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Responsible QA – committing to impact

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Caty Duykaerts holds a master degree in Translation from ISTI (Brussels) and a master degree in Management from the Solvay Business School (ULB Brussels). Language teacher for over 20 years, she became the director of a major adult education centre in 2003. Since October 2008, as head of the Executive unit of AEQES, she's been responsible for implementing external evaluation procedures in the Belgian French-speaking higher education (universities, university colleges, art schools & conservatoires and adult education centres). From October 2012 on, elected member of the ENQA Board, she's committed to its missions and was elected Vice-president in 2015. Also member of the quality assurance WG of EURASHE, she contributes regularly to international and national conferences



on higher education quality assurance as well as to quality assurance international projects (e.g. HAQAA project).

Proposal

Title: How to get ready for change?

The paper is based on: policy

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? NO If yes, give details.

Discussion questions:

ESG 2.2 (Designing methodologies fit for purpose) states that “Stakeholders should be involved in its [EQA] design and continuous improvement”. How have you been involved – if ever - in a process to improve an EQA system? What lessons have learned from that process?

Designing an EQA methodology to support the “twin purposes of accountability and enhancement” can be considered as a technical answer to high policy stakes for HEI and more globally HEA. How to engage non specialists (i.e. students, academics...) in a co-building process?

...

ABSTRACT

This paper aims at describing why and how a QA agency decided to trigger a process of in-depth reflection and consultation on its external quality assurance (EQA) practices in order to better fit the quality purposes of its HE system. Convinced that some evolution was needed, AEQES set up a working group that first benchmarked some European systems and produced a preliminary report. It then surveyed the HE sector (online questionnaires). With the survey results in mind, it developed further possible methodological changes and asked key stakeholders (advisory and decision-making instances) and international experts to write down a feedback on five principles. Then AEQES elaborated a comprehensive report to inform the Belgian lawmakers on the desirable changes of the legislation that defines the QA mechanisms. The authors will share the outcomes reached so far at the Forum session, and invite participants to discuss the process and exchange experience.

PAPER

Why would a quality assurance agency decide to trigger a process of in-depth reflection and consultation on its methodologies, and therefore take the risk of opening up a time of uncertainties? Several reasons may explain this position.

Like many other QA agencies in Europe, the story of AEQES is a relatively new one. Set up by law in November 2002, the agency started to operate in 2004 and – mainly for lack of resources - had quite a slow implementation. In 2008, changes to its founding legal Act were made in order to increase the agency’s efficiency, and improve its ESG compliance. However, the legal Act of 2008 is still the one within which the agency operates nowadays, despite the evolutions of the EQA practices resulting from both gained experience and implementation of several ENQA/EQAR recommendations after the first review of the agency in 2011.

Beyond the legal aspects defining the scope and remit of its EQA, the agency is above all willing to support the higher education institutions in developing their IQA practices, and therefore strengthening their autonomy and responsibility for the quality of the overall HE provision. This is in line with the spirit of the ESG 2015, against which the agency was reviewed in 2016.



To give a brief description of the present situation, the EQA methodology is focused – by law – on the programmatic dimension exclusively, and the cyclical planning of the evaluations is based on the provision of study programmes in the Belgian French-speaking higher education system. Four types of HEIs provide these programmes: universities (6), university colleges (19), art colleges (16) and adult vocational education HEIs (84). The programmes are clustered by subject area – sometimes across the types of providers - to have their evaluation conducted during the same period by the same panel of experts. As a consequence, at the end of all evaluation visits for a cluster or a study programme, experts are mandated for writing a detailed report on the situation at the scale of French-speaking Belgium, which represents an extra value for both institutions (benchmarking of practices) and other stakeholders (multi-faceted information on studies, disciplines and employment perspectives). This system-wide analysis complements the review reports that each institution offering the programme receive from the panel, and which include findings and recommendations for improvement for individual institutions.

However, the regular feedback collected from the evaluated institutions, some impact analyses (for instance, the unavoidable evaluation fatigue for the large HEIs being regularly evaluated) and international trends showed that a shift towards a more holistic approach would probably enrich the EQA processes, for instance by focusing on the quality policies that are part of the strategic management, and strengthen the HEIs responsibility and autonomy.

To kick off the revision process, the question was: “What external quality assurance methodology (or methodologies) should be considered to guarantee the quality of higher education in the French-speaking Belgium changing environment, and continue supporting the development of a quality culture in all HEIs?”

A future-oriented approach was initiated in that respect. Concretely, a working group (WG) was set up, with five members of the Steering committee (representing academic staff), the Board of the Agency, two officers of the Agency’s Executive Unit, and seven Belgian HE stakeholders and international experts chosen for their competence in the field of IQA and EQA. The WG started its work by analysing international practices on external quality assurance, and by exploring potential methodological developments for AEQES, in accordance with the needs of society in general and the higher education institutions in particular.

