

The perceived impact of external evaluation: the organisation vs the individual

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of how the employees of institutions of higher education perceive the influence of external evaluation. The study was conducted using the concurrent mixed method and involved 361 employees from Estonian universities and professional higher education institutions. The results indicated that evaluation is mostly deemed necessary on the level of the organisation or the system; the positive effect of external evaluation from the personal viewpoint of the employee is perceived to a lesser extent. The negative influences quoted were increased bureaucracy, extra work and stress. Top managers of institutions saw the most positive influence in external evaluation, as it helps to implement reorganisation and development activities within the organisation.

Introduction

The aim of this study was to identify the perceptions of employees of the Estonian higher education institutions (HEI) regarding external evaluation. The perceived effect on the level of the system and the individual was analysed, using a combination of the quantitative and qualitative methods (i.e. the concurrent mixed method) (Tashakkori and Cresswell 2007). We addressed different types of evaluation under the same term – ‘external evaluation’ – because the process is similar for all evaluations and is based on the classical model: the self-analysis report, a visit to the institution of higher education including interviews with management and lecturers, etc.

In Estonia, HEIs must undergo institutional accreditation and the quality assessment of study programme groups once every seven years. However, the aim in external evaluation is to move away from control towards supporting autonomy and encouragement of improvement, while at the same time keeping the institutions accountable and comparable (Udam, 2013). This situation is inevitably contradictory.

This study was conducted by the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency (EKKA) and attempts to answer the following questions: Do employees of higher education institutions perceive external evaluation as supportive, or as controlling and pressuring? Is the attitude towards external evaluation mostly positive or negative, and why? Are there differences between employees’

attitudes depending on the type of HEI and the main role of its employees, their age and gender? We investigated what external evaluation means to employees of HEI-s and what they believe external evaluation influences.

The study used a questionnaire that included multiple-choice questions and open questions, compiled by the authors of this article. In spring 2014, the questionnaire was conducted in all Estonian HEIs online. In total 361 employees of HEIs took part in this study and included 261 employees of universities and 100 employees of professional higher education institutions. There were 52 whose primary role in the HEI is being a manager. There were 143 lecturers, 71 researchers, 79 administrative workers and 16 other employees. The respondents were divided by age group as follows: there were 52 employees below 30; 91 aged 31-40; 80 aged 41-50; 78 aged 51-60 and 60 employees aged 61 or older. 233 respondents were female and 128 were male. The study sample size can be considered acceptable, while the confidence interval is 95% (Denscombe 2010).

Results: positive and negative impact of external evaluation

The current study showed that employees of Estonian HEI-s perceive the positive and negative impact of external evaluation fairly equally. Still, managers view external evaluation more positively than other employees of higher education institutions (Table 1). Also employees of professional higher education institutions perceive the positive impact more than staff from the universities. The negative impact of external evaluation is perceived similarly by all employees, regardless of age, gender, role or HEI type.

Table 1. Perceiving positive and negative impact of external evaluation by different groups surveyed (gender, age, type of higher education institute and primary role of respondent in HEI) (Anova and t-test)

Characteristics of the respondents	Positive influence	Negative influence
Gender	No differences according to gender	No differences according to gender
Age	No differences according to age	No differences according to age
The type of HEI (professional higher education,	The staff from professional higher education institutions	No differences according to the type of HEI

higher education)	perceive the positive influence more than the staff form universities	
The primary role in the HEI (manager, lecturer, researcher, administrative worker)	The managers perceive the positive influence more than other workers	No differences according to the primarily role in the HEI

Organisation vs individual: the perceived impact of external evaluation

The study enabled us to show that alongside the positive and negative impact of external evaluation perceived, it is important to differentiate between the impact of external evaluation at the level of the state higher education system, the HEI and the employee (Figure 1). The current study enables us to conclude that in the opinion of Estonian employees of HEI-s, external evaluation influences the level of the system and organisation positively, except for the bureaucracy involved. Employees generally feel that external evaluation directs them to acknowledge the weaknesses of the system and seek solutions, and makes Estonian higher education more reliable and prompts changes within the organisation. At the same time, this means a lot of work, self-evaluation, changes, feedback and evaluations at the personal level, which inevitably involve stress and the feeling of being controlled. Less frequently it was felt that external evaluation strengthens teamwork within an organisation, provides a good opportunity to share experience with experts and to get useful feedback from them, and that it is a positive challenge for those being assessed. The lowest mean points were gained by the claim that external evaluation makes those being assessed feel supported and encouraged.

