

Thematic Analysis 2016-2018

(Status: August 20th 2018)

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1. Introduction

Thematic analyses have been a regular activity of **evalag** since the implementation of the revised European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) in 2015. Thematic analyses have replaced the former system-wide analyses.

ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis

Standard: Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.

Guidelines: In the course of their work, agencies gain information on programmes and institutions that can be useful beyond the scope of a single process, providing material for structured analyses across the higher education system. These findings can contribute to the reflection on and the improvement of quality assurance policies and processes in institutional, national and international contexts. A thorough and careful analysis of this information will show developments, trends and areas of good practice or persistent difficulty.

evalag provided a first thematic analysis in 2016 as part of the follow-up process of its ENQA review 2014. It based upon a thorough analysis of **evalag**'s annual reports as well as the proceedings of the Accreditation Commission and the Foundation Board. The purpose of the analysis was to identify significant developments and trends in the various fields of **evalag**'s activities.

For the thematic analysis, regarding the period 2016 to 2018, **evalag** used the same approach and reflected modifications of procedures and criteria. Suggestions for improvement gained from the **evalag** project managers during the annual retreat (internal SWOT-analysis) as well as from the regular analysis of stakeholder feedback are also included (see 2.1).

Due to the short time interval to the first thematic analysis 2016, however, only few modifications and improvements (primarily on operational level and relating to the portfolio of the agency) were identified (see Chapter 2).

evalag, therefore, decided to focus the thematic analysis additionally on ESG Standard 2.4. Chapter 3 describes the agency's respective approach, findings and conclusions.

2.4 Peer-review experts

Standard: External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

Guidelines: At the core of external quality assurance is the wide range of expertise provided by peer experts, who contribute to the work of the agency through input from various perspectives, including those of institutions, academics, students and employers/professional practitioners. In order to ensure the value and consistency of the work of the experts, they

- are carefully selected;
- have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task;
- are supported by appropriate training and/or briefing.

The agency ensures the independence of the experts by implementing a mechanism of no-conflict-of-interest. The involvement of international experts in external quality assurance, for example as members of peer panels, is desirable as it adds a further dimension to the development and implementation of processes.

2. evalag as a „learning organisation“ – Development 2016-2018

2.1 Methodical Approach

evalag offers (in two departments) a broad range of services in the area of quality assurance and quality enhancement as well as quality management.

	Department 1: Quality Management	Department 2: Accreditation/Certification (Procedures according to ESG)
national	<p><i>Organisational Development and Quality Management at Higher Education Institutions (incl. Service and Administration)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consulting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preparation and Accompaniment of Accreditation Procedures - Strategy Development - Human Resource Management - Academic Controlling/ Reporting - etc. • Further Education (not according to ESG) • Science Support (Coordination of Peer Reviews and Funding Procedures for Research Projects) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accreditation of study programmes and system accreditation in Germany (before 2020); • Programme assessment procedures and institutional assessment procedures in Germany • Evaluations of fields of study • Certification of Advanced Study Programmes
International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluations (Institutions, Programmes, Projects, Strategies) • Applied Higher Education Research in the field of quality assurance in teaching and learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audits in Austria (§ 22 HS-QSG) • Institutional Accreditation (Swiss) • International Programme Accreditation • International Institutional Accreditation

All **evalag** services, especially in department 1, are tailor-made – within legal guidelines – to be fit for purpose for the particular institution or programme. Consequently the overall degree of standardisation of processes and criteria is not very distinctive. And since the number of projects of each service type carried out is limited, a quantitative analysis would not provide regular continuous insights. **evalag**, therefore, applied a qualitative analysis.

In its former thematic analysis of internal developments 2016, **evalag** put forward the agency's self-concept as a „learning organisation“.

evalag wants to contribute actively to the successful implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). For this purpose, the agency continuously tracks and analyses trends in the higher education sector, proactively integrates them into its own portfolio, and makes them accessible to the higher education institutions.¹ Here some examples:

¹ See Mission Statement (Decision of the Foundation board, May 4th 2018).

- In 2008 the **evalag** Foundation Board decided, that the agency should offer a broad spectrum of quality assurance services, which encompass consulting services as well as accreditation and certification procedures, both at a national and international level. This decision was accompanied by internal rules to strictly separate consulting activities from accreditation or certification procedures – they cannot be carried out in the same higher education institution.
- From 2013 to 2016/2018, **evalag** coordinated an ERASMUS+-research project with ten European partner organisations (higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies) for the implementation of methods to investigate the impact of quality assurance.
- In 2014, **evalag** extended its portfolio to include the (institutional) certification of advanced study programmes; this was partly a consequence of the broader definition of study programmes in the ESG, but also a consequence of the increasing “market” of advanced study programmes.
- In 2018 **evalag**'s statutes will be extended with another purpose and field of activity of the foundation: Applied Higher Education Research in the field of quality assurance in teaching and learning.

evalag as a learning organisation considers the implementation of coherent P(lan)-D(o)-C(heck)-A(ct)-cycles² and regular self-reflection as basic principles to improve its quality management. **evalag** is committed to professionalism in all its actions, to transparency and reliability.³ The agency is strategically striving for the development of new fields of activities that satisfy demands and needs of higher education institutions to improve their quality culture and to support their organisational development.⁴

The **evalag** staff, therefore, ensures necessary modifications and adaptations of basic documents, processes and results in their daily work.

