

IEP study: Examining the usefulness and impact of IEP evaluations

By

Goran Dakovic, Policy & Project Officer, IEP
Anna Gover, Programme Manager, IEP

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Introduction

This study seeks to empirically analyse what is the usefulness and impact of evaluations by the Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) as perceived by the evaluated institutions?

To analyse the research question, we first need to define the causality of activities that are performed under external evaluations. According to Gerring (2005, p. 169), “X may be considered a cause of Y if (and only if) it raises the probability of Y”. When reinterpreted to external quality assurance, we argue that a cause refers to the procedures and instruments used by a quality assurance agency that raise the probability of an impact occurring at the evaluated institution after the evaluation (under *ceteris paribus* conditions). Hereby, the impact is defined as a long-term type of effect, in contrast to short-term outputs and mid-term outcomes (see IMPALA, 2016, p. 7).

In taking this approach two key difficulties that are in general associated with the concept of causality and measuring impact in external quality assurance should be noted. First, the difficulty in identifying which specific cause has resulted in an impact on the evaluated institution; and the struggle to eliminate all other factors of influence (i.e. relationships between the causes or so called ‘causal networks’) (IMPALA, 2016). Second, one cause can impact several areas of a higher education institution simultaneously, which adds to the complexity.

About IEP

IEP is a quality assurance agency, listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). The Programme’s mission is to support higher education institutions and systems in developing their strategic leadership and capacity to manage change, consistent with institutional autonomy and a fitness for (and of) purpose approach. It is independent from any national authority and offers institutional evaluations that are voluntary for the participating higher education institutions.

The evaluations are context sensitive, provide a European perspective and consider institutional mission and goals as the starting point (IEP, 2018c, p. 6). Above all, the most significant characteristic of IEP for this research is its improvement orientation. The evaluation process identifies good practice and areas of weakness, resulting in recommendations for improvement, but does not lead to summative judgement, accreditation, comparison or rankings. As such, it avoids using a check-and-report approach which assesses the compliance of an institution against externally set standards (for the accountability narration of external quality assurance see Danø & Stensaker, 2007; Hoecht, 2006; Vroeijerstijn, 1995; for the discussion on the outcomes of external quality assurance see Kis, 2005; Stensaker, 2008; Stensaker & Leiber, 2015).

Some investigation into the impact of IEP has been carried out, though primarily through the presentation of case studies of particular institutions or systems, for example the cases published to mark the 20th anniversary of the Programme (IEP, 2014). This publication also included a review of previous impact studies related to IEP (Dias et al., 2014, pp. 24-25). However, it should be noted that most of these studies focused on analysing the evaluation reports and recommendations as a means to identify the areas of institutional activity where IEP seeks to have an impact, rather than establishing the extent of changes introduced at institutions as a result of the reports.

Methodology

The primary evidence for this study is the results of a qualitative research survey conducted in December 2017. The survey was sent to institutions that underwent an initial or follow-up evaluation by IEP between 2011/12 and 2015/16 (inclusive). In total the survey was sent to 103 institutions, of which 32 responded (31%). The first part of the survey asked about the extent to which the IEP evaluation had been useful for the institution and requested an explanation for the response. The second part of the survey asked about changes made in various areas of institutional activity either as a result of the evaluation, or as a result of the evaluation and other external factors. Respondents were asked to provide examples of such changes.

The results of the research survey are complemented with data taken from the post-evaluation survey, which is routinely sent to institutions immediately upon the completion of their evaluation (the link to the survey is sent together with the final evaluation report). While this survey does not serve to examine the impact of the evaluation, it nonetheless provides some insights into the reasons for which institutions choose an IEP evaluation and their initial reactions to the report and recommendations. It should also be noted that responses to this survey are anonymous and the sample is not the same as that which responded to the research survey conducted specifically for the purposes of this study.

In considering the sample of the research survey, one key limitation must be noted, namely that a certain 'self-selecting' bias must be assumed among the respondents. The introduction to the survey clearly stated that it was seeking to examine the usefulness and impact of the IEP evaluation and therefore those that responded are more likely to be those who felt they had (positive) information to contribute on this topic. Furthermore, as IEP is a voluntary programme, those registering in the first place are likely to have a high level of commitment to improvement and believe that the IEP methodology is suitable for their needs. The influence of an institution's internal orientation to quality culture and willingness to use evaluation results for change have been cited in previous studies as factors in the expected impact of IEP (Dias et al., 2014; Tavares et al., 2010)¹.

