Evaluation activities in the European Commission

Josep Molsosa

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Abstract

The purpose of this contribution is to review the current context and the prospects for evaluation activities within the European Commission. Under its President, Mr Prodi, the Commission has been radically overhauling its internal working methods and planning and decision-making procedures since 2000; this is having a significant impact on the role of evaluation within Commission services.

It is, therefore, of interest:

(a) to give a brief overview of evaluation activities prior to the reform, especially in the areas of education and vocational training;
(b) to assess the Commission’s new guidelines;
(c) to predict the changes that these guidelines are likely to bring about (objectives, methods, organisation, etc.) in evaluation activities.

This contribution aims to encourage, promote and offer pointers for future research into the new culture of planning and evaluation of Community activities.
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1. Brief overview

1.1. Policy and programme evaluation: some background

Though not an exhaustive picture of evaluation activities at the Commission, some background is given below to provide a framework for the following analysis.

First is the reform of the Structural Funds in 1988. This reform marked a transition from an intervention approach based on support for a large number of projects (tens of thousands per year under the European Social Fund) to an approach involving planning and programming in consultation with the Member States. This new approach made it necessary to use evaluation practices for policies and programmes; the Commission services had had little experience of this at that time, as they tended to focus on evaluating ‘small’ projects.

Second are the efforts to clarify concepts. Methodological documents on the logical framework and on project cycle management, promoted by Directorate-General Aid and Cooperation in 1992-93, were of considerable use to those evaluating the three Structural Funds. An overall methodological document, Common guide for monitoring and interim evaluation, was published in 1995. In parallel, the MEANS (methods of evaluation of structural actions) initiative made it possible to consolidate evaluation methods and practices for this type of policy and programme. DG Agriculture also developed its own evaluation guides within the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy.

Third, the support and assistance activities of DG Budget, and in particular the organisation and leadership of an evaluation network within the Commission in order to exchange experience, methods and the results of internal practices. The 1997 document, Evaluating EU expenditure programmes, paved the way for a very useful systematisation of evaluation methods and practices.

The pioneering work of DG Budget in this area enabled the Commission to adopt a Communication on evaluation (European Commission, 2000b), to promote good practice (European Commission, 2000a), and to reform programme preparation methods (European Commission, 2001c). This was done in accordance with the Financial Regulation and pursuing the efforts to improve management methods that the Santer Commission had launched prior to the 1999 crisis.

1.2. Review of evaluation activities

In general, Commission services have made major progress in recent years in evaluating policies and programmes. The Communication on evaluation of 26 July 2000 states: ‘reviewing the situation in 1995, the Commission concluded that, in a formal sense, the evaluation policy had been successfully implemented: an increasing number of evaluation reports are completed in most policy areas, an annual evaluation review is published, evaluation systems are regularly reviewed against agreed good practice guidelines, the Network of Evaluators is operative and evaluation reports are increasingly available to the public. However, it was acknowledged that further progress was needed, in particular as regards the quality and use of evaluation and its relevance for decision making.’ (European Commission, 2000b).

Problems, nevertheless, continue to exist. The following are some of the conclusions, by way of example, from the Annual evaluation review 2001: ‘there are some weak points in the Commission’s policy instruments or management methods, revealed in several evaluation reports in different policy areas. However, it is not possible to draw wider conclusions without more detailed investigation of the background and reasons behind these observations. Nevertheless, it is significant that different evaluators in different policy areas are repeating similar types of criticism – some of it already in previous years’ (European Commission, 2002a).
These are the main weak points:

(a) the need to reduce the administrative burden imposed by the Commission on the beneficiaries or participants in EU programmes. The complexity of procedures had already been criticised in previous years. In 2001, for example, it was highlighted in the following evaluation reports: authorisation of medicinal products, IDA II programme, 5th Framework programme monitoring report, IST programme, Youth for Europe, food aid and in some reports on external assistance and development aid, PHARE and ECHO programmes;

(b) the need to reinforce the definition of clear strategy and clear objectives for Community interventions. A lack of focus can be a problem, even in interventions that are considered effective. This is the case, for example, in the support for forestry measures in agriculture and humanitarian aid policy. In development policy, there is a risk that NGOs ‘dictate’, policy when interventions are only ‘demand driven’;

(c) shortcomings of monitoring systems and lack of appropriate data continue to be recurrent observations in evaluation reports, as noted in previous years. Evaluations strongly urge strengthening project and programme monitoring and introducing more structured monitoring procedures, while avoiding unnecessary bureaucracy.

