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Evaluation – the (not so) softly-softly approach to governance and its consequences for compulsory education in the Nordic countries

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Abstract
Public sector reform involving decentralisation and marketisation has led to “soft” indirect forms of governance aimed at steering more fragmented systems. Although based on information and guidance rather than hierarchy and legislation, these new methods of regulating through evaluation and quality control may be as powerful as more direct control methods. Frequently embodying practices building on values concerning consumer choice and competition, they may challenge values of equality and social justice associated with the Nordic model of education. Drawing on a qualitative analysis using documentary data concerning evaluation structures and techniques, the development of an evaluative culture and consequences for compulsory education in the Nordic countries are examined. Although soft governance techniques of evaluation and control have impacted on compulsory education in all five countries, there are differences concerning the extent to which the Nordic model’s values have been challenged. Further, there are signs of resistance and reluctance to abandon the model’s basic tenets.

Keywords: evaluation, soft governance, self-regulation, calculative practices, Nordic model of education

Introduction
Over the past three decades, processes of public sector reform involving decentralisation, deregulation and marketisation have led to more dispersed and fragmented education systems with more autonomous schools and agencies, even in the previously strongly state-controlled Nordic countries (Antikainen 2006; Telhaug et al. 2006). New forms of governance, adapted to arm’s-length steering, have emerged incorporating new management methods collectively known as New Public Management (Tolofari 2005). There has been a shift from norm-based management to management by objectives (Antikainen 2010; Nusche et al., 2011) requiring, amongst other things, quality assurance and performance management through techniques of audit and evaluation (Andersen et al. 2009; Simola et al. 2009; Segerholm 2009). These “soft” or more indirect forms of control involve new ways of regulating that may be as powerful as, or even more coercive than, traditional methods of direct
control (Moos 2009). Frequently embodying practices and procedures that build on economic norms and market values concerning consumer choice, competition and self-interest (Tolofari 2005), they may challenge values and practices of equality, welfare, social justice and a strong state role characteristic of the Nordic model of education (Antikainen 2010; Telhaug et al. 2006). Calculative practices associated with evaluation and quality control, such as those inherent in data-based systems of inspection and performance management, can function as powerful mechanisms of self-regulating performativity as well as central steering (Ozga 2009). They may serve to direct attention to what can be quantifiably measured (targets, indicators) and be used to improve efficiency, accountability and performance in terms of the logic of the market rather than promoting fairness and solidarity (Moos 2009).

The focus in this paper is not on whether these developments have led to a retreat of the state in Nordic compulsory education, but on the implications of the evaluative techniques of “soft” governance for the Nordic model. The aim is to provide an overview of the development of institutions and techniques of evaluation in the field of compulsory education (i.e. primary and lower secondary education) in the Nordic countries and to discuss their consequences for the Nordic model of education. To what extent have evaluative institutional frameworks and techniques and practices of soft government been introduced in the different countries and in which ways are they challenging the underlying values in the Nordic model of education?

Methodologically, the paper utilises a qualitative analysis based primarily on publicly accessible documentary data concerning evaluation structures and techniques. These include official policy documents, statements and evaluation reports such as the OECD reviews of Evaluation and Assessment for Denmark, Sweden and Norway; the information database Eurybase on European education systems; and the websites of the education ministries and evaluation agencies in the respective countries. The paper is structured as follows: it begins with a discussion of the changing forms of governance and the development of “soft” methods of steering related to evaluation and their implications for education. It then examines what has been happening in the Nordic countries in terms of the introduction of: i) institutional frameworks fostering an evaluative culture in education; and ii) techniques and practices of evaluation. For reasons of space, the latter are limited to a number of developments that have had a wide impact: self-evaluation, and national tests and web-based information portals. The consequences of these for the Nordic model of compulsory education are then considered and, in the final section, some brief conclusions are presented.

