Challenge of the appropriation of a "diversity-respectful" Quality management policy in a university

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Abstract

The *Université libre de Bruxelles* (ULB) is a wide-ranging university composed by 7 Faculties, 4 Institutes and 1 Hospital. In 2007, ULB authorities decided to implement their own Quality management policy due to the fast changing context. Thanks to two new entities (the "*Internal Evaluation Committee*" and the "*Support office of Quality evaluation*"), the ULB Board created a "*Quality structure*" which has to implement the Quality management policy. Three pilot experiments were started in order to test various methodologies. From those evaluations, some conclusions were drawn. As ULB authorities intend to create a "*Quality culture*" within the entire Institution and as their perception of "*Quality*" is "*fitness for purpose*", it appears crucial that a general framework, which respects specificities of all entities of the Institution, was is built with its members' involvement. As a result of several consultations and interviews of professors', scientists', students' and administrative workers' representatives, a "*Quality Charter*" is progressively written.

Paper

1. Introduction

The *Université libre de Bruxelles* (ULB) is a wide-ranging university based in Brussels composed by 7 Faculties, 4 Institutes, and 1 Hospital. Almost 21,000 students are studying in this Institution, which offers numerous Bachelor and Master Degree programmes and doctoral training.

Authorities of the University decided to implement a Quality management policy because of the fast changing framework in Higher Education [1]. Its chosen objectives did not include a specific traditional or industrial Quality process, such as ISO or EFQM, since they wanted to respect the ULB specificities and its entities[2]. The University is thus looking for a "*diversity-respectful*" Quality management policy,

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[1] The person, who is going to present this paper, is Sandrine Canter.
[2] An entity can be a faculty, an institute or an administrative department.

which takes into account the individuality of each of its parts. As a result, three pilot experiments were set up: Faculty of Law, Faculty of Applied Sciences (Engineering School) and Registration and Admission Office. Those experiments allowed to test various methodologies in order to select, with the approval of the Board, one of them to implement in the entire University.

At the present time, three pilot experiments are ending. With conclusions and lessons learned from those pilot projects and with the evolution of the internal context, ULB authorities had to adapt the Quality procedure before proceeding with the implementation in the whole University.

This paper will enlighten why the University choose to create a "*Quality Charter*" before implementing a Quality process and how it was accomplished.

2. ULB context

Like the other European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the ULB environment has evolved these past few years at different levels.

First of all, some worldwide rankings, such as the "*Times Higher Education*" [2] and the "*Jiao Tong University of Shangai*" [3], are published each year. Even though universities do not agree with them, they are taking an increasing part in the Higher Education environment. Consequently, it becomes one of the hidden reasons for most of the Higher Education Institutions to develop a Quality Assurance.

At the European level, the Bologna process aims to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) [4]. Besides, European institutions produce some decrees and reports such as the "*European Standards and Guidelines*" [5]. Those documents seek to stimulate the development of Quality culture in HEIs. Moreover, there is a European Research Area emerging [6]. Objectives of these two European projects influence the ULB world.

Lastly, the French speaking community of Belgium established an agency in 2002 called AEQES[3] [7]. This agency evaluates the teaching Quality of every Bachelor and Master degree in universities and Higher Education institutions in the French speaking part of Belgium. A ten years calendar is set out in order to establish when each degree course will be evaluated in all French speaking institutions of Belgium. After the peers' visit in each institution on the basis of a confidential self-evaluation report, a (partially) public report on each individual institution is written. The AEQES evaluation procedure does not take into account the research mission of the University in its evaluation.

3. ULB Quality management policy

3.1. Decisions of the ULB Board

Given this context, ULB authorities decided to implement their own Quality management policy. The main objective of this policy is to proceed to the evaluation of the three missions of the University which are education, research and service to the wider community (so called "*third mission*"). This means that the Quality management policy is going to take into account all ULB activities unlike the AEQES evaluation which simply concerns the mission "*education*". Moreover, the goal of this volunteer

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[3] *Agence d'Evaluation de la Qualité dans l'Enseignement Supérieur* http://www.aeqes.be/

approach of ULB authorities is not an inspection but aims at continuous improvement of all its entities. Therefore, they intend to create a "*Quality culture*" within the entire Institution.

