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Education Assessment Exercise (EAE)

- A path to quality enhancement in engineering education?

S. Karlsson¹

Quality Assurance Officer
KTH Royal Institute of Technology
Stockholm, Sweden
sarak2@kth.se

P. Berglund

Vice-Dean of Faculty
KTH Royal Institute of Technology
Stockholm, Sweden
prodekanus@kth.se

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In Sweden, as elsewhere, higher education institutions (HEIs) face a complex reality. Government, students, research councils and industry expect HEIs to deliver ever higher quality education and research, and HEIs need to have strategies to deal with such expectations.

This paper explores one of the strategies chosen by KTH Royal Institute of Technology: self-initiated evaluation, exemplified by an Education Assessment Exercise (EAE) undertaken in 2011.

In the paper, the context in which the project came about is discussed. Further, the project process, with emphasis on the self-evaluation phase, is described and analysed. This is in order to make an assessment on the benefits of the project so far, and to identify the issues that merit further consideration in future.

THE CONTEXT

In the paper, it is argued that the EAE project is best understood in the context of Swedish and European higher education politics and the on-going transformation thereof. The autonomy movement, in tandem with the expansion of quality assurance in higher education, are key characteristics of this transformation.

The EAE is described as a strategic attempt by KTH management at channelling internal development needs and external demands into one project. Table 1 describes the EAE in relation to the scope and aims covered by the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (HSV) evaluations.

¹ Sara Karlsson, sarak2@kth.se



Table 1. Approaches to quality assurance: EAE in a comparative perspective

		Type of quality assurance		Aim of quality assurance	
		External	Internal	Enhancement	Control
Europe	ESG	x	x	x	X
Sweden	HSV	x			X
	EAE		x	x	(x)

THE EAE PROJECT

The EAE project was a comprehensive internal evaluation of 90 education programmes at KTH, undertaken in 2011. It primarily had a formative aim. In the project process, it was hoped that new arenas for discussion and reflection would emerge which in turn would foster quality enhancement. In part, the EAE also had a summative aim. The intention was to assess whether the intended learning outcomes had been achieved by KTH students, and thereby provide a status report in advance of the external HSV evaluation scheduled to take place in the latter half of 2012.

In the EAE, an internationally recognised methodology was used, comprising self-evaluation at programme level, followed by peer review including site visit and report by an external, internationally composed panel of assessors. The self-evaluation format included questions on the prerequisites, processes and outcomes of education delivery. The external panel of assessors comprised 50 subject area experts, students and industry representatives.

LESSONS LEARNED AND ISSUES FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

The most welcome aspect of the EAE, and the clearest benefit of the project so far, was the opportunity to discuss educational quality matters, to form new networks and to identify strengths, weaknesses and ways forward. The project confirmed the strength of the enhancement approach as well as the importance of adapting evaluation methodology to local circumstances.

Another lesson learned from the EAE was the importance of clarity regarding project aims. Above all, participants must have a clear picture of what the potential consequences, positive or negative, of the evaluation might be. Regardless of which approach is chosen, it needs to be well communicated and substantiated.

A third lesson learned was that comprehensive evaluation projects of this type require a lot of time, energy and resources. In order to avoid evaluation fatigue and to get long-term benefits, it is important that the project dynamics are fed into a regular quality management system afterwards.

The EAE project made clear reference to the national and the international policy context. Given the on-going transformation of the higher education sector, it will be an imperative task for KTH management to explore the new boundaries of autonomy and to work out future quality assurance strategies that suit internal needs as well as external expectations. In doing so, experiences from completing the EAE project will be of great value. Hopefully, sharing the experiences will be of value to other engineering education providers as well. ■