The Foundation Board is responsible for the overall monitoring and, if necessary, the further examination of all internal and external activities and services. The Accreditation Commission is accordingly responsible for international accreditations⁵ and certifications. The decisions and regulations, considerations and recommendations in the proceedings of these two committees therefore play an important role for the development of **evalag**.

Another important role play the various external stakeholders of **evalag** (experts, students, representatives of professional practice and institutions as clients). **evalag** collects their feedback through regular surveys and workshops⁶ and uses it for the improvement of its quality management and portfolio.

² The proceedings of the Foundation Board prove that the P-D-C-A-cycle works: The Foundation Board gives the **evalag** office the order to initiate activities. – The office prepares a draft and/ or guidelines for decision. – The Foundation board discusses the draft or guidelines at its next meeting and makes a decision. – The office is obliged to implement and exercise the decision on operational level. – The office checks the implementation and if need be proposes follow-up measures. – The Foundation Board is informed about the status quo of the implementation and if need be the proposal for the follow-up. – The Foundation Board gives the office further order to do something. – And so on.

³ See Mission Statement (Decision of the Foundation board, May 4th 2018).

⁴ See Mission Statement (Decision of the Foundation board, May 4th 2018).

⁵ As well as Accreditations in Germany contractually defined before 2018.

⁶ An external SWOT-workshop to identify the strengths and weaknesses as well as opportunities and threats for the agency always happens during the preparation process of the self-assessment report for the ENQA review (every four years). **evalag** for this purpose invites representatives of all external stakeholder groups.

The annual reports also document substantial changes and improvements of the agency.

The following findings, therefore, are – as in the first thematic analysis 2016 – based on the proceedings of the Foundation Board, the Accreditation Commission and the annual reports 2016 and 2017.

2.2 Findings

During the last years, **evalag** observed and – with regard to quality assurance issues – actively supported the development of several trends in the European higher education area. These trends concern the increasing internationalisation in teaching and learning, the differentiation and maturing process of quality management systems of higher education institutions and the digitalisation in this area.

evalag adapted and improved its services methodologically, especially considering the further professionalization and integration of quality management in the overall management of the higher education institutions. Meanwhile available data and qualitative information of diverse quality assurance activities direct any further development towards the conception of analytical tools and its application.

Evaluations

As anticipated in the thematic analysis 2016, the number of evaluations regarding research topics, strategic development or impact analyses of programmes and grants have increased. Clients are not only higher education institutions, but also (federal) ministries, non-university research institutions or scientific associations.

Evaluations meanwhile are usually announced by a call for bids and, therefore, often do not allow to clarify the purpose and objective or open questions bilaterally before submitting an offer. Moreover, clients sometimes expect all-embracing and detailed elaborated evaluation concepts.

The number of evaluations regarding political and/or otherwise sensitive topics, which **evalag** (especially in department 1) performed, has increased. Besides an adequate methodical design the procedures require very time-consuming efforts to maintain a trustful and confidential communication between all relevant stakeholders and to secure the necessary transparency of the process and its results. Sometimes the process has to be modified in the ongoing project to manage the tightrope walk between methodical austerity on one side and diplomacy on the other side.

The maturing of quality assurance at higher education institutions and scientific institutions also increases the demand for specified evaluation approaches. **evalag** therefore designed a new format, the so-called expert consulting. This format allows the reflection on certain topics in a kind of “condensed evaluation process” (usually a workshop with stakeholders and only a small expert group or a single expert) and is closely linked to the **evalag** activities regarding organisational development. **evalag** applies this approach only for evaluations outside the scope of the ESG.

Furthermore, **evalag** offers certain elements of evaluation processes as a service for higher education institutions (HEIs) (e.g. the search for experts, the planning and preparation of the site visit, the coordination of reporting).

The follow-up relating to voluntary evaluations (outside the scope of the ESG) still is not obligatory and clients often refuse binding conditions. **evalag** nevertheless aims at

securing the follow-up with more emphasis. The agency therefore replaced the former phone interviews with clients relating to follow-up activities about one or one and a half year after the end of the project. Now the **evalag** office requests the client with an official letter on behalf of the Foundation Board to give substantial answers to the recommendations given by the experts in the evaluation.

Organisational Development

The large number of HEIs in Germany, that **evalag** accompanied along the process of system accreditation and that afterwards successfully accomplished a positive system accreditation decision, proves that **evalag**'s consulting approach is effective.⁷

This approach aims at supporting the organisational development by considering the institutional characteristics (e. g. strategic aims, structures, processes, quality culture and communication) of the particular HEI and offering tailor-made activities instead of following a normative, model-bound guideline.