### Changing governance

The decentralisation, deregulation and marketisation of state institutions have been seen as leading to the need for new ways of ensuring performance, quality and efficiency in public services such as education (Newman 2005). In the transition from government to governance, the state has been altering its methods of steering to adjust
to the problems of managing a more dispersed and fragmented system at arm’s length (Clarke 2004). There has been a tendency for hard governance in the form of legally binding and more precisely defined laws to be replaced by soft forms of governance that are persuasive and advisory (Abbott & Snidal 2000). Soft governance has been used to refer to the methods of “steering” developed in global and EU governance in areas where organisations such as the OECD and the EU commission are not empowered to use direct forms of control such as laws and regulations (Moos 2009). Applied in the national context, soft governance is seen as leading the state to rely increasingly on information and guidelines rather than on hierarchical imposition to steer local government and local agencies (Brandsen et al. 2006).

Initially, these new methods of governance were seen as marking the retreat of the state. However, this has been increasingly questioned (see Hudson 2007, 2010) and, rather than implying less state control, the devolution of authority, removal of constraints and awarding of managers and organisations such as schools with greater freedom constitute processes of re-regulation involving new forms of control, albeit “a much more ‘hands-off’, self-regulating regulation” (Ball 2003: 217) characteristic of NPM (Tolofari 2005). Indeed, Moos (2009) argues that “(h)ard law stands for regulations that influence people’s behaviour, while soft law/governance influences the way people perceive and think about themselves and their relationships with the outside world. Soft governance therefore influences agents in much deeper ways” (Moos 2009:399).

The search for new ways of steering in the de-centred state has, according to Clarke (2004), led to the emergence of the “performance-evaluation nexus” or evaluative state (Neave 1998) comprising a cluster of governance institutions and practices involved in evaluating, auditing, inspecting and regulating. Rose (1999) drives this argument further, suggesting that a culture of evaluation has developed that penetrates all levels of society from the supranational to the local level and in which all aspects of social behaviour have been reconceptualised along economic lines – as calculative actions. The focus is shifted to the practices and procedures of governance and the ways in which these are shaping, guiding or affecting conduct and making some forms of activity thinkable and practicable (Newman 2005; Swyngedouw 2005). Technologies both in the form of agency by which the individual is made responsible for her/his actions and of performance involving benchmarking rules (Dean 2010) have appeared. Data-based systems of inspection and performance management associated with evaluation and quality control, whilst couched in neutral terms as measuring tools providing information about “outputs” or “outcomes”, can constitute a means of centralised steering (Ozga 2009). Promoting marketised values of efficiency, effectiveness and performativity, they can function as powerful mechanisms for dictating normality that are “deeply penetrating, consciousness-molding” (Grek et al. 2009b: 129).
Soft Governance and Education

At the level of compulsory education (i.e. primary and lower secondary education), the decentring of the state (Clarke 2004) has often meant decentralisation to local government, to the market and to schools themselves. However, this apparent extension of local freedom has often gone hand-in-hand with requirements for systematic evaluation and documentation of performance with local government, schools and even teachers and pupils being given responsibility for carrying out self-regulation and self-evaluation (Hudson 2010). The drive for improved quality in education has been linked to the requirement for even better evaluation (Simola et al. 2002) so that “(t)he idea that improving quality entails an evaluation of education systems is now taken for granted” (Eurydice 2004:2). A focus has been placed on controlling the output side of education and quality control mechanisms have been implemented to improve efficiency, accountability and performance in education (Ball 2003). Calculative practices, framed in terms of measurable objectives providing the basis for monitoring and means of ensuring accountability, have been introduced (Grek et al. 2009b). By directing attention to what can be (and is) measured, education policy risks being moulded through data (Grek et al. 2009a). This emphasis on the quantifiable has been seen as having negative consequences – reducing education quality to a technical language of evaluation (Simola et al. 2009; Segerholm 2009) expressed in terms of quantifiable indicators, results and standards – the “language” of global benchmarking (Grek et al. 2009a). This facilitates comparisons between schools not just locally or nationally but also internationally, so that education is judged via a constant, competitive comparison for improvement (Grek et al. 2009b).

