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Chapter 17

IF YOU BELIEVE YOU ARE GOOD, TRY INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION!

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ABSTRACT

The traditional wisdom in favour of institutional evaluation in universities suggests that it is an excellent tool to contribute improving the quality of most, if not all, services offered: teaching, research and outreach, as well as of their support services to students and staff. I shall argue in this chapter that institutional evaluation is more than an instrument to evaluate the quality of the services produced by a university: it is a powerful means to help universities to revisit their strategies in order to adapt to a rapidly changing world; in other words, it is an essential tool to enhance the capacity for change.

INTRODUCTION

The traditional wisdom in favour of institutional evaluation in universities suggests that it is an excellent tool to contribute to the improvement of the quality of most, if not all, services offered: teaching, research and outreach, as well as of their supportive services to students and staff. This is true for private as well as for public universities. Public institutions in particular should deserve the autonomy they are permanently fighting for by paying great attention to the quality of their services (external and internal). This is obviously in their own interest. But the state, as main provider of the financial resources and infrastructure of universities, has to also exercise a control role; it is eventually responsible towards it's citizens for the adequate spending of all public funds. Hence, quality assurance – or better, improvement – has gradually become since 1999, one of the most visible obligations of the bologna process. The expected outcome is twofold: first, to promote a culture of quality improvement within each institution, whatever its mission and comparative quality level; second, to have either the procedures used to promote quality or even the intrinsic quality of most services provided by the university checked from time to time by an external agency or

independent peers using methods like accreditation of institutions and, possibly, of programmes, accreditation of internal quality assurance procedures or institutional evaluation. Concerning private universities, for profit and not for profit, there is no doubt that they are well aware of the necessity of a comprehensive quality culture, as they are dependent on private money, which means that they have to satisfy their customers. Public universities, on the contrary, suffer for having benefited for too long from a situation of quasi-regional monopoly.

I shall argue in this chapter that institutional evaluation, which is both an internal and an external process, is more than an instrument to evaluate the internal quality processes or even the quality of the services offered. It is a powerful means to help universities to revisit their strategy in order to adapt to a permanently changing world. In other words, institutional evaluation is an essential tool to enhance the capacity for change of an institution. This potentiality was clear, since the beginning, to the pioneers of the european rectors' conference (cre), who developed and launched the institutional evaluation programme as a service to their members. It is stressed on the occasion of the informational meeting organised for the institutions that have asked for an evaluation and reminded in many institutions at the beginning of the visit. It required also clarification at the beginning of the sectoral evaluation of Irish universities in 2004.

In order to make my point that institutional evaluation is key to the capacity for change of a university, I shall first describe briefly the many characteristics and consequences of the phenomenon of globalisation in higher education in order to justify the imperative for higher education institutions to adapt to their changing environment. Then I shall dispute that most universities, even if they continuously adapt to the changing world, do not do it fast enough today. Last but not least, I shall elaborate why and how an institutional evaluation can be an essential tool for the capacity for change of an institution.

THE CHARACTERISTICS AND CONSEQUENCES OF GLOBALISATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Two consecutive geopolital events, the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and, thereafter, of the totalitarian USSR empire, which marked the end of the cold war, have unleashed the full potential of the globalisation revolution, which was made possible, thanks to the burgeoning scientific and technological progresses and the emergence of global firms. Although, if it is only one aspect of them, the information and communication technologies revolution, as well as the rapid development of air and surface transports, have an amazing impact on the possibility to think, communicate and act globally. This phenomenon has been multiplied by the sudden, but impressive, economic upturn of very populated countries, like China, India, South Korea, Brazil, and, later on, Russia, as well as of a couple of east and Central European countries and some Latin American countries. These countries became within one or two decades the biggest producers of industrial goods and the producers of an increasing number of services, thanks, not only to their nearly unlimited number of cheap labour, but also, more and more, (which is particularly challenging for the developed economies) to their rapidly increasing capacity to master complex tasks and to innovate (see weber 2007). In other words,

these countries not only benefit from cheap labour, but have also realised that the future belongs to those that can build their development on a knowledgable society.

The consequences of globalisation are twofold. First, it promotes an irresistible movement of standardisation. More and more, the same products – and increasing services – are to be found all over the world, like Mcdonald, Coca Cola, Evian water, HSBC, Toyota, Swatch or Nespresso. Second, the climate of competition has become intense, if not ferocious, for markets, resources and locations offering cheap labour unit production cost. This last factor is at the origin of massive delocalisation of the production, not only of industrial good, but also of back office services, which are quite often painful for the regions being abandoned. This affects local industrial production, private services, as well as governments, which have increasing difficulty in collecting the necessary funds to finance all the services they are invited to provide.