The demand of HEI for **evalag**'s consulting along the process of system accreditation therefore remains at a high level.

Moreover, another reason for the high demand for consulting is the recent reform of the accreditation system in Germany. It strengthens the system accreditation approach and other so-called "alternative approaches" to ensure the quality management in teaching and learning.⁸ An additional reason is that the development of the internal quality assurance at HEIs begins to spread out to other areas (e. g. research units, administration). Therefore, **evalag** needs to meet new demands and challenges relating to its consulting activities (e. g. the development of science support structures and processes). The agency consequently enlarged its services in the area of organisational development and university management during the last two years. The agency ~~also~~ is now also engaged in consulting activities relating to alternative approaches, to strategic development and the development of mission statements, and to (European Credit Point Transfer System) ECTS-appointment procedures.

Science Support

For more than ten years **evalag** has supported a well-known company foundation as well as the Ministry of Science, Research and the Arts Baden-Württemberg (MWK) and occasionally other HEIs and/ or science organisations by coordinating the assessment of funding programmes. The agency aims to improve continuously the processes and instruments therefore implemented to ensure procedures that are perfectly fit for purpose.

For the MWK, **evalag** additionally supports HEIs in the process of self-assessment to identify the impact of state-funded activities and to improve related structures and processes.

⁷ Since 2016 **evalag** so far accompanied (or respectively still accompanies) 9 universities, 14 universities of applied science, 4 universities of arts and music and 2 universities of education in the process of system accreditation.

⁸ The Interstate Treaty on the organization of a joint accreditation system to ensure the quality of teaching and learning at German higher education institutions (Interstate study accreditation treaty) came into force on January 1st 2018. It established a new legal basis for the accreditation system in Germany, following the resolution of the Federal Constitutional Court on February 17th 2016.

(Institutional) Certification of Advanced Training Programmes

evalag noticed an increasing number of advanced training programmes offered by HEIs and the development of a – rather intransparent – market without reliable quality assurance. **evalag** therefore decided three years ago to expand its own portfolio by offering a certification regarding the quality assurance at institutional or programme level. The certification process is closely linked to the ESG.

Knowledge Transfer and Advanced Training by evalag

evalag continually checks, if its own advanced training programme meets the demands of the target audience (primarily quality managers at HEIs). If necessary, **evalag** reacts at short notice to current and important changes of topics discussed in the community. Seminars that are in high demand are usually offered several times. Sometimes subjects put forward in **evalag**'s programme turn out to be too progressive and the demand then often is low at first. However, **evalag** learned from this experience and then promotes the same subject again some months or a year later.

Furthermore, **evalag** is engaged in the board of an online journal (DUZ Wissenschaft und Management). **evalag** uses this function as another chance to identify trends in higher education from the perspective of a quality assurance agency.

Applied Higher Education Research in the field of quality assurance in teaching and learning

The conception of analytical procedures that can be used for the overall development of HEIs is getting more and more important. This is revealed by data and qualitative information relating to quality enhancement and to performance development of HEIs.

evalag has reacted to this trend and initiated the Erasmus+-project (2013-2016) "IMPALA (Impact Analysis of External Quality Assurance Processes of Higher Education Institutions)" with several HEIs and agencies abroad as project partners. The results of the project are online.⁹

Besides the now ongoing Erasmus+-project coordinated by **evalag** (2017-2020) „SQELT (Sustainable Quality Enhancement in Higher Education Learning and Teaching. Integrative Core Dataset and Performance Data Analytics)"¹⁰ the agency focuses on the following subjects: Governance of HEIs, impact analysis, performance data/indicators. Furthermore, cooperation and networking with HEIs, quality assurance agencies and other scientific institutions in Europe as well as the integration of HEIs from Baden-Württemberg as project partners are of high importance for **evalag**.

Accreditation

Although Germany implemented accreditation procedures already more than fifteen years ago, a considerable number of HEI members still criticise this kind of quality assurance as merely bureaucratic and pointless. **evalag** therefore supports the development of the accreditation procedures towards a more development-oriented approach.

⁹ Leiber, T., Stensaker, B. & Harvey, L. C. (2018) Bridging theory and practice of impact evaluation of quality management in higher education institutions: a SWOT analysis. European Journal of Higher Education 8 (3), 15 pages. (published online 31 May 2018) DOI: 10.1080/21568235.2018.1474782. To link to this article: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/xraC2mkPezXQBSKqcyC/full>

¹⁰ See <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/eplu-project-details/#project/b8a93e06-2000-4a82-9fac-90b3bcacadec>

Based on self-critical reflection and considering the results of stakeholder feedback **evalag** continually improved its related internal processes (e. g. the preparation of expert groups, the schedule of site visits or the cooperation of all relevant stakeholders).

evalag by now considers the quality management systems of many HEIs as mature and well-working. The agency therefore supports alternative approaches for external quality assurance (e. g. alternative approaches in system accreditation, the so-called experimental clause, Network Quality Audit¹¹).