National governments now produce a plethora of soft-steering instruments – guidelines, models for evaluation; “best” or “good” practice, “tool-kits’, training courses on how to evaluate and assess quality, advice on what level of quality should be regarded as the professional standard (Brandsen et al. 2006), as well as education consultation services, “help” materials and information services. Processes of continual monitoring and evaluation, seeking improvement and better performance, may however lead to a narrowing of the purposes and goals of education. Indeed, Ball (2003) argues that the need to recreate or re-make themselves in response to targets, indicators and evaluations is leading educational practitioners to produce “fabrications” of performance to create the most beneficial account in order to be accountable. In a worst case scenario, this could lead to the development of a regime of panoptic performativity (Perryman 2006) in which the “frequency of inspection and the sense of being perpetually under surveillance leads to teachers performing in ways dictated by the discourse of inspection … Lessons are taught to a rigidly prescribed routine, school documentation and policies closely mirror the accepted discourses of school effectiveness and the whole school effort is directed away from education and towards passing inspection” (Perryman 2006: 148).
The Emergence of the Evaluative State in the Nordic Countries?

What has been happening in the Nordics? These countries have been regarded as representing a particular model of education that builds on specific Nordic values and practices of equality, welfare, social justice and with a strong state involvement (Antikainen 2006; Telhaug et al. 2006; Tjeldvoll 1998). These characteristics might be expected to temper the effects of marketisation, competition and individualisation. However, even the Nordic countries are subject to international conditions and influences (Antikainen 2006) and it is difficult for them to isolate themselves from the “Global Educational Reform Movement” involving a trans-national policy of testing and ranking (Simola et al. 2009). Processes of deregulation and decentralisation of education to local government, to schools and even to the market have taken place in the Nordic countries over the last 30 years (Hudson 2007, 2010). Public administrative reforms, collectively known as New Public Management (NPM), characterised by marketisation, privatisation, managerialism, performance measurement and accountability (Tolofari 2005) have also been implemented.

Norm-based management and central control of the input side of education characteristic of the Nordic model (Antikainen 2010) has been replaced by the management by objectives and control of outputs inherent in NPM. Techniques of quality assurance, performance management and the use of evaluative data in educational decision-making have been introduced (Nusche et al. 2011; Andersen et al. 2009; Segerholm 2009) that build on social technologies utilising the liberal core concept of choice where the citizen-consumer is able to make comparisons between competitors (Moos 2009). In other words, new “soft” governance ways of managing more dispersed and fragmented systems at arm’s length have also appeared in the Nordic countries. These are challenging some of the basic tenets of the Nordic education model concerning equality and social justice (Simola et al. 2009), shifting the focus in education from “Democratic Bildung” to “back to basics” (Moos 2009; Solhaug 2011), and promoting a pedagogic ideology subjecting pupils to even higher expectations and competitive levels of performance (Telhaug et al. 2006). The next section will consider whether the modes of soft governance being introduced are contributing to the formation of an evaluative culture involving both institutions and techniques of accountability and performativity in relation to compulsory education in the five Nordic countries.

Institutional Frameworks for Evaluation

Sweden has been a frontrunner, even in an international context. The idea of using evaluation as a control instrument within primary and secondary education was introduced early, with an (unsuccessful) attempt in the mid-1980s to implement an evaluation system based on the idea of management by objectives and results (Foss Hansen 2009). Whilst lacking a separate evaluation agency, the Swedish National
Agency for Education (NAE), particularly since its reform in 2003, has been playing an increasingly important part in the monitoring and evaluation of schools. It is, for example, charged with collecting educational statistics that can be used as comparative indicators for schools. From 2004 onwards, schools have been obliged to use the criteria drawn up by the NAE in their self-evaluations (Eurydice 2004: 80). Following continued criticism of insufficient attainment of goals throughout the school system, the NAE was reformed yet again in 2008 and, as well as reaffirming its responsibility for following up and evaluating compulsory education, it was given a role in ensuring quality assurance in school development. Inspection as a form of evaluation of schools was strengthened through the establishment of a new separate government authority, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen) “to respond to the needs of national evaluation, audit and accountability in a highly decentralised system of governance with a high degree of local responsibility” (Eurydice 2009/10e: 215). Once an inspection is completed, schools receive a very detailed and specific “to-do list” and inspectors usually return to check whether the required action has been taken, making it difficult for schools to ignore the feedback (Nusche et al. 2011). The new Education Act, in effect from 1 July 2011, further enhances the supervisory power of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate by allowing it to impose fines and other sanctions on both public and private bodies responsible for schools (Rönnberg 2011).