Higher education institutions do not escape, by far, the consequences of globalisation (nayyar 2008). This is certainly a threat for those institutions which cannot move ahead, but it is also a great opportunity to revisit traditional activities and to create new ones. Increasingly subject to international, if not world competition, higher education institutions are losing their regional monopoly. They are facing increasing competition for good students, good teachers and researchers, as well as for funding by public authorities, students, sponsors and contractors. At the same time, the cost of doing good research in hard and life sciences, as well as in softer social sciences, is increasing rapidly, all the more now that interdisciplinarity has become key to innovative research. The cost of teaching and learning is also increasing due to the development of postgraduate studies and to the move away from traditional teaching towards new approaches more favourable to learning. Transfer of technology is also changing, moving from a sequential model with very tiny links between the different phases of the innovation process from basic research to development to a more interactive system between the different stages of the innovation process. In addition to that, the relation universities-industry in research is also changing. Some industries are becoming challenging competitors to university laboratories they benefit from gigantic research budgets; whereas other firms, on the contrary, outsource most of their research to university labs, in particular. if the result of the research effort is particularly uncertain. It is important to realise also that the adaptation to these new parameters has to be done in a period marked by increasing external and internal pressures to be efficient, in particular, because of the lack of funding, at least from traditional sources.

In Europe, the bologna process is also contributing both to the standardisation of the framework of higher education, and to more competition, thanks to a greater transparency. Although the demographic trend is more or less flat in Europe, new needs emerge, in particular, the need to offer education to citizens throughout their lives: first, in order to compensate for the fact that knowledge is getting faster obsolete and that job requirements are changing and second, to respond to the need to give a second chance to those who were unable or unwilling to utileze education when they were younger. Last, but not least, it is striking to observe that, today, universities are not where most students are (duderstadt *et al.* 2008). These developments are presently at the origin of a strong development of distance learning and of the creation in developing countries of subsidiaries and franchises of established universities, mainly from Australia, United States and United Kingdom (see chapter 14). However, Europe, notably Western Europe, is much less involved or concerned

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by transborder education than the other continents. We observe also a very fast development – four times the growth of the traditional sector – of private for profit universities.

The booming development of information and communication technologies, in particular of the Internet, means clearly increasing competition for established institutions. Let us just mention the development of the "open learning initiative" of MIT, large, accessible scholarly archives like Jstor and ARTstor, the growing role as knowledge provider played by search engines like Google, the forthcoming Google library, the decentralised encyclopaedia 'Wikipedia' or news or information producers like 'Youtube', 'Myspace' or 'Facebook', or the possibility to set-up narrow interactivity between teachers and students thanks to internet, mobile phones or video on demand (Duderstadt 2008; Gourley 2008; Vest 2008). In the views of Chuck Vest, "a global Meta University is arising that will accurately characterise higher education a decade or two hence. Like the computer operating system Linux, knowledge creation and teaching at each university will be elevated by the efforts of a multitude of individuals and groups all over the world" (Vest 2008). Finally, in an epoch where Medias put as much attention to the form as to the content, attractive packaging of teaching material becomes a necessary condition to attract the attention of students (Tsichritzis 2008).

The globalisation of the world is also inevitably challenging the intercultural dialogue and the political, economic, social and ecological sustainability of our societies. This requires that Universities reinforce also their involvement in favour of a sustainable development (Weber 2008). Indeed, universities should be responsive to the changing environment; but they should also be responsible towards society and contribute to solve their problems with all the means they have.

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS ARE NOT CHANGING FAST ENOUGH

Obviously, universities are adaptable institutions; otherwise, they would not be one of the most ancient institutions in our society and have survived so many crises. Moreover, they are the main engines of scientific progress, probably the most important source of the changing world. Adapt to change, or better lead the change, is a 'genetic' characteristic of researchers and of most university teachers. Moreover, universities have a great opportunity to introduce change on the occasion of the recruitment of new professors or researchers.

Obviously, this model worked well for centuries. However, we have to ask ourselves today if this decentralised model of adaptation is capable of coping with the rhythm of change imposed by globalisation and the necessities of the knowledge society? I believe that the attitude and the organisation of many European universities is no more up to the challenge of the present changing world.