At an international level, **evalag** is open for bilateral cooperation with other EQAR-agencies abroad (e. g. with the National Centre for Public Accreditation (NCPA) for accreditation procedures in Russia). Furthermore, **evalag** is committed to the development of assessment procedures for transnational educational programmes according to § 72 a LHG¹².

Cooperation

For a long time **evalag** has sought to enter into strategic partnerships to enlarge its expertise and to join in innovative and challenging international projects for instance the in the ongoing Erasmus+-project “E-TALEB (Professional Standards Framework for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Lebanese Universities)”.¹³

In autumn 2016, **evalag** agreed upon a cooperation with the Russian agency NCPA based on a memorandum of understanding. The already persisting memorandum of understanding with the Agency for Development of Higher Education and Quality Assurance (HEA) in Bosnia-Herzegovina was prolonged. Furthermore, **evalag** signed a memorandum of understanding with the China Education Association for International Exchange (CEAIE).

2.3 Conclusions

It is difficult to identify an overall conclusion based on the findings outlined above. But it may have become clear that **evalag** is truly and since many years committed to the continuous tracking of trends in the EHEA and to the proactive integration of these trends into the agencies portfolio to support HEIs in the best possible way.

Although the quality assurance system at many HEIs and in the EHEA altogether matures, **evalag** foresees many challenges in the future. New risks for the quality management and the quality culture of HEIs are lying ahead (e. g. unquestioned used quality assurance routines), that demand continuous willingness to change from all stakeholders – the HEIs as well as the quality assurance agencies.

¹¹ <https://www.quality-audit.de/>

¹² http://www.landesrecht-bw.de/jportal/portal/t/5q6/page/bsbawueprod_psml/action/portlets.jw.MainAction?p1=3i&eventSubmit_doNavigate=searchInSubtreeTOC&showdoccase=1&doc.hl=0&doc.id=jlr-HSchulGBWV26P72a&doc.part=S&toc.poskey=#focuspoint

¹³ www.etaleb.org

3. Challenges of the Peer Review

3.1 Introduction

For **evalag** peer review is an important and basic method of (external) quality assurance. This concerns evaluation, accreditation and certification procedures in the scope of the ESG and also various **evalag** services beyond. **evalag** regularly gathers feedback from HEIs (clients) and peers, i. e. the members of expert panels (including students) and asks about their satisfaction and their suggestions for improvement. The feedback by the majority is consistently positive. The stakeholders often especially praise the professionalism of the project managers and the composition of the expert panels.

In principle, (informed) peer review is state-of-the-art for assessments in higher education and science; this is especially valid with regard to the quality of results and the choice of methods. Peer review is used for the pre-check of scientific publications, for the awarding of funding (e. g. grants) or prizes, the assessment of study programmes, fields of study or HEIs or scientific institutions, or for the assessment of doctorates and postdoctoral qualifications as well as for appointment procedures. Nevertheless, there are objections and doubts regarding the objectivity of peer review.

Therefore, **evalag** decided to focus the thematic analysis also on peer review in order to identify critical aspects and challenges. The purpose is to point out basic conditions and capabilities of peer review.

3.2 Methods

evalag applies peer review for the

- assessment of study programmes, institutions and quality management systems at national and international level (programme accreditation, system accreditation, accreditation, audit),
- evaluation of study programmes, (research) subjects, institutions, projects and programmes,
- awarding of funding (grants) in the context of science support.

In the period 2016 to summer 2018 **evalag** coordinated about 60 (international) procedures with peer review in the scope of the ESG and about 8 procedures with peer review outside the scope of the ESG.

After completion of the procedures the members of the expert panels involved as well as the clients (mostly HEIs but also some ministries and scientific institutions or organisations) were asked for feedback. **evalag** analysed this feedback for positive and negative hints relating to possible improvements. The **evalag** project managers discussed the results during their biannual reflection meetings that are part of **evalag**'s internal quality management. Necessary changes were implemented.

Additionally, **evalag** quantitatively analysed all written expert requests in the field of science support submitted (on behalf of a company foundation) in the period 2014 to 2017. The percentage of commitments and refusals as well as the reasons for refusal (substantial compatibility of the subject is missing, lack of time/ work overload or refusal because of personal reasons) were identified.

Furthermore, **evalag** discussed the peer review approach at its external SWOT-analysis with various stakeholders.

Finally, **evalag** did a literature analysis (see the bibliography in 3.6).

3.3 Findings

3.3.1 Assumptions and questions regarding the peer review

For a better understanding of the findings described below, some assumptions and questions regarding the nature of peer review in principal are presented at the beginning.

