

LEARNING & TEACHING PAPERS #4

Evaluation of learning and
teaching

Thematic Peer Group Report

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Introduction

The evaluation of learning and teaching has long been an important institutional activity due to the emphasis placed on quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area. Institutional responsibility for this is a core principle promoted by EUA¹ and in European policy documents.² Recent developments in the discussions around the fitness-for-purpose of higher education, preparedness of graduates for both the labour market and participation in civil society, and a renewed focus on education as a central mission of higher education institutions have again put pressure on universities to have effective policies and processes in place to ensure the quality of their educational provision. As a result, EUA chose to explore this topic further through one of its 2018 Thematic Peer Groups (hereafter 'the group'), in the framework of its learning and teaching activities.³ The group was composed of representatives of 10 EUA member universities, covering a diversity of institutional profiles (see Annex).

Over the course of three meetings, the group explored in depth the topic of how universities evaluate learning and teaching at the programme level so as to ensure that programmes are fit for purpose and support students in achieving learning outcomes.⁴ This report represents the outcomes of the group's work. It summarises the main challenges that the group identified when approaching the theme, reflects on some contextual differences and proposes four overarching recommendations for tackling these challenges. It should be noted that this report does not address in detail the specific methodologies for evaluating programmes nor standards that should be applied for quality assurance processes. Instead, the group chose to tackle the general framework conditions that support effective evaluation measures. It is hoped that these reflections may provide inspiration for institutions across the European Higher Education Area facing similar issues.

Findings

CONTEXT

When discussing the topic, some key contextual differences emerged that had an impact on the institutional approach to monitoring and evaluation of programmes. While most of the challenges and potential solutions transcended these differences, two points are worth mentioning as an important backdrop to the topic.

- The level of centralisation at the institution has a significant impact on the extent to which there is an institution-wide approach to the monitoring and evaluation of learning and teaching. In institutions with a high level of faculty autonomy (either formally or culturally), it might not be possible or desirable for the central administration or leadership to impose specific approaches.
- The external quality assurance framework in which the institution operates influences the type of evaluation measures in place at institutional level; in particular, whether external quality assurance is focused on the programme or institutional level, and whether it is primarily geared towards accountability or enhancement.

CHALLENGES

Six key challenges related to the evaluation of learning and teaching were identified by the group and are briefly described below.

CHALLENGE #1

Having a systematic approach to evaluation processes

Having a systematic approach to the monitoring and evaluation of programmes, student outcomes and teaching competences was identified as a key difficulty, even in institutions with a relatively centralised structure. Yet, results of evaluations can only feed into strategic planning and decision-making at the central level and be used for comparison or benchmarking if everyone involved is working towards common goals within an agreed institutional framework (even if there is flexibility across the institution regarding the exact details of the implementation).

CHALLENGE #2

Balancing trust and autonomy of faculties with centralisation

Following directly from challenge 1, there are further difficulties around how to implement a systematic approach in a way that also respects faculty autonomy and disciplinary differences, particularly in institutions with a tradition of independent faculties. In this regard, there are also challenges around supporting the intangible elements that affect engagement in evaluation processes such as trust, ownership and communication.

CHALLENGE #3

Motivating teaching staff to take part in training for teaching development

Teaching competence was frequently cited as one of the most difficult aspects of programme delivery to evaluate and enhance, in particular in terms of ensuring that action is taken where a need for development is identified. Many institutions offer initial teacher training, but nothing further. If voluntary training is offered, it often does not reach those that most need it, is always accessed by the same individuals, or there is a lack of time for teachers to attend. At the other end of the spectrum, many institutions have some form of teaching awards, but the actual award or incentive varies significantly, and there is often little public recognition attached, thereby reducing its value.

CHALLENGE #4

Ensuring student involvement in programme evaluation and development

Ensuring meaningful engagement of students in evaluation processes came up repeatedly, regardless of the specific evaluation methodology used. Examples of difficulties included achieving sufficient response rates to student surveys, involving students in curriculum development, and offering sufficient opportunities for input to governance and decision-making processes in order to

involve them in discussions about follow-up of evaluation results. Furthermore, it was found that students often lack the skills to give constructive feedback, and motivation to do so may be low when the results will not benefit them directly, but only the next cohort of students.

