

The “integrated evaluation” process developed by the AERES: how it works, its difficulties and benefits

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Abstract

The French evaluation agency for research and higher education (AERES) is tasked by law of three main missions (evaluation of higher education institutions, research units, and degrees and programmes). As the interactions between the three departments were not organised by the law creating the AERES, the agency has developed a process of “integrated evaluation” which allows to feed the department for evaluation of higher education institutions with pertinent information elaborated by the department for evaluation of research units and the department for evaluation of degrees and programmes. This process has required the definition of the objectives fixed to integrated evaluation, the determination of the methodology adapted to the objectives and the resources to be engaged. It is the aim of this paper to give insights on these topics.

Introduction

Until the AERES was founded, the evaluation of higher education institutions as well as the major part of the formations and degrees was carried out chiefly by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research.

The evaluation of research units was more complex as it was organised by:

- the numerous French research bodies (CNRS or national centre for scientific research, INSERM or national institute for health and medical research, INRA or national institute for agronomical research to simply name the most important of them) evaluated their own units and the units in partnership with a university .Within organisations, the evaluation was entrusted to in-house commissions made up of a variable proportion of elected staff representatives.
- a department of the Ministry of Higher Education and Research for strictly university research units.

The law offered a simplification of the overall picture in tasking the AERES, of three main missions:

- evaluating research organisations and institutions, research and higher education institutions, scientific cooperation foundations and institutions and the French National Research Agency as regards all of their missions and activities;
- evaluating the programmes and degrees of higher education institutions;
- evaluating the research activities conducted by the research units of the aforementioned institutions and organisations; the AERES was to perform said evaluations either directly or by calling on institutions and organisations whose procedures it has validated;

The AERES analysed the two possibilities offered in the latter paragraph and concluded that it was certainly better that , for the first time in France, all research units could be evaluated by the same agency, using well-defined procedures elaborated after discussions with stakeholders and made public on its web site. In addition, the AERES decided that all evaluation reports would be made public on its web site as well as the observations of the evaluated structures.

But a new question arose : the French law has tasked the AERES with evaluating higher education and research institutions, research units, programmes and degrees but did not forge any interaction between the three different types of evaluation, *i.e* finally between the three departments of the agency. The consequence, and the danger, was then that evaluations conducted independently would not benefit from each other and that there was a risk of a lack of consistency between them.

For these reasons, the AERES considered from its onset that, for higher education and research institutions - especially universities - the three types of evaluation should not be carried out independently because:

- the evaluation of higher education programmes, doctorates in particular, requires knowledge about the quality of their association with research;
- the evaluation of institutions is conducted more pertinently if it takes account of evaluations of the range of programmes and research units;
- the new campaign's preparatory and feedback meetings are more effective if they are held with the three departments.

This common-sense reasoning was the driving force for a major axis of the AERES' policy conducted since November 2007. It led the agency to foster interactions between its three departments so as to turn its missions to best account.

The concept of integrated evaluation has emerged from this "cross-fertilisation" of its activities. This has been implemented from the evaluation campaign of the so-called "group A institutions" (*i.e* the group of institutions evaluated from October 2009 to June 2010) and having signed a contract with the French Ministry of higher education and research.

In this paper, we describe the integrated evaluation process, its benefits and the difficulties we had -and for some of them still have-to face¹.

The integrated evaluation process

Integrated evaluation involves control of a complex procedure in both scientific and logistical terms within a tight schedule, as well as the allocation of the AERES' own resources and implementation of such specific operations as the delivery in useful time of analyses and reports meeting the expectations of the department for the evaluation of institutions.

The AERES has resources tailored to the constraints of integrated evaluation for conducting its evaluations in a synchronised and effective manner. Logistics and evaluation activities at the AERES are organised so as to enable integrated evaluation.

A cross-disciplinary mission unit has been set up to improve coordination of logistics for on-site reviews.

Starting from the group A institutions, the AERES has set the programme for evaluating programmes and degrees, research units and higher education and research institutions in a way that makes integrated evaluation possible.

