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Editor

Assessing Quality in European Higher Education Institutions

Dissemination,
Methods
and
Procedures

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and Procedures

With 13 Figures
and 8 Tables

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Introduction

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Attention is increasingly being focused on quality management in higher education institutions throughout Europe. The reasons lie with some relevant political and social changes happened in the last few years. Firstly, a large number of education institutions all over Europe have seen a progressive withdrawal of the State as the main financing body of the university system. Higher education institutions were therefore compelled to try and develop new ways to attract students and financial resources. Secondly, after granting higher education institutional autonomy, the State has required more transparency and accountability. Thirdly, a series of external factors, such as the labour market, the European higher education arena and the increasing social relevance of research and higher education led universities to the implementation of quality assurance procedures.

In light of these new challenges, quality assurance represents for many higher education institutions the main tool for planning, managing and controlling their own activities. Transparency, accountability, legitimacy of degrees and comparability between different European higher education institutions are just some of the achievements of the quality assurance process.

In Europe, the meaning of quality assurance is being developed in apparently different ways. In some countries quality assurance is an internal responsibility of each higher education institution and is based on an internal evaluation of the institution's programmes. In other countries, quality assurance entails an external evaluation or accreditation. In the first case, external peers evaluate programmes and institutions, while, in the second case, an external independent agency grants a specific 'quality label' to programmes and institutions which have met a set of pre-defined requirements.

This difference in terms of tradition and meaning allocated to the idea of quality assurance represents, on the one hand, a hindrance to the integration process of European higher educations, which is also hoped for by the Bologna Declaration. On the other hand, these different approaches might foster the development of a European quality assurance mechanism based, for instance, on the mutual acceptance of different systems.

This book offers a starting point for such reflection. It is a collection of case studies about different quality assurance procedures implemented in relevant higher education institutions of some European countries.

Before describing the contents of this book, it is now worth explaining the reasons which brought about it. The starting point was a research project funded by the Ministry for Education, University and Research and by the University of Bologna aimed at promoting the internationalisation of the university system and enhance the mobility among teachers and technical and administrative staff throughout European institutions. To this purpose, teachers and technical administrative staff of the University of Bologna visited some European higher education institutions. At the same time, a few foreign representatives experienced in evaluation and accreditation were invited to hold several lectures at the University of Bologna.

The tangible result of this project lies in this book which collects the evaluation and accreditation experiences gathered by higher education institutions in Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Spain and Sweden. Every case study in this book features a recurrent pattern. To start with, information is provided about the quality assurance system of each country. Then, a specific higher education institution case study is introduced. In this part high premium is placed on the operating principles of the quality assurance system and on its impact on the organisation. This book does not aim at an exhaustive description of the quality assurance scenario either at European level or at national level. However, a few lessons for a future European dimension of quality assurance can be drawn from a cross-reading of the case studies presented.

Finally, this project also brings about an intangible result such as the relations and cultural exchange networks built up between the people who took part in this initiative. These networks do not only help standardize future quality assurance systems, but they can also act as the driving force for the development of cultural projects at European level.

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Quality assurance and evaluation of programmes at the University of Bologna

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1 Introduction

With its 23 faculties, 68 departments and about 100,000 students enrolled, the Alma Mater Studiorum - University of Bologna is one of the largest higher education institutions in Italy. Since the early nineties it has been implementing a project of de-localization of its activities, opening four branches in the southern part of the region and one international centre in Buenos Aires.

In 1999 the Reform Law of universities ushered in a process of unprecedented change and innovation in Italian universities by means of two main cornerstones: the autonomy of universities and the adoption of the guidelines of the Bologna Declaration and subsequent acts [1]. The University of Bologna played a primary role in the implementation of the reform and today, five academic years later, it has fully implemented the new model, thus organising the whole teaching activity according to the "3+2" year scheme required by the reform.