CHALLENGE #5

Encouraging responsibility at all levels of institutional hierarchy

This challenge leads on from that of student engagement but expands to encompass the difficulties in ensuring engagement and ownership across the full range of institutional stakeholders, including leadership, academics, and support staff. As responsibility for quality assurance is increasingly focused in one office (either centrally or in each faculty), it risks becoming an isolated task and those directly responsible may find it difficult for relevant stakeholders to become involved. It can also be particularly difficult to reach certain groups of stakeholders, such as international or part-time staff.

CHALLENGE #6

Lack of resources

Lack of resources, be it funding, staff or time, is a complaint that could be voiced by most institutions in relation to almost any aspect of their work. While some small-scale actions such as disseminating student questionnaires or sharing basic information about actions resulting from feedback can be implemented with relatively few resources, developing a systematic approach to evaluating learning and teaching (for example, having a comprehensive and efficient data collection system), making real changes on the basis of the results requires ongoing investment, as does closing the feedback loop to demonstrate how the resources have been used and the resulting impact.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on the discussions around these challenges, four overarching recommendations are formulated for institutions to take into consideration when developing their approaches to the evaluation of learning and teaching, with particular attention to ensuring that programmes are fit for purpose.

Recommendation #1

To put the focus on the programme as the main reference point around which the evaluation of learning and teaching is organised.

A good programme⁵ is more than the sum of its constituent elements. For students, their programme is the central aspect of their educational experience and in order to maintain a student-centred approach it is logical to view each programme as a whole (while reflecting the diversity of study paths available to students). While individual courses should have learning outcomes, these need to be mapped against learning outcomes at the programme level to ensure that they are coherent and that the overall programme aims are reached. Evaluation approaches should

ensure reflection by everyone involved in the programme design, and delivery on whether the content and teaching and assessment methods ensure students develop not only the necessary breadth and depth of discipline-specific knowledge and skills, but also generic competences; and that teachers have the necessary skills to transmit these. This approach does not detract from or remove the need for the evaluation of teaching and learning at a course level, rather it ensures that there are clear links between individual courses and the associated programmes.

Taking this approach also affects how teaching development is organised. While researchers are commonly coordinated around research groups, teaching staff often have little contact with other academics who teach courses as part of the same programme. Therefore, institutions should consider coordinating their teachers around the programme as the central element of reference, for example when evaluating teaching, providing opportunities for peer learning and ensuring the right balance of teaching expertise to deliver both discipline-specific and generic content of the curriculum.

Recommendation #2

To have one institutional policy and framework outlining a systematic approach to the evaluation of learning and teaching at programme level, defining the overall shared aims and expectations.

The degree of centralisation and/or the flexibility to act at faculty level depends heavily on the institutional context, as discussed above. However, even in institutions with a high level of faculty independence, it is important to have a common policy and framework from the central level to ensure that everyone is working towards the same goals and in accordance with the same principles. This framework should recognise and define the different dimensions of autonomy and how these relate to the implementation of programme evaluation, and clearly state where responsibilities are devolved to faculty level and where they are not. For example, it may be appropriate to allow flexibility for faculties, departments and programmes to choose or adapt evaluation approaches suitable for their specific context (e.g. disciplinary differences), but this flexibility and, importantly, also its boundaries, should be communicated clearly and transparently across the institution.

The focus of a central framework may take on different forms or combine different elements, from defining concrete measures such as a set of common evaluation indicators to allow for comparison across faculties and programmes to setting common ground for practice sharing and cooperation. Regardless of the aims and the level of prescription regarding the methodology, specific responsibilities and lines of communication need to be clearly defined at all levels, e.g. from subject level up to board of directors to ensure links between implementation and decision-making.

The institutional framework or connected implementation plans should also define the resources needed for the planned activities. Whether budget setting is a central or devolved power, the framework needs to give a clear message that resources should be allocated not only to monitoring and evaluation activities, but also to follow-up activities. Basic elements and even some very

effective small-scale approaches can be carried out with limited resources. However, translating this into a coherent, institution-wide system with ongoing analysis, action and follow-up requires investment. If permitted by the institutional (or national) context it should even be considered if the budget for this can be ring-fenced to safeguard against changing priorities.

A common framework, endorsed by institutional leadership, contributes to building a shared understanding of the importance of and responsibility for continually enhancing the quality of the educational offer. In this regard, the issue of communication should be carefully addressed. It is equally important to communicate broadly about the approach to evaluation of learning and teaching. Those responsible for doing so should therefore consider carefully their target audience and adjust the terminology used, for example by avoiding quality assurance 'jargon' and using language that is more meaningful for e.g. students, academics and administrative staff. Furthermore, it is important to provide opportunities to discuss the framework in an open and constructive manner that furthermore gives space for sharing practice/guidelines, discussing new proposals and developing bottom-up initiatives. This provides an ideal opportunity for cross-faculty communication and peer learning to ensure that successful practices or lessons learnt do not remain isolated.

