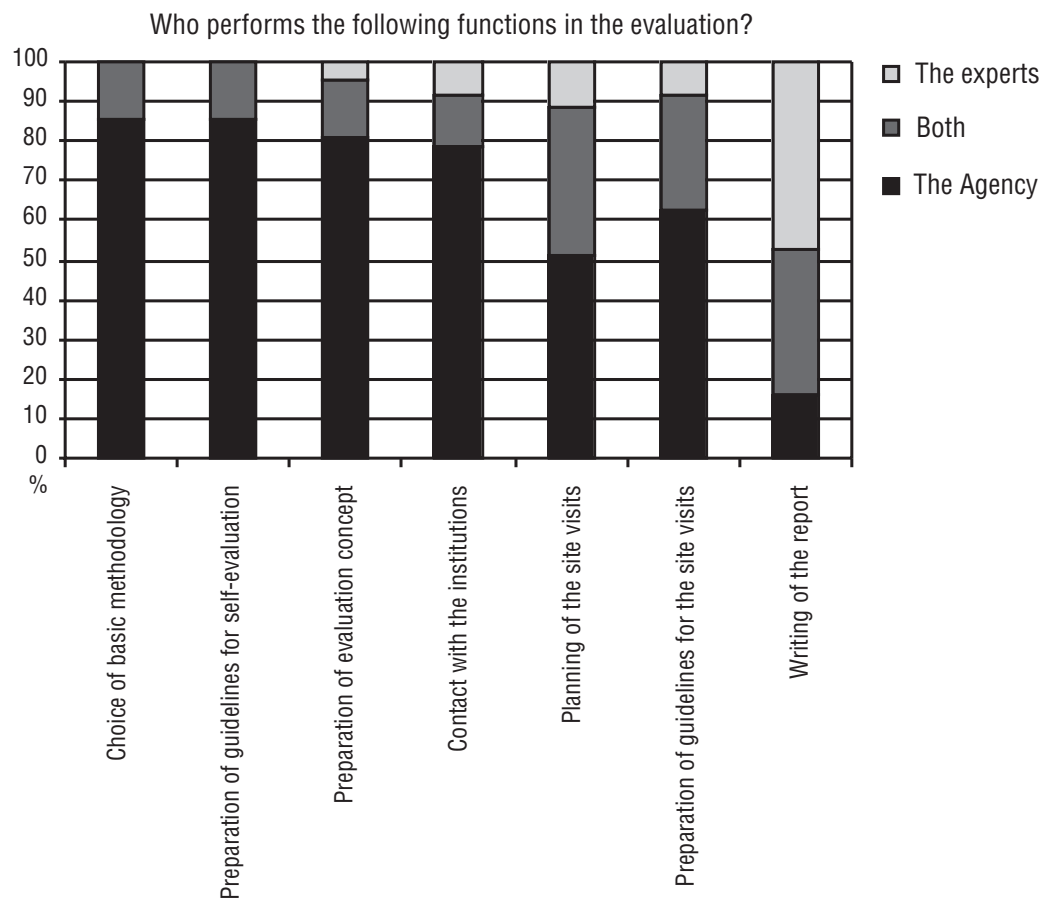
The figure below illustrates the division of labour between the expert panel and the quality assurance agency. The evaluation process has been divided into phases, and the succession of the phases may of course vary from one evaluation procedure to another. It may be justified, however, to see the x-axes as time-axes, and in that regard the figure gives a clear picture of the agency starting up the process, and the experts taking gradually over.

The crucial point, at which the experts take over to a large degree, is the site visit. In 30 cases, experts are involved in the ‘planning of site visits’ (in 7 cases without assistance from the agency)³⁵, and in 23 cases the experts are involved in the ‘preparation of guidelines for the site visits’ (in 5 cases without assistance from the agency). But the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Division of Evaluation and Supervision in Iceland, the National Evaluation and Accreditation Council in Bulgaria, and the National Institute for Accreditation of Teacher Education in Portugal, are examples of agencies, where the experts are involved in the process from day one.

Reading Figure 6 from the left to the right ‘Preparation of the evaluation concept’ is the first phase, during which experts in some instances act without

³⁵ The actual conduct of the site visits are discussed in subsection.

Figure 6: Division of labour between the expert panel and the agency



assistance from the agency. That is the case with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Division of Evaluation and Supervision in Iceland, and the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre.

The National Institute for Accreditation of Teacher Education in Portugal, and Vlaamse Hogescholenraad in Belgium, are examples of the expert panel taking completely over from the phase of ‘contact with the institutions’ for the rest of the evaluation phases. In more than half the cases, however, the agency is involved in all phases, including the final drafting of the report, and in 16% of all cases they write the report without the assistance of experts. By contrast, experts write the reports without the assistance of the agency in 49% of all cases. Thus, the agency and the experts draft reports jointly in 35% of all cases. This cooperation may cover a variety of roles, ranging from the agency functioning as secretary for the experts, to

the agency having sole or shared responsibility for the content of the report.

On average in 45% of all cases, the experts have exclusive responsibility, on average in 40% of all cases QA agency and the expert panel shared the responsibility, and in 15% of all cases the QA agency has exclusive responsibility. Figure 8 below shows that the division of responsibility is approximately the same with regard to ‘description and analysis’, ‘conclusions’ and ‘recommendations’.

