2021 European Quality Assurance Forum

Building trust and enhancement: from information to evidence

Online event
18-19 November 2021

Call for contributions: Paper submission form
Deadline 26 July 2021

Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

Author(s)

Name: Vincent Rauzier (Principal Author)

Position: Head of the International Monitoring and Management Support and Territorial Program Unit, External and International Affairs

Organisation: Université Grenoble Alpes

Country: France

E-mail address: vincent.rauzier@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr

Short bio (150 words max):

Vincent Rauzier is Head of the International Monitoring and Management Support and Territorial Program Unit, part of the Office of External and International Affairs at the Université Grenoble Alpes. A computer scientist and historian, he also holds a master's degree in communications. Before joining International and External Affairs in 2017, he specialized in the creation of pedagogical projects resulting from high-quality research.

Name: Nicole Lassahn (Presenter)

Position: Project Manager for International Monitoring and Management Support, External and International Affairs

Organisation: Université Grenoble Alpes

Country: France

E-mail address: nicole.lassahn@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr

Short bio (150 words max):

Nicole Lassahn is Project Manager for International Monitoring and Management Support at the Office of External and International Affairs of the Université Grenoble Alpes. She completed her doctorate in Comparative Literature at the University of Chicago in 2001, after which she served as Assistant Director of that university's Academic and Professional Writing Program. Before coming to France in 2010, she was also Assistant Dean of the Graduate School at Loyola University Chicago.

Proposal

Title: Transforming information into data: a use case at the Université Grenoble Alpes

Abstract (150 words max):

In 2017, the Université Grenoble Alpes (UGA) began the construction of a new database of relationships with its external partners, both local and international. The database provides the university with its first global view of its external relations and some of its impact. This new database also provides university stakeholders with tools for evaluation and decision-making. Built from available information already present in a variety of university information systems, it also demonstrates how much can be accomplished with the information already collected and archived as a result of day-to-day university processes. However, the project also highlights some of the university's ongoing weaknesses with respect to assessment, quality management, and data-driven decision making, and the need for further, more strategic use of information.

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details.

No.

Indicate whether your contribution is based on practice, policy or research: Practice

Text of paper (3000 words max):

In 2017, the Université Grenoble Alpes (UGA) began the construction of a new database of relationships with its external partners, both local and international. This database, called *Opéraateur*, provides the university with its first global view of its external relations and some of its impact. Built from available information already present in a variety of university information systems, it also demonstrates how much can be accomplished with the information already collected and archived as a result of day-to-day university processes. However, the project also highlights some of the university's ongoing weaknesses with respect to assessment, quality management, and data-driven decision making, and the need for further, more strategic use of information.

In 2020, the implementation of this database as a tool for strategic management facilitated the creation of a new institutional structure: a small department within International and External Affairs dedicated to monitoring, management support, and support for institutional decision-making. Together, the availability of reliable information and the expertise of dedicated staff who produce, maintain, analyze, and contextualize the relevant information, have enabled some preliminary steps toward increased trust, as well as an increased emphasis on data-driven decisions.

Context and Goals of the project

The *Opéraateur* project began just after the 2016 merger of three Grenoble universities, each with disparate data collection processes and institutional cultures. This merger was itself a response to changing national policies and major funding instruments in France, which was and is seeking to raise the profile of some of its larger and more prestigious research universities, including by moving them up in international rankings; in particular the AWRU or Shanghai rankings.

As a public university, the UGA also manages a variety of complex relationships with its local environment, including the city of Grenoble, the larger metropolitan area (Grenoble-Alpes *métropole*), the Isère *département* where it is located, and the larger regional structure Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes. In addition, and like all universities, the UGA also maintains relationships with employers, associations and the not-for-profit sector, and cultural actors. Simply mapping and describing these varied and complex relationships was a necessary first step for managing these relations and developing an institutional strategy as the new, larger university adjusted to the effects of the 2016 merger. This mapping was complicated by the diverse and often *ad hoc* nature of the available information, which was housed in different ways in different pieces of software in nearly every department of the university[1]. Some data appeared multiple times in different databases or information sheets, others did not exist at all.

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At least three types of information were mobilized:
- Large-scale management data, for example information from our accounting software and databases, information from our human resources software, information from our internships and work placement database…
- Information used to manage specific processes or projects, often used by a single individual to manage a single process. For example, an excel spreadsheet housing budget details for a sponsored project.
- Data associated with research, sometimes statistical[1], such as survey results from a specific research project undertaken by a faculty member.

