CRITICAL FRIENDS OR INDEPENDENT CRITICS?
On trust relationships in external quality assurance in Flemish higher education

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Outline

• External quality assurance in Flemish higher education
• A detour: the notion of trust
• Checks and balances in external quality assurance in Flanders:
  • Balance of dependencies
  • Independency checks
• Trust relationships
• Conclusion and questions
External quality assurance in Flemish higher education

- VLUHR: origins in umbrella organizations of universities and university colleges
- QA unit: ‘clustered’ programme assessments, carried out by peers, aimed at judgment and improvement
- Programme assessment run in 3 phases:
  - preparation and selection,
  - visiting and
  - reporting phase
- High levels of trust are crucial
A detour: the notion of trust

• Essentially, trust is:
  • a measure of honesty of an actor or equitability of a system...
  • ... in order to reduce complexity, making the future predictable

• Circular relationship with perceptions:
  • high levels of trust make actors willing to share ‘trustworthy’ information (alternative for control)
  • NOT, by definition, ‘symmetrical’, or absent of power: checks are built in (and betrayal is sanctioned)
Checks and balances in external QA in higher education (1)

- Task division or ‘balance of dependencies’ between institutions, QA unit and accreditation body
- Programmes play a key role in the selection of panel members (increases trust in the assessment process)
- ‘Ownership’, but check by different actors
Checks and balances in external QA in higher education (2)

• Generally, this system works well

• However:
  • Some programmes feel that the composition of the panel didn’t turn out as expected
  • External ENQA-audit of the QA unit states: selection procedure remains a ‘black box’ and independent steering committee can act as a ‘firewall’ against the influence of the umbrella organizations

• Trust relationships between QA unit and programmes?
Trust, independence and expertise

• From the perspective of perceived trust, a trustworthy panel is:
  • for the programmes foremost a panel that exhibits expertise
  • for the QA unit foremost a panel that exhibits independence
• Sharing trustworthy information is important
• Looking for an equilibrium (judgment and improvement)?
Conclusion

- The panels’ independence and expertise is the nexus of equitability
- The panels are effective ‘mediators’ of trust between the programmes and the QA unit if they portray characteristics of friendly critics and independent critics
- Optimum levels of trust must be sought after, danger of too rigorous independency requirements
Questions

• How does your organization manage trust relationships with other bodies and on what are these relationships based (expertise, procedures, affect...)?

• Are policy changes in the (inter)national higher education area creating possibilities and/or posing threats to existing trust relationships?

• How does trust relate with more formal aspects of power, like accountability, in the daily functioning of your organization?
Many thanks for your attention