1.3. Community policies and programmes on education and training

The current main programmes in these fields (Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci [LdV] in particular) are the outcome of a process of consolidation within the Commission, in conjunction with the Member States, of the initial programmes launched in the 1980s. These followed the formation of the Task force RHEFJ, which was to have greater operational autonomy in comparison with the highly financial approach taken by the European Social Fund at that time.

In vocational training, drawing on experience with small programmes or initiatives such as PETRA, Comett, Eurotectnet, FORCE, which supported small pilot projects in innovation, exchanges and cooperation networks, mobility, etc., systematic thinking in the form of memoranda (on the concentration of actions in vocational training, for instance, as well as on rationalisation and integration in 1990-91) led to the ‘integrated’ programmes of 1995-99. It should be noted that the LdV programme was originally an action programme for implementing European Community vocational training policy.

In culture, this concentration took place in 1999 in order to rationalise and improve the cultural programmes Kaleidoscope, Ariane and Raphael, set up in 1996-97. The new programme Culture 2000 for the period 2000-04 was the result of a process of consultation and reflection as well as evaluation exercises.

The logic of these instruments was to promote and stimulate innovation and bottom-up exchanges, attempting to involve the largest possible number of participants/partners. It was also a way of consolidating and playing a part in the construction of Europe. Visibility was very important in this respect, allowing participants to feel that they were actually ‘experiencing’ Europe. Less important than impact on systems, the implicit objective was to encourage activism: the aim was to get things moving and to get the maximum number of people, and those responsible for education and training activities at the various levels, to work with one another.

The continuation of these programmes had been decided during 1998 and 1999 at a time when the Commission was subject to strong pressures following, among other things, the management problems of the LdV programme. With fairly formal ex ante evaluation exercises, the second phases of Socrates and LdV were a continuation of the intervention logic; this was despite some simplification and concentration of objectives and measures, thanks to a slight budget increase.

From an operational point of view, the new programmes included many more decentralised procedures and methods: in some cases this was not the best solution (see the networks in the context of LdV II). In evaluation, decisions made it compulsory, for the first time, to follow a set sequence: interim evaluations, proposal on possible continuation and ex post evaluations.
1.4. Evaluation of Community education and training programmes

Evaluation activities have covered action programmes, but not Community policies in these areas.

The main evaluation activities for education/training/youth programmes in recent years have included:

(a) 1997-98
   (i) interim evaluations of the Socrates I, LdV I and Youth for Europe programmes;
   (ii) ex ante evaluations of the programmes following on from them;
   (iii) evaluations of the Raphael, Kaleidoscope and Ariane programmes, and ex ante evaluation of the future framework programme Culture 2000;

(b) 1999-2000: launch and finalisation of the final or ex post evaluations of programmes;

(c) 2001: a year of transition without much programme evaluation, but during which the external evaluation of Cedefop was finalised;

(d) 2002: a number of evaluations of actions or initiatives of DG Education and Culture (EAC):
   (i) ex ante evaluations of the e-learning initiative and Erasmus-World;
   (ii) operational evaluations of the NARIC network, the European year of languages and Eurydice.

Other thematic evaluations have also been launched, to assess specific aspects of the implementation of measures or actions, or to measure the impact of programmes on specific target groups or beneficiaries.

The main evaluation exercise, however, was the launch in late 2002 of work to prepare proposals for future programmes for the period 2007-13. Bearing in mind that 2004 and 2005 will be years of change (elections to the European Parliament, new Commission), which will have an impact on the ways in which new decisions are taken, DG EAC felt that this work should be started as soon as possible in order to be able to put forward proposals in late 2003/early 2004. Building on the results of all the preceding evaluation work, and using the new evaluation approaches decided by the Commission, offer opportunities and pose challenges (see Section 3.2).