Figure 8 is divided into EU/EFTA-countries and associated countries, as the survey shows a clear tendency of the agency having or sharing more responsibility for the content of the report in EU/EFTA-countries than in the associated countries. Other aspects, such as the scope, method and focus of the evaluation procedure do not seem to influence the division of responsibility.

Figure 6 shows the division of labour during the actual performance of the different phases of an

Figure 7: Division of Responsibility

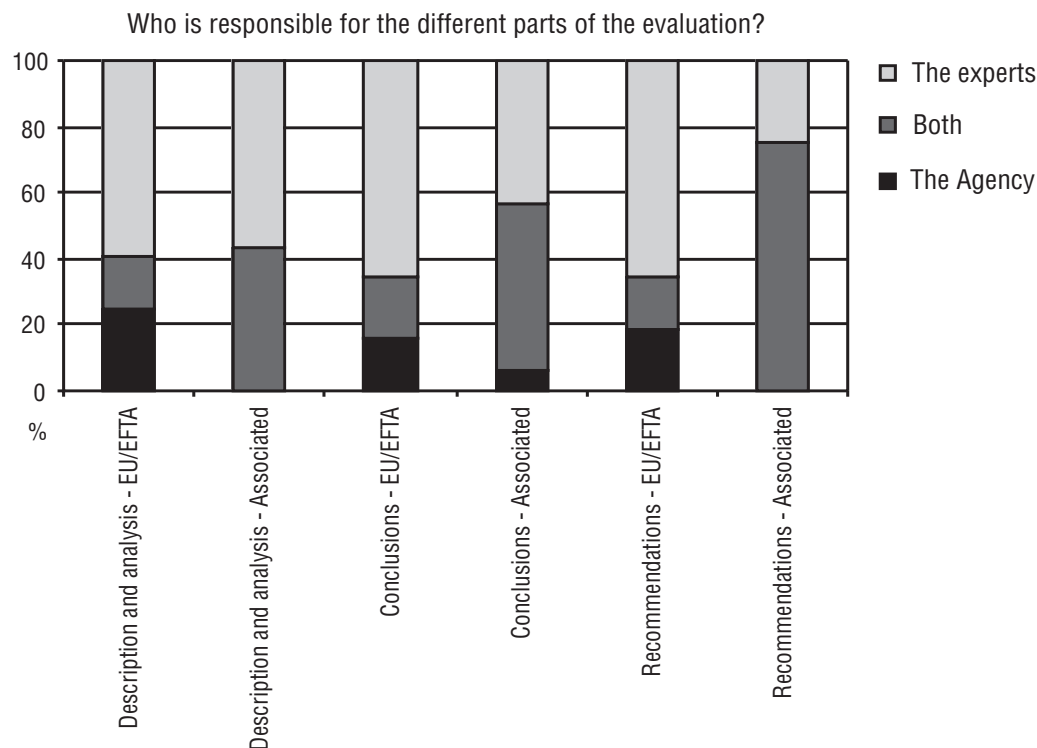


Figure 8: Composition of the self-evaluation group combined with the method³⁶

Who, typically, represent the institution in the self-evaluation group?	Evaluation	Accreditation	Audit	Total
Students	72%	25%	100%	59%
Graduates	7%	13%	25%	12%
Management	83%	56%	100%	75%
Teaching staff	79%	69%	100%	77%
Administrative staff	59%	69%	50%	61%
N=	29	16	4	51

evaluation, whereas Figure 7 shows the division of responsibility. If one looks at the two figures together, the following picture emerges: The agency typically performs the majority of the functions of an evaluation procedure, and the experts have typically primary responsibility.

Compared to earlier reports and investigations mentioned above, this picture gives the impression of a development, where the workload of the experts has been reduced a little. This could be seen in relation to the recommendation in the Status Report: *“As more and more countries and institutions initiate evaluation procedures the need for experts grows, and good experts will to an increasing extent be in demand. In this situation a division of labour between an evaluation agency and the experts that reduced the workload of the experts may be a decisive factor in the recruitment of the latter.”*

Another possible explanation for the division of labour and responsibility could be meeting the need for more professionalism in the performance of the functions of an evaluation procedure, as the field of evaluation is expanding and the demand for transparency and comparability both nationally and internationally is increasing considerably.

5.3 Self-evaluation

Since almost all agencies answer that quality improvement is an objective of their primary activity, self-evaluation is, not surprisingly, still an element

in most evaluation procedures: Self-evaluation is included in 94% of the evaluations, but only in 68% of the accreditation processes. This could be expected, as the process of self-evaluation is typically seen as having a dual purpose in evaluation procedures: On the one hand, the process of self-evaluation ends up with documentation, on the other hand, it forms the basis for continuous improvement.

However, five agencies answer that self-evaluation groups are not used in their primary activity; four of them carried out accreditation of programmes or institutions as their primary activity. The last one, QAA in Great Britain, is working on a new ‘lighter touch’ concept excluding self-evaluation.

An analysis of the agencies that does work with self-evaluation groups shows the composition of the groups as shown in Figure 8 (due to the low values, the percentages should be taken with certain reservations).

The overall picture is that management and teaching staff are usually part of the self-evaluation group, whereas graduates rarely participate. The participation of administrative staff and students vary considerably, and for the latter there seems to be a connection to the method used: Students are usually represented in evaluations, but rarely in accreditation procedures. In addition, the survey shows a tendency of students being more represented in the EU countries (62%) than in the associated countries (47%), and more represented in the area of university sector (67%) than in the area of non-universities (46%). The only indicator of diversity in the representation of administrative staff seems to be the status of the country: Representation by administrative staff is more common in the associ-

³⁶ As the respondents have the opportunity to tick several answers to each question, vertical calculations do not add up to 100%.

ated countries (73%) than in the EU countries (56%).

