Chapter 5

Accreditation: the role of a new assessment approach in Europe and the overall map of evaluation in European higher education

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Introduction

Since the late 1990s, a certain type of scheme established for the assessment of the core functions and activities in higher education has spread rapidly in Europe: the accreditation scheme. The establishment of accreditation schemes has had quite a tremendous impact on the overall scene of evaluation in higher education in Europe. Therefore this development deserves special attention even though one might consider it premature to analyse the development of accreditation, to assess its strengths and weaknesses and to summarize its impact all over Europe.

In the subsequent text, efforts will be made to: (i) describe the character of accreditation in the overall setting of evaluation in higher education in Europe; (ii) discuss the causes for the rapid emergence and spread of accreditation in Europe; (iii) demonstrate the extent to which the accreditation systems emerging in the various European countries have common characteristics or differ from each other; (iv) summarize first experiences as regards proper functioning and desired outcomes of accreditation schemes according to their own goals; and (v) discuss the impact of the emerging accreditation schemes on the overall map of evaluation activities in Europe.

When accreditation became increasingly popular in Europe, I raised the question of whether accreditation was the single most relevant, suitable and useful instrument of system-wide systematic assessment of study programmes in Europe. In the meantime, a second sceptical working hypothesis might have been proposed: the establishment of accreditation schemes might have contributed substantially to the overcomplexity and overburdening of assessment exercises and it might endanger other schemes of assessment in higher education which are potentially more important to ensure the 'quality' in higher education in Europe [1].

These two cautious observations at the beginning set the agenda of the subsequent analysis in two directions. First, the scope of the analysis is not limited to the question of how a system of accreditation and its immediate impact on the 'right to be' of study programmes differs from other modes related to the 'right to be' of study programmes, notably from approval by governments in combination with various modes of public funding and public supervision of higher education. Rather, accreditation is viewed as one of possibly various activities of systematic assessment of study programmes and various mechanisms of ensuring the quality of study programmes. This is appropriate because the establishment of an accreditation system is one of the possible options of assessment of study programmes and, as will be discussed, the establishment of an accreditation scheme has an enormous impact on previously existing assessment schemes. Secondly, the analysis focuses on Europe (cf. the overview in [2]). Accreditation was developed in the U.S.A. [3] under conditions

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that differ substantially from those in Europe today, and it is not the aim here to discuss the rationale of accreditation in the U.S.A. (see [4] for details), a country much more prone to any kind of formal assessment exercise, traditionally experiencing and only tolerating a weak 'visible hand' and traditionally not having any 'gold standard' of quality embedded in the steeply stratified higher education system. We have to expect that accreditation in Europe works under substantially different conditions and might have substantially different consequences, even though some elements of the contextual setting for assessment of higher education programmes in Europe might be less different from the U.S.A. at the beginning of the 21st century than they were a few decades ago.

This analysis draws substantially from the first major substantial account of the development of the newly emerged accreditation schemes in about 20 European countries until 2003. This study was co-ordinated by two higher education researchers of the International Center for Higher Education Research Kassel (formerly the Centre for Research on Higher Education and Work of the University of Kassel) (Germany) and the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies of the Twente University (The Netherlands). Stephanie Schwarz and Don F. Westerheijden (2004) jointly edited the book *Accreditation and Evaluation in the European Higher Education Area* [5]. The comparative analysis and about half of the country reports were also published in the German language [6].

Concepts and definitions

Accreditation is one type of decision-making-related, and thus practically relevant, assessment (i.e. analysis and valuation) exercise of the core functions and activities in higher education of HEIs (higher education institutions) and subunits.

'Quality assurance' became the most popular umbrella term in Europe for all types of assessment in higher education linked directly to activities of developing and improving the 'quality' of higher education. The term 'quality assurance', however, is dubious in three respects.

1. The criterion of practically relevant assessment of higher education is not only 'quality' in terms of the most common understanding, i.e. the level of standard of what is considered good in higher education. Rather, assessment in higher education tries to establish quality, relevance and efficiency. If we define 'relevance' and 'efficiency' as sub-criteria of 'quality', we play down the possible conflicting nature of these three criteria.

2. 'Quality' does not tend to be viewed in terms of a scale from 'very high' to 'very low' or from 'very good' to 'very bad'. Rather, the term 'quality' underscores the positive end of the scale: the top is quality. Thus the use of the term 'quality assurance' contributes to a positive normative bias for the highest possible standards, thereby implicitly disregarding or treating pejoratively a high degree of vertical diversity within higher education which many experts consider the normal state of affairs as a consequence of the expansion of higher education systems.

