Case Study template

A) General Part

General	
Case Study Title	Establishing an external institutional evaluation model in higher education
DIALOGUE thematic group	Quality
Date of the case study	2006 – today (Implementation of results still in progress)
Contact Information	
Name of the institution	University of Primorska, Faculty of Management
Location/country	Slovenia
Size of the organisation/ Number of academic/research and non-academic/administrative staff	Situation in November 2011 Academic/research staff: 81 Administrative staff: 35 Students: 1076
Website	www.fm-kp.si, www.upr.si
Abstract	
Key words	external evaluation, higher education
Please provide a short abstract of the case study	The case study presents the process of establishing a model of external institutional evaluations in higher education, focusing on the interaction of research and practice in the process. This interaction occurred in the preparation of a methodology and tools for evaluations and in trainings for evaluators. A good result of this interaction was the modification of the tested pilot model. This interaction still persists in the implementation of the existing model of external national quality assessment and assurance in higher education.

B) Specific Part

The following part depends on each thematic group, outlining strengths and weaknesses of the chosen situations.

1. Context:

Please present the general background ("landscape of experience") of the activity and in which institutions, organisations, units or sectors the case took place.

Quality is of key importance in higher education. Different systems and approaches to quality assurance have been developed since mid 1990s and quality assurance was given a formal note of importance in the so called "Berlin Communique" in 2003 with first initiatives to make uniform standards (measures) of quality in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Universities should have internal responsibility for quality with (regular) self-evaluation processes, which is a common element in such systems, as promoted by the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA). In order for the self-evaluation practices to be comparable among institutions and internationally, practices of external evaluation were developed.

The need to keep up with other European universities emerged in Slovenian higher education, as well. Slovenian higher education institutions had to become capable of evaluating their educational, research and professional practices. Even though most of these institutions are regularly self-evaluated, there was no measure to assure that those self-evaluations were in any way comparable. In order to assure national as well as international comparability (and consequently mobility), some Slovenian higher education institutions applied for external institutional or programme evaluations within different international agencies or networks, such as EUA, Phare, CRE and other.

Slovenian higher education legislation was changed (upgraded) a few times since the mid 1990s until 2004, first introducing the aspects of quality in higher education and after each change defining them to further detail, especially in terms of formal responsibilities and establishing a national body responsible for external quality assurance. Even though a National Agency for Quality Assurance was supposed to be formed, the existing National Committee for Quality in Higher Education (NCQHE) took up the tasks of establishing a national model for external quality assurance in higher education. NCQHE was a body of academics in different fields of science that were interested in quality assurance; some of them were also external evaluators or observers with international experience. The ministry in charge of higher education appointed the NCQHE to prepare ground for first external institutional evaluations and test the model. The Committee prepared measures for monitoring, assessing and assuring quality of higher education institutions, study programmes, scientific research, and artistic and professional work (Measures). The measures were adopted at national level. Since NCQHE did not have the resources (staff) to continue with the activities of establishing the model, a public tender was opened and the University of Primorska, Faculty of management was selected for

2. What are the objectives and purposes of the concrete action?

The objective of the action presented in the case was to establish a proposal of a national external evaluation model and to pilot test it. Based on other countries' experience, it was decided to focus primarily on students as key stakeholders of higher education. More specifically, it was one of the aims of the project to test the adopted Measures, prepare a methodology and instruments for external institutional evaluations and test the methodology and instruments through piloting external institutional evaluations. The purpose of the pilot testing was not to assess or rank the evaluated higher education institutions.

The first phase of the project included preparing the methodology and instruments for external evaluation. These were prepared in working groups following recommendations and best practices observed in international evaluation networks and agencies, especially ENQA. The instruments comprised a Checking questionnaire for the higher education institution and a Visit protocol for the evaluation committee. The Checking questionnaire was prepared based on the Measures and served as a preparation tool for the higher education institution before the visit of the committee. It was composed of three parts that were systematically edited to cover different fields. The evaluated institution had to tick the existing elements in their self-evaluation practices and add appropriate references and/or appendixes as proof. This documentation was then checked and analysed by the external evaluation committee prior to the visit.

The Visit protocol was prepared as a help tool for the external evaluation committee. It comprised five dimensions of quality assurance and each of them was thoroughly defined by different elements of a higher education institution organization, as well as by suggestions for questions for further investigation of different practices in use.