This paper aims at describing the main steps of the process and looking at the lessons learned so far.

1 OVERVIEW OF THE TIMELINE AND OUTCOMES

April 2015	Set-up of the working group	Outcomes
From April 2015 to May 2016	Exploratory desk-research on quality assurance in HE Writing of a preliminary report	Preliminary report http://aeqes.be/documents/Rapport%20interm%C3%A9diaire%20Perspectives_20160707.pdf
From September 2016 to April 2017	Conception and monitoring of two online surveys (to HEIs stakeholders and HEIs authorities) Writing of a synthesis (context, general guidelines and five principles)	Results of the 2 online surveys (stakeholders and HEIs authorities) http://aeqes.be/rapports_details.cfm?documents_id=561
From April 2017 to July 2017	Consultation on the five principles document - focus groups with the HEIs respondents to the surveys	The Five-principle document Summary of the written feedback

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> written feedback asked from the main HE bodies and international independent experts and QAAs. <p>Writing the final report</p>	
September and October 2017	Endorsement of the final report by the Steering committee of the Agency	Final report
From November 2017 on	<p>Dissemination of the report among stakeholders</p> <p>Start of the legal process</p>	<p>AEQES seminar “<i>la conduite du changement</i>” on November 10, 2017</p> <p>A new AEQES Decree</p>

2 EXPLORATORY QA DESK-RESEARCH AND PRELIMINARY REPORT

The first task assigned to the WG was to collect and analyse examples of QA systems developed in several countries across Europe and beyond. The WG members shared the reading and summarising of reports, comparative studies, official documents and books,¹ and during several sessions the main findings were discussed in order to identify schemes and principles that would be relevant to, and/or could be somehow transferable or adapted to the context of the French-speaking Belgian HE sector.

Progressively, the discussions led the group to a set of principles and guidelines that would frame the proposals of future methodologies. A preliminary report was written to present the outcomes of that work, including four scenarios of potential methodologies using combinations of programmatic or institutional approaches. Once endorsed by the Steering committee of the agency, the report was published and disseminated. For instance, a full session of the 2016 annual seminar of AEQES² was devoted to this issue and enabled the attendees to debate.

3 CONSULTATION OF THE STAKEHOLDERS

It had been clear, since the revision process was envisaged, that all stakeholders should be involved in a way that they would gain ownership of the results from the revision process. However, after the first phase of the process, it appeared that only the WG members, and possibly the Agency Steering Committee, could say that they were involved and learned from it. It was time to involve more stakeholders into the process.

The next consultation phase was designed with a three-folded purpose: collecting data, engaging the participants in the global reflection, and co-building a future scenario for quality assurance in the sector.

It consisted in the following:

- An online survey to teachers, students, administrative staff, quality officers, etc. involved in the programmatic external evaluations conducted by AEQES from September 2013 to April 2016. The stakeholders' sample was not intended to ensure statistical representativeness, but rather to reach a range of different HEIs and disciplines. 5677 stakeholders were contacted and 1000 questionnaires were anonymously completed (response rate: 17.6%)

¹ See list under the heading REFERENCES

² http://aeqes.be/calendrier_events_details.cfm?news_id=152



- An online survey to the academic authorities of the 125 HEIs of French-speaking Belgium (6 universities, 19 university colleges, 84 adult education centres and 16 art HE schools). 48 questionnaires were completed (response rate: 38.4%)

Based on the preliminary report, the questionnaires presented the pros and cons of the programmatic and institutional approaches, and asked the respondents for their perceptions of the proposed scenarios, for questions it raised and for further suggestions. In that respect, the methodology differed greatly from an opinion poll or a “vote” for or against a specific approach. Prior to the surveys, two information sessions had been organised and short educational videos were posted on the agency website³. The surveys ran from December 2016 to February 2017.

Responses from both surveys were analysed on the basis of anonymity. Taking into account the characteristics of the sample as well as the purpose of the surveys, the WG tried to understand underlying factors such as the HEIs’ governance, strategies, resources, QA system level of development, etc., that had brought up sometimes-contrasted answers. The WG decided against attempting to extrapolate the results from the surveys to the stakeholders’ population or to all institutions. Indeed, the respondent status or the type of HEI did not always explain the differences between opinions. Moreover, some variables such as the size of the institution or the number of times they had been evaluated appeared to be discriminating facts in these samples. As explained earlier, the purpose of the surveys was not to bring the respondents to “vote” for one methodological approach (programmatic versus institutional) and, indeed, this did not happen. No preferable approach was unanimously chosen by the respondents.

