

Self-assessment by strata and CAF= an interplay between learning and teaching

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Abstract

The HEPCUT, Haute Ecole provinciale de Charleroi-Université du Travail, is a school for Higher Education organised by the « Province du Hainaut » and funded by the French speaking Community, Wallonia Brussels, of Belgium. Since the statutory law of 14 November 2002, when the National Agency for Quality in Higher Education was created (= AEQES in French) all schools for Higher Education in French speaking Belgium have had to initiate a quality approach and to set up self-evaluation in order to launch continuous improvement. The HEPCUT chose to involve all stakeholders: directors, teachers, students, administration staff and society partners. Focus groups composed of free will members base their work on an action plan for success borrowed from the SEQuALS methodology. The HEPCUT Quality Commission set up an evaluation approach in strata called “NSA” (Needs and satisfaction Assessment) which is cross-applicable to each type of stakeholder. The Quality Commission also set up and completed a CAF analysis (Common Assessment Framework) which enabled the school to define more precisely which zones needed improvement primordially. In parallel with the global institutional evaluation, the NAQHE has also launch an evaluation per specific types of training since 2004. The approach follows the same principles as the institutional self-evaluation: a writing committee works on indicators, gathers results then presented to the specific training internal evaluation commission.

The objective of the global approach is obviously to create a learning school and also aims to develop a real school culture oriented to auto-evaluation and external evaluation, in view of continuous improvement and total openness.

Keywords: HEPCUT, quality in education, learning school, satisfaction evaluation, CAF, bottom-up, SEQuALS

Self-assessment by strata and CAF= an interplay between learning and teaching

1. Historical background

The Statutory law of 5 August 1995 organising non-university higher education into so-called « Hautes Ecoles » put French-speaking Belgian higher education upside down. Indeed, this law resulted in the creation of 27 “Hautes Ecoles”, so Schools for Higher Education, based on a common Pedagogical, Social and Cultural Project, and it also resulted in the voluntary grouping of higher education institutions organised or funded by the French-speaking Community of Belgium.

The Provincial School for Higher Education of Charleroi – Université du Travail was then born, grouping 6 higher education institutions that became, in September 1995, the Agronomical,

Economical, Paramedical, Social and Technical Departments of **HEPCUT** (Haute Ecole Provinciale de Charleroi – Université du Travail, website: <http://www.hepcut.be>).

Besides socially-oriented departments like the Paramedical, the Pedagogical and, of course, the Social departments, others were totally business or technology-oriented. Can we find things in common between a nurse, an electro-mechanic or someone in charge of International Trade? Besides some departments, like the Agronomical and the Economical ones, that were relatively young, about twenty years of age, one of them, the Technical Department, was almost a century old. This Technical Department used to be called “l’Institut Supérieur Industriel” and it was created in 1903 in order to meet the requirements of the developing mines and industries that made the area, known as “Le Pays Noir” (The Black Country), famous beyond Belgian borders and as far as China or The United States. Besides departments deeply rooted in town, like the paramedical or technical ones, others were located dozens of kilometres away from the central administration headquarters. Indeed, the HEPCUT, a School for Higher Education depending on the Province of Hainaut and funded by the French-speaking Community Wallonia-Brussels of Belgium offers more than 25 short (Bachelors organised in 3 years) and long (Masters organised in 5 years) types of training in 6 departments situated in 5 different locations in Charleroi, Ath and Tournai that are 80 kilometres away from each other. Grouping those drastically different departments was much of a challenge, really.

The statutory law imposed that the Pedagogical, Social and Cultural Project in common should specify the overall means implemented to reach at least a certain number of objectives, among which and to quote only a few promoting success and fighting school failure, ensuring student and staff mobility and exchanges with other Belgian or foreign higher education institutions, integrating the school into its social, economical and cultural environment, encouraging interdisciplinary work within each department and between them inside the School for Higher Education and, last but not least, defining the methods of quality control implementation inside the school. At the time (1995), each School for Higher Education was free to orient its quality approach towards an ISO-type quality system or towards self-assessment. Implementing a quality approach could become the unifying element we were missing!

A second statutory law gave a much better defined orientation to Schools for Higher Education regarding quality: the law of 14 November 2002 created the Agency for Higher Education Quality Evaluation in French-speaking Belgium. In French, it is called **AEQES** (Agence pour l’Evaluation de la Qualité dans l’Enseignement Supérieur, website : <http://www.aeqes.be>). By that statutory law, all Schools for Higher Education in the French-speaking Community of Belgium had, from then on, to develop quality approach and to implement self-evaluation towards continuous improvement.