Both the questionnaire and the protocol covered all the fields of the organisation and functioning of a higher education institution as presented in the Measures. These are:
- strategy, organisation and managing of the institution, arrangement of archives and concern for quality,
- education and study activities,
- scientific research, artistic and professional,
- faculty members, teachers and researchers and other academic co-workers,
- administrative and technical staff,
- students,
- infrastructure and equipment for educational and research activities, library,
- financing of education, research, artistic and professional work,
- cooperation with local, regional, national, and international environment.

The project group also prepared a sample External Institutional Evaluation Report, so that the evaluation commission only had to fill in the observations and findings of the evaluation

process.

According to international (best) practice, committees were comprised of 5 members, two to three academics, two or three representatives of employers and one student representative. Committee members were chosen from candidates that took part in special trainings organised for the purpose. One committee member was appointed as committee president.

Besides evaluation committees, observers joined the evaluation visits to follow the procedures, committees' work and the institutions' feedback. All feedback (committees', observers' and institutions') was checked and analysed to get an overview of the proposed model as well as proposals for its modification.

3. How does this activity combine insights from research and practical hands-on experience?

A lot of research efforts were put into designing the pilot external institutional evaluations. In the first phase, researchers analysed foreign practice, national legislation and policy, and existing quality assurance practice in Slovenian higher education institutions. A consultative conference with practitioners in quality assurance in higher education was organised to collect their experience as well as ideas on how an external institutional evaluation should take place. A lot of these practitioners at the time were academics, specialist in other scientific fields but concerned or interested personally in quality. Others were administrative staff responsible for self-evaluation in their institution. Existing practice was as diverse as people participating in the conference and it was taken into account in preparation of methodology and tools for the pilot evaluations.

Upon findings from research and the conference, the training for candidates for evaluators was organised. It comprised two events in September and November 2006. Besides practitioners and researchers who were willing to become evaluation committee members, deans and heads of schools' quality commissions, student representatives and heads of university quality commissions were invited. In total, there were 50 participants in the first and 33 in the second event. The first event was a combination of lectures of academics involved in quality assurance and practitioners of quality assurance from economy. The second event aimed at an acknowledgment with the Measures, the methodology and the tools. Of the participants that took part in both training events, four committees and four observer groups were appointed by NCQHE and four higher education institutions were selected for pilot evaluations.

Committee members got the evaluated school's documentation to check and analyse prior to the evaluation visit. The visit's aim was to gather extra information and get an insight into the school's every-day life. The committee checked for extra evidence and conducted interviews with the school's management, students, faculty and other groups. Findings were reported in the evaluation report and the evaluated schools were asked to prepare a feedback on the report as well as on the whole evaluation process.

The project team analysed all the work and all the feedback and prepared a report. This was

sent to evaluation committee members and other evaluator candidates with a request for feedback. Based on practitioners' and schools' feedback, modifications of the methodology and the tools were made. Participants also commented the training events, which was taken iton consideration for the final model proposal.

4. Does the institution/sector/unit provide instruments (e.g. ICT or human resources) for the implementation of the concrete action? Which tools were applied?

Based on the pilot project, a model of external institutional evaluations in higher education was established. It was formed not only based on research results, but included the practitioners' point of view and suggestions for final implementation. Since the end of the project more than 5 years have passed and policies as well as national bodies in charge of quality in higher education have been modified several times. Nevertheless, the model persists with minor changes.

At the time being, the National Agency for Quality in Higher Education is the body responsible for accreditations and evaluations at national level. One of the major changes took place in the external evaluation committees' structure: they include a foreign expert. The tools used for evaluation have been modified to better cover higher education institutions' functioning. Even though they are not more user friendly from the institutions point of view, they offer more information to the committee. Visits usually last two days.

The training of candidates takes longer, about four days, but contents are more or less the same. Training includes testimonials of experienced practitioners, which is a great way to introduce new evaluators to the field as well as to exchange (good and bad) practice with experienced practitioners.

Thus, through implementation of the project, besides the methodology, tools and training, the main outcome are the actual practitioners. Since a lot of the evaluators come from academia, after taking part in external evaluations as evaluators they actually become practitioners in the field of quality and a lot of them report to become more involved in their home institution's evaluation processes, as well.

5. Best practice/ Bad practice:

What kind of results were obtained? What do you consider to be the innovative or interesting part of this concrete action?

What are the barriers (potential and effective) to the full implementation of this action and what are its benefits?

In which sense can this action be useful for DIALOGUE?