3. The term 'assurance' links, in a fuzzy way, the analysis and the valuation of the status quo of higher education at the time of analysis with subsequent actions of rewards and sanctions or other actions aimed at improvement.

Therefore 'evaluation' can be considered to be the most suitable umbrella term for systematic activities of practically relevant assessment and valuation of the core functions and activities of HEIs or their subunits.

Admittedly, evaluation is used by many experts and actors not only as an umbrella term in this way, but also as term for supra-institutionally institutionalized schemes of assessment of the core functions and activities of HEIs or their subunits not closely linked to approval processes. In this way, the term was used in the 1980s in France and The Netherlands, and subsequently became popular in many other European countries.

Accreditation schemes differ from those specific evaluation schemes, both in the type of judgement and its function. Accreditation schemes end in a "formal summary judgement" (e.g. 'yes' or 'no'), and they are linked to "formal approval processes" (of

institutions, study programmes, etc.) [5].

Approval means that a legitimate power grants "the right to exist" [5]. Or one should add that a power wishing to have the respective social control certifies the right to exist in the hope that institutions, study programmes etc. not being granted the right to exist would actually cease to exist or that the beneficiaries of the non-accredited institutions or programmes would be stigmatized.

If the accreditation activities are managed by the institution granting the right to exist, approval is likely to be the inherent component of the accreditation process. If, however, the management of the accreditation process is dissociated from the power of granting the right to exist (this holds true for most national accreditation systems established in Europe since the late 1990s), there is room for two options: either the power of granting the right to exist foregoes any additional procedure, thus accepting the result of accreditation automatically as the basis of approval, or this power establishes a formal procedure in which it examines the result of the accreditation as well as possibly other information available and eventually makes an approval decision (or non-approval decision) on its own. With regard to the latter, for example, the Hungarian government, in establishing the first major accreditation system in Europe in the early 1990s, asked the Hungarian Accreditation Committee to assess the quality of study programmes and the Higher Education and Research Council to assess the social relevance, the economic needs and the feasibility of the programme, and eventually based the approval decision on both assessments [7].

The emergence of evaluation schemes in Europe prior to accreditation schemes

The sudden popularity of accreditation in Europe cannot be explained only by pointing at changes in the regulatory 'logics' of higher education systems emerging between the mid-1980s and the end of the 20th century (see, notably, [8]), nor on the basis of a growing inclination to 'borrow' solutions from the U.S.A., but it certainly has to be viewed as well as a reaction to the state of national evaluation systems which had emerged and spread in Europe during the same period. Therefore before discussing the character of this reaction, we first need to look at the understanding and the state of evaluation in Europe before the spread of accreditation systems.

Assessment in higher education is a traditionally well-established activity with respect to students: students' achievements are assessed frequently, and they are eventually awarded a degree which is conferred on the basis of assessments during the course of study and at the end of study. Grades or expressions such as 'with distinction' suggest that assessment to a certain extent is relative to the pool of students assessed. Decisions of 'pass' and 'fail' as well as the decision not to award a degree suggest, on the other hand, that assessment of students also has an absolute standard in mind as well. Assessment practices of individual teachers and within institutions and countries vary in the extent to which assessment is viewed relative to the pool of those assessed or is absolute according to perceived standards, but some kind of a compromise between these extremes is customary.

Also, academics are accustomed to frequent assessments of their 'performance'. They are assessed if they (i) apply for appointment and promotion, (ii) apply for resources beyond those granted to more or less every academic, and (iii) want to publish in prestigious publication outlets.

Retrospectively, i.e. after we have experienced various evaluation systems, we might argue that assessment of 'performance' and 'achievement' in higher education in European countries traditionally: (i) was primarily linked to specific occasions: assessment was undertaken if positions were to be filled and individuals looked for a position, if promotion was at stake, if scholars wanted to acquire grants and if persons wanted to publish in a highly reputed way; (ii) primarily addressed individuals, i.e. students and scholars, but hardly aggregates, i.e. study programmes, departments or institutions of higher education; (iii), in the case of assessment of scholars primarily directed to the above-average successful ones, was often only scheduled when scholars wanted to be promoted, to receive more grants than others and to publish with a mark of distinction; and (iv), in the case of assessment of scholars, was more strongly directed to research activities than to teaching activities.