Experts involved in assessments in higher education and in science require a broad and in-depth specialist knowledge. They also need practical scientific experience regarding the subject and its context (e. g. a scientific publication on a certain method, a research project or the module of a study programme). Otherwise, they cannot appropriately decide if, for example, a research project is manageable and innovative or if the contents of a module are fit for purpose regarding its volume, focal points, form of teaching and examination and so on.

Therefore, the question is, how much scientific experience and specialist knowledge does an expert need to be a good and fair peer? How much experience can an expert gain during her or his professional life? What is the minimum of experience and specialist knowledge needed for an expert to act as a peer? What extent of overview knowledge is essential?

These questions are far from being marginal due to the enormous differentiation in many disciplines in the recent decades and the increasing multi-disciplinarity and trans-disciplinarity.

Representatives of the professional practice and students involved in assessments in the area of teaching and learning usually are not expected to join in discussions of scientific aspects of the curriculum, but it is their turn to ensure the consideration of their special stakeholder perspectives. The questions relating to them are therefore quite similar to the ones above: What kind and what extent of professional experience is required? How much own study experience does a student peer need and how many HEIs does she or he have to know from inside? The answers are especially relevant relating to study programmes that train their students for diverse or specialised professional fields.

There is no overall standard answer to these questions,¹⁴ the requirements of the members of an expert panel have to be adjusted for each single case.

3.3.2 General Procedural Practice

Selection of Experts

For the selection of experts, **evalag** as other agencies uses various sources: an internal database, expert lists provided by expert associations, web research and where appropriate suggestions of HEIs or scientific institutions.

As a rule, the selection procedure consists of several steps: The project manager is responsible and asks – if necessary – a colleague or the department head. Selected members of the Accreditation Commission give advice regarding the listed experts and

¹⁴ There are standards relating to the compilation of expert groups in various procedures of course as well as guidelines for independence and so on. However, these standards aim at other purposes.

if need be make recommendations for further experts. Afterwards the whole commission holds a ballot to define and prioritise which experts shall be involved or not.

Important criteria for the selection of experts are either personal acquaintance or a meaningful CV. Furthermore, the type of HEI (e. g. university, university of applied science, university of arts and music, public or private university) the experts come from is of importance. As outlined above, the question how much specialist knowledge and professional practice are necessary on the part of the experts, must be answered for each individual case. For this purpose, a close communication and coordination process between the HEI, the agency and the envisaged experts is vital to match the respective expectations as far as possible. However, there are obstacles that sometimes lead to conflicts in the further assessment process. The main problem is that rather often the best-qualified experts are not available due to other obligations and schedule difficulties. Then experts on rear positions of the expert list need to be involved. This can work perfectly, but sometimes it does not. Another problem may be a lack of integrity on the part of some experts, which does not become apparent during the selection process.

Relating to the recruitment of students for expert panels, the agencies usually contact pools under student self-administration. These pools also ensure the preparation and commitment of the student members. However, the questions outlined above, how much study experience and how much professional expertise is necessary, are not always sufficiently answered by the pool's suggestions for student members.

Representatives of professional practice are often members of professional associations and/ or are listed as experts by these associations, but again the question is, how much professional experience is necessary and furthermore if the assessment procedure, its purposes and criteria are known at all.

As assessments are mostly – and in the scope of the ESG obligatorily – done with expert panels (Panel Peer Review), the compilation of the panel is finally the most important challenge. Not each single member, but the panel in total must be able to cover the complete requirements that arise relating to the subject, purpose and criteria of the assessment.

Additionally, so-called secondary criteria must be considered. These are internationalisation and gender and/or diversity aspects. As examinations of whole series of panel peer reviews have proved, the compilation of the expert group as heterogeneous as possible is the most promising base for a successful assessment (Olbrecht/Klein, 2011).

Preparation of Peers

In Germany peers in higher education as well as in science are not „professionalized“, since there is no obligatory training. The general preparation for being a peer (expert) instead is voluntarily. Nevertheless, **evalag** – as other agencies – offers general expert trainings, but the demand is rather low. Only the student members of expert groups pass an obligatory training of the student accreditation pool.

Mostly peers prepare themselves for an assessment gradually in the run-up to the site visit. Therefore, they get general information relating to the subject, information about the assessment procedure and the criteria, if applicable guidelines for the assessment and finally the self-assessment report of the HEI. On request, the project manager of the agency gives further information or organises it from the HEI. Usually experts also do some web research relating to the subject. A crucial part of the preparation of experts is a preparatory meeting before the site visit. Its purpose is to get acquainted and

discuss respectively agree on the division of work and the purposes of the assessment, the process and the criteria.