5.4 Statistical data

In this report statistical data is understood as pre-existing data, typically output data on the student drop-out rate, average time of study, staff numbers etc. In the Status Report, quantitative data were presented in connection with the self-evaluation report. As a supplement to the qualitative reflections, the institutions were asked to provide a range of quantitative data in the self-evaluation report. And in most cases, the examination of documentary evidence, amongst other statistical data, was an important part of site visits³⁷. Therefore statistical data has not been dealt with as a separate methodological element. There are, however, cases where statistical data provided by external agents are taken into consideration. In Denmark, the use of labour market statistics is an example.

In all the survey data, there are only two examples of statistical data not having been used, while every participating agency used statistical data in connection with their primary activity. The various types of statistical data are distributed as shown in Figure 9.

The total numbers shows that data on students and on teaching staff are used most frequently. It is remarkable that labour market statistics are used far more often in connection with evaluation than with accreditation. One explanation may be that relevant

data does not exist yet in connection with *ex ante* accreditation. Labour market statistics could be an important indicator of relevance in connection with the approval of new programmes. Neither the status of the country, nor the scope of the agency (university/non-university) seems to influence the use of labour market statistics.

The variety in the use of financial key figures seems to be related to both the status of the country and the scope of the agency: Key figures are used in 64% of cases in the university sector, and in 66% of cases in the EU countries, but only in 44% of cases in the non-university sector, and in 44% cases in the associated countries. Not surprisingly, the use of financial figures is also strongly represented in the evaluation procedures with an institutional focus, as is data on administrative staff: Financial key figures and data on administrative staff are used in 4 out of 5 evaluations, accreditation processes or audits at institutional level.

5.5 Supplementary surveys

The borderline between statistical data and supplementary surveys is not completely clear. If statistical data are defined as pre-existing data, supplementary surveys will typically be produced in connection with an evaluation procedure; and they can be either quantitative or qualitative (questionnaires, interviews etc.). The choice of using supplementary surveys could partly be seen in relation to the amount and reliability of existing statistical data:

Figure 9: Types of statistical data combined with the method³⁸

What sort of statistical data is used?	Evaluation	Accreditation	Audit	Total
Data on students	100%	91%	75%	92%
Financial key figures	61%	48%	100%	58%
Data on administrative staff	61%	71%	75%	65%
Data on teaching staff	90%	95%	100%	90%
Labour market statistics	61%	38%	25%	50%
N=	31	21	4	60

³⁷ See Figure 10 later in this chapter.

³⁸ As the respondents have had the possibility to tick more answers to each question, a vertical sum will not give 100%.

When is it felt necessary to supplement the existing data with more data or with data of qualitative kind?

These deliberations concerning definitions of ‘statistical data’ and ‘supplementary surveys’ originate in this survey. The agencies do not have access to any definitions when filling in the questionnaires. Therefore the present data should be taken with all possible reservations.

As mentioned on page 24, the use of supplementary surveys is not as common as the use of other methodological elements. Nevertheless about half the participating agencies (53% of the cases) make use of some kind of supplementary surveys. The number, however, hides the fact that supplementary surveys are rarely used in connection with accreditation: 81% respondents said that surveys are not used, whereas surveys are part of 77% of the evaluations. There are minor differences related to the status of the country and the scope of the evaluation procedure; surveys tend to be used more in the EU countries than in the associated countries and more in the university sector than in the non-university sector.

Surveys of graduates are used most frequently. Neither the status of the country, nor the scope of the evaluation is of much significance in this regard. The fact that surveys of graduates are the most common kind of surveys could be due to graduates being most readily accessible in that way. But the same could be said about employers, who as a group are used least of all in the surveys.

There seems to be a connection between the use of surveys of employers and the use of labour market statistics. 12 of the 13 respondents, who use surveys of employers, also used labour market statistics. This connection indicates that surveys of employers are used in order to assess the employability of candidates. Unfortunately there was no item in the questionnaire dealing with the employability or the relevance of programmes, subjects or institutions, and the questionnaires show no clear connections between the use of surveys (neither of employers nor of surveys in general) and the aspects assessed in an evaluation.

The questionnaire shows no connection between the use of surveys and the objectives of evaluation procedures either, so a central question still remains unanswered: How and to what extent do supplementary surveys contribute to the evaluation procedures? The emphasis in this question has to do with the expenses connected to the use of surveys as documentary evidence.

Whether the expenses are in the form of time or money depends partly on whether the agency itself conducts the survey, as in 44% of the cases, or an external agency conducts the survey. The latter, however, is true only in respect of three agencies: Zentrale Evaluations- und Akkreditierungsagentur Hannover in Germany, Fachhochschulrat in Austria, and the Danish Evaluation Institute. The most common model is, found in 20 of out of 32 cases, that the institutions conducted the surveys.³⁹

5.6 Site visits

Site visits are with some justification regarded as a uniformly used follow-up on the self-evaluation reports. There may be a difference depending if the central focus is on control or elaborating of the content of the reports, but the two sources of documentary evidence seem to be closely connected. Therefore it is interesting that site visits are still standard in almost all evaluation procedures, even though the analysis above shows a tendency to self-evaluation being less widely used than earlier – mainly in accreditation procedures. Only in two cases site visits are not used: In Norway, during accreditation of programmes (self-evaluation is not used, either), and in the Netherlands, when the HBO-raad does benchmarking of programmes (self-evaluation was used, site visits are not). This means that in 8 cases (distributed over 6 agencies in 5 countries) site visits are conducted without a preceding self-evaluation.