This evaluation programme has been validated by the AERES Board. It is described below.

1) Rationale of the integrated evaluation

The rationale of the integrated evaluation is to control and organise each step of the evaluations conducted by the 3 departments so that no difficulty arises from the evaluation schedule, to find the human resources necessary to the process and to determine which documents have to be prepared by the department for evaluation of research units as well as the department for evaluation of degrees and programmes in order to fuel in time the department for evaluation of higher education institutions with useful material.

¹ Some of the points discussed in this paper have been presented in the agency's auto-evaluation report

This last part of the overall scheme emerged only slowly and is still matter of discussion within the agency. The “integrated evaluations” conducted in 2009-2010 allowed us to check whether the different steps of the process were operative and which point(s) needed improvement.

2) The integrated evaluation conducted in 2009-2010

a) Tentatively, the sequence of the evaluation activities for the campaign 2009-2010 was as follows:

- evaluation of research units and programmes (bachelors and masters) at the same time;
- evaluation of doctoral schools, with account taken of the evaluation of the research units to which these schools are attached;
- evaluation of institutions and the policy of university sites;
- feedback and preparation for the next campaign.

This sequence of events is only a part of the overall process, but it is critical that the successive evaluations be compatible with the 9 months period allowed to all evaluations. The experience proved that though difficult in that no delay might be accepted without endangering the whole process, the tight schedule did not induce unbearable difficulties.

b) Specific resources were attributed to the integrated evaluation process:

- an increase in staff working on visit logistics within the mission administrative unit;
- one administrative coordinator per department;
- one evaluation management officer dedicated to integrated evaluation;
- one scientific delegate (for the departments in charge of the evaluation of research units and degrees) per programme and research field and per site, responsible for:
 - writing the documents for the experts of the department for the evaluation of institutions;
 - taking part in this department’s preparatory and post-evaluation meetings;
 - helping to analyse feedback and prepare the methodological documents for the new evaluation campaign.

c) Specific documents were drafted for the purposes of integrated evaluation

It was decided that:

- The AERES’ departments for the evaluation of degrees and programmes, on one hand , and research units, on the other hand, would provide the department for the evaluation of institutions with clear, explicit documents within a timeframe compatible with organising the institution’s evaluation.
- The department for the evaluation of degrees and programmes and the department for the evaluation of research units would write and validate site reports and analyses at each relevant level on the basis of their evaluations.
- These documents aimed at providing useful information for institutional evaluators would be distinct from the annual summaries drawn up by the departments.

d) Several stages to the drafting of the necessary documents for integrated evaluation were introduced:

- The evaluation of research units results in:
 - evaluation reports, which are sent to the department for the evaluation of degrees and programmes prior to the evaluation of doctoral schools;
 - analyses of these reports per site, which are sent to the department for the evaluation of institutions, though not published
- Site reports (for institutions and regional education authorities) are written following the evaluation of bachelors and masters per programme field, and then sent to the department for the evaluation of institutions and published.
- The evaluation reports for doctoral schools are sent directly to the department for the evaluation of institutions.

3) Documentary contents for the integrated evaluation

Site reports and analyses provided the experts in charge of evaluating institutions with clear and explicit information for evaluating the institutional strategy, both in terms of research and the range of programmes available.

Site reports and analyses for integrated evaluation:

- shed light on research and training prospects
- gave information about how to develop these where possible
- identified their strengths and weaknesses
- highlighted any redundancies between institutions belonging to the same site
- made suggestions for reorganisation or bringing together.

These documents were particularly useful with respect to higher education and research clusters, to help the partner institutions to build a new, sustainable institution with the purpose of increasing international visibility and implementing a site policy.