In Finland, evaluation has been statutory in all sectors of education since 1999, which is considered to have strengthened its importance as a tool for managing education (Eurydice 2009/2010b). Indeed, Finland has been characterised as the “Evaluative State” attempting to “practice education policy through governing by results” (Simola et al. 2002: 253). A separate Council for Educational Evaluation was established under the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2003 (Eurydice 2009/2010b) to organise external evaluations of the operations and activities of education providers and of educational policy and to publish the results. A National Evaluation Plan for external evaluations and assessments of learning outcomes and setting priorities concerning the effectiveness, quality and efficiency of education is drawn up at regular intervals by the Ministry of Education and Culture. However, in contrast to Sweden there are no national regulations or recommendations for the evaluation or inspection of individual schools, the education providers (the municipalities) are responsible for evaluating education and deciding about the approach to local evaluation (Simola et al. 2009).

Iceland also has a well-developed evaluation system and has established a separate evaluation and supervision division in the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Increased decentralisation and schools’ greater responsibility for evaluating their own activities are seen as requiring the Ministry to monitor activities more closely than before (Ministry of Education Science and Culture 2005). This function was reinforced in the 2008 Education Acts and the Ministry is charged with responsibility for conducting comprehensive external evaluation at all school levels (Eurydice 2009/2010c).
Denmark, on the other hand, has been criticised for its lack of an evaluative culture. Poor results in PISA 2003 and the highly critical 2004 OECD review highlighted a substandard evaluation culture. The absence of school self-evaluation and an inadequate sharing of good practice were indicated as serious weaknesses in the Danish school system (Eurydice 2009/10a). These findings were seen as challenging the traditional trust in schools and municipalities to manage themselves (speech by Jørgen Balling Rasmussen, Chief Adviser at the Danish Ministry of Education) and demands were raised for a new, stronger culture of evaluation with attainment targets and a mandatory national assessment system. The Evaluation Institute (EVA) was set up in 1999 to be responsible for the systematic and mandatory evaluation of teaching and learning at all levels of education (Eurydice 2009/10a) and to help bring about a shift in focus from inputs to outputs (Shewbridge et al. 2011). It was supplemented in 2006 by the Agency for the Evaluation and Quality Development of Primary and Lower Secondary Education, under the Ministry of Education (Eurydice 2009/10a). This new agency was given specific responsibility for improving the evaluation culture in Danish schools; contributing to the documentation and analysis of school results; disseminating best practice; and for overseeing the municipalities’ quality assurance of public schools (Hudson 2010). According to Rambøll (2011), it can be seen as “institutional evidence of the increased focus on evaluation and assessment in the Danish school system” (Rambøll 2011: 11). The creation of a separate Quality and Supervision Agency from 1 March 2011 would appear likely to further strengthen the quality control function (Danish Ministry of Education 2011). Thus, a culture is emerging in Denmark in which evaluations are explicitly considered to have a control function informing stakeholders about the quality of education (Eurydice 2009/10a). Nevertheless, the recent OECD review (Shrewbridge et al. 2011) considers that, despite considerable efforts to stimulate an evaluation culture, competency in this field is still very limited and a coherent framework for evaluation and assessment is still lacking in the compulsory education system (Rambøll 2011).

In Norway, critical OECD reports concerning its evaluation system spurred on the development of the National Quality Assessment System (NKVS) with national tests, a web-based portal (Skoleporten) for publishing results and other data, and user surveys concerning learning and well-being (Norwegian Directorate for Education & Training 2011). The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (DET), set up in 2004, has the overall responsibility for developing, organising and implementing NKVS. It is charged with ensuring that there are suitable and adequate quality assurance systems to assess and follow-up on school performance and frequent evaluations (Eurydice 2009/2010d). Schools are required to provide information on a number of quality areas which are then used for follow-up and improvement. Central inspection and guidance functions have been strengthened following the change of government in 2005 (Norwegian Directorate for Education & Training 2011). Further, the DET is responsible for all national statistics concerning primary and secondary education,
making these public and for using them to continuously assess the status of Norwegian education. However, despite these efforts the evaluation culture in Norway is still considered to be poor at both the system and individual levels (Norwegian Directorate for Education & Training 2011).

