



10th European Quality Assurance Forum

19-21 November 2015

Quality Assurance Agency and UCL Institute of Education

London, UK

Taking stock and looking forward

Paper presented during EQAF 2015

Authors

Name: BERTHIAUME Denis

Position: Vice-rector – Quality Assurance and Enhancement

Organisation: University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland

Country: Switzerland

Short bio:

Denis Berthiaume holds a PhD in Educational Psychology from McGill University, Canada. He also studied higher education management at Harvard University, USA, and international relations at Université Laval, Canada. His areas of research and publication include reflective practice in higher education teaching and learning, assessment of learning, evaluation of teaching, the professional development of academic staff, the psychology of doctoral supervision and the management of quality assurance in higher education. Denis has provided training for academic staff and advice for management in higher education institutions in various countries including Belgium, Canada, France, Estonia, Hungary, Japan, Morocco, Tunisia, and the United Kingdom.

Name: VAN OUYTSEL, Audrey

Position: Project manager at the executive unit at AEQES

Organisation: Agence pour l'évaluation de la qualité de l'enseignement supérieur (AEQES)

Country: Belgium

Short bio: Audrey Van Ouytsel holds a PhD in Sociology from Louvain-La-Neuve University and the Royal Military Academy of Brussels. Her areas of research include regulation of educational system, production of social inequalities, identity issues in intercultural context as well as organizational analysis in Africa. Audrey taught sociology to students enrolled in the "Marriage and family counseling" program. She organized seminars in intercultural awareness and supervised Bachelor's degree thesis projects.



Audrey is member of AFS (Association française de Sociologie), AISLF (Association Internationale des Sociologues de langue française), and REF (Réseau Education et Formation).

Name: DUYKAERTS Caty

Position: Head of the executive unit of AEQES

Organisation: Agence pour l'évaluation de la qualité de l'enseignement supérieur (AEQES)

Country: Belgium

Short bio:

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. Also member of the quality assurance WG of EURASHE, she contributes regularly to international and national conferences on higher education quality assurance (ADMEE, ENQA seminars, EQAF 2013, Malta 2014...)

Proposal

Title:

A Tribute to transversal expertise: What is the contribution of non-disciplinary experts to evaluation committees in academic programme evaluation in French-speaking Belgium?

Abstract:

Expert evaluation of study programmes has been a common feature of quality assurance systems in Europe and worldwide. In general, expert committees are formed of disciplinary or professional specialists who examine said programmes with a "peer review" approach. In the French part of Belgium, expert committees have included, for several years now, three other types of experts, namely education, quality management and student experts. Their contribution has been significant in the process of programme evaluation but empirical evidence was needed to understand the nature and value of their contribution better. This exploratory research project thus examines the contribution of "transversal" experts. A variety of data collection and analysis procedures have been used to gather evidence that takes into consideration the experience of both "transversal" and "non-transversal" experts. Results point to five areas of contribution for "transversal" experts. These five areas raise further questions as regards the composition of expert panels.



Text of paper:

1. Context and motivations for this research project

The *Agence pour l'évaluation de la qualité de l'enseignement supérieur* (Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education - AEQES) is responsible for the formative evaluation of study programmes (Bachelor and Master level). Evaluations are grouped around specific "clusters" meaning that all study programmes with identical titles or pertaining to a single domain of learning are evaluated concurrently by a single panel of experts. The dual objective of this evaluation is (1) to provide information on the quality of evaluated programmes (all reports are published on the AEQES website) and (2) to support institutions in the development of autonomous and efficient quality assurance systems. Initial evaluations are supplemented with follow-up evaluations in order to consolidate actions undertaken to improve the quality of study programmes.

To guide all this work, AEQES has developed a frame of reference (*référentiel*)¹ made of five criteria covering both institutional dimensions (governance, quality procedures and ongoing improvement, human and material resources management, communication, etc.) and pedagogical dimensions (graduate attributes and learning outcomes targeted by study programmes, internal coherence of study programmes, teaching and assessment methods, activities to support the students' learning experience, etc.). Thus, even if the entry angle is the evaluation of study programmes, the process is clearly contextualised and takes into consideration situational data from each HE institution.