The average length of site visits in these 8 cases is two days. The total average length is also two

³⁹ This could be an indication of the blurred border line between statistical data and supplementary surveys.

days; so the length does not indicate that site visits in these cases can have a compensatory function. In general, the site visits last from 1 to 5 days, with 2 days as the most common duration. Evaluation procedures at the institutional level lasted typically longer, especially the audits at institutional level in Ireland, Italy and Sweden, where the average length is 3.3 days.

As shown in sub-section 5.5 above, experts have varying functions and responsibilities. Their core function, however, seems to be to conduct site visits. In 83% of all cases (49 cases), the expert panel conducts the site visits. In 15 cases (25% of all cases) QA agency staff accompanies them. It is, however, notable that the agency conducts the site visits without external experts in 15% (9) of all cases. With Romania as the only exception, all these 9 cases are in EU countries, but evenly distributed among various methods.

The content of site visits distributed among various methods is shown in the table below (Figure 10).

The overall picture is mutual agreement on the elements constituting site visits: Almost every participating agency worked with interviews, tours of the facilities, with final meetings with the management, and the examination of documentary evidence. There are no great differences related to the method used. Of course there may be great differences in the content of each element, but that is not the case of who is interviewed at the site visits. Everybody agrees that teaching staff and students shall be interviewed. Whereas the presence of stu-

dents in self-evaluation groups, and not least in the expert panel, is perhaps in some cases controversial, there are no disagreements on the relevance of students' statements during site visits.

In half the cases, graduates are interviewed as well; status of the country, scope or type of the evaluation procedure are not influenced by graduates being interviewed or not. In 69% of all cases, administrative staff is interviewed. The interviews with administrative staff are most common in the evaluation procedures at the institutional level, most of all in audit procedures.

The most controversial element of the site visits seems to be classroom observations, which are used in 25% of the cases. The occurrence of classroom observations on site does not depend on the scope or type of evaluation procedure, but it does seem to be a much more frequent element in the associated countries than in the EU countries. In 50% of the 16 cases in the associated countries, classroom observation is used, the figure for similar cases in the EU countries being only 17% of the 41 possible-cases.

5.7 Report and follow-up

The last stage of the four-stage model is the publication of a report. With the exception of the EUA that ticks 'the evaluated institutions', the quality assurance agencies themselves in practically all cases published the report. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Division of Evaluation and Supervision in Iceland, and the National Coun-

Figure 10: Content of site visits combined with the method⁴⁰

Which elements are included in the site visit?	Evaluation	Accreditation	Audit	Total
Interviews	100%	95%	100%	97%
Classroom observations	20%	33%	40%	25%
Tour of the facilities	87%	91%	80%	86%
Final meeting with the management	73%	67%	80%	71%
Examination of documentary evidence	90%	90%	90%	90%
N=	30	21	5	31

⁴⁰ As the respondents had the opportunity to tick several answers to each question, a vertical calculation will not add up to 100%.

cil for Academic Assessment and Accreditation in Romania, have ticked the 'central government' as joint publisher with the quality assurance agency.

It is interesting that a report is not published in 13% of all cases. Six agencies answered that a report is not published when they carried out their primary activity. Typically this activity is an accreditation activity (Akkreditierungsrat in Austria, State Commission for Accreditation in Poland, Council of Educational Evaluation-Accreditation in Cyprus and Accreditation Commission of the Czech Republic), and in both Poland and the Czech Republic they publish reports when they do evaluations (their secondary activity). The Fachhochschulrat in Austria, and the Conseil de Recteurs in Belgium do not publish reports when carrying out evaluations of programmes.

Furthermore, there are examples of agencies, i.e. Akkreditierungsrat in Germany, that publish abridged editions of their reports. In general, there are certain variations concerning the content of the published reports. Almost all reports (91% of the cases) contain conclusions, and a large majority (81% of the cases) also contain analyses. Only in 30% of the cases do reports contain empirical evidence. In 89% of the cases, the reports include recommendations, but unfortunately the study does not indicate anything about whom the recommendations are aimed at. However, examining who is formally responsible for the follow-up on the recommendations may give an indication of the intended recipients of the reports, as all agencies replied that some kind of follow-up or action is taken.

In 39% of all cases the quality assurance agency is responsible for the follow-up on the evaluations, in 46% of all cases the government (central or regional) is responsible, and in 76% of the cases the evaluated institution is responsible. The fact that

the figures add up to more than 100% is due to many agencies having mentioned several responsible agents. In some cases, including the Danish Evaluation Institute, this may be a result of reports containing recommendations at different levels, some aimed at the legislative and regulatory level, some aimed directly at the evaluated institutions. In other cases, one could presume that the division of responsibility has to do with the interpretation of the word 'formal': The evaluated institutions are directly responsible for following up on the recommendations, and the government is responsible for taking subsequent action, i.e. an instance of lack of institutional follow-up.

It is common practice to consult the evaluated institutions before the reports are published, but only in 8% of all cases the government is consulted, while other agents mentioned in the questionnaire, such as the 'rector's conference', 'association of universities', professional organisations, and the labour market, are rarely consulted.

