

# Responsibility of Educational Institutions for Strategic Change

Enrique Reboloso

*Department of Social Psychology, University of Almería, Spain*

Baltasar Fernández-Ramírez

*Department of Social Psychology, University of Almería, Spain*

Pilar Cantón

*Department of Social Psychology, University of Almería, Spain*

**Abstract:** The Spanish university is well into its  $n^{\text{th}}$  reform process, this time for the purpose of improving its legibility for members of the European Union under the extended Bologna Process. The reform involves a structural change in plans of study, as well as a cultural change to the Europeanist discourse, which mixes mercantilist values and defence of a fuzzy social orientation as public service in a difficult balance. Goals such as professionalization of degrees, meeting social demands and requirements, and widening the student base to include professionals who wish to continue their education are being pursued in different ways and with different intensities by national systems and centres of higher education. Evaluation, as a decision-making instrument, plays a key role in innovation and improvement and determining the direction of the changes (the goals) and the rhythm of change (process control). Evaluation is inserted in a model of strategic thought or of directed strategic change, which requires discussion by system stakeholders to define the future of higher education institutions. Some results of a recent metaevaluation of the institutional evaluation system employed in Spanish Andalusian universities show the difficulties in strategic change, assuming instead a legitimist model, in which our approximation to the models of other European university systems is pursued with a pronounced isomorphic character.

**Keywords:** metaevaluation; strategic change; Bologna Process; higher education

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The university is one of the social institutions that has demonstrated the most capacity for adaptation and survival (Reboloso, 1999). Its history and distribution throughout the world confirms this. The complexity of the institution combines a certain culture and formalisation across different countries with a different legal and administrative framework for each country, as well as the traditional

autonomy of each university. As a result, changes in university organisation have a multitude of potential origins, from supranational legislation or ideological tendencies to strategic changes and improvements promoted in each centre, even in each departmental unit (Wittrock, 1993). University reforms serve as a “laboratory” and model for change in other types of

organisations, and the interest in university management and the higher education sector is reflected in the vast list of publications and evaluation projects that are making their way into the specialized media.

This article briefly reviews the goals of the current reform process in European universities, known as the Bologna Process. We describe the changes in the structure of degrees that are demanded in the official declarations. Especially, we emphasize the role that institutional evaluation may have in this context, beyond the traditional functions of improvement and responsibility. Our goal is to propose a model for directed strategic change in which the metaevaluation activities are of central importance. Finally, we use an Andalusian metaevaluation study as a basis for discussion of some ongoing changes in the Spanish university. Institutional responsibility for redesigning it is outlined in the conclusions (Reboloso, Fernández-Ramírez, & Cantón, 2007).

## The New European University

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the University of the Masses has given way to a situation characterised by a reduction in students and increased competence of private, distance universities and other educational centres. They offer quick and mixed degrees with more professional projection, which are more attractive than the traditional academic degrees. At the same time, political leaders in European higher education began the change fearing for funding of an aging and fading system, unable to adapt to the new international market and social requirements for higher education. The original Bologna Declaration (1999) outlined the basic directives for changes, with the goal of creating a common space for higher education on the Continent.

Bologna, or convergence, means different things to different stakeholders. It is a dynamic process that also has had also varied meanings

over time. The original political declaration proposed the goal of creating a competitive international European Space. The basic strategy was to increase legibility of the degrees or programmes that are taught across the Continent (Huisman & Wende, 2004; Westerheijden & Leegwater, 2003). However, the proposal takes arguments fought on a hypothetical level for granted and leaves how the changes should be introduced in practice completely open. Each country's legislative autonomy and the autonomy of the institutions themselves, which have the final responsibility for introducing the expected changes, should be mentioned.