For almost five years now, in order to examine such data with high-level precision and fairness, AEQES has decided to form expert panels comprising various types of specialists:

- Academic (coming from the evaluated discipline)
- Employers/Professional practitioners (coming from the professional field targeted by the programme)
- Student (coming from the evaluated discipline)
- Educationalists (specialising in teaching and learning and/or curriculum development in higher education)
- Quality managers (specialising in quality management in various settings including higher education)

These last two profiles are called, in the AEQES framework, "transversal experts" to the extent that they are not related to a specific disciplinary field or cluster of disciplinary fields. To AEQES, it has always appeared as common sense to consider the plurality of viewpoints and types of expertise in the formation of review panels, in particular in light of the recently updated Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), which put a lot of emphasis on teaching and learning. This research project was thus undertaken to obtain empirical evidence of the added value of the presence of such "transversal experts", namely through testimonials from the various types of experts involved in our evaluation panels. In the presentation, the various aspects of the exploratory study are described: the methodology used to collect data, the results

¹ <http://www.aeqes.be/documents/20121004AEQESCompilationAssessmentGuide2012.pdf>



themselves, and conclusions that can be drawn for both theory and practice.

2. Research questions

Our overall reflection bears on the perception all experts have of the role of “transversal” experts on evaluation panels. What is their specific contribution? How useful do they themselves feel in the process as they are not experts of the discipline or professional field being evaluated? What added value, if any, do their colleagues see in having them on the panel? How do transversal and non-transversal experts perceive the role of their counterparts based on their own panel experience? What are the similarities and differences?

In this study, as we aimed at understanding the lived experience of experts, we favoured a phenomenological approach (Embree et al., 1997; Schutz, 1973) whereby we did not come about with preconceived ideas or questions. Data collection was very free and emerging in order to capture the true experience of participants to this exploratory study.

Our research questions can thus be formulated as follows:

- How do “transversal” experts perceive their contribution to programme review panels organised by AEQES?
- How do non-“transversal” experts perceive the contribution of their “transversal” colleagues to programme evaluation panels organised by AEQES?

Through this exploratory study, we wish to understand the lived perceptions of both categories of experts. As such, we have no aim of statistical generalisation. Rather, we wish to outline dimensions of the lived experience of experts in order to identify further areas of research and/or practice with regards to the composition of expert panels.

3. Methodology

The overall approach to this research project is phenomenological. The data collection approach was thus phenomenographic (Åkerlind, 2005; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999) in that we attempted to group lived experiences according to similarities in order to foster the emergence of specific trends that could be used in further exploration of the targeted phenomenon.

In this exploratory research, two data sets were collected and analysed at different times. Figure 1 below shows the relationship between them and the overall chronology of the exploratory project.

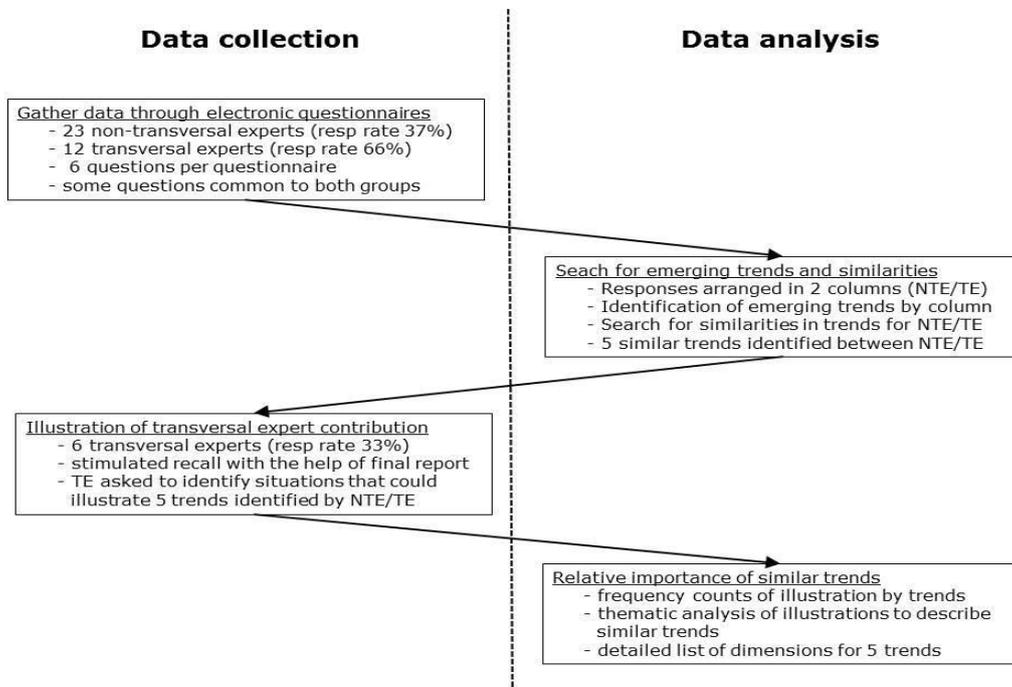


Figure 1. Data collection and analysis process

3.1 Gather data through electronic questionnaires

Random sampling was first used within a list comprising 317 transversal and non-transversal experts. In this sample, we have then purposefully targeted certain criteria in order to diversify the sample according to gender, number of evaluations and time since the last evaluation was conducted. In the end, a total of 47 participants were identified, including 29 non-transversal experts and 18 transversal experts.