1.5. Evaluation results and evaluability problems

The following are some overall comments by way of review.

Ex ante evaluations are still seen too often as formal exercises that have to be carried out, alongside the memorandum or statement of grounds, for the financial statement required by the Financial Regulation. It is difficult to see them as genuinely independent evaluations, especially as they are generally written when the decisions have already been taken.

Interim evaluations, focusing on operational matters, are those which provide the most useful information for managers, as they can be used to improve implementing procedures or to draw up better targeted priorities. In general, however, they have not been used to assess the conceptual relevance and coherence of instruments, which should be one of the objectives of interim evaluations: finding out whether the approach being taken is the right one.

The purpose of ex post evaluations is, in practice, to report on and justify what has taken place. In many cases, they can be seen as reports on implementation rather than genuine evaluations.

In general, an overview of the methods of evaluation of Community programmes in education and training shows that (1):

(a) all evaluation reports provide a great deal of information on achievements, outputs (number of projects, number of participants, fields, financial data, etc.), but find it difficult to measure results against the specific objectives of programmes and, in particular, their impact on systems, which is, in general, the objective of such intervention;

(b) all the reports detail implementation and follow-up problems: complex and cumbersome procedures, delays in selection and decision-making, etc.;

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(1) Other analyses of the results of this kind of evaluation are contained in this report or can be consulted on the DG EAC website: http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/education_culture/index_en.htm [cited 15.4.2004].
(c) most report a lack of complementarity with other Community policies and problems linking up with national and/or regional policies and initiatives in the same field;

(d) the conclusion is that these are programmes which help promote innovation and exchange but which are not genuine instruments serving what should be a Community policy; etc.

It should be possible to improve some of these problems during the programme second phase, even though they have been negotiated in an undoubtedly difficult context. In practice, improvements include a reduction in objectives (even if this is only formal in some cases), an attempt to simplify measures and procedures (even if there are still too many in some cases) and decentralisation of some tasks to national agencies (which may limit Community follow-up of the results).

The Commission’s services are making significant efforts to improve the management of these programmes and of outside technical assistance. It would seem, however, that this improvement work is still meeting limitations, and that there is still a long way to go to provide operational instruments that can be genuinely controlled and that serve Community policies.

An initial explanation/justification of this conclusion has to be sought in the characteristics of programmes themselves, which are the outcome of a difficult process of integration of old practices or priorities and are, in some cases, designed in an intentionally ambiguous way in order to allow participation by any project promoter. Priority is given to number and diversity of direct beneficiaries rather than to any attempt to make these programmes into an instrument of active policy. These choices are probably explained by the process of building the Community.

To understand all these problems, the features of these programmes need to be analysed in further detail. This does not just entail an analysis of formal decisions, but an analysis of actual practices, choices of annual priorities, selection criteria for projects and promotors, etc.

It is when evaluations are being prepared, when questions are being drawn up, when the actual logic of the action measure is being explained, and when the theory on which it is based is being explained as well as the way in which it is supposed to achieve the objective, that these problems are encountered (2).

When it is attempted to transform the general, often vague, questions that those commissioning an evaluation have in mind into questions that are precise enough to be able to be handled using evaluation research methods (invariably based on research methods from economic, social, management and other sciences), the practical result, as pointed out by DG Budget’s evaluation manual (European Commission, 1997), is that, ‘retrieving the original intervention logic of a programme is sometimes easier said than done. Official documents often do not contain any systematic description of causal assumptions. Even the programme’s objectives may only be stated in a very limited fashion. In any event, when a programme’s objectives are not given a sufficiently transparent and precise meaning, it can be very difficult to judge its success’.

This raises the question of the evaluability of programmes. Evaluations need to be designed in the most realistic way. It is always useful to evaluate a programme, even if it is necessary to confine the evaluation to questions for which answers can be provided with a minimum of rigour and reliability.