Haug and Tauch (2001) summarise the goals of the process in the following way: (a) promote the mobility of students and graduates, (b) improve their employability, and (c) increase international attractiveness and competitiveness of European higher education. The instruments for convergence are (a) the (re)design of degrees making them more legible and therefore comparable among the different types of institutions involved in higher education, (b) a new structure in two large stages or cycles (the bachelor/master's degrees), (c) the use of the European credit (ECTS) as a system of accumulation and transfer, (d) and the implantation of quality assurance (QA) and accreditation systems that assist international acceptance of the degrees that each institution gives. Supposedly, these changes will result in the legibility necessary to favour the creation of joint degrees, the establishment of international university networks, and the mobility of students and of professional staff. The final goal is for employability of graduates, as well as the quality, competitiveness, and international attractiveness of our universities and the educational programmes they offer (Bergen Communiqué, 2005).

In the case of Spain, the situation is confusing and not entirely praiseworthy. The impression is that we are behind and that important matters beyond the simple

bachelor/master's structural reconfiguration (well accepted, the same as we already had before the reform of the reform, when the programmes were organized in a first and second cycle of diploma and bachelor degrees) are neglected (see the *Trends IV* report by Reichert & Tauch, 2005). We have hardly progressed from the pilot-project stage and formation of working groups, motivated by goodwill and with little outside aid (regional, when there is any, but not national). We have not yet abandoned the previous system and, although the proximity of the change is in the air, it is not even clear what legislation will govern the structure of the study programmes, much less matters such as employability, lifelong learning, joint degrees, or mobility—all of which are key goals and strategies of the convergence process. There is much misinformation, although it should be acknowledged that in good part this is due to a lack of interest among faculty, students, and academic authorities, who are comfortably settled back and waiting to be told what to do and for others to experiment first. Power groups have assumed a certain Europeanist discourse, although it occurs to us that this may be more electoral publicity. The date of 2010, originally proposed as the culmination of the reform, seems already too near and precipitated, with the risk of losing the initial impetus and keeping us at a superficial level of change that leaves things just the way they already were.

## The Question of Recognition

The new degrees adapted to the bachelor/master's and ECTS structure do not in themselves ensure that our graduates will be recognised or be able to continue their studies or practice their professions in other countries. (This is true for only a few degrees already specifically regulated in Europe.) The decision depends on national legislation, and even on each university centre. We need the different countries and centres to be able to prove to

each other that our students have studied quality courses and possess the competencies that they need to have. The forums promoted by the Council of Europe for the matter of recognition since the Lisbon Convention (1997) advance in line with the process of convergence: international recognition requires a homogeneous structure of degrees in different countries (ECTS, bachelor/master's, diploma supplement, etc.) and accreditation and quality assurance networks (van Damme, 2003; Westerheijden, 2003). Let us suppose that a graduate from another country applies for admission in a course we are giving, or wants to practice his profession in our city. How do we know that his or her level of education is a guarantee? First, we have to be able to understand what degree the individual studied in his or her own country (that is why a common programme structure facilitates legibility) and second, that it is a degree of sufficient quality (that is why accreditation networks and evaluation certify quality). Otherwise, we need our degrees to be structurally similar and have passed common evaluation processes, that is, homogeneity of structure and homogeneity in the management systems (Council of Europe, 2002; Council of Europe/ENIC, 2001; ENIC/NARIC, 2003), under the general assumption that legibility of the degrees will increase mutual confidence in institutions for recognition of the professional competence of their graduates (Reichert & Tauch, 2005).

Summing up, the legal framework is quite well advanced, and there have been many reforms in the different countries during the last decade (Witte, 2006). Now national governments and universities must go further into reform and really enter the post-Bologna European Higher Education Space with all of its consequences.

## The Role of Institutional Evaluation

Evaluation has been common in our universities since the nineties (Mora, 2004). Formally, it follows the American accreditation models, with the important exception that the external report is not binding (no more than a friendly peer review). Evaluation leads to a situation we could consider “tranquilizing,” since, in any case, there are no negative consequences (see criticism by Scriven [1996] of biased peer evaluations). The basic work materials are evaluation guidelines that have been adapted to the university context (e.g., Unit for the Quality of Andalusian Universities [UCUA], 2004; Reboloso, Fernández-Ramírez, & Cantón, 2003). Evaluation also formally pursues the traditional goals of improvement and responsibility as assumed in the European discourse of convergence (European University Association, 2003; Nyborg, 2002; Surssock, 2003; Westerheijden, 1997). Responsibility is the mechanism by which the university justifies itself to society about the way in which it employs public resources placed at its disposition; improvement is the consequence of preparing improvement plans and actions as the outcomes of the process, as required by the corresponding guidelines. Both functions could be analysed and discussed in a critical manner, although this is not the moment to do so.

