

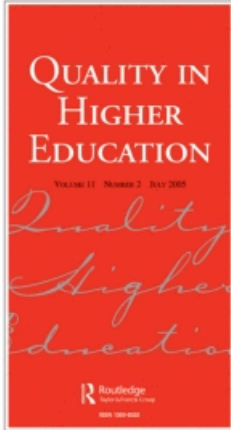
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The Alliance of Accountability and Improvement: the Danish experience

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ABSTRACT *During the 1990s, more or less systematic procedures of evaluation of higher education have been set up in several European countries. A key issue has been the degree of externality of organisation and procedures vis-à-vis higher education institutions. Accountability and quality improvement are often conceived as mutually exclusive goals of evaluation which are based on different methods related to the ownership of the evaluation system. However, the character of the process is a different issue from, and is independent of, the matter of control. There is not necessarily a simple and direct relationship between initiative to and ownership of the evaluation system on the one hand and on the other hand the balance between accountability and quality improvement. Furthermore, accountability and quality improvement may be combined in a balanced strategy. In the Danish case these two perspectives have thus been synthesised in a dual approach, in terms of goals and the ensuing procedures and methods, with an emphasis on the improvement dimension.*

Introduction

The last few years have witnessed a remarkable European trend towards assessment and improvement of higher education. Government policies of decentralisation, value-for-money perspective and internationalisation have all contributed towards this development. Accordingly, government initiatives have led to the establishment of agencies in France (1987), The Netherlands (1988), the UK (1992) and Denmark (1992) with the task of systematically assessing all higher education in their respective countries. An increasing number of initiatives were also taken by the higher education institutions (HEIs) themselves in the face of transforming from élite to mass universities. An understandable and fundamental perception of universities is that government initiatives and ownership do not fulfil the expectations and quality improvement nursed by the universities.

Much of the recent discussion on quality assurance and assessment seems on the part of universities and university-based research to take its starting point in the belief in a fundamental linkage between the central initiative of governments and evaluation systems that are:

- government owned;
- fundamentally external and bureaucratic in perspective and procedures *vis-à-vis* the sensitivity of universities;
- assessing quality towards standards defined by peers;
- being focused on accountability often perceived in terms of efficiency or productivity.

The contrary belief is that if initiative and ownership are left to the higher education institutions themselves:

- procedures will be internal, non-bureaucratic and acceptable to universities;
- a 'fitness for purpose' approach will ensure that quality is established as a result of institutional practice being close to or identical with stated aims and goals;
- the focus is on quality assurance rather than accountability.

Much of this argument has a distinct UK bias and seems to be based on the interpretation of UK funding councils being owned by government and focused on accountability, and on the UK Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) being owned by universities and focused on quality assurance. On the other hand, the Dutch system has a government-owned, as well as a university-owned level. Even the systematic evaluations organised by the VSNU (the Dutch Rectors' Conference) have a mixture of focus on accountability and improvement. In Denmark, the government owns the evaluation system, but the main focus is on quality assurance. In other words, the character of the process is a different issue from, and is independent of, the matter of control [1].

However, there is a dilemma of principle which is identical with the dilemma of purpose: the dilemma between an essential quality-improvement related purpose and a purpose related to external accountability. There is a conflict in terms of the difference in method, which follows from differences in purpose of the quality system that is established. However, there need not be such a simple and direct relationship between, on the one hand, initiative to and ownership of the evaluation system and on the other, the balance between quality assurance/improvement and accountability [2].

Of course this statement begs the obvious question: what in an operational sense are the criteria for identifying goals and objectives of improvement and accountability respectively?

Both concepts are in themselves ambiguous or certainly are used ambiguously, but for the purpose of clarification can be defined more specifically.

The criteria for *improvement* are those procedures that are conducive to strengthening the conditions, motivations, scope and level of information of the higher education institutions in this direction. In other words, procedures that engage the institutions in terms of a self-learning process. Procedures should aim at promoting future performance (formative evaluation) rather than judgements on past performance (summative evaluation). Procedures lead to ends that are specifically in the interest of the HEIs, and towards the specification of quality according to goals and criteria that are internal or may be made internal by the institutions.