An evidence of good practice of the above described project is that implementation was successful enough to persist till the present time. All modifications to the initial proposals were

made in collaboration with researchers and practitioners, so that both groups took active part in designing the current model.

Practitioners from economy, who have a longer and richer tradition in quality assessment and assurance as compared to higher education, were included in a project phase to contribute with their experience.

Another benefit is in intertwining the roles of researchers and practitioners. Several evaluators are researchers in their own scientific fields and interest in quality leads them to research and take practice in evaluations at institutional level as well as at national level as external evaluators.

This is overall not a very innovative approach if we consider the development of quality assurance in higher education Europe-wide, but it was a novelty in Slovenia and the principles of action in this project could be used positively in other similar initiatives.

6. Are researchers and practitioners directly linked in this activity?

- If yes, how are they linked and what are the communication and interaction processes?
- If they do not communicate directly, how are findings from research connected to practical activities and vice versa?

As stated in the previous section, a direct link between researchers and practitioners in the project was established in the conferences and in designing the final model proposal. In the practical activities, they worked together in the external evaluation committees.

In the current model, researchers and practitioners are still linked in the same way. The can communicate directly and exchange views and experience in the training events, where new research findings are presented to the practitioners and practitioners communicate their practical experience to researchers. Another communication tool are the evaluation reports and feedbacks on the visits as well as observers' reports that serve as an orientation point in designing potential modifications of the model.

7. Which elements would you identify as easily transferable to other institutions in different regional and national contexts?

An approach we found very effective on several occasions was the consulting conference where different groups of participants (in this case researchers and practitioners) met and exchanged opinions, views and experience. Meetings of this type can be applied to several different topics and when implemented in a less formal way, an open conversation occurs that can lead to establish direct links between the two groups on experiential and on personal level.

The other easily transferable and widely applicable approach is the training. This kind of events

can also be called workshops depending on how they are implemented. It is important that the host can achieve a mix of members of the participating groups so that any tasks given are solved by subgroups with different members (in our case researchers and practitioners). This way we achieve a direct interaction and the results are already including the linkage of different views.

8. Recommendations for dissemination:

Briefly identify the most important points in the case study for other ULLL managers and practitioners – these may include risks as well as benefits.

Please formulate some recommendations for the dissemination on the basis of the case study addressed to the working group and other partners.

When talking about external evaluation, the risk is always that the evaluators misinterpret the aim of the action and try to quantitatively grade or even rank the institution. It is of utmost importance that any evaluator gets proper training, both in evaluation theory and a practical insight (which can be effectively done by role-playing or simulations). Since the personal or subjective factor can never be fully excluded, potential conflicts of interest should be checked when selecting evaluators in external committees for specific schools. Including a foreign expert is a good way to improve the objectivity as well as experience of the group, but language (and cultural) barriers have to be taken into account.

Training of evaluators should be performed periodically, and this is a good LLL opportunity for both participants and hosts since experienced evaluators will most probably share their experience (good and bad practice) during different parts of training. This is also a good opportunity to follow up on the changes in policy and legislation in the field of higher education and quality, along with discussing it and preparing some (expert) feedback on it.

Here are some practical recommendations:
- discuss research results with practitioners for a "real life" feedback
- organise an informal conference or workshop including "mixed groups" activities to get feedback on proposed (theoretical and/or practical) solutions to analysed problems
- organise training or other activities periodically to maintain the linkage between researchers and practitioners for a (proper) follow-up of the ongoing activities

9. Additional information. E.g. bibliography, website, publications, reports

There is few evidence of the above described project in English. It was presented in some scientific conferences and a few articles were published in international journals.
- Rodman, Karmen, Katarina Košmrlj and Nada Trunk Širca. 2008. Analysis of the first institutional external evaluations of higher education institutions (in Slovenia). MIC '08 – Management International Conference, Portorož, Slovenia, November 26 – 29 2008, p. 69-80.

- Rodman, Karmen and Nada Trunk Širca. 2008. Ensuring professionalism of the external evaluation commission: the Slovenian case study. Managing global transitions : international research journal (6) 3, p. 301-315. (http://www.fm-kp.si/zalozba/ISSN/1581-6311/6_301-315.pdf)
- Rodman, Karmen and Nada Trunk Širca. 2008. On following the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European higher euation area : a Slovenian case study. International journal of services and standards (1) 4, p. 54-69.

The final report and other materials are in Slovenian and are available in the UP FM library and by the project team members.

We are intending to put your case study on the website.

Please tick here   if you do **not** wish to see your case study published on the project's website