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A PEER REVIEW LESS ORDINARY
A case study of an institutionally driven external review

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ABSTRACT

In the course of revising its internal quality management system, the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, in cooperation with the Austrian Quality Assurance Agency, tested an external peer review in one of its units. In order to take account of initial faculty and student scepticism towards the project, which was primarily based on its potential for curtailing internal diversity, the project design discarded some of the general rules for peer reviews and replaced them with its own methodology for an institutionally driven external review. This paper outlines the model developed in the pilot project, analyses the major lessons learned and provides an outlook on how the Vienna Academy plans to utilise periodic peer reviews in its internal quality management system. Beyond the individual institutional context this contribution also proposes a debate on the general relevance of the suggested methodology for any type of higher education institution.

Introduction

Public universities in Austria have been charged by law to develop and implement an internal quality management (QM) system which encompasses all of their activities.[1] The law does not prescribe any characteristics of the system, but institutions are required to undergo an external audit and, based on this audit, have their QM systems certified.[2] While these provisions leave considerable leeway to institutions as to which specific mechanisms they employ, they clearly indicated to the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna[3] that it would have to revise its internal quality management, which had been primarily based on student surveys of individual courses until then.

When the university leadership announced plans for a project to test the method of periodic external peer reviews as the potential cornerstone of a future quality management system, this was met with widespread internal scepticism. At the core of the reservations of students and faculty was the multi-faceted internal diversity at the Academy, considered a vital element for arts education, which, it was suggested, would be curtailed by the proposed plans.

There was merit in the argument, because diversity does pose particular challenges to QM at universities of the arts. Preserving and fostering internal diversity implies that the institution cannot follow a one-fits-all approach, but has to adjust the parameters and indicators used in quality management to the various layers of diversity. How this could be achieved within one and the same system became the seminal question for the project.

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[1] University Act of 2002, section 14, paragraphs 1 & 2. For an English translation of this law, see
http://www.uniko.ac.at/upload/UG_2002_Englisch.pdf
[2] At the time of writing, the provision on the external certification has not yet passed into law, but is foreseen for autumn/winter 2009/10.
[3] Even though it holds full university status with the corresponding right to confer university degrees, including doctoral degrees, the original seventeenth century designation "Academy" denoting an art school has been retained.

Diversity in context

The Academy of Fine Arts Vienna is Austria's smallest public university with 1100 students offering study and research opportunities in fine arts, art teachers' training, architecture, stage design, conservation and restoration, art history and theory and the natural and technical sciences in the arts. Despite its relative smallness, it is a highly diverse institution in which teaching/learning, research and service vary considerably not only according to discipline - which may be expected at any multi-faculty university - but also within disciplines and study programmes as well as among individual faculty and students, which tends to be an intrinsic feature of arts institutions.

For example, teaching and research at the Academy in academic subjects such as art history or the natural sciences follow "traditional" higher education arrangements, and hence "traditional" quality management methods may be applied in these subjects. However, these arrangements differ significantly from the visual arts, in which teaching is mainly done in a studio environment combining artistic practice with critical reflection. Team teaching by several faculty, peer learning among students and one-to-one instruction also play prominent roles in the studio setting. Students are both learners as well as practitioners in their field from the outset of their studies, and thus independence and diversity in terms of individual expression is a prerogative of both students and faculty. Teaching and learning emphasise process and open-ended solutions, as opposed to formal knowledge. Assessment is usually accomplished through the presentation, examination and discussion of student work, and the assessment process in the visual arts has been characterised as "socially negotiated" and including unwritten criteria based on tacit knowledge by both faculty and students (Shreeve et al. 2009). The special relationship between students and faculty, which has been aptly described as "close and vulnerable," is another distinctive feature of arts education (Hanken 2009).[4] In terms of space and equipment, a studio will also have special functions and requirements. Moreover, research in the strict meaning of the term is of hardly any relevance in the visual arts. The notion of artistic research covers a wide variety of work whose outcome may be e.g. a work of art or an exhibition, rather than a publication (Douglas et al. 2000) and – as a rather new field of interest within the Vienna Academy – the definition of artistic research is still being internally negotiated. To further add to the complexity, most study programmes at the Academy combine artistic and academic elements to differing degrees.