The criteria for *accountability* are procedures that lead to the assessment of quality of teaching and learning in terms of criteria set down by external authorities and institutions and with the goal of strengthening external insight and even control, opening the door for eventual external corrective action.

However, the empirical realities do not necessarily conform to theoretical positions and types (Barnett, 1994). The self-chosen strategy of the Danish Evaluation Centre has been to combine the perspective of improvement and that of accountability. In the Danish approach these two perspectives have thus, in terms of procedures, methods and goals, been merged or synthesised in a dual approach with an emphasis on improvement.

The Danish context will firstly be presented in terms of the 1992 Reform of Higher Education. This reform provided the formal basis for the balanced strategy argued for above, to the extent that the reform changed power relationships between government and higher education institutions towards a more decentralised system giving considerable

autonomy to institutions. Secondly, the mandate and procedures of the Danish Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education will be presented.

The 1992 Reform of Higher Education

In the spring of 1992 the Danish conservative – liberal minority government and parliament arrived at a number of compromises on higher education which seen as a whole constituted a reform of the entire education system (DMER, 1992).

The stated objectives of the reform or rather package deal were to ensure a higher degree of institutional autonomy combined with a tightening of each institution's management structure, to secure an undisturbed working environment through political compromises reaching several years into the future; to find a better balance between supply of, and demand for, study places; and to improve the quality of the programmes offered, so that these came up to the highest international standards.

Accordingly, the principles of the reform stressed institutional freedom and autonomy. The intention was to formulate the main objectives for, and framework of, the higher education sector and to give higher education institutions the autonomy to develop within this framework. Consequently the objectives of the reform as set out by the government were to be deregulation and decentralisation, combined with mechanisms to ensure quality.

The cornerstones of the reform were:

- a pluri-annual agreement on budgets for higher education from 1993 until 1996;
- an improved PhD programme;
- better balance between supply and demand for study places and a more open intake to most programmes;
- a new uniform study structure for higher education with a three-year BA programme, a two-year master programme, and a three-year PhD programme;
- a new university act which reorganised the political and management structure of the higher education institutions.

Key elements in this new and to the institutions, highly controversial act were a massive transfer of authority from the Ministry of Education to the higher education institutes and preservations of the institutional democracy, but a reduction in the number of governing bodies and their members.

Internally there was a significantly strengthened mandate and authority for rectors and deans, a separation of management of education and of research, and external representation in the senate and faculty councils.

Educational Quality

An important message in the reform was that the changes caused by the reform and the pressure from the growing student population must not have a negative effect on the quality of programmes. Accordingly a number of special provisions contributed to ensure continued educational quality:

1. stiffer admission requirements to the most demanding programmes;
2. introduction of first-year tests where they did not already exist;

3. strengthening the central quality assurance through the establishment of an evaluation centre and through reorganisation of the system of external examiners.

Higher education institutions were, from the outset, certainly sceptical about the reform package. The criticism focused especially on the new uniform structure of studies and on the new university act. The seriousness of the intended programme of decentralisation was also questioned, as initially was the new centrally-based mechanisms for accountability of quality.

However, from one perspective it could be said the government needed evaluation as a steering mechanism towards the modernised and decentralised field of higher education. The general development and trends of higher education could be monitored through evaluations, which simultaneously controlled the level of quality in individual programmes. Also, the institutions of higher education received considerable autonomy as a consequence of the new university act. Accordingly the presidents, deans, and governing boards were now facing independent, broad, and often difficult decision-making. Systematic evaluations would provide the institutions with an insight into the quality of their own study programmes. Good evaluations, which reflected the relation between institutional goals and realities, could therefore form the basis for planning and priorities of tasks.

The Danish Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education

Accordingly, the Ministry of Education established the Danish Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education, which started operating on 1 July 1992 (Thune, 1994a). The Centre is funded by the Ministry and in 1995 its total grant amounts to 9.5 million DDK. The Centre is in principle an independent institution in respect of the Ministry of Education as well as the universities and other higher education institutions. The Centre is governed by a board composed of the five chairpersons of the National Education Councils [3]. It is staffed by a director, eight academics in charge of projects, three office secretaries and a dozen experts and assistants employed in the short term in connection with various evaluation projects.