In the mid-1980s, The Netherlands, France and the U.K. established national evaluation schemes in higher education. In subsequent years, many other European countries followed suit and established evaluation systems as well which reflected the different approaches prevailing in the three 'pacemakers' of evaluation to a varying extent [9–11]. Certainly, more or less all of the new evaluation systems differed from formerly existing schemes of assessing academic performance, notably in four respects [12].

1. Evaluation under the new schemes was undertaken regularly (for example every 5 years) instead of previously dominant assessments at specific occasions (for example, on the occasion of asking for specific research funds).

2. Evaluation schemes were all-embracing. Not only the high achievers were assessed (as in the case of application for research grants or for publication in selective publication outlets), nor only the low achievers, but also all levels of performance were included.

3. Evaluation schemes were systematic: criteria and procedures were to a certain extent general and known in advance. The systematic nature of evaluation was expected to guarantee a high level of quality of the assessment exercise.

4. Evaluation schemes, as a rule, addressed aggregates of scholars or other actors. Individual scholars or small relatively homogeneous teams were not assessed, but rather whole institutions of higher education, departments or study programmes in which the average and the interaction of a relatively heterogeneous set of actors belonging to an institutional unit were taken into consideration.

The evaluation was not used as a term to characterize merely any kind of assessment, but rather regular, all-embracing, systematic and aggregate-directed assessment.

The causes for the establishment of evaluation schemes

There are various interesting explanations for the emergence of national evaluation schemes in Europe [9,13]. They differ here and there, but we can easily draw from them a common core of explanations.

•   Concerns had grown that the level of performance had been watered down at least in some sectors of the higher education systems in the wake of expansion and 'massification'.

•   Governments, as the major funders of higher education, aimed increasingly at achieving efficiency gains. They wanted to keep or increase the level of quality, even though they reduced the real per unit expenditures in higher education (i.e. expenses per student and research expenditures per scholar).

•   After a period of increasing involvement of governments in the planning and co-ordination of governments of the various European countries in the 1960s and 1970s, we noted an increasing loss of confidence in the 1980s and 1990s in the ability of governments to control and foster the quality, relevance and efficiency of higher education through detailed means of control and supervision.

•   Concurrently, there was an obvious loss of confidence in the academic profession that academics themselves would improve and safeguard quality, relevance and efficiency in higher education through concentrating on their subject matter as such in their teaching and research activities, driven primarily by intrinsic motives and traditionally grown privileges.

•   Hopes spread in the 1980s and 1990s that institutionalized reflection of the processes and outcomes of activities in higher education, and increased managerial power within HEIs, would lead to advanced performance in higher education.

One has to add, however, that there is no full consensus among experts about the major causes of the establishment of evaluation schemes. Schwarz and Westerheijden [5] argue convincingly that in the countries that were slow to introduce an evaluation scheme or have not introduced general evaluation schemes at all, the public trust in the academic self-regulation of quality was by no means higher than in countries that were at the forefront of

introducing evaluation schemes.

The initial disinterest in accreditation in Western Europe

To a substantial extent, these changing views about deficits in the proper functioning of higher education systems in Europe were based on the assumption that the higher education system in the U.S.A. had been the most successful one for a couple of decades and that it would be valuable to copy some of its features in Europe in order to enhance the quality, relevance and efficiency of higher education in Europe. Many features of higher education evaluation established since the mid-1980s in Europe had been borrowed from the U.S.A.

Why did Western European countries, when a need was felt to have all-embracing, regular and systematic assessment of HEIs or its subunits and areas of activities, not introduce accreditation systems? And why did Western European countries move towards the establishment of accreditation systems more than a decade later? Why did some Central and Eastern European countries establish only accreditation schemes or accreditation schemes prior to other evaluation schemes, and why did several of these countries introduce accreditation systems earlier than Western European countries?

I do not believe that we can explain the decisions of Western European countries not to introduce accreditation in the 1980s and 1990s by the peculiarities of the U.S.A. system of accreditation, i.e. a general, although decentralized, scheme of institutional accreditation alongside various separate schemes of professional accreditation, only if strong and highly organized professions existed, whereby accreditation remained officially 'voluntary' ([5], cf. [3]). One could have assumed that these characteristics had been viewed as suitable for Western European countries. Such an explanation would not be convincing, however, because, when the Western European countries eventually introduced accreditation from the late 1990s, they did it distinctly from these U.S.A. peculiarities. Therefore one could argue that European countries could have introduced a distinct 'European' accreditation system earlier.