These data are neither homogenous, nor intended for strategic management. They are nonetheless a powerful resource when placed in relation to one another and mobilized for self-assessment, planning, and decision-making.

The project was also complicated by a lack of dedicated funding, both for strategic management and analysis and also for the specific technical and IT skills which support these processes. A UGA student was hired on a specific type of contract – *alternance* – a form of practical work placement which integrates classroom learning with real world experience in alternating weeks.

Methodology and implementation
The first step was to identify the extant sources of data, both internal and external. This identification considered both individual actors who produce information and various pieces of software which store and mobilize data. Secondly, a common nomenclature was defined.
At this point, several important internal processes were implemented: the project was staffed with technically competent personnel, key members of university leadership were consulted, and regular exchanges with potential internal users were initiated. Calling on university leadership was particularly effective in obtaining buy in and coordinating with the diverse university structures producing information and data; as international and external relations involve all aspects of institutional activity – teaching, research, human resources and recruitment, relationships with suppliers and service providers, and institutional ties – the information sources mobilized come from areas of the university which might not otherwise directly interact with one another. Also, offices which are not typically targeted for processes like internationalization – such as accounting – nonetheless manage relevant information.
Currently, we are responding to requests about specific issues from university leadership and selected colleagues, as well as conducting preliminary user tests for our standard dashboards with potential internal users.

The following principles were employed:
- All external relations are included, and all are treated equally (no weighting and no preselection)
- The simplest and most generic data model possible is employed whenever possible. The idea is to include as many different university activities as possible, as well as to allow for the inclusion of new types of information in the future, should the overall institutional context change.
- Existent, recurring, and trustworthy data are used. Most of these data come from the software used to manage university processes. One-time or unreliable data are typically not included.

- Whenever possible, data are placed into an external, normalized framework. For example, ISO norms for country codes, OECD and UNESCO data for foreign countries, INSEE (the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies) for French data sources…

The new department for monitoring and management support

The principal means of communicating information from the database is the new department for monitoring and management support. This department, which combines technical expertise in database management with skills in analysis and qualitative research, also responds to requests from colleagues in external affairs for assistance with evaluation and analysis. This department has been crucial for establishing international relationships based on trust.

Our strategy relies on the following principles:

- All information and analysis provided is factual and strictly neutral. This is particularly important in the case of contentious issues. While individual staff members do have opinions about best practices, these opinions do not form a part of information and support provided. This is true even in the case of qualitative information, which is summarized and properly cited from relevant literature.

- Related to this neutral presentation is a clear account of what the department does and does not offer – we provide technical expertise, not decision-making. Decision-making, choice of priorities and goals, and prioritization of needs and projects are left to the colleagues and departments who solicit our input.

- The department presents itself as an internal resource, with a specific document detailing which services can be provided available to colleagues in the External Affairs office. We hope in the coming year to increase the visibility of these services, possibly working with colleagues in other central offices and in the academic departments.

- If possible, we try to accept all feasible requests for help, in order to establish a reputation as a responsive and available service unit. In some cases, these projects may not involve the *Opéraateur* database specifically, but still showcase the skills and expertise of the department's staff (for example, an analysis of real versus projected expenses for grant-funded projects managed in the External Affairs office). These projects build trust and credibility, laying the groundwork for future requests, and improving visibility.

Preliminary results

The project meets several specific, current institutional needs which arise from an intersection of national and local conditions and university, national, and European goals: support for the selection and evaluation of strategic institutional partnership, informed choices and priorities in a context of limited resources, and an accurate assessment of real needs, particularly for specific populations such as international students and scholars.

Strategic partnerships: consolidated data by partner allows for a global view of institutional relations with individual partners, bringing together diverse types of relationships – student and staff mobility, research production, sponsored projects and joint funding, and specific cooperative degree programs. These data have also been placed in context, notably via comparison with other partners from the country or region. These data allow for the global view necessary in establishing wide-ranging strategic partnerships, and also provide a basis for year-to-year comparison, in an effort to evaluate the real impact of the partnership.