The Centre's mandate is:

1. to initiate evaluation processes for higher education in Denmark;
2. to develop appropriate methods for assessing programmes;
3. to inspire and guide the higher education institutions in aspects concerning evaluation and quality;
4. to compile national and international experience on evaluation of the educational system and quality development.

A substantial part of the Centre's work consists of regular and systematic evaluations on a rotating basis, in which all programmes will be evaluated within a period of seven years.

In addition, the Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education evaluates new programmes after their establishment period, and programmes for which the Ministry of Education, consulting bodies or an institution of higher education find that there is a need for an evaluation of the quality of the programme.

The Centre must ensure that reliable methods are employed in connection with the execution of the various evaluations.

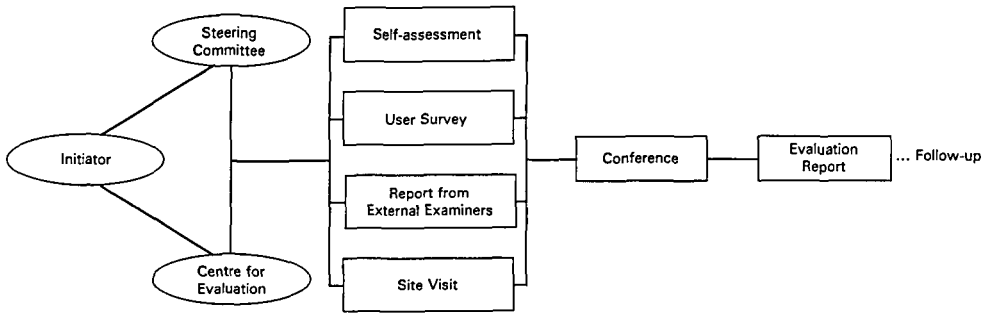


FIG. 1. The different phases of a structured evaluation model.

Evaluation Method

The Centre initiates evaluations by arrangement with the initiator of the assignment, who could be one of the Danish National Education Councils, one or several institutions of higher education or the Ministry of Education.

Generally an evaluation will comprise five phases spanning a period of 12 months: planning, self evaluation, user surveys, visit of experts, reporting (Fig. 1).

The *planning phase* sees the establishment of the steering committee that will be charged with the professional responsibility for the evaluation. The steering committee covers, in principle, the functions of what in other contexts are called peer group, expert panel or visiting team. The characteristics of the steering committee is that it follows the whole process of evaluation. Further, the composition of the four to five member committee typically reflects not only professional or academic experts, but also one or two representatives of employers. The planning phase also includes a number of information and planning meetings with the institutions involved.

In the *self-evaluation phase* the pivotal element of any evaluation is launched, that is, the self-evaluation process. The higher education institution prepares a self-evaluation report which should identify and discuss the central aspect of the evaluation and should contain an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the programme in relation to its objectives. Furthermore, the report should set out proposals for initiatives to ensure the quality of the programme is maintained or improved. The long-term objective of the self-evaluation process is to encourage continued internal quality development of the programme.

In the *user survey phase* an inquiry is carried out among the users of the programme: students, graduates and employers. The observations of the external examiners will also be included in this phase.

In the *visiting phase* a panel consisting of representatives of the steering committee, often supplemented with independent (international or Nordic) experts, will visit the programmes under review. During the day-long visit the panel will discuss the self-evaluation report, the user surveys, and the external examiners report, with top management, teaching staff and students.

Reporting will be carried out as an evaluation report in which the steering committee will sum up the observations and recommendations for quality assurance of the programme. The evaluation report will be delivered to the initiator for further processing and implementation.

TABLE 1. Evaluations completed by the Danish Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education

Discipline areas	22
Programmes/self-assessment reports	232
Initiator	—
Educational Councils	18
Ministry of Education	4
Higher education institutions	4
Users surveys	
Students	6
Graduates	17
Employers	17
Other surveys	4
External examiners' report	17

The scope and level of activities within this model is indicated in Table 1, which gives figures for the evaluations completed within the first 3½ years' activities.

Feedback to the Centre from the higher education institutions indicates, to a growing extent, that the basic methodology has in fact stood the test of trial in practice. Compared to the concern and sensitivity which tend to be associated with external evaluations, the Centre has received very few decidedly negative reactions. On the contrary, many institutions accept the challenge and consequently express satisfaction with the process and results of evaluation. The first two or three founding years have demonstrated that the Centre has established itself with a model for evaluation which those evaluated can accept and which is able to produce the results set out in the Centre's mandate.