Given this situation, it soon became obvious that a "regular" peer review would not be an option and that the pilot project and future QM system needed to address directly the concerns about diversity, particularly in terms of the differences between artistic and academic disciplines, raised by the university community. But rather than merely dispelling doubts and establishing trust, as important as these are for any quality management initiative, the project aimed at incorporating the Academy's specific characteristics and drawing primarily on the expertise and creativity of the university community in the design and implementation of the peer review.

Project outline

The basic idea for the future QM system was to establish a system of periodic external reviews in each of the six institutes that make up the major academic/artistic units of the Academy.[5] Each review was to form its own quality circle for the respective unit, touching upon all of its main activities; and the reviews in their entirety would offer a global view of the institution. This in itself was not new;[6] the innovative aspect of the project consisted primarily in developing a methodology that took account of the Academy's internal diversity, rather than reverting to a predefined peer review model or indeed looking out for *one* model. While the QM system as such would eventually need to hold up to external certification, the main purpose of the review was enhancement, and not accountability.

Getting right to the heart of the matter on diversity, the Institute of Fine Arts, which constitutes the core of the Academy with its 600 students, was selected for the project. To keep the pilot within manageable limits, the peer review proper was to be undertaken at one of the Institute's subdivisions (new media and conceptual art), but members of the other two subdivisions (painting and sculpture) contributed to the project's preparatory phase, too.

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[4] Ingrid Maria Hanken is referring to instrumental music education in this article, but her description of the student-teacher relationship applies to the visual arts as well.

[5] At the Vienna Academy, "institutes" resemble university departments in function and size.

[6] The University of Zürich, Switzerland, is one of the best known examples among universities in the German-speaking area with an institutional QM system based on periodic external reviews of individual units; see http://www.evaluation.uzh.ch/index_en.html .

The Austrian Quality Assurance Agency AQA was invited to cooperate with the Academy in this project within the framework of AQA's advisory services.[7] AQA supported the Academy in its two main objectives for the project:

- Develop a formative peer review methodology which takes account of internal diversity and can be used for the Academy's future QM system

- Test this methodology by way of a review of the new media and conceptual art division of the Institute of Fine Arts

AQA contributed to the project by providing input to the project design and organisational support. AQA was also responsible for coordinating the peer review proper and providing the peers with an induction to the project. Furthermore, an AQA staff member acted as secretary to the peer team.

Two external experts were invited to accompany the project. One of them was an art professor; the other expert, too, was a university professor and expert on organisational learning, but with a background in a field other than art.

The project format was a series of workshops over the course of three semesters form March 2008 to June 2009, divided into the following project phases:

1. Preparatory phase: designing the terms of reference (TOR) for the review

2. Peer review phase following the established four step-protocol:

   · Self evaluation, resulting in a self evaluation report

   · Site visit by external peers, stakeholder interviews

   · Draft evaluation report, followed by comments (including correction of factual errors) from the institution

   · Final evaluation report

3. Follow-up phase: discussion of recommendations and consequences of the report

Breaking the rules

Defining one's own quality standards

It is a standard feature of external peer reviews that the terms of reference and the quality standards they contain be predetermined, usually by the external body responsible for the review such as a quality assurance agency. Even when institutions organise reviews internally, they will normally have one fixed set of terms for all their reviews.

In this project, however, faculty and students from the Institute of Fine Arts, aided by the two external experts, the rector and vice-rector for teaching and research, AQA staff and the head of QM, were responsible for defining the terms of reference. Over the course of several meetings the group discussed which parameters constituted quality in the visual arts in general and which of these were thought to be relevant for the Institute of Fine Arts. It then proceeded to identify indicators for these parameters and framed them in a set of questions. The terms of reference asked questions on (1) the definition of goals, (2) their implementation, (3) monitoring of implementation and (4) reflection and feedback, thus establishing – if not in words, then in spirit – the basic elements of a PDCA quality circle.

The parameters and indicators that were developed combined issues of relevance for both the evaluated unit and the Academy as a whole.