From an international point of view whenever transparency is on the agenda, the language of the reports is of course of interest. In 76% of the cases the national language is mainly used in the reports while in 35% of the cases English is mainly used. Apart from the agencies in English-speaking countries and EUA, seven agencies write their reports in English. They are: Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre, Council of Educational Evaluation-Accreditation in Cyprus, Austrian Accreditation Council, Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Division of Evaluation and Supervision in Iceland, Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre in Latvia, and the Netherlands Association of Universities of Professional Education.

5.8 Summary

The variety in evaluation types used also causes a differentiation in the methodological elements applied and differences compared to 1998. For instance, there are examples of accreditation procedures, where self-evaluation does not take place, where external experts are not used, and where reports are not published. In general, however, the four stages mentioned in the pilot projects and reflected in the Council Recommendation are still common features in European Quality Assurance.

All agencies use external experts. Most often these are experts representing the area, and very often international experts are represented in the expert panel, but probably these are from neighbouring countries or countries sharing the same national language. In a few cases students are included in the expert panel. In general the expert panels seem more multifaceted in the EU/EFTA-countries than in the associated countries.

The experts are typically appointed by the quality assurance agency, but in 1/3 of all cases higher education institutions have taken part in the nomination of the experts. The experts have varying functions and responsibilities. Their core function, however, seems to be site visits, and in half the cases they also write the reports without the assistance of the agency. In another third of all cases they draft the reports in co-operation with agency staff. The agency seems more involved in the different functions of an evaluation process in the EU/EFTA-countries than in the associated countries.

Self-evaluation is included in 94% of the evaluations, but only in 68% of the accreditation processes. Management and teaching staff are usually

part of the self-evaluation group, whereas graduates rarely participate. The participation of administrative staff and students vary considerably, and for the latter there seems to be a connection to the method used: Students are usually represented in connection with evaluations, but rarely in connection with accreditation. As documentary evidence, the self-evaluations are in almost all cases supplied with statistical data, and in about half the cases also with some kind of supplementary surveys.

With the exception of two cases site visits are part of all evaluation processes in Europe. The average length of the site visits is two days, but site visits in connection with audits typically last longer. The results of the survey demonstrate a mutual agreement on the elements constituting site visits: Almost every participating agency works with interviews, tours of the facilities, with final meetings with the management, and the examination of documentary evidence. The most controversial element of the site visits seems to be classroom observations, which are used in 25% of the cases.

Reports are published in almost all cases of evaluation, but sometimes skipped in connection with accreditation. The reports typically contain conclusions and recommendations, and very often they also contain analysis, while empirical evidence is only contained in 1/3 of all cases. It is common praxis to consult the evaluated institutions before the reports are published, whereas other agents are rarely consulted. In 3/4 of all cases the evaluated institutions are also responsible for follow up on the recommendations, while the quality assurance agency and the government are responsible in a little less than half of the cases. But all respondents agree that follow-up is taken in one way or another.

6 Criteria and standards

According to the 1998 Status Report on European quality assurance, quality was at that time as a rule interpreted in terms of the extent to which the individual programmes achieve their own goals and the legal provisions under which they operate. This approach is commonly referred to as the ‘fitness for purpose’ approach.

In accreditation, when it is decided whether a programme, institution, or other parameter meets certain external standards, criteria and standards have been a well-known feature and a regular element of the accreditation process. Interestingly, the survey results show that, not only in accreditation but also in quality assurance in general, the use of criteria and standards has become a common element of the evaluation process. Almost all countries are using criteria and standards in one form or another in evaluation procedures.

6.1 Use of criteria and standards in European quality assurance

On the basis of the survey results it is obvious that the distinction between the term ‘criteria’ and ‘standards’ is blurred. Nevertheless, the term ‘standards’ seems to be used more in connection with accreditation, and the term ‘criteria’ seems to be more often linked to evaluation. The standards in accreditation seem to be used as threshold values, often formulated by government or other educational authorities.

The term ‘criteria’ seems to be of a more broad nature and in evaluation criteria imply a sort of reference point in measuring the quality of education. Criteria are not fixed, but function as suggestions or recommended points of reference for good quality against which the subject, programme and institution is evaluated.

Cases where ‘criteria’ are used as a synonym to standards indicating minimum threshold, add to the confusion. When criteria and standards are used in the same evaluation, it is difficult to identify the internal hierarchy between the terms in the survey data.

Finally, there is a difference between explicitly formulated criteria, which are written down and made available, and implicit criteria of good practice, which are often formulated through the guidelines for self-evaluation by the agency, or by the expert panel while writing of the report, but are not explicitly set out in writing⁴¹.

The focus of the evaluation procedures seems to mark the line between the use of criteria or otherwise. All accrediting agencies use criteria or standards. Most of the agencies that regularly conduct evaluation of institutions and subjects, and institutional audits, use criteria, and so do 10 out of 14 of the agencies carrying out programme evaluation. Exceptions to this rule are 4 out of 10 of agencies conducting programme evaluation, or the one that conducted programme audits – they do not use criteria, but the ‘fitness for purpose’ approach.

In analysing the use of criteria by the 34 agencies it is interesting to investigate who set the criteria for good quality in education, that is, who formulated the criteria. It differs, both from one agency to another, and depending on the type and focus of evaluation, within an agency. Criteria can be formulated by an agency, by a government body, an expert group, or a professional organisation, but criteria are also often formulated jointly by diverse stakeholders.