Assessment procedures

An appropriate organisation (preparation and execution) of the site visit is important for excellent assessments of the experts. This is one element of the international standard of an assessment procedure: Self-assessment of the unit assessed – site visit – expert report – follow-up. However, the practical implementation of the steps and the procedure can vary a lot. **evalag** has extensive experiences in the organisation of site visits and knows well, how much time the particular steps of an assessment procedure consume and how much they may vary under particular conditions. Therefore, the early and thoroughly and detailed planning of the schedule of a procedure is an essential element of **evalag**'s professional self-image and service-orientation and the agency emphasises this in its guidelines and briefings. Experiences show that assessment procedures which have to be organised under extreme pressure of time or that have to be re-organised due to unforeseen developments are challenging for all stakeholders – the agency as well as the experts and the unit assessed – and that they carry a high(er) risk of unwanted results.

evalag asks potential peers as early as possible (usually four to eight months before the prospective date of a site visit) if they are willing to participate in an expert panel. Afterwards **evalag** informs the experts systematically about the subject, the procedure and criteria. In doing so, **evalag** tries to relieve the experts from organisational tasks, to provide the information needed in compact and easy accessible form and to ensure that their demands (e. g. further information by the HEI or modifications in the schedule of the site visit) are considered. Hence, a steady mutual communication (by phone or mail) between the agency and the experts is necessary during the assessment procedure. Additionally, the agency has a risk management. If a project manager is ill or otherwise absent, colleagues take over as contact persons for the experts and the further organisation of the assessment. If experts drop out for the site visit, **evalag** tries to gain deputies or if the drop out happens shortly to ensure other forms of participation of the expert (e. g. by skype conference).

evalag's practical experience is in accordance with several examinations (see Donsbach/Brade et al., 2013). They prove that the timing of the overall procedure, the extent and kind of information provided, the sequence and extent of discussions groups during the site visit as well as the atmosphere and the form of documentation, and not at least the reporting process all have a decisive influence on the quality of the assessment.

Significance of Assessments

It is widely known that peers usually have a high intrinsic motivation, as they want to contribute to the development of science (Gülker/Simon/Torka, 2010). Furthermore, the function or purpose of the particular assessment procedure strongly influences their self-image and behaviour as experts. It makes a great difference for peers if they give not-binding development-orientated recommendations (e. g. relating to the future profiling of an HEI) or if their assessment has serious consequences for the status quo (e. g. the continuation of a particular study programme).

3.3.3 Criticism relating to the Peer Review

The analysis of the general procedural practice of **evalag** showed, that objections against the peer review descend from various stakeholders and relate to different aspects. The involved peers have objections as well as the HEIs (as clients) and the units assessed.

Of course, each objection should first be analysed in relation to the particular assessment. Do the points of criticism relate to basic aspects of the assessment procedure that can be improved or to exceptionally unfortunate coincidences? What exactly has happened and who is criticising? What is her or his role as a stakeholder? Is she or he an observer or a person immediately concerned with the assessment?

evalag fortunately seldom finds any polemic points of criticism in the feedbacks of its peers and clients. However, the analysis of the stakeholder feedback proved, that objections against the peer review depend very much on perspective and function – and that consequently not all stakeholders join in all particular points of criticism.

Points of criticism of Peers

On an overall systemic level, the increasing number of procedures based upon peer review is part of a broad critical discussion for long. **evalag** observed a further and significant increase of peer reviews in the last years. This development concerns teaching and learning as well as research. The increase relates to the overall extent as well as the temporal cumulation of peer activities. At the same time, the seasonal time slots for assessments and site visits shrink: The majority takes place from February to April, from June to the mid of July and from October until the middle of December. Professors widely respected for their research activities and/ or their commitment for innovative teaching are especially under pressure. They are overrun by a multitude of pleas to participate as peer experts in various contexts.

The analysis of **evalag**'s written expert requests in the field of science support submitted in the period 2014 to 2017 (in total about 1200) proved that nearly 90 % of all refusals were justified by lack of time and/or work overflow. The proportion of refusals accounted for 35 to 40 % in 2014 to 2017. In 2018, the percentage of refusals was extremely high (although in a very innovative and recently much promoted area of research): For each expert commitment at least two prior requests that ended up with refusals were necessary (110 %). By contrast, the inadequate compatibility of the subject or a principal lack of interest only played a minor role (each 3 %). Additionally, the analysis showed an obvious connection between the date of the request, the date of the site visit or deadline for a written survey and the percentage of refusals. Requests with a timeline shorter than six weeks turn out to be a real problem – not only relating to organisational aspects but also for ensuring a fair assessment process.

Further objections of peers relate to the amount of documents and the time needed for their analysis. Indeed it is a tightrope walk for an agency to define what amount and what depth of information is needed to ensure a thorough analysis and at the same time to limit the experts time for preparation on an appropriate level.

evalag therefore focuses strongly on the quality of self-assessment reports and hands out relating guidelines that refer to important aspects (e. g. structure, necessary basic information and annexes). Nevertheless, the agency cannot guarantee the quality of information delivered by the HEI, especially if staff members of the HEI with little or no experience with peer review procedures are responsible for the compilation of the report. Furthermore, some HEIs still seem convinced that the significance of information depends on the amount of documents provided.

