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Both authors will be responsible for presenting the paper at the Forum.

Proposal

Title: Designing a Framework for Internal Quality Assurance of Research in a Flemish University of Applied Sciences

Abstract (150 words max):

Quality assurance in Flemish professional higher education has traditionally focussed mainly on teaching and learning processes. Given the threefold mission of universities of applied sciences, however, their internal QA system should cover research and services to society as well as education. Up to now, QA for applied research has largely been a question of peer review of individual projects. In order to stimulate quality culture on the more encompassing level of research units, HOGENT (University College Ghent) is designing a new QA framework to be used by its departments. The framework is not an instrument for rating or ranking research activities, but seeks to stimulate reflection on research by adopting an appreciative approach. In this paper, we discuss the main features of the framework, the co-creation process leading up to it, and the preliminary findings of a pilot project.

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

Text of paper (3000 words max): see following page

References: see text of paper

Discussion questions:

1) It seems logical to organize internal QA for applied research not just on the level of individual projects, but also on the more encompassing level of research units. However, research funding at Flemish Universities of Applied Sciences is mainly project-based. How can QA be optimally adapted to this situation?

2) An appreciative approach to QA is well-suited to identifying and developing research units' existing strengths, but may also obscure possibilities for improvement and their follow-up through concrete actions. How can this pitfall be avoided?

3) HOGENT's research vision places a strong emphasis on interdisciplinarity. How can we take account of this in a QA framework that operates on the level of individual departments organized along disciplinary lines?

Designing a Framework for Internal Quality Assurance of Research

in a Flemish University of Applied Sciences

Els Palmans & Koen Rymenants

1. Introduction

Like elsewhere in Europe, quality assurance in professional higher education in Flanders (the Northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) has traditionally concentrated mainly on teaching and learning processes (Bollaert 2014: 147). The mission of Flemish Universities of Applied Sciences (officially, and somewhat confusingly, known as 'University Colleges') is, in fact, much broader and also includes applied research and services to society. This threefold mission is crucial to the societal role of professional higher education in general (Bollaert 2014: 36). Since the mission, vision and strategy of a UAS constitute the starting point for its (internal) QA, the latter should cover research and services as well as education (next to the management of the institution itself).

Broadening the scope of QA entails thinking about the most useful tools and processes to achieve this. University College Ghent (Hogeschool Gent or HOGENT) fosters the ambition to create a strong quality culture underpinned by an efficient system of quality assurance for both its core and its supporting processes (HOGENT 2017: 15). In this paper, we will present a framework for internal QA of applied research that we are currently trying out. First, we will briefly sketch the regional and institutional context in which we are designing this framework. Next, we will describe the main components of the framework, the co-creation process leading up to it, and our first experiences in testing it. This will lead us to some preliminary conclusions and questions for further reflection.[1]

2. The context: QA in professional higher education in Flanders

External QA in Flemish higher education saw a major change recently as the existing system of periodical assessments of individual study programmes was largely replaced by an institutional review assessing 'the quality of the educational policy pursued by an institution' (NVAO 2015: 5). This places responsibility for the quality of education squarely on the higher education institutions themselves, and provides them with the autonomy to organize their own internal QA systems. HOGENT's system was reviewed and approved for the first time in 2016.

The institutional review 'comprises all policy domains that support the quality of the education provided, i.e., including policy in the field of research as well as social and academic services provided' (NVAO 2015: 5). In other words, it takes the teaching-research nexus into account, but 'expressly does not

concern the actual quality of the research'. Nevertheless, an informal recommendation voiced in the course of the first institutional review was that HOGENT should reflect on the relation between its internal QA system and its research activities.

There is as yet no Flemish equivalent of the external review specifically for applied research that exists in the Netherlands, where universities of applied sciences agreed on a sector protocol for research quality assurance (Camilleri et al. 2013: 43-46; Vereniging Hogescholen 2015). Flemish higher education legislation, however, explicitly mentions that higher education institutions should permanently take account of the quality of their research on their own initiative, and should regularly evaluate it in co-operation with other institutions (Higher Education Codex: II.121). This has led to various research assessment exercises in the traditional universities, but not (at least not systematically) in the universities of applied sciences.