⁴¹ Unfortunately, we do not make this distinction in the survey, and may have added to the confusion. We have been loyal to the information on the use of criteria and standards supplied by the agencies. However, after analysing the responses, we are aware that the nature of some of the criteria mentioned seems to be of more of an implicit than of an explicit nature.

6.2 Use of criteria and standards in accreditation

There are long-standing traditions of accreditation and the use of pre-formulated standards in the associated countries such as Bulgaria, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Lithuania. Standards for the different fields are often formulated by members of an accreditation commission.

In Germany, general standards for the accreditation of new degree courses for bachelor's and master's degrees and continuing education courses have been formulated. These include basic guidelines, research and application orientation. General requirements have been laid down by the Education Ministers' Conference (KMK), the Conference of Presidents and Rectors of Universities and Other Higher Institutions (HRK), and the Accreditation Council (AR), and all evaluation agencies in Germany must follow these minimum standards. For example the following two threshold criteria are used: More than 30% (at universities 50%) of academic staff must have an academic degree of PhD, and more than 50% of the academic staff must have full-time appointments. In addition, the regional evaluation agencies can apply further standards within the context of these guidelines. ZEvA⁴³ has, for example, developed further crite-

⁴³ Zentrale Evaluations- und Accreditierungsagentur Hannover.

ria⁴⁴.

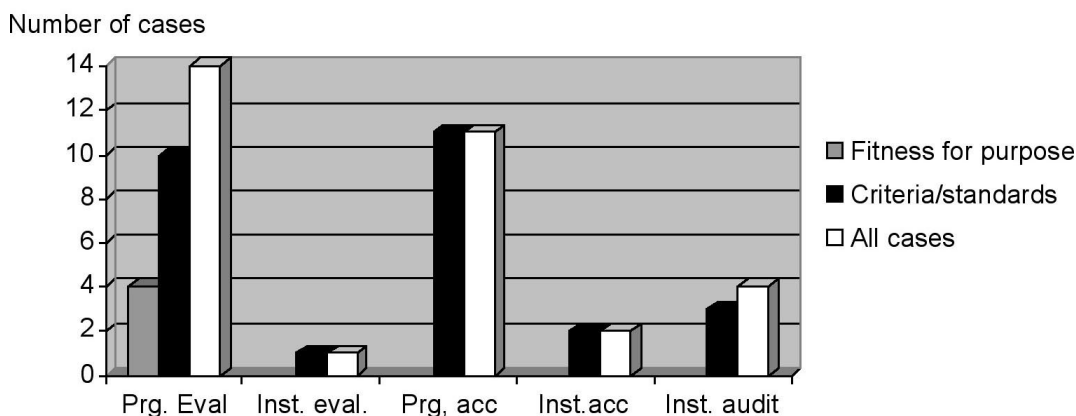
The Austrian accreditation standards are very similar to the German standards. However, the standards are applicable to the institutional level, which seems natural as the primary evaluation activity of the Austrian Accreditation Council (AAC) concerns the accreditation of institutions. An application must include proof that the minimum standards concerning research staff, curricula design, and range of study courses⁴⁵ will be fulfilled.

In Southern Europe, the National Institute for Accreditation of Teacher Education in Portugal (INAFOP) used legal regulation and standards set by the agency. The *Standards in initial teacher education* were approved by the agency in the year 2000 and referred to the accreditation process of pro-

⁴⁴ E.g. a research-oriented bachelor's degree must involve 50% teaching of basic scientific principles, 20% method and 30% knowledge on the subject, whereas the application-oriented Bachelor's degree must involve 30% basic scientific principles, 20% method and 50% knowledge on the subject. Other criterias could be that, the programmes must guarantee that the students obtain general key qualifications (competencies), that the degree courses with foreign orientation are internationally recognised, that the degree courses must be offered in a modular form etc.

⁴⁵ The standards constitute a set of criteria for assessing the extent to which the programmes meet the demands of teaching performance and focus in the following areas: (i) The programme's professional objectives, co-ordination and regulation, (ii) Collaborative and partnership efforts for developing the programme, (iii) Programme curriculum, (iv) Selection and evaluation of trainees and professional qualification, certification and (v) Teaching and non-teaching personnel and materials.

Figure 11: Frames of reference combined with the type of evaluation



grammes which gave access to professional qualifications for teaching in basic education (including pre-school education), and secondary education. The professional teaching profiles approved in 2001 by the Government set the requirements for teaching performance, and were used as criteria to evaluate the adequacy of the goals of the teacher education programmes.

6.3 Use of criteria and standards in other types of evaluation

In programme evaluation, the use of criteria is becoming a common feature. For example in the Netherlands, non-university education is evaluated by the HBO-raad. A *framework for assessment*⁴⁶ is set for all quality assessments. The Board of the Association determines the evaluation questions included in the framework, and they are binding on the expert-panel and the Universities of Professional Education for drawing up their self-evaluation reports. The *framework for assessment* is based on three principal quality perspectives: the relation between the study programme and the labour market, the effectiveness and the efficiency of the study programme, and the conditions necessary for quality management and improvement. The *framework for assessment* consists of 24 evaluation questions divided over the three quality perspectives and corresponding criteria. The criteria are limited to the requirements to be met by the quality of the aspect in question. The results of the assessments are rated on the scale of poor, insufficient, moderate, sufficient or good.

The Italian agency Comitato Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Universitario uses criteria in its primary evaluation activity; the institutional audit. Finally, the French Comité Nationale d'Évaluation use in its institutional evaluation criteria formulated by the agency, but the criteria are adapted to each evaluation.