I suggest that evaluation systems such as the

Dutch system introduced in the 1980s were considered to be more suitable in Europe and no need was felt for a long time to introduce accreditation of any kind.

First, a need was felt in Europe in the 1980s and 1990s to mobilize reflection of the performance of higher education and to improve higher education through such a reflection. This was considered in most European countries as being better served by an open system of evaluation rather than by a system linked to formal approval decisions.

Secondly, 'quality' improvement as well as decisions about the re-allocation of resources on the basis of quality assessment were viewed as necessary across all levels of quality. This need would not have been served well by an accreditation system putting a stronger emphasis on the minimum threshold of 'quality'.

Thirdly, on the other hand, no strong need was felt initially to move the quality assessment linked to the official approval of the right to exist to some visible distance from the government. The key issue was not the influence of government on the evaluation system, but rather government's use of information collected in evaluation activities in decisions of resource allocation.

Fourthly, no strong need was felt in the 1980s and 1990s to create substantial mechanisms in order to identify the 'black sheep' which should not have a right to exist. One assumed that more or less all government-funded programmes have the right to exist and that the identification of black sheep within the private programmes could be undertaken through other specific means.

The first steps towards accreditation in Central and Eastern Europe

The establishment of accreditation schemes was first discussed and implemented in some cases in Central and Eastern European countries. Actually, the first major accreditation system was established in Hungary in 1993. This system could already be evaluated systematically before various Western European countries decided to establish an evaluation system [7].

Two reasons have to be named for why the introduction of accreditation schemes was more

favourably viewed initially in Central and Eastern European countries than in Western European countries. First, when the old political regimes collapsed in Central and Eastern European countries, many representatives of universities and many academics hoped to gain substantial autonomy by becoming the visible prime actors of assessment of study programmes linked to approval. Secondly, a substantial expansion of higher education in the process of catching up with enrolment rates similarly to Western Europe was expected in Central and Eastern Europe; in this process of expansion, private higher education was assumed to be given a fairer chance, with the emergence of black sheep controlled not by the government, but rather by an accreditation system.

One might cast doubt, however, as to whether accreditation in Central and Eastern Europe really could fulfil the expected functions. The external evaluation of the Hungarian accreditation system, for example, which was undertaken 5 years after its inauguration, is diplomatic in tone, but raises a few principal questions [7].

- For example, the accreditation system does not guarantee the autonomy of the decision-making process as a whole. The Hungarian Ministry not only asked the Accreditation Committee to assess the quality of the study programmes, but also asked the Higher Education and Research Council to consider the needs and the financial feasibility of the study programme, and the Ministry eventually made an approval or non-approval decision, thereby taking into consideration the recommendation of both bodies.
- In addition, the standards for accreditation were viewed to be so high that a substantial expansion of the higher education system, and notably of the private sector, was by no means smoothly supported.
- Moreover, the workload involved in the accreditation system was generally viewed as being so high that it clearly discouraged the establishment of any improvement-oriented evaluation system alongside it. One could argue, however, that the advice for improvement might have been more important for the higher

education system than the stigmatization of black sheep.
- Finally, it remained unclear how powerful the accreditation system would be for the actual provisions of study programmes. Experts agree that no public university would continue to offer a non-approved programme and that programmes in many fields of study in the private sector would not survive for a long time. In the most fashionable programmes in the private sector, i.e. business study and computer science, non-accreditation would hardly be a threat for private HEIs offering these programmes.

Having been a member of the external evaluation team of the Hungarian Accreditation Committee, I came to the conclusion that the majority of Hungarian actors involved were not sure whether one should introduce an accreditation system if one could decide again. But hardly anybody saw the possibility, once this system was established, of moving to any other logic of accreditation, evaluation and approval. In most cases there was room for minor improvements.

The recent growing interest in Western Europe in establishing accreditation

One might argue that there was not such a substantial change in the Western European higher education systems and their socio-political context from the 1980s and early 1990s towards the late 1990s that more or less 'necessitated' the shift from emphasis placed on evaluation schemes towards a preference for accreditation schemes. But there was a bundle of factors, each of which contributed towards a general change of public mood around 2000 in favour of accreditation schemes. Three of these factors are outlined here.