The relative ambiguity between the general objectives set out in decisions and the content of the concrete measures included in programmes to achieve them has to be seen in this context. It is probably in the actual design of programmes that it is possible to locate the causes that limit their efficiency in terms of impact and the possibilities of measuring this impact.

In more concrete terms, and by way of pointers for analysis:

(a) as regards implicit objectives: the aim is to reach a large number of beneficiaries, promotors, participants, etc., but also to obtain high-quality results with a clear-cut Community added value and a significant impact on systems. Are the measures, as designed, able to contribute to this?

(b) as regards the steering of instruments to serve Community policies: the aim is to step up the Commission’s capacity to draw

(2) See the latest interim evaluation of the LdV programme (September 2003, accessible on the Europa site).
conclusions and make proposals to the Member States, but procedures which are in some cases too decentralised (the networks in LdV for instance), or too complicated, make it impossible to work towards conclusions or proposals that can be used for policy-making purposes in a timely way;

(c) as regards operational aspects: the aim is to work with many projects, with promoters able successfully to manage a process of innovation, formalise their results and disseminate them widely among other partners and the Community and national authorities concerned. These are, nevertheless, very small projects with an annual budget which is still very limited in comparison with requirements, and they are managed by very committed promoters who lack the capacity to exploit and disseminate results;

(d) as regards management and follow-up, the aim is to promote and follow up concrete achievements and the results progressively obtained but people are inclined to monitor financial aspects which, although necessary, do not in themselves provide any real Community added value;

(e) as regards complementarity with other Community policies, or with other national or regional policies, programmes generally contain simple statements of intent (of the type ‘the Commission shall ensure complementarity with […]’), which are not actually translated into measures or into the design of the programme.

In practice, programmes are the result of an ambiguous conception of the intervention logic, which is half-way between two logics or two separate approaches:

(a) an approach geared towards promoting basic innovation among a large number of small actors, who cooperate with other small actors in other Member States, making it possible to disseminate the European idea. This is a ‘sprinkling’ approach which undoubtedly leads to highly visible positive results, but has no real role to play in shaping policy;

(b) an approach geared towards supporting policies and practices of innovation within the education and training systems and practices of Member States. This is a ‘laboratory’ approach whose main beneficiaries are those responsible for designing and implementing policies and decision-makers. It requires more specific objectives, more demanding criteria, measures that are better designed and linked with one another, and simpler and more controllable operating procedures.

It is probably this ambiguity that explains why these programmes are difficult to evaluate and why it is difficult for evaluators to produce rigorous, exhaustive and useful evaluations. A good number of evaluation reports are, in practice, implementation reports that ‘evaluators’ are asked to draw up, bearing in mind the problems that Commission services have in actually following up the implementation of programme measures.

1.6. Limited use of evaluation results

Despite the problems mentioned above, evaluators provide analyses, conclusions and proposals. These results can only be put to limited use, bearing in mind the following.

Timing is a concern. Judging by the reports and communications set out by decisions, and since programmes understandably cannot be made to ‘stop in their tracks’, successive phases of programmes have to be decided upon before the results of the evaluations of the previous stages are available. For instance, the second phase of the LdV programme (adopted in 1999 for the period 2000-06), was prepared from the interim report on implementation, drawn up in late 1997, which summarised the analyses of the implementation reports submitted by the Member States in late 1996.

The range of commissioners/beneficiaries of results of evaluations also offers problems. In vocational training, for instance, the range of guidance, cooperation and policy-making structures (Advisory committee on vocational training, LdV programme Committee, Employment and Education Councils, European Parliament Committees, Directors-General of vocational training, Cedefop’s Management Board, etc.), national authorities, education agencies, etc., means that the steering of evaluation exercises (priority questions, terms of reference of evaluations), actual conduct (management of external contracts, acceptance of evaluators’ reports, etc.) and the use of results, is complex.
Despite real progress, the new culture of evaluation introduced by the Commission has been assimilated only to a limited extent in some Commission services:

(a) evaluation is still seen too often as a formal obligation to justify expenses, rather than as an effective way of preparing for new actions, or as an efficient way of improving the ways in which current actions are implemented;

(b) senior staff and managers are overly occupied by direct management of programmes, especially by administrative and financial procedures. This leads, in some cases, to evaluation plans whose design, rigour and quality could probably be improved;

(c) basic concepts are still not widely known and used by officials to prepare evaluation plans, even the three simplest concepts set out in Commission documents (3). Despite training schemes, there is still work to be done to promote the correct use in practice of the conceptual framework ‘resources → outputs → results → outcomes’ within management units responsible for setting up evaluations.

The budget and deadlines available for many evaluations, which have to measure results and impact throughout Europe, in some cases limit the quality of the offers received. Specifications, which in some cases are overly ambitious in comparison with the financial resources available, discourage many experienced experts and lead to offers only from experts with limited experience of the requirements of Europe-wide evaluations.

(3) Defining objectives and progress indicators, SPP Unit of the Secretariat-General, 2002.
2. Commission reform and new guidelines

2.1. Reform of strategic decision-making

Following the 1998/1999 crisis (the Commission resigned in March 1999, following the report by the Committee of Wise Men), the new Prodi Commission made working methods in the Commission one of its strategic priorities (4).

The proposals of the White Paper on reforming the Commission (March 2000), were justified by President Prodi, before the European Parliament, when he said that there was a need for a genuine revolution in the Commission’s working methods: a policy planning mechanism, including the definition of policy priorities and activity-based management, should make it possible to ensure the necessary match between objectives, actions and resources.

As regards decision-making, the Commission has adopted an activity-based management approach (July 2001), whose main objectives are to:

(a) increase cost awareness through integrated decisions on priorities, objectives, activities and the allocation of human, administrative and financial resources;

(b) tie in strategic planning with the operational programming of activities and monitoring and evaluation of implementation,

(c) develop performance-based management by emphasising results rather than input control.

These are the operational principles:

(a) a new programming, decision-making, management and evaluation culture which is more systematic, more streamlined, more transparent and more efficient;

(b) all decisions are to be taken from a systematic knowledge base, detailed and transparent analyses and rigorous evaluations;

(c) evaluation becomes a management tool and a tool for planning and programming activities;

(d) the annual planning and programming cycle comprises the following elements:

(i) the annual policy strategy, decided by the Commission in consultation with its services;

(ii) the annual management plans of each DG;

(iii) the Commission’s work programme;

(iv) the annual reports.

2.2. Improving evaluation at the Commission

In the context of the reform of the Commission, the Communication of July 2000 on evaluation, mentioned above, proposed a number of routes or measures to improve evaluation activities:

(a) refocus or supplement mandatory evaluations with other evaluations able to serve as a basis for informed decision-making in the annual strategic planning and programming cycle;

(b) gear evaluations towards more political and more strategic issues;

(c) ensure that evaluations are able to provide results in a timely way;

(d) adapt methods, the work plan and the timetable to ensure that evaluations make an effective contribution to decision-making;

(e) make ex ante evaluations systematic and improve them (needs analysis, setting of objectives, alternative forms of intervention, checking of Community added value, cost-benefit analyses, etc.);

(f) ensure that monitoring systems are provided with information on inputs, outputs and the results of activities.

In order to ensure the correct preparation of new proposals, the Commission has decided to require prior evaluations of impact, to accompany the proposals of the Directorates-General, as part of preparations for the annual policy strategy and the annual work programme.

(4) Reference documents may be obtained, in all languages, from the Commission’s website: http://europa.eu.int/comm [cited 15.4.2004].
This requirement is the key to effective integration of evaluation into the annual programming cycle. It is explained in the Communication from the Commission on impact assessment (European Commission, 2002c).

In practice, it is a prior evaluation of the estimated impact of the various possible options and instruments. It is a method that aims to structure the process of policy-making. It is the systematic analysis of:
(a) the problem addressed by the proposal concerned;
(b) the objective it pursues;
(c) the alternative options available to reach the objective;
(d) their likely impacts;
(e) respective advantages and disadvantages, including synergies and trade-offs.