Recommendation #3

To ensure different stakeholder perspectives are involved in defining programme aims and intended learning outcomes, and then in evaluating whether these goals are being reached.

Adequate stakeholder engagement is often discussed in relation to quality assurance processes in terms of ex-post evaluation. However, it should be viewed as a continuous cycle, with involvement in a) defining the aims and intended learning outcomes of a programme and in designing the curriculum, b) formative evaluation during programme delivery in order to make small-scale adjustments where possible, and c) evaluation of outcomes, in order to adapt how the programme is designed and delivered in the future.

Students are key stakeholders here and should be provided with sufficient opportunities to provide feedback, through both formal and informal channels. Attention should also be paid to opportunities for providing feedback mid-course and mid-programme to allow that, if possible, action can already be taken while it still affects them. Furthermore, particular efforts need to be made to reach different student groups, e.g. mature students, part-time students, international students and distance learners. Beyond students, engagement should be sought from teachers, employers, alumni, societal actors and external (international) peers. Approaches to programme evaluation should be introduced with the principle of shared responsibility, for example by using cross-stakeholder seminars for reviewing and developing curricula in order to promote innovation and ensure stakeholder groups are not consulted in isolation. However, it is important to consider exactly when and how each of these can provide the most constructive input, remembering that not everyone needs to contribute to every aspect of every process. Similarly, for all

stakeholders, it can be useful to provide information on the sort of feedback that is constructive for the further development of the programme. For student representatives this could even extend to formal training (that may also be student-led or provided by an impartial external organisation) to empower the student voice and their involvement in institutional processes.

Motivating stakeholders to engage in evaluation processes can be a challenge but several aspects can support this. Here institutional leaders have a key role to play by signalling the importance of programme evaluation, 1) by highlighting the value placed on learning and teaching in the institutional mission, 2) by ensuring adequate resources are available for it, and 3) by ensuring that results from evaluations feed into broader institution decision-making processes where appropriate.

Finally, a crucial point is to pay attention to closing the feedback loop. When the hard work is done in implementing changes on the basis of feedback, communicating these changes to relevant stakeholders is often neglected. This can be particularly difficult for students where those that provided the feedback may have left the institution. In this case it is important to make use of communication channels with alumni, but also to inform incoming students about changes so they can see from the start that their feedback is valued and acted upon, thereby increasing their own motivation and engagement in such processes. A small-scale example of how this can be done is requiring teaching staff to explain in the first class of a course, if and how they have changed the course on the basis of feedback received in the previous year.

Recommendation #4

To evaluate and enhance the full range of services that support students in achieving their learning outcomes, and teachers in delivering high quality programmes.

In order to ensure the quality of the educational offer, it is important to evaluate not just student outcomes but to consider the full range of aspects that contribute to the student learning experience.

This involves looking more broadly at facilities and services provided for students, including library resources, learning spaces and student support (such as academic writing and career development). Institutions should also consider linking the provision of these services more strongly to the programmes themselves (in line with recommendation 1) in order to facilitate visibility and cooperation.

Support services for teachers should also be included in evaluation and monitoring processes. This includes ensuring appropriate support for programme directors and teachers so that they know how to properly define, communicate, use and assess learning outcomes; offering sufficient opportunities for developing teaching competences; and ensuring that their teaching can be explicitly and consequentially linked to their career development.

In order to make evaluation effective, there should be extensive coordination and communication between different institutional units, specifically including those responsible for quality assurance, teaching support and student support.

Conclusions

The group's wide-ranging discussions about the topic of evaluation of an institution's educational provision highlighted the interdependency of this issue with other aspects of learning and teaching. Two cross-cutting themes that repeatedly arose were:

- the need to enhance the visibility of learning and teaching as a central mission of higher education institutions to address the current disparity of esteem in comparison with research;
- the importance of investing in support for teaching development (including training, practice-sharing and awards)

and ensuring that teaching can play a central role in career paths for academics.

Finally, the group identified key factors that underpin the implementation of the recommendations presented in this report. These include: communication, teamwork, stakeholders' engagement and balancing systematic approaches with innovation, and flexibility. These factors highlight that it is just as important to pay attention to how evaluation policies and processes are implemented, as it is to introduce them in the first place.