⁴⁶ The Basic framework for the assessment of higher professional education as used by the Netherlands Association of Universities of Professional Education for its quality assessment procedure, November 1999.

In the United Kingdom *academic review*⁴⁷ is the new, integrated method of review that focuses on the establishment, maintenance, and enhancement of quality and academic standards. It has been used in Scotland since October 2000. Since January 2002, it is in use across the whole of the UK. It operates over a six-year cycle, with each institution and all subjects being reviewed once in each cycle. For each subject area in an institution, a judgement is made about academic standards⁴⁸. Further, for each subject area reviewed in an institution, judgements about the quality of learning opportunities offered to students are made against the broad aims of the provision, and the intended learning outcomes of the programmes. Each of these three categories is judged as either commendable, approved or failing. Finally, an institutional review addresses the ultimate responsibility for the management of quality and standards that rests with the institution as a whole. This draws on the evidence of subject level reviews, and uses points of reference provided by sections of the so-called *Code of practice*⁴⁹.

⁴⁷ Quality Assurance in UK Higher Education: a Brief Guide, 2001. Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

⁴⁸ Reviewers consider: 1) whether there are clear learning outcomes that have been set appropriately in relation to the qualifications framework and any relevant subject benchmark statements; 2) whether the curriculum is designed to enable the intended outcomes to be achieved; 3) whether assessment is effective in measuring achievement of the outcomes; and 4) whether student achievement matches the intended outcomes and the level of the qualification. In the light of this, reviewers will state whether they have: a) confidence in standards, limited confidence in standards, or no confidence in standards.

⁴⁹ In the United Kingdom, clear reference points are made to explain the basis on which judgements are made. The Agency works with the higher education sector to maintain a qualification framework, subject benchmarks, and the Code of Practice, and to provide guidance on programme specification. The qualification framework sets out the attributes and the abilities that can be expected of the holder of a qualification. The subject benchmark statements are about the conceptual framework that gives a discipline its coherence and identity, and define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the techniques and skills needed to develop understanding in the subject. Programme specifications are standard sets of information that each institution provides about its programmes. Finally, the Code of Practice sets out guidelines on good practice in relation to the management of academic quality and standards. Each section of the Code of Practice has precepts or principles that institutions should demonstrate, together with guidance on how they may meet these precepts. The Code of Practice provides a point of reference for use in the Agency's reviews.

In Northern Europe, the ‘fitness for purpose’ approach is still dominant in the evaluations. In use are implicit criteria of good practice, and aspects that must be highlighted in the guidelines, and at the site visits. An exception is the Danish Evaluation Institute, which is developing an approach based on a ‘fitness for purpose’ principle applying implicit criteria to more explicit criteria-based evaluations. This has primarily been the case in the evaluation of master’s degree programmes of further education, also intended to be implemented in the evaluation of non-university education. However, as in other accrediting practices, it has been a regular component of the accreditation of non-university programmes; when a decision of approval, conditional approval, or non-approval has been made.

6.4 Summary

It is an interesting result of the survey that a new characteristic dimension is emerging as a common feature of European quality assurance practices, namely the use of criteria and standards.

In contrast to 1998 when the terms of reference of the evaluation procedures were typically legal regulations and the stated goals of the evaluated

institutions, today almost all agencies use some kind of criteria. This, of course, is especially true for accreditation procedures, where threshold criteria or minimum standards are used in order to judge whether thresholds are met. But this trend is also evident in other evaluation procedures when for instance ‘good practice’ criteria are applied. In several countries, however, the criteria used are still not explicitly formulated.

The questionnaires and the attached material from the European quality assurance agencies argue that a number of features ought to be investigated further in relation to the use of criteria and standards: What is the difference between criteria and standards? When does an agency work with threshold criteria, and when does it work with best practice criteria? Is it important whether the criteria are explicitly formulated or not? Who formulates the criteria? And to what extent do agencies work with a pre-formulated set of criteria suitable for every evaluation process?

There is no doubt that the use of standards and criteria are relevant tools in connection with transparency – nationally, and internationally, but the essential question is of course the extent to which this promotes the continuous quality improvement of the higher education institutions.

Appendix A: Participating agencies and the use of different evaluation types

Name of Evaluation Institute	Country	Evaluation type used regularly ⁵⁰	Evaluation type done occasionally
European University Association (EUA)		Institutional audit Institutional evaluation	Theme evaluation Audit at theme level Benchmarking of institutions
Fachhochschulrat (FH-Council)	Austria	Programme evaluation Institutional evaluation Accreditation of programme	
Österreichischer Akkreditierungsrat (Austrian Accreditation Council, AAC)	Austria	Accreditation of programme Accreditation of institution Institutional audit	
Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad	Belgium	Programme evaluation	
Vlaamse Hogescholenraad	Belgium	Audit at programme level	
Conseil des Recteurs (CRef)	Belgium	Programme evaluation Other evaluation type ⁵¹	
National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency at the Council of Ministers (NEAA)	Bulgaria	Programme evaluation Institutional evaluation Accreditation of programme Accreditation of institution	
Council of Educational Evaluation-Accreditation	Cyprus	Programme evaluation Accreditation of programme	
Accreditation Commission of the Czech Republic	Czech republic	Accreditation of programme	Institutional evaluation
The Danish Evaluation Institute, university and non-university	Denmark	Programme evaluation Accreditation of programme	Institutional evaluation Theme evaluation Other evaluation type
Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre	Estonia	Accreditation of programme Other evaluation type ⁵²	
Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council	Finland	Programme evaluation Institutional evaluation Theme evaluation Institutional audit	Accreditation of programme Accreditation of institution Benchmarking of subjects Benchmarking of programmes Benchmarking of institutions Benchmarking of themes
Comité nationale d'évaluation	France	Institutional evaluation	
Akkreditierungsrat	Germany	Accreditation of programme Accreditation of institution	

⁵⁰ As the answers below were based on a questionnaire, it was difficult to interpret, how the term 'regularly' has been perceived by the respondents. As the size of the higher education sector and that of the agencies in member countries varies, a set of numbers indicates that regular praxis vary correspondingly.