The impact assessment is not a fiche that is filled in just before the Commission adopts a proposal. It is not a checklist with boxes to tick. It requires thinking about the proposal's possible impacts and how to assess them from the beginning of the process and continuing to review them until its final elaboration. Both the impact assessment and the ex ante evaluation have to be seen as a process that supports the preparation of proposals for new or renewed Community actions.

According to the Commission document, the purpose of impact assessment is to improve the quality and coherence of policy formulation. Impact assessment is an aid to decision-making and not a substitute for political judgement. In practice, political judgement involves complex considerations which go far beyond the anticipated impacts of a proposal. An impact assessment does not necessarily generate clear-cut and decisive conclusions and recommendations. It nevertheless makes an important contribution by informing decision-makers of the consequences of policy choices.

This communication is supplemented by a further Communication on evaluation standards and good practice (European Commission, 2002d), which is to be progressively implemented by services to ensure that evaluations are high-quality and useful and are put to practical use.
What changes are these new guidelines and the major overhaul of the methods of designing and deciding on Community actions likely to bring about in evaluation methods and practices?

Despite the problems and the apparent overload that the first cycles entailed, the Commission reform is becoming established in people's minds and practices, and the new management culture is gradually taking root. The integrated approach to strategic planning includes the evaluation function in an intelligent way.

This new trend offers an opportunity for evaluators to make their work more useful. It requires, however, a major change in approach. There needs to be a shift towards forecasting, which may actually make decision-making easier.

Use needs to be made of methods able to provide ideas and useful information in a timely way, to assist decision-making, which is increasingly complex and based on an increasingly systematic knowledge base; it is also grounded in economic, social, technological, cultural, demographic and other environments where change is also gathering pace.

New methods need to be found in which rigour, coherence and the relevance of analyses are compatible with deadlines and available resources, in order to design and adopt effective solutions for the new and expanding issues facing Europe.

From a more practical point of view, there needs to be a shift towards merging ex ante and impact assessment methods. The Commission, which has so far drawn up a whole range of evaluation and monitoring methods, should finally provide itself with methodological base for programming its activities.

3.1. Context and policy prospects in education and training

Before looking at ways of promoting or guiding prospective research on the evaluation of policies and programmes in education and training, some aspects of the context and of prospects for these policies need to be examined in more detail.

First is the gradual ‘politicisation’ of DG EAC initiatives and the launch of new strategy proposals. Action programmes (Socrates, LdV) are gradually being supplemented and framed by policy thinking and proposals. These include the Memorandum and Communication on lifelong learning, the White Paper on Youth, the promotion of a European area of knowledge, open coordination at Community level of the objectives of education systems, etc. Other initiatives are being prepared on mobility, accreditation, transparency and the recognition of qualifications.

The Bologna and the Bruges processes (5) are indicators of this increased push for cooperation and policy coordination and received significant support at the Lisbon European Council in March 2000 (6).

Enlargement to a Europe of 25 Member States will undoubtedly influence the content of policy proposals, for instance towards systems innovation/restructuring and the consolidation of cooperation and exchange procedures between those responsible for national/regional education and training policies.

The Convention on the Future of Europe, set in motion by the Laeken European Council (December 2001), in its proposals on the EU’s mission, confirms the Commission has a role to play in education and training. The Convention proposes that the EU should implement support measures in employment, education and vocational training, youth culture, sport, etc.

The adoption of the open method of coordination (7) seems to reflect the will of the Member States to step up such cooperation and exchanges in the form of ‘open’ coordination of the general problems in some fields, with two main objectives:
(a) disseminating best practice;
(b) ensuring wider convergence on the main objectives of the EU.

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(5) See information on the Commission website, DG EAC pages on political cooperation.

(6) See conclusions of the Presidency (European Council, 2002).
This requires the Commission to demonstrate a better capacity to lead, analyse, evaluate and propose new and innovative strategies to improve the efficacy and efficiency of systems.