As part of the "*Quality Culture*", ULB authorities defined their perception of the concept "*Quality*" as the difference between the objectives and the reality measured also called "*fitness for purpose*" [8-9]. Consequently, all entities, including administrative departments, have to define their own individual aims with respect to its missions and the strategic plan approved by the ULB Board. Then they should create, or choose, some indicators which are going to measure whether or not the entity reaches its objectives.

In order to develop and extend the policy within the Institution, it seemed important to avoid different disadvantages of this project [10]. On one hand, administrative work of professors and researchers cannot rise; otherwise, either they will reduce their research or teaching time or they will not be part of this new process. On the other hand, the approach has to be so that some results can be shown rapidly to employees involved in the Quality process. Those are the main reasons why ULB authorities decided to pay attention to respect sensibilities and specificities of all its faculties and departments.

Additionally, the ULB Board created a "*Quality structure*" thanks to 2 new entities: the "*Internal Evaluation Committee*" (CIE – ULB) and the Support office of Quality evaluation (CAEQ – ULB).

The CIE – ULB is composed of representatives of professors, researchers, administrative employees, students and graduate students. Some experts are selected by the Rector to help the CIE – ULB in its work. Its tasks are to define the Quality management policy in harmony with the ULB Board. Moreover, it should help entities during their internal evaluation procedure.

The CAEQ – ULB is part of the administration and is under the responsibility of the Rector's Quality Advisor. This unit has to accumulate every experiment of Quality evaluation and help the implementation of the Quality management policy. In addition, the CAEQ – ULB will support the entities, which are evaluated either by the internal process or by an external agency such as AEQES.

3.2. Lessons from pilot experiments

As mentioned earlier, the evaluation of the Registration and Admission Office and two faculties, namely Faculty of Law and Faculty of Applied Sciences (Engineering School), are reaching the end. Therefore, some first deductions are drawn from those experiences.

First of all, the implementation of the Quality management policy will have to be implemented progressively if ULB authorities want to create a "*Quality culture*" in the Institution. Effectively the implementation of a Quality management policy needs the involvement of every member of the institution. For that reason a global communication strategy should be built to inform both employees and students. At the same time, this will allow to weaken the reluctance to take part in a Quality process.

Moreover, it does not seem possible to start with an evaluation of an entire administrative department or a complex faculty, if the ULB Board wishes to involve the majority of employees in the process. Indeed, some entities are composed of a quite large number of employees. Therefore, it would be sensible to begin with the evaluation of smaller units within each administrative department and

faculty. Subsequently, every evaluation will be summarized in the evaluation of the whole administrative department or faculty. This "*step by step*" evaluation allows most of the ULB employees to experiment the Quality process. As a result, it will not remain seen as a whim of ULB authorities.

Nevertheless, small units will need to know their objectives if they want to carry out a Quality evaluation as established by the Quality management policy. Consequently, a pre-requirement of each Quality procedure is that the evaluated entity determines its objectives on the basis of Rector's strategic orientations. In addition, a common Quality framework, which respects the specificities of all entities, is crucial in order to ensure that all entities work "*in the same direction*".

3.3. Consequences on the ULB Quality management policy

In order to construct this framework, it was decided to work on each internal process individually. In fact, the ULB can be seen as a large entity in which there are several processes. Three processes, related to the missions of the University, are identified, namely the education (or teaching) process, research process and third mission process.

Members of the CIE – ULB suggested to the ULB Board to implement first the Quality management policy in the education process for two reasons. Firstly, the research process is frequently evaluated by European or Belgian research-funding organisations such as the National Funds for Scientific Research (FNRS[4]). Moreover, an internal evaluation process of the research was going to be implemented by the Research Department. Secondly, the third mission process is vague and so, it will be hazardous to evaluate this process in the first phase of the implementation of the quality process.

The Quality process is structured thanks to two tools approved by the ULB Board:
- "*Quality cycle*": its length is five years which represent the time needed to evaluate each entity of the teaching process and to review strategic orientations of the University.
- "*Quality procedure*": it was composed of four stages explicitly definition of the ULB strategy, self-evaluation, institutional evaluation and external evaluation.

Even though this proposal seemed sensible; it was not possible to implement it with any change. In fact, there are three different evaluations:
- Evaluations due to the Quality management policy,
- Evaluations due to research evaluations,
- Evaluations due to the AEQES procedure.