**Calculative practices in the Nordic countries?**

**National Tests and Web-Based Portals**

*Sweden* was a forerunner in introducing national tests. However, the way in which testing is used changed as a result of the educational reforms in the 1990s. Following the decentralisation of education to local government and the transition from a regulated school system to results-based management, tests began to be used to monitor the education system as a whole. Whilst “league tables” of schools are not produced in Sweden, the use of tests for monitoring and accountability (and hence control) has been seen as introducing a different and conflicting purpose into the system, one that compounds questions about validity, reliability and equity in assessment (Björklund et al. 2004). In the past, testing tended to play a comparatively minor role, mainly helping teachers to ensure equitable and consistent marking. However, given greater parental choice, the growth of competition between schools and increased public distrust in teachers, Söderberg et al. (2004) suggest that assessments designed for summing up student achievement have become a means for checking up on schools and teachers. Nevertheless, a survey carried out by the NAE in 2004 shows resistance on the part of Swedish teachers to adapt teaching to take account of the content of tests (Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency 2009), i.e. a reluctance to “teach to the test”.

The online information system *SIRIS*, developed by NAE and in operation since 2001, contains information (much of it at the individual school level) on results and quality. The focus on the need for improved accountability in education figures clearly in SIRIS’ aims, which include “to make it easier for schools and municipalities to see what can be improved by examining their own performance and comparing themselves with others” (SIRIS 2011) and to encourage debate, locally and nationally, on how to better achieve the goals set for education. It allows teachers, parents, school leaders and other stakeholders to see not only the school’s current performance but also its improvement (or failure) over time and its performance compared with municipal and national averages (Nusche et al. 2011). Further, even when the results are used only to identify areas for improvement, teachers may work to find ways of “laundering” their figures to avoid the public stigma of poor results. Indeed, Henning-Loeb & Lumsden-Wass (2011) illustrate, in the context of a Swedish school, how the need to use a certain “vocabulary” in evaluating pedagogical activities (in order to be “successful”) led the teachers to present themselves and their setting in a performative way. Thus, according to Segerholm (2009), there is a risk that values such as equality and democracy that have long been important in Swedish education are being pushed back in favour of easily tested competencies.
Iceland also introduced national testing early. Initially these were purely for pupil assessment, but have in recent years also been used in monitoring the education system and for comparing schools. Iceland has had since 1993 an independent institute, the Educational Testing Institute, responsible for the development, implementation and grading of national tests and for making results public (Eurydice 2009/10c). Although they are not used as “aggressively” as in Sweden, national tests nevertheless represent a means of centralised control that can be used to assess and compare how well schools are meeting national goals. Indeed, the new Education Acts in 2008 put more weight on quality assurance, emphasising schools’ (and municipalities’) accountability to their pupils, parents and society, and requiring schools to develop their internal quality processes and provide information about their activities and results (Eurydice 2009/10c). However, the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (2009) points out that, in Iceland, improving the quality of education has been closely coupled to efforts to promote the development of a self-evaluation culture. National tests were introduced to function as a “mirror” to enable schools and teachers to improve their performance on their own initiative. It thus argues that tests have been used “mainly to support the learning of individual pupils by identifying their needs and adapting teaching accordingly” (Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency 2009: 20). This seems to be reinforced by the abolition in 2009 of the use of national tests to stream pupils for academic or vocational upper secondary education.