The implementation of some of the most significant elements of the Bologna process in such a short period of time and with limited financial resources has been made possible by a joint effort by all sectors of the university community: students, technical and administrative staff and faculty members. In the spirit of the Bologna Declaration, the reform mainly focuses on five objectives:

- achievement of curricular flexibility;
- adoption of a mainly two cycle-system;
- introduction of a credit transfer system based on the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System)
- innovation in teaching programmes taking account of students' needs;

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– increase system flexibility and its ability to renew itself.

Once this new model and the autonomy principle of universities were fully implemented, it was time to look ahead and deal with the issue of quality certification and accreditation of new curricula. For this reason an experimental project about "programmes quality certification and evaluation" was financed and launched in 2003. The aim was to test the implementation of such functions with particular reference to the European and international experience and debate on the subject. The final goal was to get ready to address the issue of quality enhancement along with quality certification and evaluation in compliance with the procedures already implemented in many other European higher education institutions.

2 Quality evaluation of higher education in Italy

2.1 The stakeholders

A number of institutions and bodies are in charge of or have a more general interest in the quality evaluation and accreditation process of degree courses. The most important institutions are:

- MIUR (www.miur.it), the Ministry of Education, University and Research (established in 1999 by the merger of the Ministry for Education and the Ministry for University and Scientific Research);
- CNVSU (www.cnvsu.it), the National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System, which is the institutional body in charge of general university evaluation criteria;
- CRUI (www.crui.it), an association made up of the Rectors of all Italian universities, raising the awareness of governmental and parliamentary authorities about the needs of the University system and supporting the university initiatives at national and international level;
- CNSU, the National Council of University Students, which is an advisory body made up of students' representatives;
- CUN, the National University Council, a representative body which promotes university autonomy and puts forward proposals about all major issues regarding university planning and administration.

The MIUR, along with its technical body - the CNVSU - is formally responsible for establishing quality evaluation and accreditation rules at the national level. Nonetheless, the other stakeholders, the CRUI in particular, significantly contributed to the debate about which system and which testing procedure for protocol evaluation should be implemented.

One of the most relevant activities was the nationwide Campus project (1995-2000) [3] in teaching processes evaluation which was organised and managed by the CRUI and funded by the European Union. The Campus project applied quality management procedures to almost a hundred university diploma programmes (approximately comparable to the present 3-year degree course prior to the reform), provided by twenty universities in Italy. Later initiatives followed the Campus experience, such as the SI.N.A.I. self-evaluation pilot project, which was promoted by the Conference of the Deans of the Engineering Faculties and involved a small number of engineering degree courses, and the Campus*One* project [4], which was launched by the CRUI as a direct follow-up of Campus for the academic years 2001-2004.

2.2 Regulatory framework

In Italy the Ministerial Decree 509/99 empowered each university to establish its own institutional teaching regulations, expressly stating that these regulations had to identify means for verifying or evaluating the quality of educational provision (Art. 11/indent 7-1).

Moreover, Annex 1 (Art. 4/4) to the ministerial Decree No. 115 (May 2001) states that each degree course must implement "an ongoing quality evaluation system for educational organisations and that the outcomes of degree course evaluations must meet national and international criteria". The Annex also states that degree courses must necessarily take into account "prospective employment opportunities and comply with the requirements of the outside world".

Subsequent ministerial documents clarified the purpose and scope of these new requirements. Accreditation procedures and criteria were set out in the MIUR-CNVSU Document 12/01 (July 2001) "Implementation of a course accreditation system in Italian universities: initial recommendations and proposals", which illustrated the structure of a document (called Quality Management "Information Model") whereby objectives, processes and intended outcomes of degree courses were stated.

The MIUR - CNVSU Document No. 17/01 (December 2001) about "minimum resources for university courses" put forward requirements for determining whether each degree course was run by a specified minimum number of faculty members and suggested that limits had to be set to the number of students enrolled in each degree course. These measures were to be immediately implemented. The document also stated that subject classifications would be re-examined in the nearest future and that checks

on university facilities (e.g., classrooms, lecture halls, laboratories and libraries) used for specific programmes would be carried out at a later date.