Selecting one's own peers

Although it is difficult to define what exactly constitutes independence, external peers are generally understood to be individuals who are not selected by those units they are about to evaluate. The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) state as one guideline for agencies' independence that "[t]he … nomination and appointment of external experts … are undertaken autonomously and independently from … higher education institutions …" (ESG 2005, 3.6). While most agencies will give evaluated units the option to veto individual peers, the latter are not meant to appoint evaluators themselves. This rule is intended to

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[7] See "Supporting the development of QM-processes in higher education institutions," http://www.aqa.ac.at/

ensure that personal or professional links between evaluators and those being evaluated will not interfere with the goal of an unbiased and fair review.

The pilot project did not adhere to these principles. The appointment of the two external experts accompanying the project was done jointly with AQA; one expert was nominated by the agency and one by the Academy leadership. Moreover, both experts were also invited to serve on the peer team. Two additional external peers were nominated by the self evaluation group, which consisted of students and faculty of the Institute of Fine Arts' new media and conceptual art division.

The decision to pursue this unorthodox nomination process for the peer team was based on a number of pragmatic and conceptual considerations. The likelihood of identifying qualified peers[8] who were not in some way associated with faculty of the Institute of Fine Arts appeared low, even though three out of four were to be international peers. Rather than embarking on a lengthy (and possibly fruitless) search for "independent" peers, the method of "stakeholder nomination" simplified the process and allowed the Academy to rely primarily on its own internal expertise in identifying peers who were as good a fit as possible for the task at hand. While the involvement of the two experts in the preparation phase, the review and the follow-up may have curbed their objectivity in the strict sense, it also ensured that they got to know the evaluated unit very well, an important factor for any QM tool utilising external expertise.[9]

Postponing the decision on publication of results until after the review

The ESG unambiguously require that, "reports should be published" (ESG 2005, 2.5). In this project, however, it was left up to the evaluated unit to decide on the publication until after the evaluation report had been received.

For obvious reasons transparency is seen by many as an important ingredient for effective quality management. But so is trust among all stakeholders, if we assume that quality management is but one factor within the larger concept of quality culture (EUA 2006). Trust in turn tends to build on confidentiality and fairness towards the evaluated unit.

The pilot project was initiated amidst a lack of internal trust in the proposed methodology and a QM system in general, coupled with a lack of experience with peer reviews at the institution. In this situation it seemed crucial to balance considerations of transparency with respect for the reservations towards the project by offering the option of keeping the results to a small group of people (basically the university leadership and the self-evaluation group), should the method not have worked as expected.[10]

… and getting away with it

Rules are defined for situations in which a lack thereof would pose high risks. The rules for external peer reviews are meant to ensure that the process will result in reliable and objective evaluations that generate pertinent recommendations and are therefore highly justified. By intentionally breaking some of these rules the project partners were aware that they had to design safeguards that could mitigate the risks involved. These included defining their own rules, setting up checks and balances through transparency, creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and balancing internal with external expertise.

The breaking of external rules did not happen spontaneously, but had been carefully planned and discussed beforehand. Moreover, this did not imply the non-existence of rules, but merely that the project partners defined their own rules, which were clearly communicated to all project participants.

Transparency has a tendency to create a system of checks and balances. For when everyone concerned knows what is being done and why, the theoretical risk of misuse tends to be significantly minimised. For instance, it is likely that the terms of reference received much closer scrutiny by anyone who had not been involved in their drafting, than would have been the case with predefined TOR. It was also highly probable that transparency about the "stakeholder nomination" of the peer team members would have similar effects.

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[8] In addition to their professional expertise, the members of the peer team had to have at least a passive command of German.

[9] The Institutional Evaluation Programme of the European University Association, for instance, tries to mitigate the problem of (international) peers' potential lack of information on institutional and national context by foreseeing two site visits, instead of the more common single visit, for its evaluations; see Riegler 2009.

[10] The evaluated unit eventually decided to publish the report; see http://www.akbild.ac.at/Portal/akademie/uber-uns/qualitatsmanagement/projekte-und-dokumente for a documentation of the project results.

Breaking the rules in such a manner also sent a powerful signal of mutual trust. It implied a leap of faith towards everyone involved to act to the best of their knowledge, and not to look out for short term goals such as an "easy" evaluation by "friendly" peers. This signal of trust, which was also implied by the project's rule on the publication of the report, had the welcome effect of directing attention away from the results of the evaluation towards the process of self-reflection and self-evaluation and thus towards the formative orientation of the review.