When the calendar, including three types of evaluation, was made, a threat came up. Some entities were going to be evaluated up to three times per "*Quality cycle*". As it was not possible to merge those three evaluations, the additional administrative work of professors, researchers and administrative agents due to all evaluations would have been too much. A "*Quality fatigue*" would, most likely, be generated [10] and annihilate all efforts to create a "*Quality culture*". Furthermore the ULB had just started an

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[4] *Fonds National pour la Recherche Scientifique, http://www1.frs-fnrs.be/.*

"*Entreprise Ressource Planning*" project which would be as well a way to review the whole organisation of the Institution.

Moreover the word "*Quality*" still remained taboo in the Institution. So implementing any Quality process was devoted to fail.

For those reasons, it was decided to focus more on the implementation of a "*Quality culture*" on a general point of view at first. So that, it appeared even more important to build first a general framework.
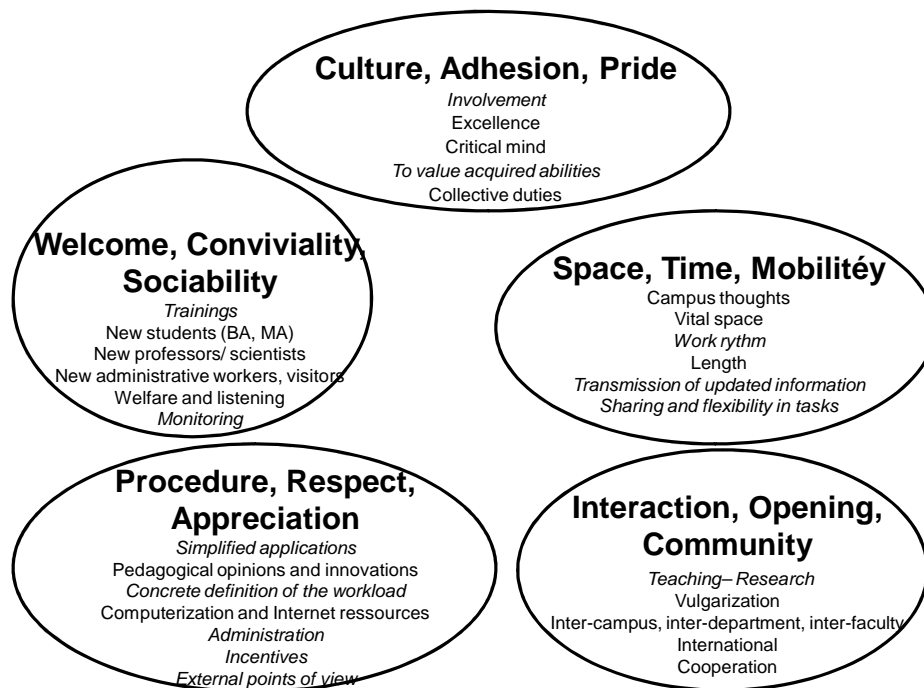
4. ULB Quality Charter

4.1. Establishment of a "*Quality Charter*"

Since this general framework would be the basis of the "*Quality culture*" of the entire Institution, it seemed important that it represents the opinions of ULB authorities, faculties, departments as well as employees' [11]. The employee of the CAEQ – ULB and the Rector's Quality Advisor met representatives of every ULB entity. This includes Deans of the 7 Faculties and the 4 Institutes and also Directors of all administrative departments. Each person was met individually and the conversation could be described as free because the only question asked was: "*What is Quality for you and your entity?*". Moreover, no document related to Quality in Higher Education was sent before the meeting. As a result, speeches were not well-structured and it was possible to bring to light the most important concerns for each person and entity.