In the context of European reform, evaluation fulfils at least two other functions, both definitely directed at increasing our potential partners' and customers' confidence in our centres: a legitimising function and a strategic function. The first refers to the potential recognition of our centres merely because they have passed an evaluation (Dahler-Larsen, 1998; Patton, 1997). Quality assurance procedures (that is, institutional evaluation processes) would become the guarantees of each centre and the basis for confidence, the creation of collaboration networks, and the extension of recognition mechanisms (Haug & Tauch, 2001; Reichert & Tauch, 2005).

Supposing that the accrediting agency that directs the evaluation in turn enjoys prestige or credibility, then passing the evaluation effectively becomes the guarantee of our quality for others. The creation of agencies or consortia of accreditors (e.g., European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education) or university networks that share an accreditation system (e.g., Philips, 2001) facilitate the goal of legitimization. Of course, the risk is that the authorities at the centres may go too far in legitimating and forget that the evaluation also fulfils other functions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Choi & Eboch, 1998).

The strategic function has to do with the existence of a future vision and planning changes (Mintzberg, 1994). Evaluation is used then, as a systematic activity to assist in implanting changes and adjusting them along the way. It is not merely a matter of correcting errors in the plan of work set up in the organisation (improvement function), but redefining it and reconstructing it in the most promising direction within the convergence process. This is how the opportunities and advantages of internationalisation and collaboration in working networks may be put to their best use. In the following section, we describe our model of the way evaluation should be used in this strategic sense. Before this, however, it is also worth mentioning the importance of choosing the agency and system that the centre wishes to be evaluated (accredited) by well, since each agency defines its own criteria of interest and areas of analysis and not all of them give priority to the internationalisation and convergence effort. For example, the criteria defined by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) (2005) for the creation of a common European institutional evaluation system do not include any reflection or criterion in this respect. ENQA criteria are rooted more in the type of evaluation tested and developed

in the pre-Bologna European context. Beyond the rhetoric of improvement and justification, the main function of these criteria is the legitimization of universities so they will be valued by their potential partners on the Continent. This is not a bad goal, of course, although it does not coincide with our idea of the strategic potential of evaluation and can create situations in which a centre that remains isolated and distanced from the efforts for convergence is legitimated.

### A Model for Strategic Change

In our context, an evaluation system (accreditation, quality assurance) is composed of, among other things, a set of criteria and areas of interest that indicate the organisational aspects that will be subjected to analysis (evaluated), leading to suggestions for improvement wherever noticeable deficiencies are found (Reboloso, Fernández-Ramírez, Cantón, & Pozo, 2000). In principle, only those

aspects defined in the evaluation system are susceptible to improvement. Therefore, it is of crucial importance that the criteria and areas of interest truly relevant for improvement and organisational change be chosen (Dahler-Larsen, 2007; Reboloso, Fernández-Ramírez, Cantón, & Pozo, 2002). An example is given in a comparison between traditional process evaluation (monitoring and control of processes) and evaluation of results (impact indicators, economic results, cost/benefit analysis). The first concentrates on key areas for structuring work processes, including the resources necessary and the appropriate management systems; the second concentrates on data on results, from which the impact of activities or relative cost are estimated (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004; Stufflebeam, 2001). In sum, by evaluating the management system, we help improve operations and by evaluating the results, we assist in decision making to facilitate the organisation's success.

Table 1  
Four Key Concepts for Directed Strategic Change

Concept	Definition	Examples
Metacriteria	Supravalues that indicate or determine the values that are to be included in metaevaluation	Democracy, improvement, responsibility, etc.
Metaevaluation criteria	Values, principles, and guidelines that show how the evaluation should be done and serve to judge its quality	Participation, diffusion of information, objectivity, feasibility, opportunity, etc.
Evaluation criteria	Values that reflect a series of management areas and best practices that show the direction in which organisational change should go	Participative style of management, information system availability, clarity of processes, etc.
Organisational Change	Specific actions for change in an established direction (isomorphism vs. innovation)	Creation of improvement teams, redesign, satisfaction surveys, etc.