The Ministerial Note No. 995 (July 2003) provided further details concerning minimum requirements and returned to the open issue of degree courses quality assurance: "until now the procedures for accrediting degree courses and their institutional structures have been developed at national and/or Community level in compliance with the objectives stated in the 1999 Bologna Declaration. It is therefore necessary to adopt a set of necessary structural and process parameters to ensure quality and provide students with a basis of comparison for making informed choices".

2.3 Definitions

The **Evaluation** of a programme or of an action (a degree programme, in our case), as stated in [5], is a cognitive activity that:

- allows to make an informed judgement about the degree course programme;
- is carried out according to clear, explicit procedures;
- is intended to have an impact on the degree course programme.

Evaluation is *formative,* if its purpose is to improve the programme or action, to organise the processes involved more effectively and to make adjustments on the way, when things do not seem to be working out. Formative evaluation is essentially based on qualitative judgements provided by experts, although it also relies on data and indicators. Evaluators generally conclude their work with recommendations, participate in the programme or action and share responsibility for it. For this type of evaluation, continuous monitoring and improvement are more important than the identification of the strengths of the degree programme.

Evaluation is *summative* when it is concerned with accountability, with certification and with the summing up of the entire programme or action. A summative evaluation heavily relies on data and indicators and it provides a final a judgement about the value of the programme (or action).

Accreditation has several meanings. In the strictest sense, it refers to *professional accreditation*, which is used to determine whether a programme or a qualification ensures access to a particular profession. More broadly, it refers to *academic accreditation*, which states that certain stated quality objectives have been met. Accreditation can also be seen as an extreme form of summative evaluation, although it differs from evaluation in that it returns a verdict which is either "yes" or "no", "pass" or "fail". Accreditation criteria state the principles higher education institutions must

abide by and translate them into a set of qualitative or quantitative statements, which allow understanding how and to what extent these principles are complied with. Consequently, accreditation must be based on criteria or standards that are stated as clearly as possible. As previously mentioned, accreditation is often described as a public acknowledgement stating that a certain quality threshold has been met or exceeded. However, accreditation aims at achieving quality by simply ensuring that minimum standards are complied with.

2.4 Evaluation and accreditation features

Thus, degree programme evaluation and accreditation procedures must be viewed as part of an international process whose objective is to *describe, develop and certify competencies*.

What should then be evaluated?

– Internal efficiency or how smoothly the organisational machine is run?
– Economic efficiency?
– External effectiveness or to what extent the programme meets the needs it is required to fulfil?

Each one of these three options represents a distinct evaluation philosophy and the third one clearly ranks first. Identifying the learners' needs entails:

– identifying relevant objectives (i.e. *fitness of purpose* concept):

  • by drawing on contributions from stakeholders outside the university, the degree course programme must identify overall learning outcomes which will enable students to meet their further study and career aspirations;

– enabling the majority of students to achieve these objectives (i.e. *fitness for purpose* concept):

  • the degree course programme must allow students to gather useful learning experiences to achieve the stated objectives.

Such multifaceted needs cannot be met by simply relying on quantitative indicators that measure students' progress, performance or achievements. These indicators are certainly useful since they can condense large amounts of information in an objective form and point out any unusual feature. Indicators are therefore necessary since they help keeping the programme on track by avoiding pure idiosyncrasies, but they do not provide

any information about actual the teaching and learning processes behind them.

Indicators must thus be accompanied by qualitative information about the factors that most contribute to creating an effective learning environment: faculty competence, the necessary commitment level of faculty members, how effectively the programme meets educational needs, whether adequate human and material resources are provided and whether the methods used for teaching and student assessment are effective.

It is important to make sure that the provision of this qualitative information is not seen as a bureaucratic chore, but as an indication of the fact that degree programmes can encourage faculty members to do their best.

Last but not least, accreditation encompasses many different concepts and has been implemented in many different ways. Similarly, any new approach to quality assurance and accreditation in the Italian system of higher education must be compared with previous experiences and the multitude of procedures that Italian universities have more or less systematically implemented over the years. Equally intense and extensive attention has been devoted by educators and legislators alike to the quality evaluation of the system. This is explicitly stated in the standards and guidelines for Quality assurance drafted by the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA, 2005) [2] and adopted by Ministries in the Bergen Communiqué.