Two standardised, self-administered questionnaires were developed through SurveyMonkey: one for non-transversal experts and one for transversal experts. Each questionnaire comprised six open-ended questions bearing mostly upon their experience of having worked on an expert panel. Questions were meant to encourage participants to talk about the specific contribution of transversal experts on evaluation panels without too much guidance. Yet, specific examples or illustrations were requested at various points in the questionnaire.

Of the 47 questionnaires sent to participants, we received 23 responses (11 from non-transversal experts (response rate 37%) and 12 from transversal experts (response rate 66%). The overall participation rate was 48%. Items were generally well answered however either group provided very few specific examples of the contribution of transversal experts.

3.2 Search for emerging trends and similarities



Responses to the 23 standardised, self-administered questionnaires were analysed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1969; Strauss, 1987). In order to examine the contribution of transversal experts, responses from non-transversal and transversal experts were organised in two distinct columns. For each column, transcribed responses were analysed one by one to identify a theme. Each subsequent answer was compared to existing themes to see if it reflected one of them or if a new theme had to be created. Once that operation was complete for each of the two columns, emerging themes from both columns were compared to identify similarities reported in Table 1 below. Despite the fact that this research is only exploratory, this analysis phase was conducted by two researchers independently to ensure maximum reliability of the data.

Table 1. Common themes emerging from the experience of both categories of experts

<p>1. Help colleagues focus their analysis on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The organisation, the structures ● The quality assurance system (its relevance) ● The context ● The overall teaching approach
<p>2. Advise colleagues on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The wording of questions ● The clarification of jargon or functions
<p>3. Help colleagues in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The reaching of consensus ● Decision making ● The formulation of proposals for improvement ● Understanding of the quality assurance system
<p>4. Support pedagogical reflection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Help draw links with pedagogical research ● Foster expert sensitivity to pedagogical issues
<p>5. Provide an additional outlook:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Critical thinking on the notion of graduate attributes and learning outcomes ● Critical thinking on the notion of employability (clarification of its true nature)

3.3 Illustration of transversal expert contribution

The first round of data collection provided interesting material to clarify the contribution of transversal experts in generic terms. We needed to obtain further concrete information in order to gain a more operational understanding of that contribution. We thus went back to the transversal experts and proceeded with stimulated recall (Biddle & Anderson, 1986; Clark & Lampert, 1986; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Shulman, 1986) in order to obtain more precise illustrations of that contribution.

Stimulated recall is a method by which the participant is brought back to a certain point in time through artefacts (i.e. transcripts, recordings). In such situations, participants are asked to explain what they were thinking about whilst conducting the specific cognitive activity they were doing (i.e. teaching, analysing a text, producing a report). In our exploratory study, we asked transversal experts to go back to the main conclusions of the report produced by their evaluation panel and to identify elements of the report that were



the result of their intervention. Participants were asked to detail what they had said or had done at the time of drafting of the report to illustrate their contribution.

Dimensions emerging from the first phase of data collection were sent to 11 of the 18 transversal experts. Each expert received the electronic version of the conclusions of the final expert evaluation report. Their task was to identify concrete situations that corresponded to the five themes that emerged from the analysis of the first phase of data collection. The stimulated recall approach served two purposes:

- To raise the validity of results by making sure our analysis rested not only on reported experiences but on concrete, lived experiences (Argyris & Schön, 1977)
- To identify the elements emerging from the analysis of questionnaires that were the most meaningful to transversal experts

3.4 Relative importance of trends common to both categories of experts

The identification of practical illustrations of the various trends and subcategories (see table 1 above) has provided some kind of validation to the five trends identified in the first phase of analysis. We tried to match the various illustrations obtained from participants to the themes and subcategories. Table 2 below shows which trends were most often illustrated, along with which subcategories were most easily illustrated in a concrete manner. Preliminary results thus seem to show that the main contribution of transversal experts is first and foremost with helping colleagues focus their analysis during the evaluation (mainly on the quality assurance system and on the context). Then their contribution is with trends 3 (Help colleagues with various aspects of the process), 5 (Provide an additional outlook) and 2 (Advising colleagues on question formulation, jargon, and functioning). Oddly enough, trend 4 about fostering pedagogical reflection has not been documented with concrete illustrations.