In Norway, national tests have a more recent origin and form an important part of the National Quality Assessment System (NKVS) set up in 2004. They are intended to clarify the school’s responsibilities (Eurybase 2009/2010d). However, there has been conflict over their introduction and a major criticism has been that they can be an instrument for controlling schools and teachers. There are fears that the publication of test results is leading to schools being ranked and thus to greater pressure on individual teachers. Following a change of government in 2005, a time-out was called during which extensive changes were made to the system. National guidelines were developed to define and delimit what should be tested; the implementation of the tests, the requirements for reliability/validity and the presentation and reporting of results and how they could be used when working with students in the classroom (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2011). A special website Skoleporten (the School Portal) was created in 2004 where test results are published and which contains various data concerning primary and secondary schools. Following heated debates concerning the publication of results from the quality assessment system, Skoleporten has undergone a number of revisions and now comprises an open portal available to all and a closed portal accessible only to specific groups such as school leaders, county governors and national education authorities. According to the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (2011), the website is intended to be a resource for schools and municipalities in relation to the systematic evaluation
and development of education and contribute to quality assessment and development within schools by providing “access to relevant information and practical aids useful for systematic, local self-evaluation” (Eurydice 2009/10d: 154). However, although it is targeted mainly at head teachers, school administrators and politicians, it is available via the open portal to parents, pupils and the public in general and thus offers potential as a means of “soft” regulation of school performance. Indeed, Solhaug (2011) argues that it can “serve as a marketplace for ‘school shopping’, where the test results might function as a ‘price’ or ‘value system’ for students and parents when choosing a school” (Solhaug 2011: 274).

Denmark was also a late introducer of national tests (2007) and these were again the subject of controversy. Introduced with the explicit aim of enhancing the evaluation culture in Danish schools (Eurybase 2009/2010a), according to the Danish Ministry of Education they are a means of monitoring the quality of the education system and a pedagogical tool for teachers in planning their teaching. However, the tests have been heavily criticised for, amongst other things, leading to the subjects covered by the national tests (particularly Danish and mathematics) being accorded greater importance to the detriment of subjects such as history, biology and geography and resulting in, for instance, schools giving greater priority to the continuing professional development of those teaching these subjects (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency 2009). Following the collapse of the technical computerised support structure for the national tests (Andersen et al. 2009), a time-out was called with reintroduction of the tests planned in 2011. There is a strong emphasis in Denmark on making information from tests readily available to parents and pupils and, by providing improved access to comparable information on education and schools, enabling individuals to make informed choices. At present, the Folkeskole Act forbids the use of results of the national tests for benchmarking purposes. However, this seems likely to change as the current government has stated that the test results will be made public in the future (Regering 2010).

Danish schools are required to have a website containing detailed information about their educational provision, publish grade averages for individual subjects and levels together with other relevant information for assessing the quality of teaching provided. A special website – the national evaluation portal (evaluering.uvm.dk) – has been set up, directed not only towards teachers but also pupils, parents and communities to act as a knowledge base for evaluation in schools, providing information, inspiration, good practice and tools for evaluation. The intention is to enable schools to compare themselves with each other, learn from the experience of others, and in this way promote the spread of good practice (Eurydice 2009/10a). The website provides information about “how the evaluation culture can be promoted in schools” and provides links to relevant laws, regulations and reports (Evaluation Portal 2011). In addition to general guidance on evaluation, it provides information for teachers on no less than 27 evaluation tools!
**Finland** has dragged its feet when it comes to introducing standardised testing and evaluation. Tests are used for diagnosis and improvement (and never for “naming and shaming”). There has been considerable discussion and strong pressure from the media about whether to publish school rankings, “but the national consensus in the ensuing debate was against publicising test results” (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency 2009: 55). Finland has, as Simola et al. (2009) point out, a long and strong tradition of good and detailed statistics in the field of education and a national test bank has been created so it is possible to check levels of skill and knowledge in school subjects. “Obligatory national testing has, however, never been applied in the Finnish comprehensive” (Rinne et al. 2002: 650). Indeed, according to Aho et al. (2006), Finland has not followed the Anglo-Saxon accountability trend, but has instead developed the idea of flexible accountability in which the focus is on deep learning and not on testing. They argue that a culture of trust has developed in the Finnish education system which means that “the Ministry of Education and the National Board of Education, believes that teachers together with principals, parents, and their communities know how to provide the best possible education for their children” (Aho et al. 2006: 138). As Rinne et al. (2002) point out, the new means of control and assessment are not as burdensome or as strict as in many other countries. However, even in Finland measures are being taken that strengthen central influence. The Better Basic Education (POP) Programme 2007–2011, for example, defines national quality criteria that “offer a useful tool for local policy-makers for evaluating shorter and longer-term effects of their decisions on school quality” (Lankinen 2010). Indeed, the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities challenges the view that evaluation is only used for development arguing that “it is a tool of municipal management and control” (Simola et al. 2009: 171).