4) Specific features of documents for integrated evaluation

Regarding education, the ranges of bachelor's degrees, master's degrees and doctorates were indicated in site reports (concerning the institution and the regional education authority):

- For bachelors, an overall report on the range of degrees available was provided as part of the evaluation of programmes per institution. A presentation of the overall consistency of the site's range of bachelor's degrees was then given by a scientific delegate;
- For masters, four committees worked at the same time. These reports per discipline were first drafted at site level by the expert committee chairmen before being applied at institution level. A scientific delegate was in charge of writing the overall report concerning the institution. The overall site report was then drawn up by the coordinating scientific officer of master's degrees;
- For doctoral schools, the site level (higher education and research cluster or regional education authority otherwise) is the most relevant. The visit to the different doctoral schools of one site was made by the same multi-disciplinary committee or by committees formed per major discipline.

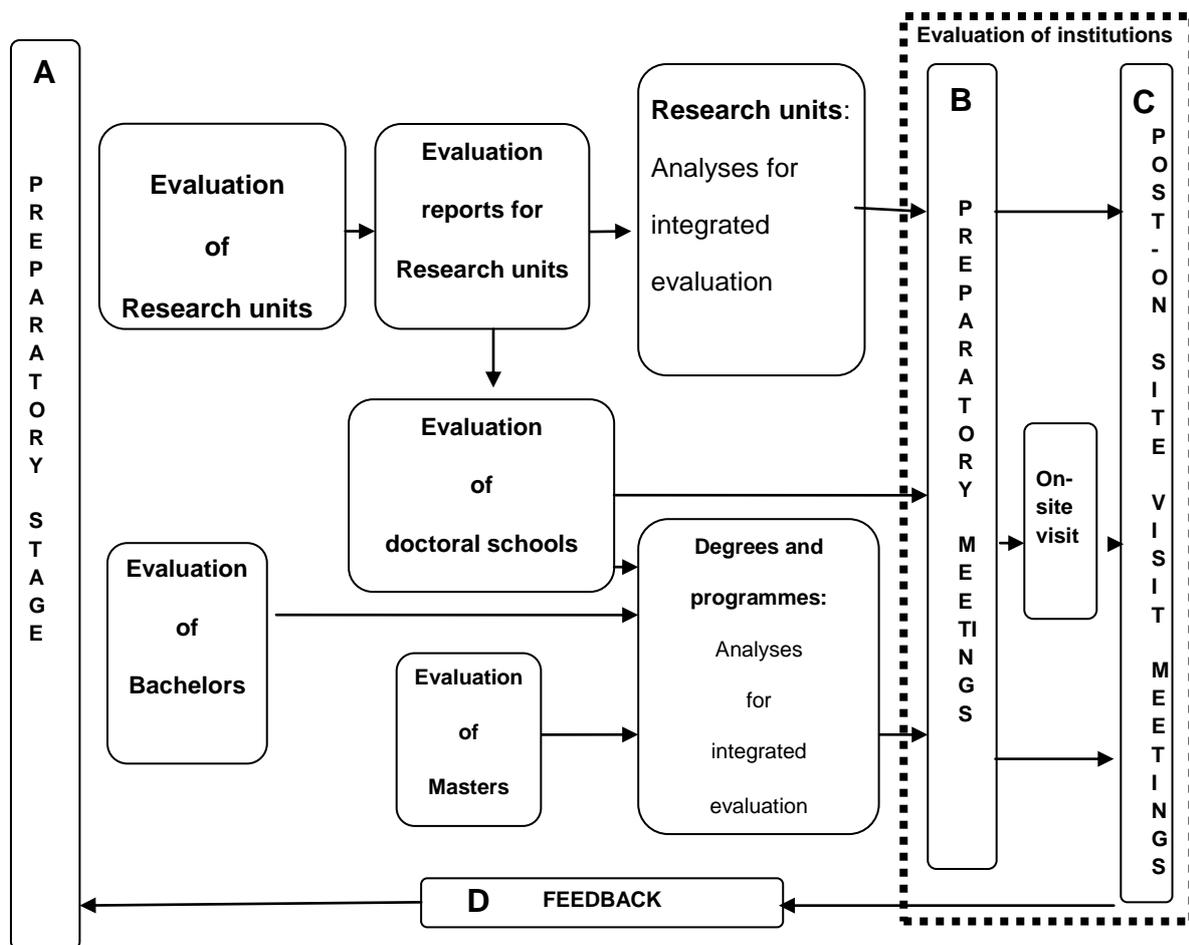
Regarding research, for research units and federations, scientific delegates wrote an analysis per major scientific field of the site once this has been evaluated, possibly breaking it down per institution.