Let us assume, at a higher level of analysis, that we wish to know whether the evaluation system implemented is appropriate for the organisation. We have to choose a second set of relevant criteria and areas of interest to judge the quality, correctness, relevance, etc., of the evaluation

system. This activity is called metaevaluation, understood as the application to itself of the principles and methods that motivate any evaluation (Bustelo, 2003; Cooksy & Caracelli, 2005; Scriven, 2000; Stufflebeam, 2001). The answer to the question of how metaevaluation is

carried out is simple: the same as any other evaluation performed assiduously by a competent professional. The problem appears when we try to decide on the specific criteria that are used to judge the evaluation system under analysis. Reboloso, Fernández-Ramírez, and Cantón (2007, 2008) demonstrate this variety in the context of the university evaluation, including professional standards (Joint Committee, 1994), ethical principles (American Evaluation Association, 1995), and quality criteria for scientific research (Chen, 1990; Coryn, 2007; Coryn, Hattie, Scriven, & Hartmann, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1989), among other possibilities. The *Checklist Project* Web site by Western Michigan University's The Evaluation Center (The Evaluation Center, 2008) provides an even larger number of

possibilities. Scriven (2000) suggests that a checklist be made for each individual case using different sources of information and negotiating its final content with metaevaluation stakeholders.

To decide on such an enormous variety of possible criteria and sets of criteria, Reboloso, Fernández-Ramírez, and Cantón (2007) propose the metacriteria concept, that is, that we need to define third-order criteria for choosing the metaevaluation values to be used to judge and point out the defects in an evaluation system. If you feel lost at this point, Figure 1 shows the simplicity of the proposal. Table 1 also includes a short definition of each of the key concepts in the model.

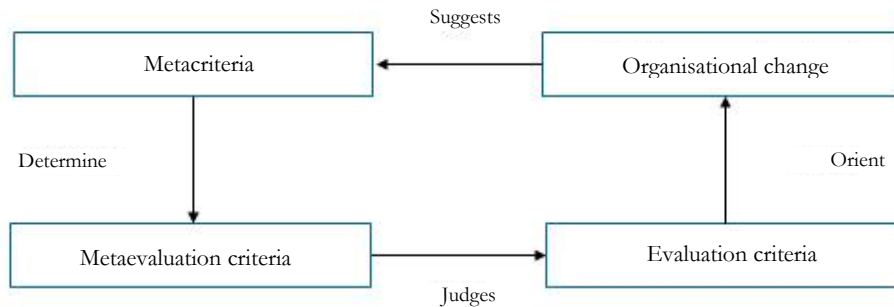


Figure 1. Directed strategic change

At this point, our experience is that necessary metacriteria are few and loaded with high ideological and strategic value for the organisation. The crucial questions would be what kind of organisation we want for the future (strategic thought, Mintzberg, 1994) and what values (metacriteria) are coherent with this vision. After that, the criteria for metaevaluation that maximise these values can be chosen and

used to critically review and adjust the evaluation system responsible in the end for revising, judging, orienting, and improving the management systems and the organisational results in line with the desired future foreseen.

In conclusion, what we are doing is generalizing the logic of evaluation and strategic thought, under the assumption that the criteria for value are selected with purposeful intention,

to orient the subject in some desired and strategically decided direction. At the bottom is a constructionist approach, according to which evaluation does not describe any established reality (although many continue conceiving of it in this way), does not judge by any absolute standard, but assists interest groups in redefining the organisation in an open, negotiated process. The approach is qualitative, constructionist, and openly post modern (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mabry, 2002; Reboloso, Fernández-Ramírez, Cantón, & Pozo, 2000).