The second contextual aspect is the progressive integration of education and training, as shown by thinking about lifelong learning, the proposals that followed on from it, and the adaptation of the actual priorities of programmes to these proposals.

The third aspect is the process of preparing future programmes of the Commission in these fields, which started in September 2002. These future instruments will have to meet new political ambitions, the new requirements of an enlarged Europe and the new social, technological, cultural, economic and other issues that our societies and political and administrative systems are facing.

DG EAC will need instruments and programmes able to achieve more ambitious general objectives, instruments with well-defined and appropriately articulated specific objectives, accompanied by intervention mechanisms that are better adapted, more flexible and more ambitious; programmes that are, ultimately, clearer and easier to monitor and evaluate.

3.2. Evaluating education and training policies and programmes

The following are the main areas for consideration in improving evaluation practices (purposes, methods, organisation, etc.) within DG EAC, which require a contribution from specialists and researchers on evaluation methods and practices:

In the short term, there is preparation of, and concerted action on, new education and training programmes for the period after 2006. This offers a good opportunity to monitor approaches by the Commission to the preparation of proposals. What is needed in practice is the organisation of a policy-making process which draws on the results of the evaluations conducted up to now and which is able to offer decision-makers a systematic information base, enhancing a decision-making culture based on analysis, instead of deal-making.

There needs to be a shift away from practices which sap the forward evaluation process, from the prior analysis of the impact of different options to the ex post drafting of an ex ante evaluation report justifying options that have been decided in an intuitive way.

Normally an internal process, this type of evaluation exercise requires clearer working methods and the sharing of responsibilities between managers/designers and those responsible for evaluations. The evaluation manual of DG EAC (8) sets out an iterative and parallel process in which evaluators work together with designers to ensure the rigour and quality of analyses and proposals.

Then come methods and approaches. Forward evaluations (ex ante, impact assessment) probably need to be improved to supplement the ‘conventional’ evaluations of decisions already taken (interim, ex post).

In terms of methods, and in order to ensure useful answers to relevant questions in a timely way, attempts should be made to set up a knowledge base, a systematically assessed record of experiences, that can be used at will and is continually updated to take account of the practices and experiences of all European participants.

The results of a continuing process of analysis would need to be fed into this database or expertise base, enabling integration of the diversity of Community experiences and participation by a large number of evaluation experts (in consultation exercises, seminars and workshops) appropriately geared to this objective of building on and making the most of expertise and evaluated experiences.

In practice, it will be necessary to place the critical observation of practices and methods on a systematic footing, to generate a capacity for analysis, evaluation and continuing exploitation. This should make it possible to exploit the results of evaluations as they become available and to ensure that European diversity is adequately represented, without being overly conditioned by the timing of the instruments used.

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(1) See conclusions of the Presidency (European Council, 2002, point 37).
This approach will probably help managers/decision-makers to reduce the time needed to obtain useful and timely analyses. It will probably reduce the costs of analysis and evaluation work, and will ensure better quality contributions that are more objective and independent (European Commission, 2002d).

Finally, employing these methods, these forward and systematic approaches, will require thinking about resources and about the means and capacities needed.

In the first place, the Commission should study the possibilities for rationalisation, integration or coordination of existing capacities at Community level. In the new Union, how can the capacities of networks or agencies such as Eurydice, Cedefop or the European Training Foundation in Turin be better used?

In the Member States, what steps need to be taken to consolidate a genuine network of experts and/or bodies that observe, analyse and evaluate education and training policies, particularly in a Community context in keeping with the policy priorities decided by the Commission in conjunction with the Member States?

At a more concrete operational level, what steps need to be taken to improve the quality and range of the expertise available in the various Member States? To make a start, DG EAC services could and should promote this new approach, this new culture of evaluation, among experts, especially those who have expressed interest in taking part in the evaluation work set in motion by the Commission (at the time of calls for expression of interest).

These are routes and initiatives to encourage thinking among researchers and to help to improve the design of Community policies, in order to ensure that they are effective and efficient.
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<td>DG</td>
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References