To some extent, of course, QA is part and parcel of common practice in research. As Bollaert (2014: 149) points out, funding is mostly dependent on peer review of a proposal detailing 'the aims, research questions, processes, actions and deadlines, budget and possible results', and the standard cycle of research methodology is very similar to the PDCA cycle used in QA. This is no different for HOGENT's research, which is mainly project-based. Quality culture, however, does not just pertain to individual projects but also to the functioning of broader research units. There is, in other words, a need for QA on the level of these units, i.e. HOGENT's departments.

3. The context: requirements for QA of applied research at HOGENT

3.1. Departments as research units

A first factor that influences the design of a QA framework for research units is their place in the institution as a whole. A typical feature of HOGENT's current organizational structure is the matrix of departments and education programmes. All lecturers and researchers belong to one of 24 departments. As a capacity group, the department ensures that expertise is developed and shared by and among its members, and also across departmental boundaries. On the one hand, this expertise is subject-specific (disciplinary knowledge, research themes and research methods); on the other hand, it relates to the professional competencies of department members (including their research competencies).

The education programmes intersect with these departments in a matrix structure, i.e. expertise from members of the same department can be put to use in several programmes. A programme committee is responsible for the curriculum and the practical organization of the programme. Some departments are mapped one-on-one with education programmes (e.g. the Nursing department and the professional bachelor programme in Nursing) whereas others (e.g. the Languages department or the Law

department) offer their expertise to a wide range of programmes. Carrying out research and creating societal impact are also among the responsibilities of every department.

The departments vary in size from a few dozen members to nearly a hundred. They can cover a narrowly defined field of expertise or a relatively wide-ranging cluster of related fields, and their track records in research display significant differences. This implies that a framework for internal QA should be applicable to a great variety of situations. Therefore, HOGENT decided that at this stage QA should seek to stimulate reflection on research in every department and suggest avenues for quality enhancement, rather than aiming at compliance or accountability. The framework is an instrument for reflection and evaluation, not for rating departments or ranking them. Thus, it relates not only to current trends in QA (cf. Merkx 2012: 43-44), but also to HOGENT's ambition to create an appreciative environment for staff to work autonomously and reflect critically on their professional practice.

3.2. A vision of applied research

Bollaert (2014: 149) raises the question 'whether QA of education and research can be undertaken according to the same, generic standards'. Given the centrality of the institution's mission to its QA, he recommends taking the specific context into account and looking closely 'at the links the HEI itself formulates between education, research and social services'. Therefore, a QA framework for applied research at HOGENT is determined not just by the specificities of the organizational structure, but also by the institution's strategic choices.

Research occupies an important place in HOGENT's mission to promote a critical, creative and open society (HOGENT 2017: 3). It aims for applied research that is closely connected to teaching in its professional bachelor programmes,[2] addresses contemporary societal challenges, favours interdisciplinary collaboration and strives for maximal impact (HOGENT 2017: 8). This research vision is closely connected to the features and ambitions of applied research more generally (cf. Veeckman et al. 2012: 18), and implies that researchers systematically seek collaboration and co-creation with citizens and with professional partners from business, industry and government on a regional, national and international level.

Although research funds for Flemish Universities of Applied Sciences have increased slightly in recent years, they offer only limited opportunities for embedding research structurally in the range of duties of lecturers. At HOGENT, these internal resources are placed in a Research Fund and are used mainly for projects that are competitively acquired by the research groups after an evaluation of proposals through peer review. An important part of the internal research funding is allocated to research projects in which

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[2] In Flanders, Universities of Applied Sciences offer only professional bachelor programmes and academic bachelor and master programmes in the arts (and, in the specific case of the Antwerp Maritime Academy, the nautical sciences). All other academic bachelor and master programmes, as well as doctoral programmes, are exclusively the domain of the traditional universities. HOGENT's artistic research and its academic bachelor and master programmes in the arts fall outside the scope of the project outlined in this paper.

different disciplines work together. By encouraging interdisciplinary approaches, HOGENT strives to enable researchers to tackle the increasing complexity of the world's 'wicked problems'. To this end, HOGENT explicitly commits itself to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals for its applied research.