⁵¹ Transversal evaluation of a programme trough all concerned universities (agency's own text).

⁵² Research evaluation.

Zentrale Evaluations- und Akkreditierungsagentur Hannover (ZEvA)	Germany, Niedersachsen	Subject evaluation Accreditation of programme	
Evaluation Agency of Germany, Baden-Württemberg	Germany, Baden-Württemberg	Subject evaluation	Programme evaluation
Hungarian Accreditation Committee	Hungary	Accreditation of programme Accreditation of institution	
Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Division of Evaluation and Supervision	Iceland		Programme evaluation
Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC)	Ireland	Programme evaluation Institutional evaluation Accreditation of programme Accreditation of institution Institutional audit	Theme evaluation Benchmarking of subjects Benchmarking of programmes
Higher Education Authority	Ireland	Institutional audit	
National Qualification Authority of Ireland	Ireland	Institutional audit	
Comitato Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Universitario (CNSVU)	Italy	Programme evaluation Institutional evaluation Accreditation of institution Institutional audit	Audit at programme level Benchmarking of institutions Evaluation of theme
Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre	Latvia	Programme evaluation Institutional evaluation Accreditation of programme Accreditation of institution	Theme evaluation
Lithuanian Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education	Lithuania	Programme evaluation Accreditation of programme Benchmarking of programmes	Subject evaluation Institutional evaluation Theme evaluation Accreditation of institution Audit at subject level Audit at programme level Institutional audit
Inspectorate of Higher Education	The Netherlands	Programme evaluation Theme evaluation Benchmarking of subjects Benchmarking of institutions Benchmarking of themes Benchmarking of programmes	Institutional evaluation Institutional audit Other evaluation type ⁵³
VSNU Department of Quality Assurance	The Netherlands	Subject evaluation Programme evaluation Benchmarking of subjects Benchmarking of programmes Other evaluation type ⁵⁴	
Netherlands Association of Universities of Professional Education (HBO-raad)	The Netherlands	Programme evaluation Accreditation of programme Benchmarking of programmes	

⁵³ Evaluation or auditing is a licensing procedure (agency's own text).

⁵⁴ Evaluation of research (agency's own text).

Network Norway Council	Norway	Accreditation of programme	Programme evaluation Institutional evaluation Institutional audit
State Commission for Accreditation	Poland	Programme evaluation Accreditation of programme	Audit at programme level Institutional audit
National Institute for Accreditation of Teacher Education (INAFOP)	Portugal	Accreditation of programme	
National Council for Academic Assessment and Accreditation	Romania	Accreditation of programme Accreditation of institution Audit at programme level Institutional audit Benchmarking of subjects Benchmarking of programmes	
Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari a Catalunya	Spain, Cataluna	Programme evaluation Evaluation of theme	Benchmarking of themes Evaluation of themes
National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket)	Sweden	Subject evaluation Programme evaluation Accreditation of subject Accreditation of programme Institutional audit Other evaluation type ⁵⁵	Theme evaluation Benchmarking of themes
The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)	United Kingdom	Subject evaluation Programme evaluation Institutional audit	Benchmarking of subjects

⁵⁵ Examensrättprövning (agency's own text).

Appendix B: Definitions

The following suggested definitions are sent together with the questionnaire to the participating agencies. The complete questionnaire can be obtained upon request from the ENQA Secretariat at: enqa@minedu.fi.

An **evaluation**⁵⁶ could be one of the following:

- *An evaluation of a subject*⁵⁷, which focuses on the quality of one specific subject, typically in all the programmes in which this subject is taught.
- *An evaluation of a programme*, which focuses on the activities within a study programme, which in this context is defined as studies leading to a formal degree.
- *An evaluation of an institution*, which examines the quality of all activities within an institution, i.e. organisation, financial matters, management, facilities, teaching and research.
- *An evaluation of a theme* which examines the quality or practice of a specific theme within education e.g. ICT or student counselling.
- *An audit*, which is an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the quality mechanisms established by an institution itself to continuously monitor and improve the activities and services of either a subject, a programme, the whole institution or a theme.
- *An accreditation process*, which builds on the same methodological elements as the other types of evaluation, but differs from the other procedures in that judgement is provided according to predefined standards to decide whether a given subject, programme, institution or theme meets the necessary level.
- *Benchmarking*, which is a comparison of results between subjects, programmes, institutions or themes leading to an exchange of experiences of best practice.
- *Criteria* are seen as checkpoints and benchmarks for assessing the quality of the input and the process. *Standards* are seen as the expected outcomes of the educational training. For example standards defined by professional organisation or legislation. It concerns the competencies that are expected from the graduates

⁵⁶ In this survey, the term 'evaluation' also covers the terms 'assessment' and 'review'.

⁵⁷ The term subject refers for example to 'chemistry' within the study programme of medicine.