Informed choices: a realistic and accurate view of our external relations has allowed for the informed decisions about the future allocation of resources. For example, mapping these trends has allowed us to see that the majority of our current local ties are with the not-for-profit

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and cultural sectors, rather than with business and industry. This knowledge will allow university leadership to decide if they would like to further invest in our current strengths or use resources to try to fill gaps.

Specific needs: following a change in national policy with respect to university tuition and fees for international students, the UGA needed to know how many students were potentially affected in order to establish criteria for exemptions to the higher fees. Placing different data sources together, and comparing them to numbers from the national database "*Etudes en France*" has allowed university leadership to see how many students are potentially affected, and to consider other criteria (nationality, program or level of study, country of origin…) which might be employed.

Ongoing challenges
Despite these advances, the university still faces a number of ongoing challenges, many related to institutional culture. The availability of reliable data is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the use of data to advance institutional goals.

The issues below continue to slow progress toward the strategic use of data:
- In many ways, the university still lacks a culture of transparency and openness, including internal exchanges between colleagues from different departments
- Related to the above, there is reluctance in some quarters to share data, even internally, and occasional misunderstandings of European regulations of personal and private data. We have seen these regulations cited even in the case of public data, such as budgetary information, or institutional assessment and accreditation, which is available to the general public as a matter of French law.
- The diversity of university partners, with different structures and institutional cultures, makes data-sharing challenging
- There is no institution-wide policy for data collection, treatment, storage, etc. Even when protocols exist, they treat the management of information, not data, and are usually created with the goal of efficiency in university processes in mind.
- There is an ongoing tendency to skip assessment steps, coupled with a desire to get a "good score" rather than informed self-improvement; that is to say, even when data are available, without a culture of employing them in decision-making, those data are useless.
- There is a lack of relevant frameworks for meaningful comparison. For example, a number or percentage will be presented without reference to peers, previous performance, targets, or recognized norms and best practices. (Example: we have 12% international students.)
- User tests reveal an ongoing focus on marketing and communications concerns rather than assessment – questions typically include logo placement, display colors, and the possibility of exporting data as a pdf, with little to no interest or feedback with respect to content or analysis of the information provided.
- There is a vicious circle with respect to dedicated funding, especially for the hiring of technical staff: without preliminary data and analyses which demonstrate the value of large-scale data collection, it is difficult to make the case for dedicating resources to this activity.

It is unclear how to solve these ongoing problems, particularly those which are tied to a culture of assessment or a culture of evidence. Presenting neutral information which informs current open questions or institutional priorities is a help, but it does not, itself, do enough to convince stakeholders of the value or necessity of this activity. In some cases, there is a continued misunderstanding of what data-driven decision-making is, or means, and there is a particular reluctance to dedicate permanent, stable human resources funding to the activity.

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We are considering creating internal training materials and specific use cases which demonstrate the impact and potential value of data-driven processes, or indeed of assessment itself, but would welcome feedback and suggestions from peers about how they have successfully managed this type of institutional change.

In addition, the university faces specific challenges as a result of its decentralized organization.

Positive outcomes

Despite these drawbacks, the project has provided concrete positive outcomes for the institution.

- We have a better view of our real place in local and international contexts, and of our real relationships and activities with various external partners
- We are able to present relevant information to various parties in a neutral and dispassionate way
- The project underpins additional tools, such as the visual tool of a partnerships map, which are available to both internal stakeholders and members of the general public, including potential partners, students, employees, and collaborators
- We are able to respond quickly to most typical requests for data; standardized dashboards have been created for partnership relations by country, partner, and university structure (academic department, central service, or research center/*laboratoire*)
- We are now able to compare like with like from one year to the next or between countries and university structures
- We have begun to include external data and benchmarks in order to make our internal numbers more meaningful (UNESCO, OECD, Eurostat…)

We believe that this approach might work for other institutions in similar situations, provided that they bear in mind the fact that it is not, in and of itself, sufficient to build a culture of quality. It mobilizes existing information, keeps costs comparatively low, and supports gradual transformation rather than sudden change.

References:

[1] This work was made possible in part through official representation on the UGA's political team. An associate VP for territorial relations, Grégoire Feyt, initiated, promoted, and supported the project as part of the university's larger strategic vision. Dr. Feyt was also made significant contributions via his research expertise in local relations and town and country planning.

The *Opéraateur* database was also made possible by generous funding from the *Région Auvergne Rhône Alpes*.

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