

Impact of QA and the effects of external and internal QA: regional perspectives to a shared issue

**A contribution by Julien Lecocq, Head of internal quality
and Solange Pizarz, Project manager for European and international affairs, AERES**

1. Contribution :

The impact of any quality assurance process depends on a combination of contextual variables (nature, focus, formal aim of quality assurance processes, the level of analysis, power relationships, methods employed...).

Created by the French programme law on research of 2006 and running since March 2007, the National Agency for the evaluation of research and higher education in France (AERES) is tasked to evaluate all the higher education institutions, research units, higher education programmes and degrees. At the beginning of 2012, a full cycle had been completed: all HEI, research units and programmes had been evaluated once. This provides us with a good opportunity to come back on our activities and their different types of impact.

Our contribution will address three main issues:

1. What are the impacts of our activity? Who is concerned by this impact? Is the impact the same for the identified bodies?

An indicative table can be used to try to map who is concerned, how and at to what extent:

	AERES itself	Evaluated body	Partners of the evaluated body	Administrative control/ authority of the evaluated body	Public bodies
Impact of the report	Pressure from the evaluated bodies	Indicator for quality(1)	Better informatio n	Indicator used as a financial key (budget repartition) (1)	Better information
Impact of the evaluation process	Changes in practices, self improvement?	Self improvement – Internal quality organization	-	Better monitoring	Needs better taken into account

(1) Let's take an example. The mark given to a research unit may have different types of impact depending of the body who is concerned. It may have a direct impact for this unit itself: it provides information on its quality level, and on its performance compared to the other units. But for the authority of the evaluated unit, the mark was also used as a key to reward the units financially: the better mark you had, the more budget you get. The mark system had also another impact on the selection of research units for national call for proposals. This is one of the reasons why we had to take this into account and finally decided to end with this system.

What are the consequences of these approaches? Do we have to take them into account and to adapt our methodology? Our contribution will try to answer these questions.

2. How can we assess this impact?

Assessing the impact of evaluations activities is not easy because of:

- the various kind of impacts already mentioned
- the influence of contextual evolution

Our activities take place in a context of many changes. To give you a few examples, over the past years, French Higher Education and Research Area has experienced many changes:

- New legislation on academic freedom and responsibility has increased the autonomy of France's universities and their annual budget has grown from €10 billion in 2007 to €15 billion in 2012.
- Higher education and research have been thoroughly reorganized with the creation of PRES (higher education and research clusters), RTRA (thematic advanced research networks), RTRS (thematic research and care networks), and competitiveness clusters.
- Call for proposals *Operation Campus and Investissements d'avenir (Excellence Initiative...)* were offered to the institutions to upgrade and reinvigorate academic facilities in France.

It is even more difficult to find a good methodology of evaluation of impact when the context is changing. But based on these changes and on the conclusions of the first "Assises de la recherche" conference on research organised in January 2009, the Agency has drawn up its strategic plan for 2010-2014. Keeping with its founding principles - independence, transparency and impartiality – and its essential values for high-quality evaluation (respect for people and institutions, effectiveness and professionalism), the Agency has also tried to evaluate its own activities and to adapt its methodology.

Is this an efficient approach? Is it our role? Or do we have to ask an external body to evaluate our own impact?

3. AERES has tried to implement a methodology to evaluate the impact of the evaluation of the HEI. But it looks more like a feedback than a real quantitative or qualitative evaluation.

This can be considered as a first step or experience. Can we share practices? What lessons can be drawn? How can we improve it and make it more reliable? And how would be able to think of improvement without any evaluation of our impacts?

AERES has tried to take the impact into account but does not pretend to solve the problem. It would be very interesting to debate on this issue and to try to find coordinated ways to evaluate our impact. Another key question to take into account is also the difference between a need to evaluate the impact and a need to communicate on it, to demonstrate the effects of our activities. This contribution could be a starting point to open the floor to this shared issue.

2. Abstract :

By 2012, AERES, created in 2006, has completed a full cycle: all HEI, research units and programmes had been evaluated once. This is a good opportunity to examine the impact of our activities.

1. What are the impacts of our activity? Who is concerned? Is the impact the same for the identified bodies?

2. How can we assess impact in a context of institutional changes?

AERES has tried to evaluate and to adapt its methodology. Is this an efficient approach? Is it our role or the role of an external body?

3. AERES has tested a methodology to evaluate the impact of HEI evaluation.

As a first experience of feedback, what lessons can be drawn? How would be able to think of improvement without any evaluation of our impacts?

Another key question is the difference between a need to evaluate the impact and a need to communicate on it, to demonstrate the effects of our activities. This contribution could be a starting point to discuss this shared issue.