5) Coordination, follow-up and feedback of the integrated evaluation

The AERES followed up the integrated evaluation process and ensured it was consistent through:

- weekly consultation meetings between the department heads
- joint discussions between scientific delegates from the three departments: this allowed for an initial integration based on sharing information
- the participation of scientific delegates from department 2 (research) and 3 (programmes and degrees) in meetings organised by department 1 (institutions).

The integrated evaluation diagram shows the different steps of the process in 2009-2010:



A) Preparatory stage before the campaign begins: this stage involves representatives of the three departments; its purpose is to bring up any points to elaborate on in the analyses to meet the expectations institution evaluation. These meetings draw from the lessons learned during the feedback meetings.

B) Preparatory meetings: the analyses for integrated evaluation are presented and discussed at preparatory meetings held prior to the institutional visit

C) Post- on site visit meetings: the scientific delegates from departments 2 and 3 take part in department 1's post-evaluation meetings which are organised after the on-site visits;

D) Feedback from department for evaluation of institutions with input from departments for evaluation of research units, and degrees & programmes

Conclusion

After having experienced the “integrated evaluation” process, it is clear that the benefits exceed largely the difficulties. The AERES has set up coordination procedures between the departments enabling them to carry out integrated evaluation.

For the AERES, integrated evaluation guarantees that the evaluations performed by the department for the evaluation of institutions are consistent with those of research units and programmes conducted by the other two departments. It helps to strengthen the overall consistency of the AERES’ activities. The difficulties to be faced are twofold:

- The workload of the agency: with over 3000 evaluations to conduct every year, there is no much place left for additional activities. The work load makes that the people involved in the daily worries of the evaluation conducted in their department have an only too understandable trend to focus more on the most urgent than on the most important matters, even if there is a general agreement on the priorities. This is a matter of reflexion within the agency and several tracks are being explored. In this context, the “integration evaluation” is a chance for the agency of improving the interactions between the departments, not to speak of the considerable enrichment of its evaluations, and as such deserves every effort devoted to its development.
- The interactions between the agency’s departments might be improved: the “integrated evaluation” was conducted for the first time in 2009-2010 and a further dialogue could lead the department for evaluation of the higher education institutions to better define what it is expecting from the two other departments, whereas the departments for evaluation of research units on one hand, and programmes and degrees on the other hand, should seek the ways to reinforce their interactions with the process developed within the department for evaluation of higher education institutions.

It is the conviction of the agency that evaluating in a coordinated manner the teaching programmes and research units are a great advantage when assessing the higher education institutions. The results obtained in this first year of integrated evaluation make the agency reasonably optimistic as to its future developments which are already underway.

Questions to be discussed with the audience:

- 1- If the interest of the process is no longer matter of debate, its complexity, the time constraints, the number of syntheses and analyses to produce, increase the potential risk that a problem occurs during the process.
 - How to simplify the process without altering it, and how to focus the specific analyses on the points of interest to the department for evaluation of institutions.
- 2- The integrated evaluation requires the respect of the procedures, time-schedule, content of reports, site syntheses. Even if the questions addressed above receive adequate answers in terms of planning, overall organisation and follow-up of the procedure, a major point should be discussed: all the evaluations rely on the quality of the scientific experts and their strict respect of the procedures of the AERES .
 - How to teach the 3000 to 4000 experts each year so that they master the principles and methods of the evaluations they will be in charge of.
- 3- The evolution of research has made that more and more units of a site host people belonging to various institutions (universities, research organisms) ; this is not a problem for assessing the quality of a research unit but makes it difficult to measure the part of each institution, and , consequently to assess the results of their governance in research.
 - How to reconcile the necessary evaluation of the governance of each institution with the not less important development of a site research which requires the cooperation of all.