Relying primarily on the members of the university community for input on substance had the added value of drawing on the expertise and creativity of those people who most likely knew the Academy and the evaluated unit and their respective strengths and weaknesses better than anyone else. They were also best suited to address the various layers of diversity and hence were in a unique position to identify those quality issues that were of relevance for their specific context. It could also be reasonably expected that they were the most competent source of information on potential peers. Furthermore, this feature strengthened the notion of collective ownership of and collective responsibility for the review within the evaluated unit.

Complementing internal with external knowledge through the work of the two experts from beginning to end allowed the Academy to profit from a wider perspective throughout the project, instead of limiting this feature to the actual review.

Lessons learned and outlook

The project results suggested that the major role played by faculty and students in the formulation of the TOR facilitated the identification of parameters and indicators relevant to the specific context. In order to take account of internal diversity, the institutional QM system that is currently under development will foresee that each unit, with external support, prepare individual terms. However, rather than giving units complete freedom in the formulation of questions, as the pilot project did, the institutional guidelines will ask that the questions address certain key areas of intuitional activity, in addition to any other parameters, in order to provide some structure and ensure that institutional priorities are not overlooked.

The institutional system will also include the stakeholder nomination of peers, but it will be offered to units as one option, the second option being the nomination of peers by an external body. If a unit chooses stakeholder nomination, its exact process must be negotiated between all institutional stakeholders (faculty, students, institutional leadership) in advance and must be made transparent.

While the project succeeded in dispelling concerns about diversity, it also showed that the methodology, precisely because it considers this diversity, will not allow for comparisons between institutes of the Academy, let alone external comparisons.

The tangible and intangible costs, in particular the requirements on the time of students and faculty, of regular peer reviews are generally considered as high.[11] This project demonstrated that if active involvement of the university community and of external experts is extended beyond the review proper, overall costs will increase considerably. While project management may work at mitigating these drawbacks and the guidelines for the institutional QM system will allow for appropriate time between reviews at individual units, the fact remains that an institutionally driven review will cost considerably more in terms of time, workload and money than a "regular" review would.

Choosing artistic/academic units as the platform for the review, rather than e.g. individual study programmes or certain activities such as research proved useful for identifying quality parameters and indicators for the full range of institutional/unit-related activities and highlighting their interdependencies. However, the project identified as one problem that this also added to the overall complexity of the exercise and hence to workloads. Moreover, this feature may lead to the repetition of some issues in the reviews of different units – a common feature of internal QM systems that rely on reviews of units or study programmes, rather than institutional evaluations. Only once the Academy has undergone several reviews will it be possible to see if this repetition will indeed happen and to assess its effects.

Whereas the project results suggested that the formative orientation of the review was fostered by the methodology, it may also be criticised for not living up to requirements of external accountability by breaking too many external rules. Even if Harvey and Newton (2007) are correct in their conclusion that the tension between improvement and accountability is but an "illusionary" one, the QM system

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[11] For an attempt to assess the costs and benefits of external reviews in the English context, see HEFCE 2005.

will be subject to an external certification process, and it remains to be seen if its inbuilt safeguards will be considered appropriate for accountability requirements.

Overall the project results suggested that experimenting with methodology, rather than following the beaten path, was successful in fulfilling the immediate objectives. Moreover, as important as conceptual ideas may be, during the course of the project it became obvious that success was highly dependent on the personal and professional qualities of everyone involved. Without the commitment, knowledge, patience and - not least – creativity of all project participants the methodology most certainly would not have worked the way it did. However, if this model of an internally driven external review can indeed fulfil its purposes within a quality management system in the long run, only experience will tell.

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Questions for the discussion:

1. The model for an institutionally driven external peer review outlined in this paper was developed in a small university of the arts, within a very specific legal context and institutional culture (a small institution, diversity a high priority, stressing internal priorities over external factors, ability of and willingness for experimentation among the university community, the QA agency and the external peers involved etc.). Do you think that this model would also be feasible in other (art and non-art) higher education institutions? Why? Why not?

2. Given your own experience with quality management (systems), what are your suggestions for improving the outlined model? What could the institution do to strengthen its advantages and mitigating its drawbacks?