Why? The organisation of universities is pretty unique and is not comparable with the organisation of business firms and governments. No organisation has so many highly competent persons at the base of the hierarchy – even if the concept of hierarchy does not apply well to universities –, that is the professors, researchers and advanced students. Such decentralisation has great advantages, as the academic staff is quite likely to know better what is good for their discipline, than any administrator above him. This is also a necessary condition for his or her motivation to compete for funds and scientific results or for good

teaching. However, as the organisation model of a federal country shows so well, wide decentralisation is subject to a least three constraints (Weber 2001). First, the activity of a department or laboratory spills over the entire institution, which implies that the university should be able to specially support an excellent activity or, on the contrary, to remediate a weak one. Second, the new technologies in particular allow to gain economies of scale in developing certain activities at a higher level than at the department, laboratory or faculty levels, and finally, if the institution has a high preference for equal treatment of equals, most rules, for example for admission of students, should be set at central level.

It is therefore important to find the right level of decentralisation-centralisation and to take into account that the changing world has an impact on the optimum level of decentralisation.

No University leader should forget that not a single institution can do everything well, even the most reputable ones, that is, teaching masses and life long learners, doing frontier disciplinary and interdisciplinarity research, doing applied research and development for business and serving the community.

Consequently, universities cannot escape better defining their missions and objectives, in other words to fix clear priorities, as well as posteriorities, as well as elaborate a strategic plan.

INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION: A KEY TOOL OF THE CAPACITY FOR CHANGE

The readers who share the previous analysis and its consequences for higher education institutions will be convinced that universities should better take their future in their hands to adapt to the changing world. However, when I say 'to adapt', I do not mean that universities should simply respond to the pressures of the market, the public authorities or any stakeholder; I mean that higher education institutions should act as responsible institutions, that is be proactive not only to guarantee quality teaching and innovative research, but also be responsible towards society, that is contribute to solve societal problems and promote sustainable societies.

Asserting a proactive attitude is first and above all a question of leadership and governance. In brief, the leaders should have the vision and the drive to lead their institution into this direction and the governance system should contribute to forge an institution project and to get the support of the greatest number. For institutions as complex and versatile as universities, even the most visionary and charismatic leader cannot set the direction alone; he/she needs help to govern its/her institution. This help comes obviously from colleagues coleading the institution with him or her and through the use of powerful management tools. However, it is not enough. It is also crucial that a large majority of the members of the institution feels well in the institution and be motivated to interact to pull it forward. This ideal situation of a virtuous circle is the product of a subtle mix between leadership, professionalism, good working atmosphere and a good governance system.

Among others, in order to lead a university in a rapidly changing and increasingly competitive environment which imposes to look ahead, to profile correctly the institution and to fix clear priorities and posteriorities, the leaders at the different levels of the institution

(rector, faculties, head of department or institutes) need to know were their institution or subdivision stands, in particular its strengths and weaknesses, as well as its opportunities and threats. In other words, they should proceed to a so-called SWOT analysis. It is a prerequisite before being able to examine alternative strategies and to implement the chosen one. But, the leaders should also know where are the most probable bottlenecks to the implementation of a strategy of change, whatever their nature: paralysing system of governance, unfavourable work climate, high level of selfishness, greater faithfulness of researchers to their discipline than to the university which employs them, etc... One cannot repeat often enough that, due to the widely decentralised organisation of a higher education institution, there is no chance of success if the whole institution is not geared towards improvement, that is if the institution is not deeply involved in a comprehensive policy of quality improvement, in other words, unless the institution has a quality culture.

Any institution could, in principle, implement a SWOT analysis, as well as a comprehensive quality culture, without any outside help. However, identifying weaknesses such as bad leadership, bad work climate, paralysing governance system or a portfolio of activities not well suited to the institution or the region can hardly be done by an institution alone. The identification of weaknesses is not evident for those who try to push-pull the institution ahead on a daily basis and the definition and, *a fortiori*, the implementation of strategic priorities is always a touchy business for university leaders, as there are rarely only winners!

This is basically why I pretend that proceeding to an institutional evaluation can be of great help. Even if a SWOT analysis is an important element of an institutional evaluation, the later goes far beyond a SWOT analysis. It is an excellent way to better know the institution, in particular its strengths and weakness, as well as the relevance and coherence of the strategies pursued, but it can also strongly support the leadership of the institution to introduce changes and to promote a comprehensive quality culture.