Points of criticism of peers also often refer to the course of the discussion groups during the site visit (e. g. relating to unstructured discussions or dominant behaviour of other experts or participants or to the exceeding of the timeline). For **evalag** it is thus especially important to thoroughly plan the topics, the sequence of discussions and the participants involved and in close communication with the peers. However, the agency cannot predict the actual course of conversation and the (diplomatic or dominant) conversational behaviour of the participants as well as of the peers. Therefore, as a rule a consistent moderation is necessary. This usually is the task of one commonly respected member of the peer group. Besides, the project manager has the duty to intervene (and to support the chair) for instance when the discussion does not refer any more to the subject and criteria of the assessment.

Points of criticism of HEIs (as clients) and of the units assessed

An (informed) peer review procedure demands a great organisational effort from the unit assessed. Especially the time needed for the elaboration of the self-assessment report and for the internal coordination of the site visit is high. This is a major objection of clients and assessed units against peer reviews.

If the clients and/or the persons charged with the organisation have only small or no experience with peer review procedures, it may happen, that the unit is criticised by the peers for the information provided (e. g. for a lack of comprehensible structure, explicit factual presentations or necessary self-critical elements). The client or assessed unit then often feels treated very unfairly, especially when the site visit proves that the assessed unit actually does a good job.

Further points of criticism of clients occasionally relate to the competency profile of experts. Sometimes clients criticise, that the assessment has been subjectively driven by individual preferences and prejudices and is therefore arbitrary, or that the assessment is not substantial due to a lack of knowledge of the peers relating to the subject or criteria. Besides all efforts of the agency to prepare its peers well, both points of criticism may be true relating to individual persons and-cases. However, as outlined above, the expectations of the clients are often very high and vague while it is not so easy to define which extent of professional knowledge and of professional experience is needed and to gain qualified experts.

Another (rare) point of criticism is, that peers seem unwilling to get involved in complicated and specific circumstances on-site. However, this is very much a question of the purpose and criteria of the assessment. If the assessment focuses on overall standards, not all meanderings of a HEI are to be tolerated.

Further points of criticism relate to organisational aspects (e. g. too many specifications by the agency or by the peers, insufficient communication, lack of mutual information or misunderstandings between client and agency) and to the form and content of the report, especially of course the assessments and recommendations.

3.4 Conclusions and best practice

Peer review has its weaknesses although it is justly considered a very good approach. Its weaknesses relate especially

- to the knowledge and expertise of the peers, which are naturally limited as no one can know everything;

- to the factual performance of the persons involved as peers, which might be not professional enough;
- to socio-psychological characteristics of peer review, as human idiosyncrasies relating to communication and interaction may cause mutual irritations of stakeholders, especially under pressure of time.

As these weaknesses are implicit, an agency cannot master them completely. However, agencies can contribute a lot to successful peer review procedures

- by the thorough selection of peers:
 - **evalag** informs stakeholders involved in an assessment procedure about the competency profiles of the peers involved and about the process and decision-making related to the compilation of the peer panel to ensure transparency.
- by a thorough preparation and training of peers:
 - **evalag** regularly offers initial trainings for peers to ensure adequate assessments and to sensitize them for adequate professional behaviour.
 - The information provided for the assessment (usually the self-assessment report) has to fulfil the demands of the peers. For international assessments, **evalag** additionally provides basic information about the specialities of the respective higher education system.
 - The preparatory meeting of the peers before the official start of the site visit is essential. Especially for international assessments **evalag** recommends an additional preparatory meeting in due time before the site visit (e. g. as a phone or skype conference). The feedback proves that peers appreciate this early discussion of the subject and criteria very much for their preparation.
- by sensitizing the assessed unit for the added value of the self-assessment as a precious interruption in daily routine that allows self-reflection:
 - **evalag** quite often observed that the relevance of the self-assessment (process) for a successful peer review is underestimated, even at HEIs or scientific institutions that have long-term experience with the peer review approach. They mainly focus on the efforts and time needed for producing the self-assessment report and seldomly realize how much the self-assessment process supports the organisational development, the internal communication and the quality culture – and that this would not have been possible during daily work.
- by a transparent communication policy towards all relevant stakeholders and by the willingness to react fast and flexibly to organisational problems as well as question relating to content and criteria.
- by a thorough planning of site visit and its schedule:
 - The communication of the agency relating to the site visit should involve the peers as early as possible and be transparent. **evalag** strongly recommends to strive for a mutual understanding regarding the overall timetable, the sequence of the discussions and their participants.
 - **evalag** recommends that sufficient breaks (at least 20 minutes) between each discussion round during the site visit are included. This allows the peers to regularly exchange their current estimates and to indicate to the project manager which aspects have to be addressed in the report in any case.
 - **evalag** recommends that an open time slot is included in the schedule of the site visit before the final internal discussion of the peers. If needed, this allows

for flexible reactions, e. g. the slot can be used for further inquiries relating to an earlier discussion round or topic.

