

ACCREDITATION AND EVALUATION IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER
EDUCATION AREA

HIGHER EDUCATION DYNAMICS

VOLUME 5

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ACCREDITATION AND EVALUATION IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

Edited by

STEFANIE SCHWARZ

*University of Kassel,
Germany*

and

DON F. WESTERHEIJDEN

*University of Twente,
Enschede, The Netherlands*



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Preface

The massification of higher education in the second half of the 20th century and the rapid expansion of knowledge set a world-wide challenge to the higher education sector and to its relation with society, which led to a new interest in – and new forms of – quality assurance. Higher education is about teaching and learning for degrees, and about research; these processes are supported by management and administration. Quality assurance concerns the development and improvement of quality of these three areas. The subject of this book is quality assurance of the educational function in higher education in Europe. Within that still very large area we developed a perspective that concentrated on external aspects of quality assurance rather than on quality management that is internal to the institution, because that is where main driving forces for current developments are found. Policy-makers across Europe are faced with the challenge of setting the contextual demands for quality assurance of higher education institutions, balancing the demands of functions (such as economic and social development towards a knowledge society) and constituencies within their countries with demands at European and global levels. ‘SOCRATES’, ‘Bologna’ and ‘GATS’ are the catchwords at these levels. Due to limitations in time and resources, we could not address all of these issues, so we concentrated on accreditation and evaluation activities at the supra-institutional level, i.e. national accreditation and evaluation schemes. Our book gives a first synoptical overview for the European Higher Education Area on these issues in order to analyse commonalities and differences in policy trends.

A study of the 20 European higher education systems represented in this volume shows that the ultimate responsibility of quality assurance for degree programmes is still in the hands of the (nation-)state. This is no surprise and it makes sense, considering the ownership of higher education: All higher education systems in Europe are mainly public (with private sectors of varying but mostly small size). As the main stakeholders in the respective higher education systems, states naturally claimed ownership of both quality and its assurance. However, since the 1980s, states proved more and more willing to loosen control over higher education and especially over quality assurance. Almost all European countries have given up direct quality control. The management of evaluation and accreditation, and the handling of how to implement, watch, manage, change and monitor the quality of higher education degree programmes and institutions shifted from direct state control to (more often than not: quasi-) non-governmental institutions. This was a major change for European higher education. The newly created institutions were called evaluation committees, accreditation councils, accreditation agencies, etc. As the detailed analysis in the country reports in this volume vividly show, accreditation and evaluation institutions often overlap and have blurred boundaries. However, they are divided by one important element of definition (see Schwarz and Westerheijden in this vol-

ume): Accreditation institutions are institutions at the supra-institutional level that manage a quality assurance process of higher education institutions, degree types and/or programmes that end in a formal summary judgement that leads to formal approval regarding the respective institution, degree type and/or programme. On the other hand, evaluation procedures do not end in a formal summary judgement and do not lead directly to any type of formal approval. But the boundaries between accreditation and evaluation practices are so blurred that it is almost impossible to draw a line between the two. To put it simply: Accreditation ‘borrows’ so many methods from its ‘older brother’ evaluation, that the two sometimes seem so similar that it makes it difficult to say when ‘the same is really different’ or when ‘different is really the same’.

Approval outside accreditation – i.e. direct state approval – was, until the 1990s, the norm for approving degree types in higher education in Europe, which functioned exclusively in a national context. But, as the 20 country reports reveal, the Bologna Process encouraged the introduction of comparable first and second cycles (‘Bachelor’ and ‘Master’) in the European Higher Education Area. For many European countries, this constituted a paradigm shift, a new mode of structuring teaching and learning. The greater the change, the more important it is that this reform process is handled with care and is accompanied by strong and stable quality assurance systems. The addition of the explicitly international Bologna perspective in many countries gave a strong impetus to the development of new quality assurance arrangements, especially accreditation schemes. In the parallel restructuring of the degree structure with Bachelor and Master and the setting up of accreditation schemes, we see a great challenge for Europe. Several countries – Germany and the Netherlands are explicit examples in this book – are struggling with the threat of an overload of work hanging over the higher education institutions as well as the accreditation and evaluation institutions. Each of the 20 European countries in this study have their own (his)stories of accreditation in the framework of evaluation activities, showing different ways of dealing with the challenge of setting up a new quality assurance scheme that demonstrates its own way of dealing with the quality of higher education institutions.

How did we go about this project that aimed to map the accreditation and evaluation activities in Europe? It started in January 2002 at the Centre for Research on Higher Education and Work, University of Kassel, in co-operation with stakeholders from higher education research and practice in Germany and throughout Europe. The goal was to investigate the current state and the dynamics of accreditation and evaluation in European countries. Stefanie Schwarz, Centre for Research on Higher Education and Work at the University of Kassel in Germany, and Don Westerheijden, Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente in the Netherlands, as project coordinators, developed the project. Given the time frame and the available resources, we chose a research design that drew on a network of national and

international experts of quality assurance. The design was discussed with an ad hoc working group at a one-day workshop in Frankfurt, during which we debated intensely and constructively about the outline of the country reports. After fine-tuning the outline, we sent it to all the European experts that we had selected as reporters for 21 countries (in the end, experts from 20 countries replied to our requests) in the summer of 2002. Within six months, the first drafts of the country reports were collected and commented, leading to final draft reports by March 2003. From April 10 to 13, 2003, the German Trade Union for Education and Science, together with the Education International and the Hans Böckler Foundation, convened a European Conference on 'Shaping the European Higher Education Area' where we presented our first empirical results and discussed them with the country experts and the other conference participants. After the conference, the experts were given five months to finalise their reports and again we were in close contact with the expert group. The result is the present volume which, we hope, sheds some light on the jungle of quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

We express our gratitude to the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, the Hans Böckler Foundation, and the German Trade Union for Education and Science for supporting the study.

We would like to thank all the contributors for their co-operation. They provided country reports in which the reader will find many more vivid and highly useful ideas than we could use for our synopsis. Moreover, they greatly supported the project with their expertise, their enthusiasm, their patience, and also their sense of humour. They truly helped to make this work not only fruitful and interesting, but also very enjoyable.

We extend our thanks to the ad hoc working group that met in Frankfurt for constructive feedback at the beginning of the project. As their names do not appear in the book, we would like to mention them here: Thank you Karin Fischer-Bluhm (Verbund Norddeutscher Universitäten, Hamburg), Romuin Reich (Senatsverwaltung für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kultur, Berlin), Hermann Reuke (ZEvA, Hannover), Roland Richter (Wissenschaftliches Sekretariat für die Studienreform im Land Nordrhein-Westfalen), Klaus Schnitzer (HIS, Hannover) and Ulrich Teichler (Centre for Research on Higher Education and Work, University of Kassel) for being constructive and critical with your feedback regarding the outline of this research project. Our special gratitude goes to Ulrich Teichler who gave expert advice throughout the project and guided the research design phase. We also appreciate the help and support of the staff at the Centre for Research on Higher Education and Work, University of Kassel.

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*Kassel and Enschede
Stefanie Schwarz, Don Westerheijden*