Analysing the responses to the research survey

Usefulness of IEP evaluations

Responding institutions found IEP evaluations to a large extent useful (97% responded that the evaluation was useful or somewhat useful to them). The reasons of the perceived usefulness can be grouped into three categories: procedures and instruments that were used during the evaluation; characteristics of IEP; and achievements accomplished due to undergoing an IEP evaluation.

First, IEP evaluations had a positive impact on the evaluated institutions due to the procedures and instruments that are part of the evaluation process. Institutions mentioned the value of the self-evaluation exercise, SWOT analysis and of the opportunity to sign up for a follow-up evaluation. As

¹ In the IEP post-evaluation survey sent to institutions immediately after their evaluation, institutions are requested to identify the main reason for registering for an evaluation. Results of this survey across the period 2011/12 to 2015/16 show that the most selected reason has been "to get an improvement-oriented evaluation". The second equally most selected reasons have been "to get a European evaluation" and "to develop further our strategy".

one institution stated, the IEP evaluation helped the institution to identify “the possible risks and opportunities that can be exploited in order to develop the strong points and minimize the weak points”.

While all external quality assurance processes involve an element of self-evaluation (as stipulated in the ESG 2015, standard 2.3), IEP puts a specific emphasis on this phase as being key to the success of the evaluation, not only because the resulting self-evaluation report provides an important first point of evidence for the IEP team and steers the direction of the evaluation, but also because it provides an opportunity for the institution to reflect critically on its own work. The responses to this research survey correspond with previous anecdotal evidence that the self-evaluation phase is the most helpful part of the evaluation process for the institution.

However, the most often cited reasons for perceived usefulness related to characteristics of IEP. The institutions appreciated the external viewpoint offered by the evaluation; the emphasis that was put on a European perspective; a context driven review of the institutions’ activities; the inclusion of stakeholders into the process; a focus on institutions’ weak points; and opportunity to target the most pressing issues. While some of these aspects can be attributed to any external quality assurance process, others are specific (although not necessarily unique) to IEP. These characteristics are primarily the European perspective and the context sensitive approach. One institution therefore mentions that “better communication of the mission, vision and the plans of the university have been made at different levels” due to undergoing an IEP evaluation. Other institutions mention that evaluations were made “from a European assessment perspective” and pursuing “different point of view compared to national assessments”. This points to the added value of voluntarily undergoing an IEP evaluation, particularly if the national framework takes a very different approach (for example programme accreditation or no involvement of international experts).

Interestingly, IEP evaluations were noted as useful also due to specific characteristics of the evaluators, such as their honesty and objective opinion on matters, expertise, serious approach to evaluation, clear explanations, sense for details, and independence. This highlights not only the perceived quality of the IEP experts, but also the importance of obtaining an additional, external perspective on the issues that the institutions considered most pressing. Even though a significant number of institutions indicated in their post-evaluation survey that the IEP team had confirmed their understanding of the institution and/or gave recommendations that they had already thought about, this did not alter the perceived usefulness of the evaluation. A possible explanation for this is that even if an institution has identified its own weaknesses and possible plans for improvement, it may benefit from having these validated by external experts to gain leverage for implementation within the institutional community.

Regarding the achievements thanks to an IEP evaluation, the most cited reason was that the evaluation was helpful because it strengthened the strategic management of the institution. One institution stated that the IEP evaluation helped them to “better organize the institutional decision-making policies and [overall] system”. IEP not only analysed “the current state of [institutional] development and [...] its effectiveness and clarity”, but also “offered assistance for process improvement”. This finding links to one of the core characteristics of IEP, i.e. to offer support to strategic development and build capacity to manage change. Next to strengthening strategic management, the respondents found IEP evaluations useful because they provided a holistic overview of the institution’s functioning. As one institution explained, IEP enabled the institution to “improve

[...] in all sectors of university activities: teaching and learning, research, service to society, internationalisation and quality management". Other institutions emphasised that IEP "contributed to the overall quality enhancement" and in "developing a quality culture", demonstrating that usefulness was also recognised in relation to less tangible outcomes.