To begin with, every Deans were interviewed. Within the Deans' speeches, 5 broad topics were always mentioned. They are settled thanks to 3 "*key-words*". It is an easy way to gather ideas. In addition, as all meetings were not realised yet, it did not seem interesting to write straight away a text. It would be more difficult to introduce items from the other discussions.
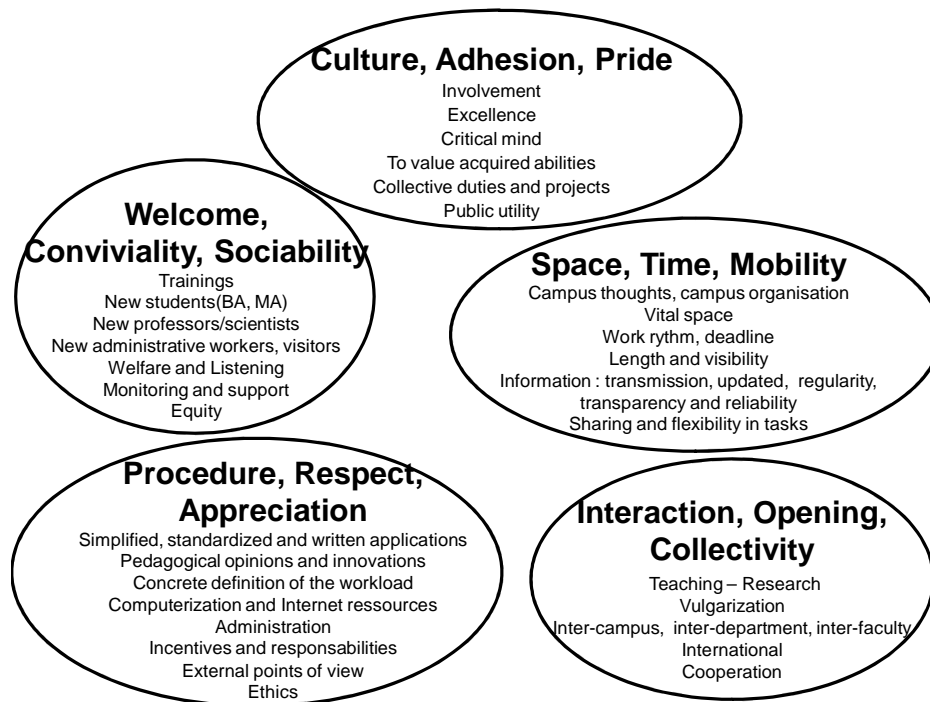
More specific ideas, also express simply with "*words*", are related to those main issues which allow to make some links between the 5 principal subjects. This could be represented as in the following figure:

Culture, Adhesion, Pride
Involvement
Excellence
Critical mind
To value acquired abilities
Collective duties

Welcome, Conviviality, Sociability
Trainings
New students (BA, MA)
New professors/ scientists
New administrative workers, visitors
Welfare and listening
Monitoring

Space, Time, Mobilitéy
Campus thoughts
Vital space
Work rythm
Length
Transmission of updated information
Sharing and flexibility in tasks

Procedure, Respect, Appreciation
Simplified applications
Pedagogical opinions and innovations
Concrete definition of the workload
Computerization and Internet ressources
Administration
Incentives
External points of view

Interaction, Opening, Community
Teaching– Research
Vulgarization
Inter-campus, inter-department, inter-faculty
International
Cooperation

Afterwards, this first diagram was amended with ideas from meetings with administrative Directors. Obviously, there were some divergences of opinions between theirs and Deans' speeches. Nonetheless there were a lot of similarities too.

In order to ensure that every category of people in the Institution could state their perceptions of Quality in Higher Education, administrative workers', scientists' and students' representatives were as well met. The professors' delegates did not want to be interviewed as they consider that it was enough to state their opinions inside the CIE – ULB.

The methodology used was slightly different as they were questioned in group composed of people from the same "*type of representatives*". Once more some dissimilarities and connections could be made in each speech. They were all incorporated in an overall diagram. Last but not least, Rector's strategic orientations were integrated.

Culture, Adhesion, Pride
Involvement
Excellence
Critical mind
To value acquired abilities
Collective duties and projects
Public utility

Welcome, Conviviality, Sociability
Trainings
New students(BA, MA)
New professors/scientists
New administrative workers, visitors
Welfare and Listening
Monitoring and support
Equity

Space, Time, Mobility
Campus thoughts, campus organisation
Vital space
Work rythm, deadline
Length and visibility
Information : transmission, updated, regularity, transparency and reliability
Sharing and flexibility in tasks

Procedure, Respect, Appreciation
Simplified, standardized and written applications
Pedagogical opinions and innovations
Concrete definition of the workload
Computerization and Internet ressources
Administration
Incentives and responsabilities
External points of view
Ethics

Interaction, Opening, Collectivity
Teaching – Research
Vulgarization
Inter-campus, inter-department, inter-faculty
International
Cooperation

At the same time, numerous claims were formulated by each person interviewed. Some of them were specifics for one entity whereas others concerned the entire University. They could be gathered under 4 categories:

- inquiries on various matters (quality of ULB restaurants, ULB cultural needs, ...),
- new developments (new administrative procedures, a vade-mecum, evaluation indicators, ...),
- revisions of existing (update of the Website, uniformity of some measures, ...),
- internal and external evaluations (Students social services, Library or evaluation by AEQES, by *Commissions des Titres d'Ingénieurs*[5]).