Several elements in the model contribute to this result. Generally, the Centre has succeeded in establishing a good operational division of labour between the steering committees, the Evaluation Centre and the higher education institutions. Other important factors that bear mention are a satisfactory running contact and dialogue between the Centre and the study programmes under evaluation; a relevant balance between quality assurance and accountability; a comprehensive solid documentation; a processual starting point without previously defined criteria of success, indicators of quality or standards of excellence.

In the following section the elements that help the institutions achieve a focus on improvement will be presented and discussed.

The Elements of Improvement and Quality Assurance

Using a Standard Methodology

It is the basic mandate of the Centre to evaluate all study programmes in higher education and from the outset it has been fundamental that these systematic evaluations should be based on a consistent, transparent and well-known methodology.

Given the stresses of meeting the six-year time schedule for the first round of evaluation, there was a temptation to differentiate evaluations in terms of basic effort and resources. However, the Centre decided against this, based on the consideration that it would be difficult to explain a variation in the scope and level of various evaluations to the higher education institutions. The Centre is especially careful to ensure there is no basis for

accusing it of 'pre-evaluating' the study programmes in order to decide the level of effort that will be applied to an evaluation.

Even more important, the HEIs are given the real possibility of preparing themselves for the evaluations within local mechanisms that are both compatible with the Evaluation Centre's basic methodology and are conducive to further improvement on local terms.

Careful Documentation

In the development of the general methodology the Centre has had three general guidelines covering the quality of the documentation collected from the various study programmes:

1. satisfactory documentation for the recommendations and conclusions of the steering committee;
2. the study programmes must be able to accept the basic evidence on which the conclusions and recommendations of the experts rest;
3. the evaluation process, including the documentation, must inspire to further and continuing internal quality assurance in the study programmes; and the implementor must have a relevant basis for implementation of the evaluation.

To achieve these aims there must be a relevant balance between the components of the evaluation. The final documentation must be comprehensive and consistent, including those cases where self-evaluation has been neither informative nor analytical, or those cases where the site visit is less successful.

Participation in Planning the Evaluation by Higher Education Institutes

The Centre gives a high priority to initial meetings with representatives of the study programmes to be evaluated, not least with a view to identifying relevant areas for potential improvement.

Stress on Self-assessment

The more self-assessment is given priority in the process, the more self-assessment will function as training and preparation of the institution or the study programme for talking over responsibility for its own quality development—and the less self-assessment is seen merely as producing information for the expert committee.

Self-assessment, ideally, should reflect a subtle balance between qualitative and quantitative data. However, there is no doubt that the quantitative part especially, bordering on performance indicators, causes considerable work and some apprehension. Many Danish universities are not yet geared to compile and deliver that kind of precise data. Nevertheless, the Centre does try to avoid giving the impression that a technician approach is being adopted through the unreflective use of performance indicators.

Self-assessment is the standard against which an institution can measure itself. It provides a framework for building up a definition of quality, it helps the institution decide how far it is achieving its strategic mission and goals and it allows it to build an action plan for development.

In the qualitative context self-assessment should be used to put more stress on inviting the study programmes to analyse their mission, value, goals and strengths and weaknesses respectively. Therefore, the second and perhaps even more important purpose of self-

assessment is to provide the institution and the study programme with a commitment and a valid procedure and method to continue a process of quality assurance. It is very important to stress that the long-term perspective of the effort vested in self-assessments is less on delivering the material for a control process, and much more on contributing towards local quality improvement.

Experts Usually Work Within the Discipline Area Under Evaluation

In general the experts on the steering committee have their professional background and loyalty within the discipline area being evaluated. The Evaluation Centre considers its experiences with more than twenty such steering committees to be very positive. Their continuous professionalism combined with a serious and committed approach have ensured that there has been no hidden or 'political' agendas involved in the proceedings. Further, the potential and implicit 'examining role' is generally more than balanced by the element of collegialism and mutual trust among representatives—and even in some cases 'partisans'—from the same discipline area.