## The Case of Andalusian Universities

### *The Metaevaluation Approach*

The Metapecu Project was developed over the last four years for the purpose of metaevaluating the evaluation system of Andalusian university degrees registered in the Plan for Andalusian University Quality (PACU) and promoted by the Spanish National Evaluation Agency (ANECA). This project has already been described elsewhere (Reboloso, Fernández-Ramírez, & Cantón, 2007).

The evaluation process, criteria and areas of interest are described in the guidelines used by the self-evaluation committees (Reboloso, Fernández-Ramírez, & Cantón, 2003; UCUA, 2004). They follow the conventional steps of planning, internal evaluation, external visit and reporting with the improvement plans (approximately the four-step model described by van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). As mentioned above, there are no direct consequences for the faculty or the degree evaluated beyond the persons directly involved being able to put into practice the improvement plans included in the final report. The Andalusian government allocates a percentage of the budget of each university to compliance with a programme-contract which includes, among other objectives, a certain number of

annual evaluations in different functional areas of the organisation, including degrees. Supposedly, each university should make an overall evaluation of the degrees, services, personnel, etc., every five years.

Metaevaluation of the system demanded the preparation of a long checklist, useful for judging each of the elements and stages in the evaluation process. The checklist criteria were extracted from very different proposals and models (Reboloso, Fernández-Ramírez, & Cantón, 2007). The list was later reduced to the four metacriteria described below:

1. Feasibility: Metaevaluation criteria should assist in ensuring the practical feasibility of the evaluation processes. Feasibility depends on a compromise between what must and what can be done in a context marked by political relationships and limited budgets (Weiss, 1998). This metacriterion leads to choosing values that emphasise availability of resources, political feasibility, centrality, responsiveness, adjustment to organisational conditions, and freely accepted participation.
2. Democratic attitudes: Fulfilling the strategic function, metaevaluation should favour a constructionist evaluation oriented toward promotion of democratic values (House & Howe, 2000; Reboloso, Fernández-Ramírez, Cantón, & Pozo, 2000). University institutional evaluation is useful for establishing a joint process of reflection by different stakeholders (faculty, administration staff, governing teams, students, social groups). Their task is to deliberate and define a common vision of what is being done and of the strategies for improvement that can be implanted in the short- to mid-term. Participation in a self-evaluation committee becomes an occasion to report and criticise, more than a place to

analyze any supposed objective reality of the institution. This metacriterion suggests application of the values of participation, diffusion of information, autonomy, a critical attitude, negotiation, and consensus, among others.

3. Improvement: Metaevaluation criteria should contribute to developing an evaluation oriented toward improvement, one of the basic goals of university evaluation (Westerheijden, 1997). The evaluation results are directed at putting the improvement plans into practice, and the responsibility to society is to make an effort along this line, more than reporting periodically on the status of the institution through sets of indicators or similar methods. This metacriterion leads to selecting values of development, relevance, utility, legibility, and exhaustiveness, among others like them.
4. Responsibility (accountability): This metacriterion covers the function of legitimisation, to increase the credibility of the institution for potential partners in international recognition agreements or sponsors and customers. Just any kind of evaluation is not good enough. It has to be one that ensures transparency and public information in keeping with the demands of university evaluation systems in use in the context of European convergence (ENQA, 2005; van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). This metacriterion leads to the selection of criteria like centrality of the evaluation, information diffusion, resolving conflicts of interest, data control, representativeness of stakeholders, public participation, and evidence-based reports.

With these four metacriteria, a metaevaluation checklist was defined that covered the four larger functions of evaluation within the framework of the European convergence process (Haug & Tauch, 2001; Westerheijden & Leegwater, 2003). We assume that, by improving the sections and components of the evaluation system that help improve organizational behaviour, we are promoting universities with a better potential for internationalisation, since they would gain in legitimacy and capacity for change. The four metacriteria resolve, by assimilation, the problem created between promoting an isomorphic model for change (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), concentrating only on the legitimacy that is gained by mere participation in an evaluation process acceptable in European forums, and an innovative model that gives priority to a desire for in-depth reform adjusted to structural and cultural changes demanded by the convergence process. The way to include a strategic perspective is transferred to the metacriterion of democratic attitudes, under the assumption that introduction of profound changes must be born of bottom-up motivations and decisions, in negotiated processes where the stakeholders defend their interests and jointly construct the strategic vision and the mechanisms for approaching it (Choi & Eboch, 1998; Owens, 1998; Reboloso, Fernández-Ramírez, & Cantón, 2005). As we describe in the following section, the evaluation system's quality, and therefore, much of the success of the change, depends on the contribution of the institution's authorities, who have a fundamental role in decisions on the evaluation model and process support, by providing the necessary resources and promoting evaluation use (European Foundation for Quality Management [EFQM], 2001; Reboloso, Fernández-Ramírez, Cantón, & Pozo, 2000; Sonnichsen, 2000).

