

## **Session 3-4**

### **First Steps of an Impact Analysis in France**

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#### **Abstract**

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

- What are the impacts of our activity? Who is concerned? Is the impact the same for the various entities?
- How can we assess the impact in a context of institutional changes?  
AERES has tried to evaluate and to adapt its methodology. Is this an efficient approach? Is it our role or the role of an external body?
- AERES has tested a methodology to evaluate the impact of HEI evaluation.

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

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

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

Created by the French programme law on research of 2006 and running since March 2007, the National Agency for the evaluation of research and higher education in France (AERES) is tasked to evaluate all the higher education and research area. Each year, AERES evaluates about 60 institutions, 600 research units, and about 1000 higher education programmes and degrees. For this, nearly 5000 experts are mandated per year.

Our evaluations occur within a policy of contracting between entities and the ministry. Every 5 years, each entity must submit a strategic plan to the ministry, and evaluation occurs before, and the plan must convince regarding strengths and weaknesses identified in the evaluation reports.

At the beginning of 2012, a full cycle had been completed: all HEI, research units and programmes had been evaluated once. This provides us with a good opportunity to come back on our activities and their different types of impact.

Our contribution will address three main issues:

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

As the scope of assessment activities is wide, to identify the different way of impact, an indicative table can be used to try to map who is concerned, how and to what extent:

	<b>AERES itself</b>	<b>Evaluated body</b>	<b>Administrative control/ authority of the evaluated body</b>	<b>Public bodies &amp; students</b>	<b>Partners of the evaluated body</b>
<b>Impact of the report</b>	- Pressure from the evaluated bodies	- Indicator for quality (2) - Way of improvement highlighted	- Indicator used as a financial key (budget repartition) (2) - Better monitoring	- Better information for choice (1) -student life	- Better information for choice (1)
<b>Impact of the evaluation process</b>	- Changes in practices, self improvement	- Self improvement - Internal quality organisation stimulated	- Needs better taken into account	- Needs better taken into account	

(1) The French research area is evolving, and even if the French ministry of higher education and research remains to be its main administrator, the role of the Region as a decider is increasing. In 2011, AERES implemented a working group to appreciate the use of evaluations by Regions: do the reports meet their needs? Should AERES offer other tools?

In 2012, in the line of this analysis, the group met regional vice-presidents of research and one of its conclusions was: Regions need regional overviews of research evaluations including links between research and training, and an identification of scientific areas with wide influence (at the national and international level), and those with low influence. The experience has been implemented for 3 regions.

Regions used that work for the elaboration of their strategic plans of research and to guide their choices for funding, but in another way and at another level than what the ministry does. This might be another kind of impact of the Agency.

(2) This table only concerns positive impacts. To make an equivalent work for the unwanted impacts could be also interesting.

On that point, AERES has already identified an unwanted impact of external quality activities. This negative effect concerned the use of the evaluation reports of research units which included a global mark. Until September 2012, the mark given to a research unit may have different types of impact. It may have a direct impact for this unit itself: it provides information on its quality level, and on its performance compared to the other units.

But for the authority of the evaluated unit, the mark was also used as a key to reward the unit financially: the better the mark it had, the more budget it got. The mark system had also another impact on the selection of research units for national call for proposals.

This is one of the reasons why we had to take this into account and finally decided to end with this system. The agency decided to keep the multi-criteria mark but replace the global mark by a sentence which defines the global appreciation. The aim of that change was to avoid the judgement on the quality of research entities to be limited to a mark, and to give more value to the report.

## **2. How can we assess the impact of evaluation activities in this context?**

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

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

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

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

It is even more difficult to find a good methodology to assess the impact when the context is changing.

What evolutions in the HE area are the impacts of the external quality assurance process? And what is due to the change of the context?

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

Currently, the new government intends to actualize the framework of higher education and research with a new law, it will require further adaptation on the part of the AERES.

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

Each year, at the end of the campaign, assessment departments of research entities and institutions organize surveys to experts who made an assessment and to heads of evaluated entities.

Regarding the evaluation of institution, the survey is integrated to a global analysis of our process.

One questionnaire is sent to experts and another one to presidents of universities. Both can make general comments.

To complete the president's feedback, AERES analyses their replies to the final evaluation report. (Agency publishes evaluation reports with observations of evaluated institutions).

This survey is used to identify ways of impact of evaluation process.

this work provides elements to answer the following questions : Do the institutions find the diagnosis (strengths and weaknesses) relevant? If so, will the report be taken into account for the strategic plan? For the organisation and monitoring of the institution? If not, why?

Rectors of the institutions evaluated in 2012 declared at 76% that the report will be implemented into the strategic plan of the institution for the next years. 85 % declared that the report will impact the internal organisation and management. 55% answered that the report highlighted new ways of improvement that the institution will take into account and explore.

The same approach has been implemented regarding the evaluation of research units. The results highlighted that assessment is considered as a tool for directors to insist on new ways of improvement.

How can we improve it and make it more reliable? And how would it be able to think about improvement without any evaluation of our impacts?

What about the impact of evaluations on the contracts between institution and ministry?

Those surveys can be considered as a first step or experience of a deeper process regarding the impacts of evaluation.

After 5 years of activity, the whole French research and higher education area has been evaluated once. In the early 2013, AERES created an internal working group dedicated on the impacts of assessment. Its first mission is to identify more precisely the different kinds of impact, and to complete the table presented above. Then, if needed, the group will propose ways to explore and to understand impact mechanisms with other tools. These first experiences made the unexpected impacts visible, and the group should also paid a particular attention to these issues and analyse which one should be taken into account and how.

This issue will be a major reflection axes for the AERES next years. The national context of discussion about the Research and higher education area leded to an increasing relationship with other actors. Maybe, this issue could be treated with those partners.

Another key question to take into account is also the difference between the need to evaluate the impact and the need to communicate on it, in order to demonstrate the effects of our activities.

AERES has tried to take the impact into account but does not pretend to solve the problem. It would be very interesting to debate on this issue and to try to find coordinated ways to evaluate our impact.