Focus on Enlisting Users or Consumers in the Procedures

This reflects a general and long-standing Danish tradition for including users in higher education planning. The attitudes of all three groups, the students, the recent graduates and the employers, are surveyed intensively as part of the individual evaluation procedure. Furthermore, employers' representatives are prominent in the steering committees.

The intent is not to use evaluation as a means of steering the higher education institutions more towards the labour market. The dialogue between consumers and institution should be balanced in such a way that the integrity and independence of the institutions are not in question. The role of the consumer is to give information and advice, not to take over the institutions, to dictate the educational content or to control production. This balance is necessary because the consumers do not have the knowledge and scientific basis on which education must be built. If the consumers took this role, there is an obvious risk that education becomes fitted to the society of yesterday rather than tomorrow's society.

Evaluation Reports Target Institutions as well as the Ministry of Education

The majority of recommendations asks for implementation by the higher education institutes. An interesting dimension though is that as a rule those evaluated criticise reports that are formulated in too general terms. However, the subjects of an evaluation report do not appreciate it either when the critical impact of a report is very specific.

Emphasis on Recommendations

The Centre instructs the steering committees to focus on recommendations that are operational, constructive and realistic within the given conditions of the discipline area in question. Further, there should be a clear structure to the recommendations, and it should be evident which recommendations are essential in the short, and which in the longer term. Finally it should be clear who must carry the responsibility for follow-up or implementation.

Joint Conference Prior to Publication

A final conference brings together, on the one hand the Centre and the steering committee, and on the other hand deans and course leaders from the study programmes evaluated, for consideration of the report prior to publication. The latter group have an opportunity for an open discussion with the former on the premises for the conclusions and recommendations of the report, which eventually may be redrafted in light of points raised during the conference. These conferences, as a rule, produce very fruitful discussions and have a distinct potential as safety valves for the evaluation process.

Follow-up Procedures Place Prime Responsibility within the HEI

Once an evaluation is finished and a report available in some form or other the crucial phase of implementation of the conclusions and recommendations begins.

Follow-up of the evaluations is the prime responsibility of the higher education institutions. As the aim of the evaluation process is to originate a continuous process of quality assurance within the study programmes, it is essential that the institutions themselves are committed to this follow-up.

With the first evaluations finalised in 1993 it is still too early to say what kind of evaluation procedures the institutions are developing. The Centre is of the view, however, that the institutions' incentive to initiate follow-up procedures is closely tied to the success of the self-assessment process and the openness of self-assessment on the one hand and to the operability of the recommendations in the evaluation report on the other.

Fitness for Purpose without Ranking

There seems to be a general consensus from both the institutions and the Ministry of Education, that higher education institutions should not be ranked. Institutions have different aims and different objectives. Considering the diversity of the institutions which exist within national higher education systems, it is important that quality assessment should assess the extent to which institutions actually achieve the aims and objectives they set for themselves. This assessment of the relationship between objectives and actual achievement focuses on the core of the quality issue.

No Linkage to Funding

In several countries a much commented and controversial issue is any linkage between evaluation and government funding. The issue is whether government's allocation of budgets to universities should wholly or in part be based on the result of systematic evaluation. In Denmark the fact that funding and evaluation have explicitly not been linked has been a markedly positive factor. At the same time positive evaluations should have the effect of attracting more qualified applicants, thus strengthening the possibilities of the higher education institution in question gaining from an output-based funding system.

The Elements of Accountability

It could certainly be argued that the elements of improvement listed above all contain elements of accountability as well. There is here an element of terming the glass of water

half full or half empty. The same observation could cover the following list of elements of accountability and so confirm the reality of dualism or synthesis in the Danish approach to accountability and improvement.

Experts' Recommendations and the 1992 Parliament Decision on Higher Education

In principle the experts' recommendations must be within the context of the 1992 parliament decision on higher education, especially as concerns financing, structure and duration of study programmes.

The implication is that the higher education institutes should not entertain too optimistic hopes as to the possibility of reports recommending positive changes in budgets and length of study programmes.

All Reports are Public and Accordingly the Criticism is Public

In some countries, where evaluation procedures have been established, the issue of openness has been controversial. The standard argument in favour of confidential proceedings has concerned self-assessment. The argument runs that confidentiality should encourage the authors of the self-evaluation to be more honest and critical. In Denmark openness is viewed as a cardinal point in regard to the overall target of making evaluations the platform for qualified knowledge of the merits of various study programmes. All reports are therefore published or available.