**Self-Evaluation**

In **Sweden**, following criticism of the extent to which education goals were being met, annual School Quality Reports were introduced in 1997 as a way of monitoring progress. Schools were required to carry out an internal audit and assessment of their performance in relation to the national education objectives. Teachers, other staff and even pupils and parents participated in drawing up these quality reports. They were publicly available and had to assess the extent to which the goals set up by the state were being achieved and make proposals for necessary changes if these were not being met. However, the limited use and impact of these reports has led to their abandonment and new provisions on systematic quality enhancement procedures (that are to be documented) are currently being developed. The municipality or organisation responsible for the schools still has, however, to systematically and continuously plan, monitor and develop its educational services in accordance with the national objectives for education (Eurybase 2009/10e).

Swedish schools are “encouraged” to use the national tests as a guide and self-evaluations are to contain common and comparable measures of, for example, the
national test results. The NAE aims at systematically strengthening quality assurance in education and is developing standardised measures for assessing results. It publishes general advice and comments on how schools should present quality standards and improvements in their written reports as well as “encouraging” schools to utilise evaluative tools. It operates, for example, a school self-assessment tool “Assessment, Reflection, Evaluation and Quality” (BRUK). This is an online questionnaire, available through NAE’s website, which allows schools to identify their strengths and weaknesses in relation to curriculum-driven activities (Swedish National Agency for Education 2011). Nevertheless, in its recent review of Sweden, the OECD judged, based on stakeholder feedback, that teachers had a sense of ownership over the school self-evaluation and that there was a democratic dialogue over the meaning of quality in education (Nusche et al. 2011).

In Norway, schools are also obliged to undertake self-evaluations of how far the organisation and implementation of their activities are in line with the national objectives for education (Eurydice 2009/2010d). Whilst there is no fixed format, national tools have been developed for schools to use in their assessments. These include an organisational analysis (used to analyse the school as a knowledge workplace) and a local point-of-view analysis (used to make an assessment of the school’s teaching practice and the pupils’ learning environment). These are available on the Directorate for Education and Training’s website as well as “guidance” material to “help” schools use these tools correctly (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2011).

In Denmark, the requirement for schools’ systematic self-evaluation and follow-up is considered to be a central principle in the Danish approach to quality (Eurybase 2009/2010a) and a model has been developed and is set out in the Danish Evaluation Institute’s publication A Key to Change: School Improvement through Self-evaluation. This is intended to guide the school through the evaluation process and make clear the types of issues that need to be tackled (Leth Nielsen and Munch Thorsen 2003). As Andersen et al. (2009) point out, this is a rather questionable “self-evaluation” as the school does not set its own agenda, but has instead to report its “view on a list of items sent in print to the school from the Evaluation Institute. It is not evident whether the term “self-evaluation” is an appropriate term for this practice” (Andersen et al. 2009:139). Another example is the binding national Common Objectives introduced in 2003, and further strengthened in 2006, that provide the overall framework for the content of teaching. The Folkeskole Act explicitly states that the continuous evaluation of student learning outcomes must involve these objectives. Obligatory municipal quality reports were introduced in 2007 which can again be seen as a method of central steering as the majority of the content of the report is prescribed by national regulation. Input, process and result indicators are specified in detail and, although the data are provided by the municipalities and schools, the legislation specifically prescribes what should be produced (Shewbridge et al. 2011).
In Iceland, schools are also required by law to carry out self-evaluations and the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture has responsibility for investigating the self-evaluation methods used by the schools (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2005). To this end, it has published the booklet *Sjálfsmat skóla* [Schools’ Self-Evaluation]. This lists criteria for self-evaluation, suggestions for implementation, and a checklist and guidelines for writing the final report (Eurydice 2009/2010c). Further, the results from the national tests are used as recommendations that should be taken into account in the schools’ self-evaluations (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency 2009).

*Finland* once again deviates somewhat here in that, although schools and other education providers have a statutory duty to evaluate their own activities following national guidelines (Eurydice 2009/2010b), it is up to local government to inform national government of the findings – if it chooses (Hudson 2010).