However, each School got the opportunity to think about its own methodology and was free to choose the quality system that seemed best adapted to its needs and requirements. The approach could thus imply the whole institution for Higher Education or only apply to specific types of training (called “entités” in French) indicated by the AEQES as to be audited in the near future.

In September 2002, the Board of Directors of the HEPCUT anticipated on the statutory law and appointed a quality coordinator whose mission was to choose and implement what would become HEPCUT’s own quality methodology.

2. Choosing a methodology

Very soon the HEPCUT coordinator found inspiration in the SEQuALS methodology. “SEQuALS is a project which makes use of the varying experiences in the field of quality evaluation in schools drawn from seven European countries.” ¹

« Quality in a school context may be understood as that which all participating parties place value on. Indications and characteristics of quality may be derived from internal values (ways of teaching, individualisation, social competence) or from external factors (laws, national curriculum, local political

¹ <http://www.sequals.org>

priorities). This, of course, means that the concept of quality always tends to be contextual. » So, the SEQuALS method draws the school institution towards the concept of school-based evaluation, that is to say and quoting Trond Alvik's words: School-based evaluation means to collect information and use methods which make it possible for all involved parties to participate in a continuous, systematic and critical discussion about activities and what the purposes, conditions, processes and results of these activities are supposed to be. (Trond Ålvik, 1994, translated from Norwegian).¹

In order to reach that objective, the SEQuALS method advises that all stakeholders be involved: « One of the implications of school-based evaluation is that it provides an opportunity to include all relevant people, both within and outside the school: pupils, teachers, school boards, parents and politicians ». ²

3. Institutional self-assessment by strata and by CAF

Consequently, from April 2003 on, the HEPCUT has chosen to involve all partners and stakeholders: leadership, teachers, students, administration staff and social partners. And as « Establishing ownership of the work is prerequisite to the participants understanding the processes that take place during the project period »³, focus groups made up of freewill members were organised. A general internal evaluation Commission (**CEvIG** in French, Commission d'évaluation interne générale) was set up, as a real interface between the focus groups and the Board of Directors. This Commission includes six members of the teaching staff (one from each department), the leader of the HEPCUT (called « Directrice-présidente » in French), one student, one member of the administration staff, one consultant and the quality coordinator. Whenever the Commission finds it necessary, it is free to call on representatives of other partners, that can be regional, technical, economical or social ones.

In order to define the objectives of the overall quality approach, the CEvIG organised and carried out a CAF analysis in 2005 (CAF=Common Assessment Framework): « CAF is offered as a tool to assist public sector organisations across Europe to use quality management techniques to improve performance. The CAF provides a simple, easy-to-use framework, which is suitable for a self-assessment of public sector organisations. »⁴.

Thanks to this CAF approach the CEvIG was able to underline and define priorities for « zones of intervention towards improvement ». So, based on results from some indicators made clear by the CAF analysis, the CEvIG, the general internal evaluation Commission, decides which key areas they will tackle and defines the overall orientation of the approach.

Freewill focus groups then start working and they do so following an « action plan for success » borrowed from the SEQuALS methodology: they carry out an inventory of the key area tackled, they analyse it, investigate about it and provide suggestions towards improvement. Those suggestions are presented to the CEvIG that transfers them to the Board of Directors, who now have to decide whether to follow the suggestions or not. Whatever the decision taken, it is then referred back to the focus groups.

Today, in September 2007, seven focus groups are working on three key areas (external communication, Interaction with society and internal communication). In relation with the concepts of the HEPCUT Quality Charter, written in 2004, the CEvIG initiated an evaluation approach based on strata and called NSA (Needs and Satisfaction Assessment). This strata approach is cross-applicable to each type of partner. So, the "student NSA stratum" assesses the needs of students and defines how satisfied they are with different fields (reception, placement, international mobility, teaching, employability, internal and external communication, etc). So works the "teacher NSA stratum", the "partner NSA stratum", etc. Then the results obtained from the evaluation of the different strata are cross-checked.

¹ idem (quotation)

² idem

³ idem

⁴ http://www.eipa.nl/CAF/Brochure/CAF2002_Eng.pdf

3.1. Student stratum

The way things are going these days, the student stratum is inevitably the most important one. Our first concern is truly to make our learners feel their roles as citizens and act as such. « School self-evaluation which engages students redresses outdated democratic imbalances in evaluation, encourages students to be participative and active contributors to learning evaluation and to be more responsible learners.”¹

From the very first time a future student gets in touch with the institution up to the moment he/she graduates and becomes a professional, his/her satisfaction is assessed many times via investigations, questionnaires, interviews, etc. Currently (September 2007) 14 tools conceived by the different focus groups are being used to that end (see chart 1 below).