Last but not least, it should be noted that a few institutions used IEP evaluations for promotional activities and found outcomes of evaluations useful in marketing activities and for raising institutional competitiveness. The "evaluated by IEP" icon, introduced in 2012, was perceived as an additional asset in promoting an institution's activities. In one extreme case, an institution stated: "The result [...] was used only for marketing, not to improve the activity in the university".

Impact on areas of institutional activity

Several forms of impact on institutional policies or practices were identified as a result of the internal institutional follow-up of recommendations that were given by IEP evaluation teams.

The research survey responses show that institutions introduced most changes in governance and decision-making. Institutions for instance reported that they simplified and streamlined their organisational structures; set strategic development objectives for future years; introduced new policies; increased cooperation among faculties; established or closed faculties, departments or research centres; introduced integrated information management systems; strengthened efficient management of financial resources; re-established strengthened collaboration with students, including their participation in decision making processes; and last but not least rethought their vision and mission.

The other two most impacted areas of institutional activity were the areas of quality culture and internationalisation. Institutions reported that following the IEP evaluation they appointed additional staff and/or established new departments to deal with quality assurance; reformed "the system of questionnaires to make them more useful for staff and students"; applied the concept of learning outcomes and learning assessment; encouraged students' more active involvement in quality assurance; provided professional training; introduced annual reviews of study programmes; and got better acquainted with Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (Part I) and the latest developments and discussions in the field. As one institution noted: "Quality management is [now] the foundation of all activities and processes taking place at the university."

When it comes to institutions' international outreach, the data show that IEP evaluations were used as a trigger and accelerator, not only with regards to mobility opportunities for staff and students, but also for measures related to 'internationalisation at home' in order to promote an international experience for the whole institutional community. Institutions stated that they supported more student and teacher mobilities after the evaluation; participated in educational fairs to promote their activities internationally; opened new programmes in widely spoken foreign languages or introduced new teaching languages in the existing programmes; developed policies for more strategic approach to internationalisation; signed new mobility partnerships, opened new branches or campuses abroad; systemised individual mobility opportunities into more formal institutional partnerships; introduced orientation days, information points and support offices for international students; and became members of international associations.

For impact related to research, many of the examples cited were linked to emphasising the relevance of research within the three-cycle degree system, such as strengthening doctoral education provision (including involvement of doctoral candidates in other institutional activities) and improving research opportunities for other students. Other examples related to changes to strategies and resource allocation.

Perhaps surprisingly, teaching and learning, one of the core missions of higher education institutions, and service to society, were not impacted by evaluations to the same extent. For teaching and learning, the underlying reason might be that teaching tends to remain in domain of each teacher (see Olsen, 2005), therefore limiting direct and more immediate impact of evaluations. In contrast, institutional activities related to service to society might be less impacted by IEP evaluations due to the international character of IEP evaluations that clashes with the need for better understanding of regional characteristics and of local embeddedness of institutions (Dakovic & Loukkola, 2017). With IEP's strong focus on European dimension, and the composition of evaluation teams with no representatives from the higher education systems of evaluated institutions, the impact of evaluations on institution's service to society might be hindered.

IEP evaluations and institutional impact: Lessons learnt and implications for future

The focus of impact on areas related to governance and decision-making can be explained as a natural consequence of the core of the IEP mission and methodology being linked to the strategic development of the institutions that it evaluates. While IEP looks at all areas of institutional activity, the focal point of the evaluation is to examine how the institution functions and changes as a strategic organisation in relation to its own mission and aims. Furthermore, IEP always looks at the institution as a whole, and not at individual faculties or units, thereby putting an emphasis on the central governance structures and overall strategic planning. A similar observation was made by Nilsson et al. (2002) in their external review of IEP's activities in 1994-2001. Their report concluded that "The programme is of value primarily to rectors [and to] leadership at the centre of the university. [It has less of an impact upon faculty]" (*ibid.*, p. 8).

It is also important to note that two-thirds of the institutions that indicated changes in their governance and decision-making policies and practices as a result of the IEP evaluation specified that those changes were not only because of IEP but also due to other factors, such as changes in the institutional leadership or national legal framework. Such factors are by their nature more likely to have an impact on governance and decision-making as opposed to the other areas of institutional activity. Therefore, it is very difficult to ascertain the level of influence to be attributed to the IEP evaluation process and the resulting recommendations.