- There certainly is a continuation of the shift in the public trust in the higher education system: a process of decreasing trust in government, declining confidence in the self-regulation of the academic community, growing emphasis on market forces, and finally, increasing efforts to strengthen management power in higher

education based on the hope that a strong university management could significantly improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the higher education system.

- The notion spread that, in the wake of growing international competition of higher education and growing international mobility of students and graduates, those study programmes which had undergone a thorough systematic assessment process with a strong role of other forces than government in the framework of approval of study programmes were likely to have a higher reputation.

- The Bologna Process, i.e. the establishment of a stage system of study programmes and degrees all over Europe in a convergent manner, necessitated more intensive activities of curriculum development than ever found before. This was viewed by many actors as the right moment of moving towards a new system of assessment of study programmes, if one considered such a move preferable at all.

This list of arguments is similar to that presented by Hämäläinen et al. [14]: a growing emphasis on 'trust and accountability' in the spread of New Public Management concepts; the expectation that a common European labour market will emerge and that accreditation systems will serve to facilitate the mobility of students and graduates in Europe; and, finally, that "borderless markets for higher education" are likely to lead to a "proliferation of accreditation systems".

One might add a fourth factor. Critique was increasingly voiced in Western Europe that the power of evaluation schemes with regard to subsequent reforms was too 'fuzzy'. This called for a system of programme assessment which does not serve either for most HEIs, even only as 'soft' advice, or for governments as a clear control instrument immediately linked with resource allocation. Accreditation was often viewed as a step towards a greater level of control, but not towards really threatening levels of control, because it denies the right to exist in extreme cases, but is not really threatening for the majority of evaluees. Such a new balance could emerge if one expected that the number of possible black sheep, for

example through expansion of private institutions and study programmes, is somewhat on the rise in order to justify the establishment of accreditation systems, but the accreditation system as a whole was not a threat for the majority of study programmes.

It seems difficult as well to explain clearly the rush towards accreditation schemes according to a change of functions expected to be fulfilled by major assessment schemes. Schwarz and Westerheijden [5], with reference to Weusthof and Frederiks [15], named four functions of assessment schemes: (i) accountability; (ii) quality improvement; (iii) validation; and (iv) information.

Accreditation schemes clearly serve validation more strongly than evaluation schemes. They might more strongly emphasize accountability and information as well, but this is by no means certain for all cases, because both evaluation schemes and accreditation schemes differ in their major thrust, and the borderline between these schemes is fuzzy in some cases. Altogether, it is not clear whether certain functions have gained so much weight over the years that they could be served better by accreditation schemes than by evaluation schemes such as those established in many European countries in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The actual development of accreditation schemes in Europe: similarities and differences

According to Schwarz and Westerheijden [5], who analysed the emergence of accreditation schemes in 20 countries participating in the Bologna Process, the "accreditation schemes with evaluation activities" existed in 1998 only in four Central and Eastern European countries as well as in the U.K. and in Ireland. Five years later, in 2003, such accreditation systems existed in 18 of the 20 countries analysed. The process of establishing accreditation schemes was undoubtedly very fast.

In comparing the 18 accreditation systems in Europe presented in the study, Schwarz and Westerheijden [5] pointed out that seven characteristics were widely spread.

1. As a rule, study programmes were the *unit of analysis*.

2. As regards *coverage*, they noted that accreditation schemes addressed all degree programmes except for doctoral programmes in the majority of countries. There are notable exceptions, however. In Austria, an accreditation system was established only for *Fachhochschulen*, and the accreditation scheme in Germany is only in charge of Bachelors and Masters programmes gradually established since 1998.

3. The *modes of inquiry and assessment* are similar with respect to some core elements. Site visits of external experts are customary. Altogether, there is a high degree of similarity between the new accreditation schemes and previously established 'elder brother' evaluation schemes.

4. Government, HEIs and academics, as a rule, are among the *reviewing and decision-making actors*. Only in a few countries is a visible role allotted to students and to external stakeholders.

5. In the majority of countries, a *national accreditation agency* was established with a *close link to government.*

6. In most cases where accreditation schemes were established in Europe, the statements made at the end of the review process are seen *officially as advice to government.*

7. In all European countries analysed, a *single scheme of government approval* exists.

Schwarz and Westerheijden [5] noted substantial differences between accreditation schemes as well.

- In some countries, *additional accreditation schemes* play a role, for example those run by professional accreditation and foreign accreditation schemes.