The study analyzes the opinions of eighty-one members of teaching staff at six Andalusian universities that had previously participated as

members of self-evaluation committees from 1997 to 2005. In general, they were permanent faculty members (83.9%) with an average seniority of 14.8 years at the university. Only a very small number of evaluations ended the same year they were begun (3.7%), and 48.1% did the following year, indicating that in most cases the period was excessive. Other potentially relevant variables, such as sex, scientific field or degrees evaluated, were homogeneously distributed and not worth any special comment. An exhaustive description of the sample data may be found in Reboloso, Fernández-Ramírez, and Cantón (2007).

The participants answered an online questionnaire made up of eighty-two metaevaluation criteria selected by the method described. The data were collected during the first two months of 2006. The questionnaire was divided into nine blocks of criteria, including the stages of the evaluation process (self-evaluation, external evaluation, final report, and post-evaluation action), as well as relevant points on expected functions of evaluation, the institutional context, information and control mechanisms, the guidelines, and the results of evaluation. The eighty-two criteria were answered twice: once to an evaluative question (Do you think evaluation should be done in line with the criterion?) and once to a descriptive question (Do you think the evaluation in which you participated was done in line with the criterion?). So we know not just whether a criterion was covered satisfactorily, but we also know whether it is important from the point of view of the committee members. The distinction also has to do with the difference between evaluative and descriptive data and the role they have in performing evaluations (Scriven, 1996). Descriptive and comparative analyses were done for the three types of data that resulted (descriptive, evaluative, and the difference between them) including the differences in means (Student's t-test) in each block of criteria. The results are being used at the present time and some advances have been

included in the source mentioned (Reboloso, Fernández-Ramírez, & Cantón, 2007).

## Institutional Responsibility for University Reform

Below we summarise some conclusions of the study using the four metacriteria that oriented it. The conclusions have been synthesised in Table 2, showing the weaknesses and strengths of the evaluation system, especially with regard to the institutional responsibility for the success of the evaluations. Evidently, this brief summary does not give a complete vision of the characteristics, good points, and defects of the evaluation systems used in the context of Andalusian universities. However, it does give us a starting point to introduce some critical reflections on the way in which the authorities at the centres are focussing the question of evaluation and the goals that are pursued. The results in Table 2 concentrate on the evaluation context and functions and on the implementation of the improvement plans. We leave the metaevaluation of performance of the evaluation itself for future work and concentrate here only on those points requiring commitment and decisive, aware, and effective action by institutional authorities at our universities.

*Feasibility.* The evaluation system has some important deficiencies, although the evaluations are carried out with apparent normality at all of the centres. The evaluations do not occupy the place that corresponds to them within a management system, are not adjusted to the planning processes, receive few resources, and the competence of the evaluation and self-evaluation teams is questionable. In our opinion, the governing teams and the technical administration teams have not assumed the role of evaluation in the university management systems, trusting instead on internal reports of doubtful quality and not-very-reliable personal intuitive diagnoses. However, the main feasibility problem is scant implementation of

the improvement plans. The percentage of skipped answers in the section of the questionnaire that refers to these matters (around 50%) is surprisingly high, even though most of the respondents participated in evaluations that ended more than a year before. This is more than enough time to have discussed and initiated the implantation of the plans. Although we share the idea that the influence of the evaluation happens in indirect ways often unforeseen (Kirkhart, 2000), we think that the evaluations must show the community direct, visible impact to overcome reluctance and make its usefulness convincing.