Let us briefly see why an institutional evaluation can be so helpful to an institution in a period of rapid change and increasing competition. Let me say also that even if the pioneers of the CRE/EUA institutional evaluation programme (IEP) were sensitive to the necessity for institutions to develop strategies, they were mainly interested in helping institutions to develop an internal quality culture. The need to pay greater attention to the missions and objective of an institution and to fix strategic priorities increased in importance over the years with the acceleration of the globalisation process and the implementation of the Bologna process, and the increased necessity to adapt rapidly which derived from them. The good news is that the CRE/EUA program of institutional evaluation, as it was conceived, could respond to these new challenges without formal modification. It became simply obvious that a comprehensive quality culture implies also good governance and leadership and the implementation of a proactive strategy. This versatility of the program is remarkable and explains certainly why it has been successful for so many years without formal change, whereas all other initiatives in quality assurance and accreditation implemented mainly at country level had to be regularly and often profoundly adapted to better respond to the needs, or simply to become realistic and more cost-effective.

I shall now describe briefly some of the characteristics of the CRE/EUA institutional evaluation programme which, to me, make it particularly versatile and supportive for institutions.

The evaluation looks at the whole institution as it is, without preconceived ideas or predetermined criteria. It allows not only to evaluate the internal quality procedures of an institution – in narrow sense –, which is an indirect way to evaluate the quality of the institution, but also to contribute to evaluate the institution's strategy and policies and their implementation. Basically, it is based on the institution's mission statement and strategic objectives and it looks at how it works and how the institution knows it works.

The evaluation process is clearly supportive to the institution, and in particular to its leadership. It is done on a voluntary basis when the institution believes this could be useful to check its internal quality assurance mechanisms and to promote change. As, contrary to an accreditation process, the CRE/EUA institutional evaluation programme does not lead to a sanction, or to a ranking, and moreover the result is not linked with financing, the institution is inclined to have the right attitude to go through the process with modesty and a real curiosity to better know itself. I cannot insist enough on the difference of attitude we can observe between an institution facing an accreditation or an institutional evaluation. For obvious reasons, an accreditation is an exam which leads to the very serious sanction of being accredited or not; it is therefore not surprising that, under these conditions, the institution is strongly condemned to inflate its good points and hide the weak ones (or presenting them as good points), hoping that the evaluators will not discover that. Nothing similar happens in the CRE/EUA institutional evaluation programme; provided the institution fully realises that this CRE/EUA institutional evaluation can be quite supportive.

The CRE/EUA IEP is based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative criteria. However, to me, the human factor is clearly dominating for two reasons. The institution is invited to launch the process in writing a self-evaluation report, which will be done by a committee, and possibly sub-committees. These committees will certainly consider the data available, but their report will be the fruit of hours of discussion during which different point of views will be presented, before agreeing on a consensus text. The same is true for the team of experts (three plus an experienced secretary and more recently from a student) visiting the university. In most cases, as none is, as a matter of principle, from the country of the institution, they will not be in an optimal position to interpret the data available; they will therefore base their judgment mainly on their analysis of the self-evaluation report and on all what they have heard putting to questions some 200-300 members of the institution, as well as external stakeholders, during their preliminary and main visits. It is important to stress here that the experts are themselves experienced active or past university rectors/presidents, in few cases vice-rectors/presidents, which means that they have experienced the hard way being a university leader; in other words, they know well where to look to forge their opinion about the institution. Moreover, as the university committee set-up to draft the evaluation report, they will spend quite some time of their five days visit exchanging views within the team, asking themselves questions and proposing answers, before drafting the oral report. Drafting of the written report is still an occasion for the team to reflect on a few issues, in particular to take into account some reactions provoked by the oral report. The conjunction of their personal experience and of the two days annual induction course guarantees a professional approach to the evaluation. Finally, it is useful to point the fact that the experts are doing these evaluations as a service to sister institutions and by personal curiosity, and not as paid job: this guarantees also that they have no vested interest.

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An additional powerful characteristic of the CRE/EUA institutional evaluation programme is that the method is applicable to any type of institution, whatever its profile – research or teaching institutions – and its quality level or international visibility.

The method is geared towards total quality of the institution, but in a much more ambitious way than a university accreditation or an ISO certification as implemented in the industrial or service sectors. Indeed accreditation procedures try to evaluate how far an institution complies with a set of predefined and often measurable criteria (minimum or a specified quality level above minimum). This approach to determine if an institution satisfy the pre-set standards of quality required to be accredited or to get the ISO label also contributes to the institutions improvement as they have to make sure they satisfy the accreditation criteria or ISO standards: however, it does not help them to see how they can improve. This is why accreditation agencies are condemned to do a lot of coaching to help institutions satisfying their accreditation criteria, without having any assurance that the institution has assimilated the justification of these criteria to be able to behave accordingly after their accreditation. I would like to make a comment here about a quality assurance method, which lies between accreditation and institutional evaluation: total quality management (TQM). Although this method is capable of creating an effective dynamic of improvement, it is mainly focused on multiple well-defined management processes (how something is done). TQM can be extremely useful to improve the way numerous daily activities are implemented, as for example the registration of students, the communication between the rector and his team and the faculties or academic staff, the library services, etc.; however, it can hardly tackle strategic questions which are so important for the adaptation of a university to a rapidly changing world.