- For assessments, that have to deal with many subprojects **evalag** successfully uses poster presentations (also it has to be admitted that the effort on the part of the assessed unit is rather high). Poster presentations are a welcome variety to the usually quite formal inquiry-response-cycle in the ordinary discussion rounds. They also offer the peers the chance to talk to those persons that do not express themselves so easily in “official” discussion rounds. For a poster presentation, the peers at best split in teams to pass by the different stations. At each station, there should be a short presentation of about 5 to max. 10 minutes. A closing session with all participants and peers concerning overall questions (about 30 minutes) is recommended.
- In institutional assessments, if possible a short time slot of about 20 minutes for a confidential discussion of single employees or internal groups with the peers or alternatively an anonymous survey of all employees is helpful.
- As far as **evalag**'s experience goes, site visits that last three days are a heavy burden for all stakeholders and have only little benefit. If a sufficient assessment in two days (e. g. by doing the preparatory meeting of the peers separately and earlier) is impossible, at least all opportunities to vary the schedule of the site visit should be used (e. g. poster presentations, world cafés, workshops with the peers)
- by precise reporting:
 - **evalag** recommends that the summary of the report as a standard includes a short background information
 - **evalag** has for many years successfully used clearly structured report templates that define a strict division between factual information, assessment statements and recommendations. The reports are as compact as possible. They as a rule include general information on the assessment, a summary of the most important findings as well as short background information about the HEI or scientific institution assessed (also containing some easily understandable reference values (e. g. number of students)), the detailed assessment report and annexes if need be. However, in assessments that lead to an accreditation or certification decision in Germany **evalag** also is bound by external regulations. Regarding this **evalag** has recently observed a tendency towards very formal, rather juridical formulated reports. In this kind of reports, development-orientated approaches of HEIs can only be considered to a very limited extent.
- by the design of the follow-up:
 - **evalag** recommends that a first feedback of the peers about their satisfaction with the overall assessment procedure is collected, their information and preparation, the communication with the agency and the organisation vis-à-vis at the end of the site visit. In any case the agency should collect further feedback of the peers after the reporting process is finished.
 - **evalag** strictly recommends that peers are informed about the results of the assessments they have been involved with. This is especially important for assessments that are divided (e. g. assessments of proposals in funding programmes with written surveys first and the later decision of a commission). For **evalag** this information is crucial to secure the peer's future commitment to be available for another assessment. It is indispensable for the development and maintenance of the agencies' expert pool.

- by ensuring backup-solutions for the assessment related to funding programmes:
 - To minimize the risk that no assessment is available (e. g. for sick leave or due to delays because of public holidays) for a grant application, **evalag** strictly recommends that always at least two (depending on the height of the funding even better three) check the same proposal. Normally the agency has no chance (beside repeated reminders) to urge an expert to actually deliver a survey in time even if she or he agreed formally to do it earlier.

Furthermore, there are systemic challenges for peer reviews in higher education and science. From the point of view of **evalag** the increasing differentiation of professional disciplines and the increasing number of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches make the definition of competency profiles for peers more and more challenging. At the same time the pool of peers that can match these specialised profiles shrinks. This is true for research as for teaching and learning. In any case, study programmes oriented towards either broad or rather specific professional fields, cannot be assessed sufficiently with small peer groups. Larger groups which assess such programmes properly cause higher costs for an HEI.

Another systemic challenge is the overload of (potential) peers that are permanently requested to join in assessment tasks in various contexts. The increasing number of refusals complicates the daily coordination work of the agencies as the search for deputies is a time consuming effort. Frequently, also dates for site visits or meetings have to be postponed several times. Under these circumstances the compilation of peer panels with the best or at least (very) good qualified members gets more and more complex and demanding.

As **evalag**'s influence on these challenges is rather small, the agency focuses on its own procedures. For **evalag** the relation management to proven former peers is of high importance. **evalag** as a rule ensures that peers get information about the assessment results and if possible the follow-up. A lot of very positive reactions prove that the peers recognise this information as a sign of personal appreciation for their commitment, time and effort. On the other hand it becomes apparent that even large and important funding organisations and frequently ministries refrain from informing (and appreciating) their peers adequately or at all.

3.5 Prospects

- **evalag** wants to contribute to a general debate about the shortcomings and potentials of peer reviews in order to ensure the high added value of this assessment approach. From the point of view of **evalag** the relief of the (potential) peers therefore is crucial. A broad understanding of all stakeholders in higher education and science is necessary to check self-critically for which purposes the peer review really is indispensable or where other assessment formats can replace it sufficiently (or better).
- **evalag** will further campaign for a broad acceptance of the implicit ("human") weaknesses of peer review and wants to prove that these usually can be successfully dealt with by a proactive and transparent process design.
- **Evalag** will furthermore push forward a better appreciation of peers that engage in the area of teaching and learning as they are the supporting pillar of the accreditation system.

- **evalag** will carry on offering trainings for peers to facilitate the professionalization of assessment procedures. However, **evalag** sees no chance for the implementation of an obligatory training as it is customary abroad.

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