The governing authorities at the centres must facilitate and empower the use of the results, taking on their recommendations themselves and supporting with resources the implementation of the improvement plans in the units evaluated. We already know other contexts where evaluations, so promising in the beginning, have become routine tasks (boring, repetitive) that many do out of obligation, aware of their uselessness (Reboloso, Fernández-Ramírez, & Cantón, 2005; Choi & Eboch, 1998).

Table 2  
Some Weaknesses and Strengths of the Evaluation System

Criteria	Strengths and Weaknesses
Feasibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The opportunity and centrality of the evaluation are undervalued</li> <li>• Evaluations have few resources and little competence</li> <li>• Compensations for committee members are not equitable</li> <li>• The evaluation does not continue in support of improvement</li> <li>• There is no clear institutional commitment or sufficient resources</li> </ul>
Democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovation and the critical function are neglected</li> <li>• Prior exposition of stakeholder interests is deficient</li> <li>• The persons and interests in the groups involved are respected</li> <li>• Participation is freely accepted</li> <li>• There is no autonomy to decide on improvements</li> </ul>
Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The evaluations are directed at improvement</li> <li>• The evaluation is not completely tuned to current needs</li> <li>• Implementation of improvement plans is deficient</li> </ul>
Responsibility (accountability)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The evaluations are oriented toward responsibility</li> <li>• Periodicity and centrality standards are not met</li> <li>• Errors and bias in collecting, preparing, and controlling basic data are common</li> </ul>

*Democratic attitudes.* The general impression is moderately positive. The evaluation system is in keeping with the ethical principle of respect for persons (AEA, 1995), nobody is hurt, and the interests of the groups involved are respected. Although the participants receive very little compensation, participation is freely accepted and all of the groups are represented on the committees. Nevertheless, the advantages of the evaluation in support of innovation and critical review of organisational practices are neither

known nor promoted. Instead, the participants understand that the evaluations are for the purpose of improvement and responsibility, conventional functions of any evaluation system (Chelimsky, 1997; Westerheijden, 1997). A possible solution would be to improve the competence of the evaluators and the participants so they are not limited to an evaluation model that is used because everybody does it or because it responds to an external political demand that is assumed

without a critical attitude. It is possible that many of those involved do not even have a clear idea of why they are doing the evaluations, what the final goals are, and what the costs and benefits to the institution and each of the stakeholders are. The opinion of the participants is that the many interests of those involved are not sufficiently presented before work is begun. This lack of information may have negative consequences, discouraging participants in the mid- to long-term and creating distrust of the governing authorities, whose image is that of being more concerned with the political situation than for the interests of the units evaluated (Choi & Eboch, 1998).

*Improvement.* The respondents fully assume the improvement function of the evaluations, perhaps as part of the official discourse that justifies their performance. The first hurdle for the effectiveness of the improvement function is the lack of adjustment to the needs of the units evaluated. It is a consequence of mechanically applying a standard evaluation guideline, which suggests a certain distance from the questions that must be analysed during the process. The process demands greater flexibility so the committees can choose among the subjects and how they are to be dealt with, keeping in mind the idiosyncrasies of each degree. Although, as mentioned above, the real problem for improvement is the apparent lack of commitment and motivation in implementing the improvement plans that emerge from the process. This fact shows how hard it is for current the evaluation system to turn into authentic management tools for the improvement of the degrees. While public commitment is limited to performing the evaluations, the effort of making the improvements is reduced to the good will and motivation of the participants, which can have a certain impact (Reboloso, Fernández-Ramírez, & Cantón, 2005), but in the end reinforces the lack of institutionalization of the whole evaluation and improvement process.