The WG identified expectations and trends to deepen its reflection and - so to speak - “translated them” into its methodological proposals. It designed a note (called here the Five-principles document) that first presents the context of the desirable changes, then re-asserts the essentials – namely the vital pre-requisites embedded in the ESG, the Bologna Reform, the overall French-Belgian HE legislation and the AEQES mission statement –, and finally formulates five principles on which further consultation was carried out.

Principle 1: towards a better articulation between programmes evaluation and institutional evaluation

Principle 2: EQA mechanisms are progressively transformed to support the HEIs in developing IQA

Principle 3: the HEIs autonomy is supported by the Agency within the ESG guidelines

Principle 4: accountability and quality enhancement are (better) balanced

Principle 5: workload and cost of EQA to be considered and coped with

The WG subsequently expanded the consultation on these five principles first by organising focus-groups with HEIs stakeholders, and then by asking a written response to the main decision-taking and consultative bodies of the sector as well as international independent experts and QAAs. This consultation phase lasted from April to July 2017 and the response rate was 66% for the official bodies and 79% for the international independent experts and QAAs.

Even if, once again, there was no unanimous feedback on this consultative step, most principles described in the text were given positive feedback from the respondents, as well as the simple fact of starting such a process. The respondents also raised further issues by stressing points of attention, risks or conditions for implementation. They also asked for clarifications (what is meant by this or that?) or explanations on how precisely the principles would be operationalized.

4 TOWARDS THE FINAL REPORT

At the time of submitting this paper proposal, the process is at the phase of producing a final report. This report will be submitted first to the Steering committee of the Agency, then disseminated to all

³ http://aeqes.be/agence_composition_GT_perspectives.cfm



stakeholders and given to the public authorities with the purpose of asking them to start the legal work on a new decree.

The report will contain an introductory note on the rationale of the process, a significant section describing the proposed methodological scenario, a feasibility study for its implementation (from the Agency staff perspective), a compilation of the written feedback and a reference to previously published reports. An extra note may hint at suggestions for the revision of the AEQES decree.

5 PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED SO FAR?

The consultation process proved to be - in itself - a learning process for the Agency and its WG as well as for the stakeholders who are taking part in it. Considering ESG 2.2 *Designing methodologies fit for purpose*, three observations can be made:

- 1 There seems to be a shift in the way the stakeholders stress the positive impacts of quality assurance on the French-speaking Belgian HE sector as well as on the HEI governance and development. Strategic management and benefits from an enhancement-oriented EQA are more favorably put into balance with the legal obligation to undergo EQA and its associated workload. As a matter of act, even if it is too early to formally “measure impact”, some encouraging signs of development can be identified in the responses to the consultation from the official bodies and academic authorities. We tend to believe this shift is to be seen in the light of the large approval of the Agency actual work as revealed in the surveys.
- 2 We have received constructive feedbacks from international experts and colleagues from other quality agencies. It confirmed that the Agency should keep focusing on a coherent “system” approach rather than a “technical” point of view. Their comments put into light the importance to envision quality assurance as a whole and to clearly define its aims in order to design an EQA methodology attuned to the HEIs’ needs.
- 3 The diversity of French-speaking Belgian HEIs is and remains a challenge. The WG must be vigilant on addressing diversity of needs without increasing possible discrepancies, in particular regarding the resources that the HEI can mobilize to reinforce their IQA. AEQES could take this into account by developing a mixed-approach combining coherently a new institutional evaluation with the existing programmatic evaluations. This mixed-approach model is planned to be implemented progressively on a pilot-phase basis with voluntary HEIs. Monitoring the pilot phase – with stakeholders’ representatives - should bring room for adjustment and develop further the model. As a consequence, by engaging all stakeholders in the co-building process, including policy-makers, one key impact is certainly the collective awareness of the respective responsibilities of all the partners.

As a conclusion, we would like to come back to basics. In its attempt to make methodologies evolve, the Agency dared to open a step-by-step reflecting and consultative process involving the entire HE sector. By the way, among the set of values of AEQES⁴, one can read:

DIALOGUE AND CO- CONSTRUCTION

The Agency promotes dialogue and co-construction practices with all the stakeholders.

REFLEXIVITY AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The Agency examines the needs of higher education; it monitors international practices and is open to a continuous improvement process and to taking any initiative and making any proposal to that end.

It is fair to assume that the process described in this paper is a truly experienced translation of these two values. Needless to say that going through the process itself is enriching and gives all a chance to gain authentic ownership of complex but desirable developments.

⁴ See the 2016-2020 Strategic Plan <http://aeqes.be/documents/AEQES-PlanStrat%C3%A9gique-2016-2020.pdf>



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