4. Designing and testing a QA framework for applied research

4.1. Co-creating a blueprint

Given the structure and culture of HOGENT as sketched above, it was clear that a QA framework for applied research should be designed in constant dialogue with all concerned. Therefore, we developed a blueprint of the framework in a co-creation process involving various internal stakeholders: faculty deans, heads of department, chairs of programme committees, members of the Applied Research Council (most of whom are researchers themselves), and the internal auditor. They were asked for their input at various stages: from initial discussions on the need for QA of research on the level of departments to practical decisions about tools and processes. Many of their comments were instrumental in shaping the blueprint. Moreover, these internal viewpoints were checked against good practices and recommendations from colleagues in partner institutions, notably Ghent University and Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. The process was led by a small working party in which the Office of Research Affairs joined forces with the head of the Quality Assurance Office. The final version of the blueprint was validated by the Executive Board.

The framework as set out in the blueprint consists of four parts: (1) four quality standards for applied research, (2) the department's research profile, (3) its research portfolio, and (4) a peer-to-peer meeting (P2P). The quality standards relate closely to the departments' research-related responsibilities, are based on current insights about research quality, and are aligned with HOGENT's 2017-2022 strategic plan. They require departments to develop a research profile (standard 1), to strengthen the teaching-research nexus by their research activities (standard 3), and to strive for maximal impact on their professional fields and on society at large (standard 4). These requirements also set the standard for the department's organization and its management of human capital and financial resources as far as research is concerned (standard 2). The standards are linked to HOGENT's vision of applied research as outlined above, and will be updated regularly as research policy is further developed, e.g. by including aspects of Open Science, sustainability and scientific integrity. They are intended as a mirror for departments and as an instrument for reflecting on the departments' functioning as research units in a dialogue with both internal and external peers.
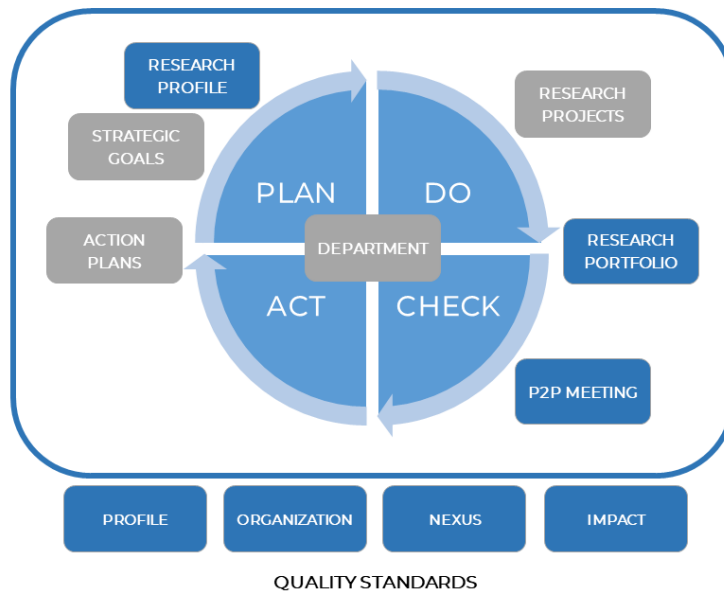
Main elements of a framework for internal QA of applied research in relation to the department's PDCA cycle.

Every department's research will be documented in an online portfolio. This is intended first and foremost as a practical internal tool, especially for use by the head of department and the members of the department council. At the same time, it functions as a source of information that peers can use to gauge to what extent the expected standard of quality has been realized, and to identify possibilities for improvement. The portfolio includes data drawn from HOGENT's strategic planning tool and its research information and accounting systems: annual action plans, overviews of projects and project evaluations, output, service activities, research staff, and financial resources. In order to minimize the administrative burden for departments, the clerical work on the portfolio is largely carried out by the Office of Research Affairs.