Finally, the CRE/EUA institutional evaluation programme is also applicable to higher education systems, composed of some number of higher education institutions. In other words, it can help to understand the general capacity of change of a whole system, as well as its approach to quality improvement.

To finish this rapid inventory of the advantages of the CRE/EUA institutional evaluation programme compared with other evaluation methods, in particular its ability to improve the capacity for change of an institution, I would like to stress the key contributing factors in the three intimately interlaced phases (SWOT analysis, visit and reports of experts, follow-up to the experts' report). In the first phase, the institution is invited to play a very active role in the process, which partly condition the final result of the endeavour, as this report, if well and cleverly done, will simplify the task of the experts, giving them more time to look at other points as they see it necessary during their visits. If, in an accreditation, the institution is encouraged to describe how good it is and how fully it fulfils all the pre-determined criteria, in the CRE/EUA institutional evaluation the institution is invited to look at itself honestly. This implies an important internal work of fact finding and analysis made by the self-evaluation committee, work that would still be useful to the institution if it had been done independently from the institutional evaluation. The only difference comes probably from the fact that the self-evaluation committee is encouraged to work more rigorously when they know that a team of experimented experts are going to compare their analysis with what they see.

The visit of the team of peers which follows does reinforce and broaden the process as the experts are going to ask multitude questions on points which they do not consider clear or satisfactory and, doing that, they will certainly discover other points which had not appeared relevant or important to the self-evaluation committee or the leadership of the institution. Moreover, the presentation by the team – generally by his or her chair – of the oral report at the end of the visit is also an important moment for the institution: in principle, the rector and his team, deans, heads of department and members of the self evaluation committee, are sitting next together – independently from their position – to listen to a report made by external peers about their institution and how it works. The question and answer part, which follows, is also an opportunity to better understand the dynamic and the power game within the institution. Finally, the written report, if broadly disseminated throughout the institution, as it should be, is also an occasion for the rector to share with the entire institution the result of the process and to prepare the follow-up.

Finally, there is a phase of follow-up, during which the institution finds itself alone, as for the drafting of the self-evaluation report, to reflect on the expert report and to try drawing the best of it. Some do nothing; others launch an intensive activity of revisiting their objectives, strategies, and quality assurances procedures, trying to improve them. Obviously, it is during this phase that an institution succeeds or fails to take full advantage of an institutional evaluation. This is probably the weakest part of the approach as there is no control if the institution examines honestly the report and then doesn't try to implement changes. However, this situation is inherent to a voluntary process and can be slightly alleviated by the possibility offered to the institution to ask for a follow-up visit (see chapter 8). This visit takes place 2-3 years after the main visit and serves mainly to examine what has been done with the conclusion of the report.

CONCLUSION

I have in this chapter, taken a strong position that an institutional evaluation is a quality assurance instrument that is important in defining the strategy of a university and to improving its capacity for change in order to promote the quality of its teaching and research. The current deep changes of the higher education environment require that institutions are changing more rapidly than they are used, and probably also, able to do. Most institutions need to be confronted to external pressures. Most of the time, the pressures originate from the State. Therefore, they are more inspired by a political vision than rooted on a solid analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of an institution; moreover, these changes are imposed top down, which provokes negative reactions. This is why, universities would be better inspired to be proactive and take their future into their own hands. This implies that they benefit from the institutional autonomy they request which, in turn, requires that they pay great attention to quality, in the broad sense of the word. Due to the lack of real competition during a long period, quality is too often mainly determined on the basis of what the suppliers think of it and with condescendence. This is why institutions should develop a rigorous quality culture based on internal procedures of quality improvement and strategic management, and why also this internal quality culture should be reviewed, from time to time, through an institutional evaluation. Moreover, I have, hopefully clearly, made the point that an institutional evaluation along the lines set-up in the CRE/EUA programme, is more than an instrument to improve the quality of an institution in the traditional sense, but also a powerful tool to help

an institution improve its capacity of change in response to the rapidly changing environment in which it operates.

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