- Accreditation of *doctoral programmes* varies substantially by country. In some cases, accreditation of doctoral programmes is more or less identical with that of the regular degree programmes, in some cases it differs substantially and, in others, doctoral training is not accredited.

- The European accreditation schemes differ substantially in the *weight put on input, process and output or outcome criteria*.

- The *period of validity* differs substantially. It ranges from 2 to 10 years.

- *Appeal procedures* are arranged differently across European countries.

- *Funding of accreditation* varies as well. In some countries, government bears all the costs. In other countries, HEIs have to pay the costs for the accreditation process, while government pays the costs for the accreditation agency.

- The varying *links between accreditation and approval* might be viewed formally and *de facto*. In some countries, accreditation serves as instrument of approval, in others it has the formal character of recommendation to the government to improve. In other cases, accreditation has no clear link to any approval decisions, and, in some cases, no supra-institutional programme approval procedures exist. With regard to the informal link, i.e. the extent to which government approval follows the accreditation decisions, the authors of the comparative analysis suggest that ownership of the accreditation schemes plays a role: the closer the accreditation agency is linked to government, the more likely the accreditation decision will lead to the approval.

In addition to these formal similarities and differences of the accreditation scheme, it would be interesting as well to note the extent to which the standards of accreditation are similar across Europe. Obviously, European accreditation agencies are encouraged in the Bologna Process to co-operate in order to establish similar procedures, if they can be considered 'good practice', and to communicate about standards. The call for the establishment of European 'qualification frameworks' might lead to an additional mechanism of discourse about standards. But altogether, accreditation schemes in Europe do not serve directly the establishment of joint standards of study programmes in Europe. They might help at most to increase mutual trust in the quality of various programmes without any measured evidence.

The future

Accreditation systems were established in a large number of European countries over a short period.

They were encouraged by ideas to establish a threshold for the right to exist through a relatively transparent mechanism of academic involvement in the assessment process which eventually leads to a 'yes' or 'no' decision. Motives to establish accreditation were manifold. Notably, accreditation was expected to make assessment of study programmes more powerful than in mere improvement-oriented evaluation schemes, to identify black sheep more clearly amid trends towards greater vertical diversification, to create assessment less closely linked to governmental power than traditional government approval schemes, but still linked to official government approval, and, last but not least, to increase the comparability of study programmes across Europe.

Actually, the accreditation schemes established in Europe have some elements more or less in common, but the differences of the formal procedures vary in many respects. They differ in the extent to which they fulfil the various expectations named above. And we do not know how similar or different they are to determine the bottom line of accreditation: nobody knows the extent to which quality standards vary in accreditation schemes across Europe. Yet, accreditation might be helpful in facilitating recognition or non-recognition of study for border-crossing students and graduates in Europe, because they might help to increase the "zones of mutual trust".

The evaluation schemes established in Europe since the mid-1980s were modified regularly at a remarkably quick pace. Therefore it should not come as a surprise to note a process of substantial change in accreditation schemes over time as well. Schwarz and Westerheijden [5] made a distinction between an "internal drive for dynamism" and "contextual dynamics". With regard to the former, one cannot only expect learning from experiences, but also: "routine, bureaucratization and window dressing are dangers lurking behind" [5]. With regard to the latter, we obviously note a process of constant realignment of power to the actors and 'stakeholders' of higher education as well as growing expectations that accreditation has to play a role in the conflicting co-ordination process between national prerogatives and European convergence.

It is premature to establish clearly the role accreditation plays in the overall patterns of evaluation exercises within the various countries, the power of accreditation in the actual decision about the right to exist and not exist and the role accreditation plays with respect to harmonization or diversity of quality standards across Europe. But certainly it is possible to note one clear trend: concern seems to grow that higher education is increasingly suffering from an overcomplexity and overload of assessment schemes. Obviously, an 'evaluation fatigue' (or 'assessment fatigue') is spreading. It is premature to predict as well how the overall activities of assessments of institutions, departments, programmes or individual scholars will be trimmed to a feasible size. We should not be surprised if accreditation turns out to be an irreversible mechanism of bottom line control. But the price for this persistence might be enormous: improvement-oriented evaluation schemes, which can be more beneficial for the quality of all higher education programmes, obviously have already suffered setbacks in various European countries as the consequence of the accreditation boom, and they might fade away in many European countries.

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