At least once every five years, every department is expected to enter into a formal dialogue with internal and external peers. This so-called peer-to-peer meeting (P2P) is a concept that we have borrowed (and slightly adapted) from HOGENT's internal QA system for education, following a suggestion from one of the faculties. It is set up as reviewing and learning activity among peers and favours an appreciative approach. For the P2P, the department forms a delegation consisting minimally of its head and two department members, including at least one member of the departmental council and one researcher. The peer group consists of at least one researcher from another HOGENT department, one independent external researcher who has a sound knowledge of applied research in one or more of the department's domains, and one independent external expert with knowledge of professional practice in the relevant field(s). During the P2P, the four quality standards and specific issues selected by the department are discussed starting from the research profile, the information in the portfolio, and participants' feedback. The output is a reflective report covering the department's main strengths, recommendations for improvement and suggestions for concrete actions.

The report will feed into the department's PDCA cycle. The department will translate its recommendations to concrete actions to be included in its annual action plans and/or other parts of the research portfolio. The realization of these plans will be monitored by the department council and the Faculty Council. HOGENT's management is informed of the peer-to-peer meetings by an annual report submitted to the Executive Board by the Applied Research Council and including a high-level overview of P2Ps and of good practices that can be useful across departments. In order to safeguard the secure environment of the P2P, elements pertaining specifically to the department are not reported to the management.

4.2. Piloting the framework

In order to test our framework, three departments were selected from different faculties, with varying sizes and different degrees of maturity in applied research: the Fashion, Textile and Wood Technology Department (which has a longstanding tradition of research in a specific niche), the Pedagogy and Didactics Department (a newly formed department with limited research experience), and the Commercial Economics and Entrepreneurship Department (which occupies an intermediate position as far as research is concerned). We were pleased to find that these departments spontaneously offered to participate in the pilot, recognizing opportunities to intensify their own strategic exercises in the field of research or to consolidate and showcase what they had achieved.

These three departments are running through a somewhat condensed version of the whole process: from writing their research profile (either from scratch or on the basis of existing documents) to participating in the P2P and reflecting on its results. Thus, we test not just the usability of the quality standards but also the feasibility and planning of the process.

While the pilot is not yet completed, our first experiences indicate that the quality framework is a useful tool to stimulate reflection both within departments and among peers. The involvement in the P2P of colleagues from other departments and of research policy advisors encourages institution-wide reflection on research, whereas the external viewpoint of peers from other higher education institutions and from the world of work offers a useful benchmark. The framework also seems to offer sufficient flexibility to accommodate the various requirements of different departments. Not requiring a fixed format for the research profile invites departments to reflect on what suits them best, and the minimal guidelines for the departmental delegation and peer group seem to inspire them to invite additional experts in view of specific questions.

5. Conclusions

On the basis of our first experiences, the main success factors of the framework can be said to include: the thorough preparation process with various opportunities for all stakeholders to provide their input

and for discussing best practices with partner institutions; the fact that the minimal requirements for the research profile and the P2P are fairly light and can be easily amplified to suit the starting situation and the ambition levels of different departments; and the fact that the framework borrows the concept of P2P from education QA, which enhances its recognizability and usability by many members of department. The flexibility of the framework might also offer possibilities to transfer it to different contexts and to adapt it to developments in HOGENT's own organizational structure.

Challenges that we encountered include ensuring the completeness and the quality of the research data to be used for the portfolio, and the fact that the success of the framework depends in part on the existing quality culture within the department, or its acceptance of the need to develop this quality culture. Moreover, even if the head of department and the department council are strongly convinced of the need for QA, this will not automatically guarantee broad support within the department as a whole. Where existing quality culture is relatively weak, the appreciative approach favoured by the framework might lead to an excessive focus on perceived strengths and a certain blindness for weaknesses that need to be remedied. As so often, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating: will various peer-to-peer meetings lead to new goals, actions and tangible results within the department's strategy? In the end, the success of the framework will depend on the strength of the follow-up on faculty and institutional levels of the department's action plans.

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