The focus in the IEP methodology on strategic development at institutional level may also go some way to explaining the reported lower level of impact in the area of teaching and learning. While this may appear surprising at first glance given the central role of institutional teaching missions, it may be explained by the fact that the issues covered are more structural or strategic, or linked to quality assurance, and are therefore reported under other areas of activity (governance and quality culture) rather than under teaching and learning, for example, opening or closing programmes, faculties or other units; implementing a learning outcomes approach to teaching and assessment; or introducing new internal quality standards. Furthermore, as IEP does not review individual programmes, there is

less focus in the evaluation reports on content matters, with recommendations referring rather to procedures for curriculum development, or strategic choices about which programmes to offer.

The reported impact on quality culture and internationalisation is also worth highlighting. While these areas are not institutional missions in themselves, they are important tools and drivers for overall institutional development and quality enhancement across teaching and learning, research, and service to society. For example, several universities reported opening new programmes taught in foreign languages and establishing new international partnerships, which serve purposes beyond increasing the international profile of the institution, such as diversifying the educational offer for local students or supporting new research collaborations.

Finally, it is worth noting that there may be a link between the type of reported impact and the type of institution that registers for IEP. Many of these institutions are relatively young (63% of the institutions responding to the research survey had been founded within the last 50 years) and participated in IEP in order to increase their regional or international profile, or to gain support in the next steps of development after the initial establishment phase. Conversely, long-standing institutions with well-established missions and strategies might not be as tempted to opt for an IEP evaluation because the potential added-value is perceived as being less relevant.

Overall the findings indicate a good level of impact resulting from the IEP evaluations, while acknowledging that changes are usually not attributable solely to IEP. However, in this context, it is interesting to consider the extent to which this impact is specific to the IEP evaluation process or would have occurred as a result of any external quality assurance procedure. As has been noted in previous research, an evaluation process itself “has an effect on the institution under review simply by virtue of its taking place” (QQI, 2014, p. 12). While the research conducted does not provide concrete evidence for answering this question, the focus of the impact on aspects of strategy and governance suggest a strong link with the IEP mission of supporting institutional strategic decision-making. These types of changes would probably not have occurred with an external quality assurance approach that focused on programme rather than institutional level. Secondly, institutions were able to cite many examples of concrete changes and initiatives that had been implemented as a result of the recommendations, which can be linked to IEP’s enhancement-led approach, rather than evaluating an institution against a set of baseline standards, and the context sensitive approach, which focuses on the issues that are identified as relevant and important by the institution itself. This approach is one that is more difficult for some national quality assurance approaches, which are guided by specific national criteria and standards. Finally, it is worth repeating the potential impact of the voluntary nature of IEP, which may mean that participating institutions have a high level of motivation for change from the outset, contributing to a higher likelihood of internal follow-up on the recommendations.

Conclusion

The identified link between the type of impact and IEP’s mission explains why the findings of our research are in general not surprising to those who are familiar with the Programme. Instead the results confirm that IEP’s methodology is fit-for-purpose in meeting the aims of the Programme (which is also specifically required by ESG standard 2.2 (ESG, 2015)), and they provide evidence to back-up previous informal observations and anecdotal evidence. In this sense, IEP follows observations by Stensaker and Leiber who claim that “instead of changing higher education institutions to fit [external

quality assurance], perhaps more impact can be created if [external quality assurance] adjusts to the norms and values of higher education institutions?" (Stensaker & Leiber, 2015, p. 339). By taking a context sensitive approach and a methodology that is flexible enough to function across the different systems of the European Higher Education Area and beyond, IEP proves to be adaptable to different institutional situations.

Although there are many caveats to the findings of this research, and with the approaches in general to assessing impact of external quality assurance, in the case of IEP, further research could be conducted into the impact of its evaluations by looking in more detail at the progress reports submitted by institutions one year after the completion of their evaluation (a requirement since 2015), and at the findings of follow-up evaluations, which evaluated institutions have the possibility to undergo between one and three years after their initial evaluation. The latter in particular is a valuable resource in better understanding the changes in institutions as a result of the Programme (22 such reports were previously used for research by Tavares et al., 2010). Although results would still be skewed towards motivated enhancement-oriented institutions that had opted for this voluntary follow-up procedure, a further study could nonetheless form an additional evidence base for impact assessment, providing information against which IEP could reflect on its evaluation methodology in order to further contribute to its usefulness and impact for participating institutions.

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