**Conclusions**

Soft governance though evaluation is prevalent in all the Nordic countries. An evaluation culture has emerged with institutional frameworks in terms of special organisations/agencies for evaluation and appraisal purposes, and techniques of evaluation and quality control. The emphasis has moved from controlling inputs to regulating outputs. An array of quality management and evaluation instruments have been produced which can be used to provide guidance to municipalities, schools and teachers; and as a way for the state to measure the quality of results in primary and secondary education, obtain information on the extent to which educational goals are being met and to ensure compliance with them. Accordingly, strong government remains within soft governance in the Nordic countries – albeit in more subtle forms.

With the exception of Finland, obligatory national tests are used as part of the process of evaluating schools. Standardised testing is not new, but was previously mainly used for diagnosis and to support fairness and consistency in teachers’ marking. Now these tests are employed as national outcome measures, with the increased availability of information concerning test results providing opportunities for making comparisons between schools and municipalities and increasing competition between schools and between pupils. Greater interest on the part of the media, municipalities and the general public for school results has “encouraged” increased generation of statistics and information portals and online systems have been developed that facilitate the spread and comparison of data. Thus, despite the lack of league tables in the Nordics it is, nevertheless, possible to compare schools’ performances. This enables not only the state to regulate and monitor the “output” of schools, but it also opens up for parents to compare schools and exercise choice (i.e. it is stimulating market values concerning consumer mentality and freedom of choice).

All five countries have also introduced self-evaluations for municipalities and schools, often including both pupils and parents in these processes. Whilst this im-
plies a decentralisation of responsibility, it also opens up potential for central steering either directly through the provision of specific guidelines or an evaluation “model” or, more subtly, through training courses and materials and information disseminating “best practice”. The quality assurance and evaluation initiatives involving goal-setting, mandatory tests and reporting mechanisms and employing calculative practices built on economic norms and market values have consequences for the Nordic model of compulsory education often challenging fundamental values concerning equality, social justice and solidarity. Although not reaching the level of panoptic performativity, these practices and procedures have a “guiding” effect on conduct making some forms of activity thinkable and practicable and others not. They are tending to foster new strategies and methods to achieve new ends in education concerned with standards, quality, competition and comparison (both national and international).

However, even if the focal point of education policy has been shifted towards a logic of the market involving pricing, competition, consumer choice, managerialism and performativity, there are differences between the countries in how far this is affecting the underlying values and practices of the Nordic model. “The ‘new’ is always entangled with and re-articulated through the ‘old’” (Simola et al. 2009:164) and thus each country responds in its own ways to the new international discourses. There are signs of resistance and reluctance to abandon the basic tenets of Nordic education in all five countries. Finland seems to have resisted the strongest and developed an evaluative culture that builds on flexible accountability focusing on deep learning and not testing. Both Denmark and Norway were slow starters in terms of developing an evaluative culture and there continue to be struggles over the use of evaluative techniques based on market values. Although Finland has dragged its heels the hardest, the introduction of national tests, for instance, led to fierce debate in all the Nordic countries. Even in Sweden which has, in many ways, been the front-runner, there has been resistance on the part of educationalists and a reluctance, for example, to narrow teaching “to teaching to the test”; and Iceland has abandoned the use of national tests for streaming purposes. Thus, there is not a unified single Nordic or even national response to quality assurance and evaluation; instead, there are dynamic processes of ongoing tensions and struggles, acceptances and rejections within each country both around and within quality assurance and evaluation initiatives.
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**Endnotes**

1 Iceland and Finland did not participate in this review.
2 Presentation at 3rd Seminar on Educational Evaluation, Barcelona, 2006
3 [http://www.uvm.dk/Aktuelt/Aktuelt/Aktuelt/2011/Feb/110224%20Faa%20overblik%20over%20Undervisningsministeriets%20nye%20struktur.aspx](http://www.uvm.dk/Aktuelt/Aktuelt/Aktuelt/2011/Feb/110224%20Faa%20overblik%20over%20Undervisningsministeriets%20nye%20struktur.aspx) 25/2/2011.
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