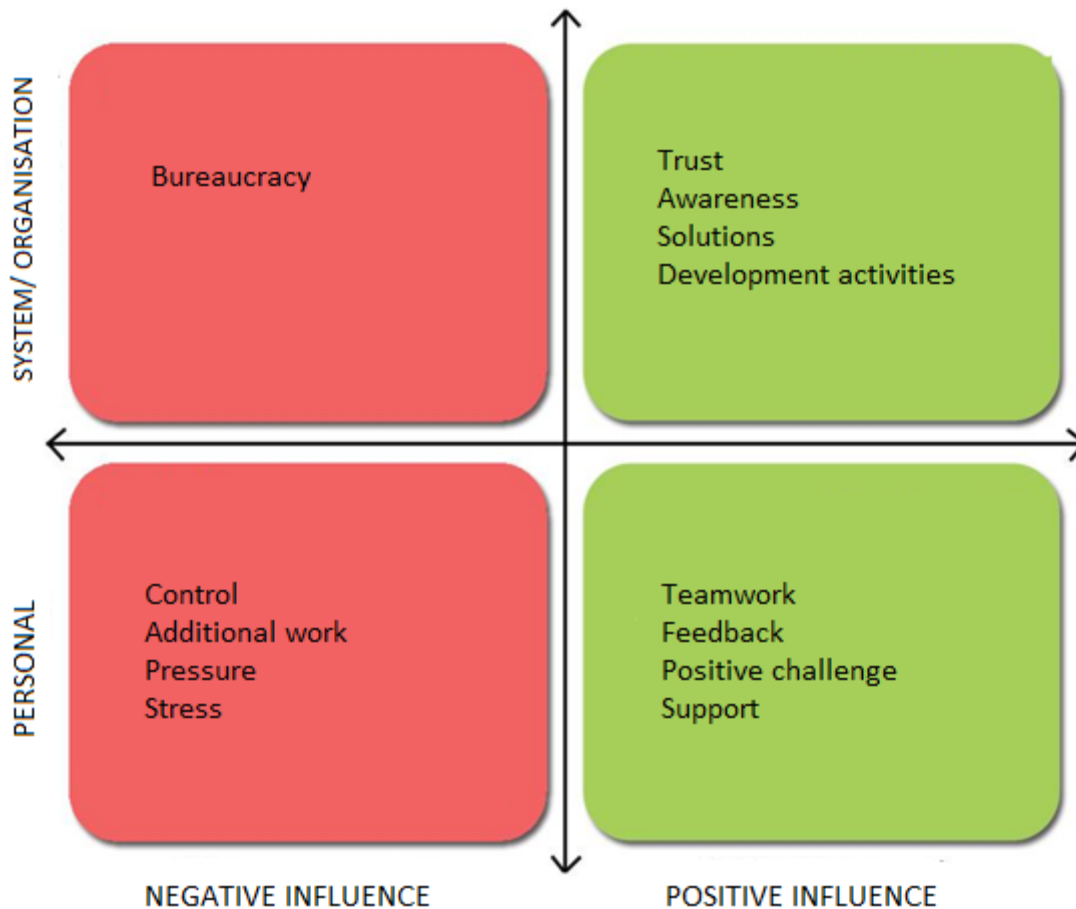


Figure 1. The perceived impact of external evaluation: the organisation vs the individual. The figure is simplified and illustrative.

Conclusion

External evaluation has the most positive impact in the view of management, helping realise organisational restructuring, raise awareness of the weaknesses in the system and find solutions, and making Estonian higher education more reliable. This study allows us to believe that the respondents mostly perceived the positive impact of external evaluation at the system level and the negative impact mostly from their personal viewpoint as an employee of an HEI. The discrepancy between organisational and individual level indicates the contradictory character of the external evaluation moving towards enhancement and improvement being still perceived at the individual level as a controlling measure.

References:

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