*Responsibility (accountability).* Our general impression of the results is inconclusive. The responsibility function is assumed in public discourse about the reason for evaluations, but it is not just a matter of performing evaluations because they are required. Evaluation forms part of the cyclic activities of management systems (planning, intervention, and evaluation, in the simplest model possible; Reboloso, Fernández-Ramírez, & Cantón, 2008; Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). At universities, evaluations are not being conducted as frequently or centrally as desirable. Centre authorities are apparently not making use of the potential for rationality and strategic thinking that evaluation provides, and we suppose they are replaced by intuitive processes of problem analysis, decision making, and planning of work processes. An additional problem has to do with the deficient and biased information given the self-evaluation committees. Credibility of the system decreases when the committees are required to reflect on unverified data and personal opinions subject to uncontrolled bias. The problem has been obvious for years (Mora, 2004), and a unified information system valid for the whole university system is lacking.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, we have an evaluation system that is reasonably feasible, has acceptably democratic procedures, is of limited value for improvement, and is generally worthy of confidence for the system users. We lack similar studies that could serve as a reference in the Spanish context, where metaevaluations as such are not made beyond the final reports linked to the national or regional evaluation plans (CCU, 2003; UCUA, 2003). Westerheijden (1997) reports on the balance found in the improvement and responsibility functions in the evaluation systems at Dutch universities. In our case, this balance may not be occurring, given that the potential for system improvement is less than its capacity to serve as a mechanism of

responsibility. Our great challenge is for governing teams to undertake evaluation as an essential function integrated in the centres' management and not just as activities that must be done (it does not make much difference by whom) because it is required by higher political authorities and because the institutional image requires the procedure of passing evaluations. Meanwhile, time goes on and the opportunities for improvement and reform in line with European convergence are not being taken advantage of. Evaluation is stabilizing in a flat line that offers certain legitimacy to the institution and its programmes, without causing important changes or problems for anybody.

Nevertheless, we are not convinced that the goal of legitimisation, which has emerged in discussions of the role of institutional evaluation, is preferable in the new context of European convergence. The evaluation systems in use were already practically defined in 1999, and neither their philosophy nor contents have been revised to adapt them to the new goals and requirements of the European Higher Education Space (for example, they completely ignore the matter of internationalisation, incorporation of new organisational structures of degrees or matters such as lifelong learning, the problem of mobility, creation of strategic university associations, and a long list of etceteras; see Bergen Communiqué, 2005; Reichert & Tauch, 2005).

The evaluation system used at Andalusian universities has a good opportunity for developing along this line of action, although we believe that the mechanisms that bind the results of the basic group discussions to the political instances of decision making lack definition and therefore the proposals for change do not arrive with clarity. Our authorities and colleagues need to have political will and a Europeanist strategic sense.

As we have shown in these pages, metaevaluation is a useful tool for describing evaluation processes, judging them, and discovering some deficiencies and strengths.

Evaluation is not an end in itself, but a tool supporting strategic change. If the model for accreditation in use in our universities is maintained with the same features as before the convergence proposals (and nothing seems to indicate that this is going to change), metaevaluation has pointed out a good number of weaknesses and occasions for improvement; in contrast, if the model is updated and even takes risks, anticipates the future, and is innovative, then we would have to begin an in-depth discussion on the reform of university structures and management processes and the best evaluation systems for these purposes.

Bologna and convergence have been an open process from the beginning, when only a few brief ideas defined the fuzzy intentions of the European ministerial authorities in matters of higher education, leading to interpretation, discussion, and proposals for a broad set of social agents (universities, the European Commission, specialists in university theory and policy, student associations, among some relevant others; Vlk, 2006). The changes that have been brought about were not foreseen in the original declaration; it has maintained the spirit of convergence and the desire for modernization and little more. Although the goals and central ideas are mentioned repeatedly (see the progress of trends from Haug & Tauch, 2001; Reichert & Tauch, 2003, 2005), each country and university has read the process and interpreted it in different ways, making decisions that respond directly and mainly to their vision of the interests in play and to their position on the great playing board of the European university (some have not even assumed a Europeanist vision, limited to taking positions within their national or regional politics).

What is the role of the Andalusian and Spanish university in the process? Are we spectators dragged along by changes that others propose or do we have a vocation for leadership, for anticipation? (Except some well located universities, the impression is that we

are being dragged along and often do not know by what.) In the open convergence process, we have the opportunity to decide what we want to be and what future we want our universities to go in, create our model, and strategically put it into practice. Evaluation systems could be the basic tool for orienting, controlling, and ensuring the success for desired change.

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