Finally, a report including the result of those meetings was made to members of the CIE – ULB. It was decided to write a "*Quality Charter*" for different reasons. On one hand, a "*Quality Charter*" would give more visibility to the Quality management policy of the University internally as well as externally. On the other hand, it would be the reference document for every internal evaluation.

4.2. Benefits of this methodology

Although ULB authorities were supported the implementation of a Quality management policy and its objectives were deeply clarified, there were a lot of reluctances and fears when this project was mentioned or explained. Employees and students thought that it was a disguised way of inspecting in order to reduce some costs. Consequently it was essential to find an approach to lessen them which would combine bottom up and top down method.

The three pilot experiments were one part of the solution as they were concrete examples of the objectives of the Quality project. In fact, many tangible changes were made thanks to the self-

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[5] It is a French accreditation agency.

evaluation procedure. None of them corresponded to criticisms such as "*it is useless*" or "*some employees are going to be fired*". On the contrary, employees of the evaluated entities were pleased with the result of the process.

The second part of the answer was the "*fieldwork*" accomplished to collect ideas to be the basis of the "*Quality Charter*". It allowed to gain the support of the head of ULB entities including students' representatives. As a matter of fact it took 6 months to realise all meetings. During this period, every head of ULB entities had time to tame the concept. Moreover they participated in its definition. Subsequently most of them are less hesitant to take part in the Quality management policy. In contrast some of them were even asking to start a Quality evaluation.

The next stage will be to obtain the cooperation of the whole University. This must be carried out as a result of a bottom up approach such as consultation inside the frame defined by ULB authorities in its broadest sense.

5. Next steps

As mentioned above, it is, now, necessary to gain the collaboration of the entire Institution. This could be done thanks to a combination of a communication strategy and practical projects.

First of all the communication plan would give the opportunity to ULB employees and students understand the concept. For instance, a small conference could be organised to present in details the notion and some suggestions of a "*Quality Charter*". Then, an inquiry or contest could ask their opinions on it, so that everyone had the occasion to contribute in the establishment of the final "*Quality Charter*". Finally, some adverts or articles in ULB newspapers could promote it.

At the same time, some concrete actions could be started. Most of them should be chosen from the demands mentioned during the meetings. And it would be wise to select some actions or projects at the institutional level like an opinion poll about the quality of the ULB restaurants and others for some entities for example the beginning a self evaluation of a department or a faculty.

6. Conclusions and perspectives

To sum up, due to the worldwide, European and Belgian contexts, it appears crucial that the *Université libre de Bruxelles* builds its own Quality management policy based on the knowledge of past and present evaluations and on pilot experiments. The ULB created its own "*Quality structure*" with the Rector's Quality Advisor, the CAEQ – ULB and the CIE – ULB. These two entities implement gradually "*Quality Culture*" in the entire Institution through a long process of consultations and appropriation. As a result a "*Quality Charter*" is being conceived. Therefore, the *Université libre de Bruxelles* will be able to evaluate its entities, operate some changes and fortify its members' cohesion. This will enhance, even more, its research and teaching Quality. Last but not least, this approach allows to implement a Quality process in an Institution, composed of rather dissimilar entities, while their differences are respected. In fact, Quality does not mean uniformity.

Questions

Throughout the process, several stringent questions arise like:

- How can we settle priorities between demands that have been expressed during the consultation phase for the "*Quality charter*"?
- How to ensure that autonomous Faculties and Institutes are going to implement the Quality Process?
- To what extent autonomous Faculties and Institutes are going to implement the Quality Process? And how the Support office of Quality evaluation can measure it?
- How could we engage the entities that did not announced interests in participating to an evaluation process during the consultation phase?
- How important is the role of a communication strategy in gaining support from the members of the university community?
- Could the implementation of a quality process through several processes (see ULB case study) be proposed as a solution for bigger institutions in order to remedy to difficulties raised by their size?

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