Chart 1 : Questioning the student stratum	
<i>Type of tool</i>	<i>Target group</i>
Student Fair Questionnaire	Potential students, Student Fairs' visitors
Open Door Day Questionnaire	Potential students taking part in one of our Open Door Days
Open Classroom Questionnaire	Potential student taking part in one of our Open Classroom Days
Advertisement Questionnaire	Students enrolled for the first time at HEPCUT
« How visible are our services? » Questionnaire	2 nd year students
Internal Communication Questionnaire	2 nd year students
Study work/Mobility Questionnaire	2 nd year students
Internal Open Door Day Questionnaire/Students	Taking all students together
Website Questionnaire	Taking all students together
Further Open Door Day Questionnaire	Students who took part in one of our Open Door Days but didn't enrol
LEONARDO Questionnaire/Preparation and follow-up	Last year students who obtained a scholarship from the LEONARDO program
LEONARDO Questionnaire/Debriefing	Last year students who obtained a scholarship from the LEONARDO program
Placement/Study work Questionnaire - arguments	Last year student
"Adequacy between training and job" questionnaire	Graduated students

3.2. Staff Stratum

Chart 2 : Questioning the staff stratum	
<i>Type of tool</i>	<i>Target group</i>
Internal Communication Questionnaire	All teachers
Student Fair Questionnaire/Teachers	All teachers
Placement supervisor Questionnaire	Teachers in charge of placements
Study Work Supervisor Questionnaire	Teachers in charge of study works
School Culture Questionnaire	All teachers and administration staff
Internal Open Door Day Questionnaire/Teachers	Teachers taking part in Open Door Days

¹ Mira Javora | Last updated: 23. 7. 2006 in <http://www.learningschool.org/>

3.3. Partner Stratum

Chart 3 : Questioning the Partner Stratum	
<i>Type of tool</i>	<i>Target</i>
Placement Questionnaire	Partners offering placements to our students
External Reader Questionnaire	Partners who accept to read study works
Placement Tutor Questionnaire	Partners supervising placement inside the company

The results between strata are cross-checked and enable to implement continuous improvement thanks to actions conferred between strata and involving all stakeholders. Upon close scrutiny, results today (September 2007) show that the focus groups all together have expressed 160 suggestions since April 2003. About one hundred of those suggestions have been taken into account by the Board of Directors and the requested changes have been made.

4. Self-assessment within a specific type of training (“entité”)

In parallel with the overall institutional evaluation, the Agency for Higher Education Quality Evaluation, the AEQES, has initiated an evaluation per specific type of training (« entité » in French) since 2004. The approach is the same as for the institutional self-assessment: a writing committee works on the indicators and gathers results that are presented to the Specific Internal Evaluation Commission (“CEVIE, Commission d’évaluation interne entité” in French). That Specific Commission writes the internal self-assessment report to be passed on to the AEQES.

Presently the HEPCUT is being assessed on three specific types of training: Electromechanical Engineering, Physiotherapy and Social Work. In order to enable objective external evaluation, the AEQES provided school institutions with a list of indicators that can be used as guidelines while assessing. Writing the self-assessment report takes about a year, after which external expert peers and specialists come and visit the institution. Moreover, the General Internal Evaluation Commission of the HEPCUT (CEViG) plays the role of critical friend for the Specific Commission (CEVIE) by reading and commenting the self-assessment report.

As you can see in the diagram below, internal self-assessment and external evaluation have coupled together quite naturally, as advised in the SEQuALS methodology.