Introducing an accreditation system that fails to build on the skills that Italy's higher education system and individual universities have acquired in this area would mean ignoring one of our most valuable assets and thus undermining the system's feasibility.

At the same time, a modicum of order and method should be brought to the many disparate approaches to internal/external quality assurance in use today, thus cutting the costs involved, optimising the effort and investments put into these programmes and making it easier to communicate and share experiences and best practices. A system is needed that does not impose hard and fast rules but establishes a common language and a set of clear and consistently applied mechanisms which ensure that higher education meets its objectives and its most basic aim, that is, serving the country and the public at large.

3 The "Project for Programme Accreditation" at the Alma Mater Studiorum - University of Bologna

3.1 General information

In September 2001 the University of Bologna saw the approval by the National Ministerial administration (MIUR) of 10 projects to support innovation in the educational process.

The aim of one of these projects (No.8), hereafter briefly named "Accreditation of Programmes", is to set up criteria for programme quality certification and evaluation bearing in mind the long-term possibility of European level accreditation.

The project stems from several initiatives already completed or currently underway at national and local level. The Campus project, the SI.N.A.I. and the CampusOne project are the most significant activities carried out.

Starting from the experience gathered, project No. 8 established the following short-/medium-term objectives:

- spread the culture of quality;
- test self-evaluation and external evaluation processes in selected programmes at the University of Bologna;
- coordinate evaluation activities and other projects carried out on this subject at the University of Bologna;
- maintain relations with national boards and projects;

Project No. 8 also sets other more ambitious and long term objectives:

- extend the evaluation approach throughout the University of Bologna;
- prepare programme accreditation.

The project focuses on the new three-year programmes deriving from the implementation of the Bologna process, which was set up by the higher education reform introduced by act 509/99, and is currently in his third year. The following sections will describe the first two years by pointing out the approach followed and the most relevant outcomes.

The project has gone through different stages, each being characterised by the implementation of one of the evaluation/accreditation models available in Italy, carefully investigating their advantages and shortcomings from both a theoretical and practical viewpoint. During its first two-year period, which expired precisely while this paper was being written, the task forces participating in the project have tried to implement quality monitoring procedures following two approaches that will be described in

the following section alongside related findings. The Scientific Manager and the Project Coordinator ensured project coordination and organised periodic review meetings. At present the project is coming to an end with a proposal for a model which aims at being the "best combination" of European experiences and the best compromise between completeness and sustainability.

The overall budget for the project approved by the administration board of the University is about 900,000 € and covers all expenses for the whole period 2003-2005.

3.2 Project Coordinator and Scientific Manager

The Scientific Manager was appointed among the professors of the University of Bologna that had experience in degree courses evaluation by having taken part in evaluation bodies and activities. The Scientific Manager is entrusted with the setting up of the activity framework for the project, mainly by means of presentations and discussions during project plenary meetings.

The Project Coordinator is an expert in quality assurance who periodically monitors project outcomes and establishes guidelines to make this outcomes as uniform as possible. He/she also runs a *project coordination office* that collects documents, builds relations among project participants, organise the logistics of plenary meetings and of the other project events.

3.3 Project Phase I (2003)

Before describing the project activities, it is now worth briefly introducing the boundaries and constraints that characterise the management of a study programme in Bologna and in Italian universities at large. Each degree course is ruled by the "Consiglio di Corso di Laurea (CCdL)", a board composed by all professors and some elected students' representatives. The President of the CCdL is responsible for steering CCdL's meetings and actions and for reporting about the CCdL's decisions. The CCdL usually entrusts the analysis and the proposal for solution of specific problems to *ad-hoc* "committees". The findings of these committees are then submitted to the CCdL that may decide whether to accept or not the proposals put forward.

It is therefore obvious that the CCdL, its President and, possibly, an *ad-hoc* committee are the primary subjects of any quality assurance activity regarding the study programme.