Table 2. Illustrations obtained for each common trend and subcategory

Trends common to both categories of experts	Number of illustrations per subcategory	Number of illustrations per trend
1. Help colleagues focus their analysis on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The organisation, the structures • The quality assurance system (its relevance) • The context • The overall teaching approach 	1 4 3 0	8
2. Advise colleagues on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The formulation of questions • The clarification of jargon or functioning 	3 1	4
3. Help colleagues in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The reaching of consensus • Decision making • The formulation of proposals for improvement • Understanding of the quality assurance system 	1 1 2 1	5



<p>4. Support pedagogical reflection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help draw links with pedagogical research • Foster expert sensitivity to pedagogical issues 	1	1
<p>5. Provide an additional outlook:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical thinking on the notion of graduate attributes and learning outcomes • Critical thinking on the notion of employability 	4 1	5

4. Results and conclusion

In this exploratory study, two sets of data were collected and analysed in order to clarify the contribution of transversal experts to evaluation panels. A first look at preliminary results seems to point to similarities in the perception of the contribution of transversal experts by both non-transversal experts and transversal experts. Five trends appeared to be common to both groups (see Table 1 above). These trends provide a first indication of the nature of the contribution of educational or quality management experts to evaluation panels. Regardless of which group formulated a response, their contribution appears to be positive. This is an interesting result in that very few quality assurance agencies include such experts in their expert panels mainly because of the assumption that only disciplinary or professional specialists can evaluate study programmes. Yet, preliminary results show that when looking beyond the traditional content-based, “peer-review” approach to evaluation panels, transversal experts can help expand the feedback provided to the study programme being evaluated.

A further analysis of the contribution of transversal experts seems to point to them bringing significant skills in areas such as interpersonal relations, leadership, understanding, critical thinking, distance taking, and reflectiveness. These skills seem to be crucial to the functioning of evaluation panels and, in particular, to the formative mission of such panels, as is the case in the French-speaking Belgian higher education system.

As this is an exploratory research, presenting preliminary results, further undertakings are required to strengthen our findings. First, it would be essential to widen the sample of participants in order to identify further themes common to both groups of experts or to confirm the present ones through saturation. Second, we would need further concrete illustrations of the various themes and subcategories for those to be truly useful in describing the contribution of transversal experts. Third, we would need different viewpoints on the contribution of transversal experts. For instance, institutions and study programmes receiving feedback from such panels, often having also experienced panels formed exclusively of disciplinary experts, could provide an input as to the difference between those two types of panels. Fourth, transversal experts were treated as one category of experts, comprising both educational and quality management specialists. As those two areas are related yet different, it might be useful to analyse the data further by separating comments according to profiles. This might help in better understanding the contribution of the two subgroups. Fifth, counter examples, contradicting previous findings, should be sought in particular with non-transversal experts who did not provide any response to the online questionnaire



Yet, these preliminary results raise a series of questions about the composition of expert committees. For instance,

- How many transversal experts should there be in one committee compared to the number of non-transversal experts?
- Who should assume the presidency of the committee? Does it have to be a disciplinary expert or would a transversal expert be more able to focus on process rather than content?
- If the skills identified in transversal experts are useful to evaluation committees, can disciplinary experts be helped in developing those skills? How?
- Should this practice of including transversal experts in evaluation committee be extending to other systems such as institutional reviews? What would be the benefits?

This exploratory research seems to identify a series of areas that might need to be further explored in the years to come, in particular in light of the evolution of the ESG and the general context of higher education in Europe.

References

- Åkerlind, G. S. (2005). Academic growth and development: How do university academics experience it? *Higher Education*, 50, 1-32.
- Argyris, C., & Schön, D. A. (1977). *Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Biddle, B. J., & Anderson, D. S. (1986). Theory, methods, knowledge, and research on teaching. In M. C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (3rd ed., pp. 230-252). New York: Macmillan.
- Clark, C. M., & Lampert, M. (1986). The study of teacher thinking: Implications for teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 37(5), 27-31.
- Clark, C. M., & Peterson, P. L. (1986). Teachers' thought processes. In M. C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (3rd ed., pp. 255-296). New York: Macmillan.
- Embree, L., Behnke, E. A., Carr, D., Evans, J. C., Huertas-Jourda, J., Kockelmans, J. J., . . . Zaner, R. M. (1997). *Encyclopedia of phenomenology*. The Hague: Kluwer Academic Press.
- Glaser, R. G., & Strauss, A. (1969). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New York: Aldine Publishing.
- Prosser, M., & Trigwell, K. (1999). *Understanding learning and teaching: The experience in higher education*. London: SRHE/Open University Press.
- Schutz, A. (1973). *Collected papers I: The problem of social reality* (4th ed.). The Hague, NL: Martinus Hijhoff.
- Shulman, L. (1986). Paradigms and research programs in the study of teaching: A contemporary perspective. In M. C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (3rd ed., pp. 3-36). New York: Macmillan.
- Strauss, A. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.