Annex

EUA LEARNING & TEACHING THEMATIC PEER GROUPS

As part of its work on learning and teaching, EUA carries out activities with the aim to engage with university communities in charge of learning and teaching. One of these activities is coordinating the work of a set of Thematic Peer Groups. The groups consist of universities selected through a call for participation to:

- discuss and explore practices and lessons learnt in organising and implementing learning and teaching in European universities, and to
- contribute to the enhancement of learning and teaching by identifying key recommendations on the selected theme.

The 2018 Thematic Peer Groups, active from March to November, invited participating universities to peer-learning and exchange of experience, while at the same time they contributed to EUA's policy work as the voice of European universities in policy debates, such as the Bologna Process.

Each group was chaired by one university and supported by a coordinator from the EUA secretariat. The groups met three times to discuss key challenges related to the theme, how to address the challenges through innovative practices and approaches, and what institutional policies and processes support the enhancement in learning and teaching. In addition, the groups were welcome to discuss any other issue that was relevant to the theme. Outside the three meetings, the groups were free to organise their work independently. Members of the groups also attended a final workshop, where they had the opportunity to meet and discuss the outcomes of other groups and address synergies. The workshop was hosted by the University of Porto, Portugal on 19-20 November 2018.

Composition of the Thematic Peer Group 'Evaluation of learning and teaching'

- Queen's University Belfast, United Kingdom: Claire Dewhirst (chair) and Karen Fraser
- University of Ljubljana, Slovenia: Tomaz Dezelan and Katja Zibert Kamsek
- Uppsala University, Sweden: Camilla Maandi, Johan Wickström and Maria Magnusson
- University of Innsbruck, Austria: Christian Huemer
- Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Norway: Ole-Jørgen Torp
- ETH Zurich, Switzerland: Daniel Halter and Medea Fux
- University of Medicine & Pharmacy Iuliu Hatieganu Cluj-Napoca, Romania: Anca Buzoianu and Soimita Suci
- European University of Madrid, Spain: Sara Redondo and María Auxiliadora Ruiz
- Kaunas University of Technology (KTU), Lithuania: Jurgita Vizgirdaite
- Ghent University, Belgium: Ilse De Bourdeaudhuij, Frederik De Decker, Nele Mahieu and Janis Vanacker
- Group coordinator: Anna Gover, Programme Manager, EUA

Endnotes

1 _____ European University Association (EUA), 2010, EUA Policy Statement on Quality and Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (Brussels, EUA). <http://bit.ly/EUAQAstatementEHEA> (accessed 21/12/2018).

2 _____ Including the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), 2015. Bitly: <http://bit.ly/ESG2015> (accessed 21/12/2018).

3 _____ EUA has previously worked extensively on QA. The Association is a co-author of the ESG (see note above). Other relevant EUA publications on QA include: Gover, A. and Loukkola, T., 2018, Enhancing quality: From policy to practice (Brussels, EUA). Bitly: <http://bit.ly/EnhancingQuality> (accessed 21/12/2018); Gover, A. and Loukkola, T., 2015, EUREQA MOMENTS! Top Tips for Internal Quality Assurance (Brussels, EUA). Bitly: <http://bit.ly/>

EUREQAmoments (accessed 21/12/2018); and Gover, A., Loukkola, T. and Surssock, A., 2015, ESG Part 1: Are Universities Ready? (Brussels, EUA). <http://bit.ly/ESGpart1> (accessed 21/12/2018).

4 _____ The group wishes to thank Queen's University (Belfast), ETH Zurich and Ghent University for hosting their meetings. The group is also grateful to the members of the other three EUA TPGs for their feedback and inputs during the joint workshop organised in Porto, in November 2018.

5 _____ The word 'programme' is used with acknowledgement that in some cases it may be a flexible concept, depending on the choices available to students regarding their study paths.

The European University Association (EUA) is the representative organisation of universities and national rectors' conferences in 48 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Thanks to its interaction with a range of other European and international organisations, EUA ensures that the voice of European universities is heard wherever decisions are being taken that will impact their activities.

The Association provides a unique expertise in higher education and research as well as a forum for exchange of ideas and good practice among universities. The results of EUA's work are made available to members and stakeholders through conferences, seminars, websites and publications.

This paper is one of a series of reports specifically focused on learning and teaching. It is designed to gather the knowledge and experiences of experts on the topic from across Europe. EUA's activities in learning and teaching aim at enhancing the quality and relevance of higher education provision, underline the importance of learning and teaching as a core mission and advocate for learning and teaching activities to be geared towards student learning and success.