Influence of Institutes

Higher education institutes are not able to influence the structure of the documentation in terms of user surveys, nor the appointment of the experts (members of the steering committees).

Ministry of Education's Role in the Follow-up Process

The Ministry has recently approved a procedure according to which the institutions hosting the programmes that have been evaluated must, within three months of the publication of the evaluation report, present individual plans of action for follow-up on the recommendations. After $2\frac{1}{2}$ years the Ministry will discuss with the institutions, through the relevant Council of Higher Education, the extent to which the action plans have been implemented. However, nothing has been established as yet as to the consequences if implementation is found wanting.

The Centre is Funded through the Ministry of Education

The Centre is formally independent, but funded by the Ministry. However, the Ministry has never interfered in the setting up of procedures and methodology of the Centre. The relationship has been harmonious but significantly of an arm's-length nature.

External Examiners

One essential dimension in the context of the need for accountability is the potential of the system of external examining (Thune, 1994b). External examiners (*censorer* in Danish) are

characteristic of the Danish educational system at all levels from the senior classes of primary schools and onwards to the graduate level of higher education. This system of permanent, salaried external examiners was initiated in 1871 at the University of Copenhagen.

Traditionally, external examiners have joined internal examiners (teachers and professors) in grading the individual examinations. In other words, at the typical Danish examination the student faces a teacher from the institution in question and an external examiner. The main tasks of the external examiners are to guarantee that the aims and demands of examinations are in accordance with the curricula; examination procedures are in accordance with the appropriate rules; and that students receive an equal and just treatment and their efforts a relevant and trustworthy appraisal.

In 1992 the system of external examiners in higher education was reorganised in order to secure and strengthen the independence of the external examiners *vis-à-vis* the higher education institutions; the dialogue between external examiners and departments; the representation of the external examiners in relation to the employers of the graduates of higher education; and ways and means of using the external examiner system to enhance the quality of the programmes of study.

In the latter respect the chairpersons of the external examiners' bodies within the various discipline areas must now, on an annual basis, deliver a report on the findings of external examiners to the various departments. These annual reports should be based on individual reporting by those external examiners who have been involved in the examinations during the year in question.

Reception among higher education institutions was initially somewhat less than enthusiastic. The general hesitancy of Danish higher education institutions towards outside suggestions of change manifested itself and was especially activated by misgivings about a more bureaucratic system and about appointing external examiners representing the candidates' employers.

Seen from the perspective of the need for accountability it should be obvious that the reorganisation of the system has a potentially central role in ensuring that the level of quality in study programmes meet the relevant standards of quality.

Concluding Remarks

There are evident advantages to an external, systematic dimension for quality assurance. Some of the key aspects are: impartiality, credibility, authority, comprehensiveness, consistency and transparency. The basis for success is the extent to which a linkage can be made to the aspects characteristic of internal institution-based quality improvement, that is, trust, commitment and understanding.

There is little doubt that a series of well-executed evaluations do not in themselves bring any merit to the concept of systematic evaluations. The proof of success is the impact and follow-up in the longer term of a quality improvement programme launched from a successful evaluation. The ambition and intention of the Danish Evaluation Centre have been to set up procedures and methods that would motivate the higher education institutions towards this end.

After an initial period of scepticism the feedback from the institutions is increasingly affirmative. At the conferences during the final phase of the evaluation the institutional representatives speak their mind very freely in terms of their experiences of the strengths and weaknesses of the process. Not least the experience of the self-assessment phase is generally considered in quite positive terms. As has recently been said by one university

representative at a conference, 'if the Evaluation Centre had not been established the higher education institutions would have had to invent it themselves, because they now realise the need for and their interest in a professional, external evaluation agency'.

Notes

- [1] I am indebted here to Ronald Burnett's very interesting analysis of the 'messiness overlappings and lack of clarity' of the quality language discussion (Barnett, 1994).
- [2] This argument evidently also covers the UK scene. Cf. the points made by Pr Martin Trove and Paul Clark, Director EFCE, respectively in Trow (1994).
- [3] The chairpersons had been key actors in the discussions leading up to the decision to launch the Centre. (NABHE, 1992).

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