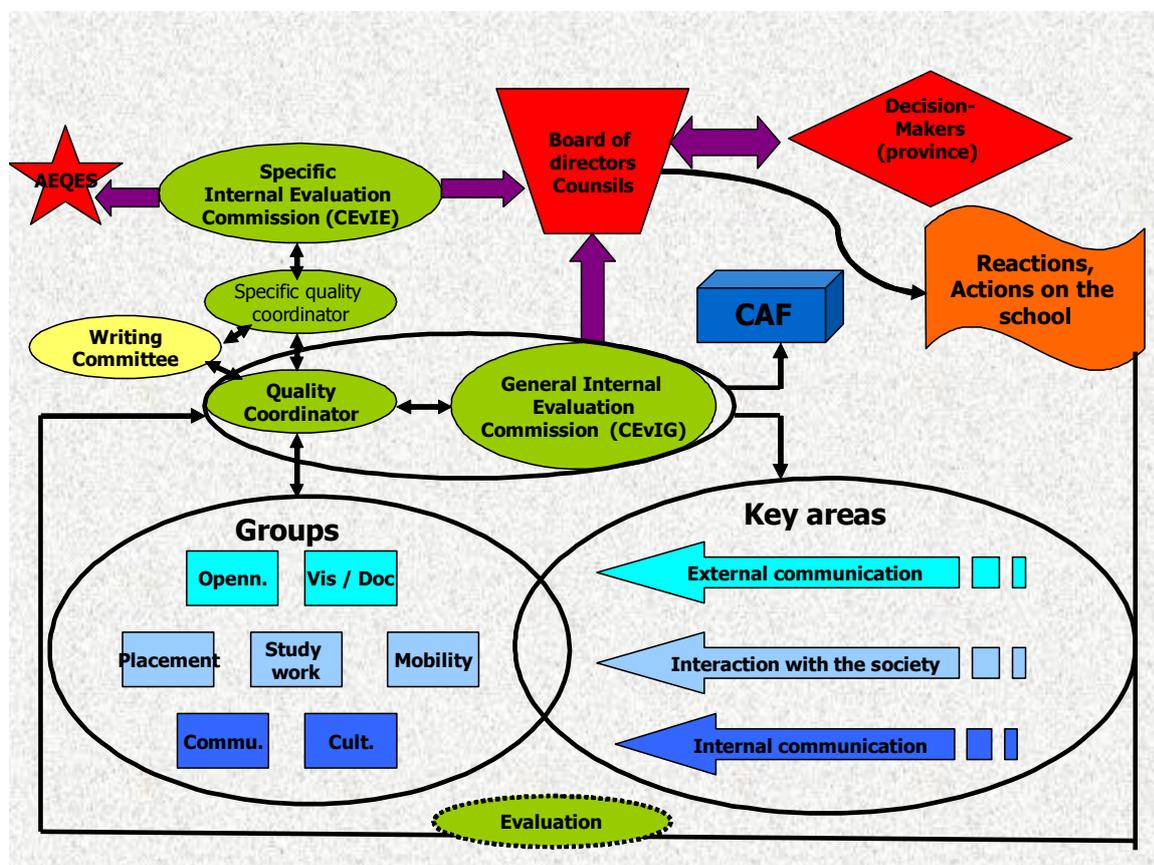


Fig 1: Internal and external evaluation: HEP CUT's institutional evaluation and evaluation per specific type of training

5. Institution and specific type of training: exchanges and interests in common

Those two types of evaluation are obviously interesting:

- Global reassuring effect: quality has already settled in and is not a repressive tool
- The general coordinator has an essential structuring role: he/she guarantees continuity and "memory"
- The numerous investigations account for an important analysis material for many indicators and enable to gain much time
- The General Internal Evaluation Commission (CEvIG) plays a fundamental role as a critical friend
- The other way round, the credibility of the quality approach previous to specific training evaluation increases sensibly
- Consequently, the participating rate to general investigations is noticeably higher
- The indicators imposed by the AEQES are easier to decode and to understand

- New tools are built inside each evaluated specific type of training and those tools are made transferable
- The analysis can go further inside each specific type of training according to a more global vision in institutional evaluation.

6. Conclusion

« School evaluation means that schools evaluate themselves, or it may mean that others evaluate them »¹. A school-based evaluation includes those two aspects and involves all the stakeholders. The HEPCUT has totally committed to this process by associating institutional self-evaluation and the one per specific type of training chosen by the AEQES.

The objective of this approach is obviously to create a learning school, that is to say a learning institution where everybody at each level continuously improves his/her capacity to produce results that really matter to him/her. This is all the more crucial since the world around us and the society that we must account for towards our learners are getting more complex by the day.

“To be outstanding these days, institutions must more than ever bank on their knowledge, check their environment and sharpen their watch (strategically, technologically and competitively speaking). They must thus adapt continuously in order to bring efficient solutions to complex and unheard of situations.”²

Our approach leads us there, as what matters to us after all is to develop a real school culture oriented to self-evaluation and external evaluation, in view of continuous improvement and total openness.

In October 2005, the HEPCUT case was awarded a prize for the originality of its approach at the 3rd National Conference for Quality of Public Services in Belgium and, in September 2006, the HEPCUT represented the French-speaking Community Wallonia-Brussels at the 4th European Quality Conference (4QC) for Public Services in Tampere, Finland.

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¹ <http://www.sequals.org>

² <http://leblocnotes.ca/fr/node/681>, Bulletin n° 10, août 2000, article de fond