CRITICAL FRIENDS OR INDEPENDENT CRITICS?

ON TRUST RELATIONSHIPS IN EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE IN FLEMISH HIGHER EDUCATION

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'He who does not trust enough, Will not be trusted.'
Lao Tzu

ABSTRACT

The Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) of the Flemish Universities and University Colleges Council (VLUHR) is assigned to coordinate the external quality assurance of the bachelor and master programs organised by the Flemish universities and university colleges. The actual assessments are carried out by a panel of peers. In order to organize the study program assessments successfully, high levels of trust must exist between the QAU and the panels (and a number of other actors like the higher education institutions, the accreditation body and the Flemish government). In this paper, we will focus on some of the trust relations between the QAU and the programs, and more precisely on the selection of the panel of peers which carry out the assessments and which can be seen as the focal 'mediators of trust' of the whole assessment system.

Firstly, we will address the *assessment process* as it is currently organized by the VLUHR. We will also spot the main actors involved in the program assessments. Secondly, we will make a short detour, tackling *the notion of trust*. Thirdly, we present the *checks and balances* which make the assessment process equitable and highlight some of the limitations the current checks and balances entail. Subsequently, we will dig deeper into some of the *trust relations* which exist between the study programs, the QAU and the panels. We will identify two key determinants of trust: expertise and independence, especially when it comes to selecting panel members. To conclude, we will argue that trust, independence and expertise are not unambiguous notions and that a panel must both act as *critical friends* and *independent critics* in order to establish trust relationships, and as such form the nexus in the checks and balances in the whole system of quality assurance.

THE ASSESSMENT PROCES

The VLUHR is an autonomous but embedded body, established by the umbrella organizations of the Flemish universities and university colleges.[1] These umbrella organizations aim at fostering dialogue and cooperation among the Flemish higher education institutions.

One of the 'pillars' of these umbrella organizations is the external quality assurance of the higher education bachelor and master programs. In order to do so VLIR and VLHORA have established the VLUHR, responsible for the organization of the program assessments and issues of

international and development cooperation in the field of higher education. The Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) of the VLUHR is assigned by the law to coordinate the external quality assurance of the study programs organized by the Flemish universities and university colleges. The current assessment system is characterized by an eight-yearly joint or 'clustered' program assessment carried out by a panel of peers. The programs are thus clustered by discipline or domain (for example all programs in history, logistics or management) and are evaluated by the same panel and are reported in one assessment report. While the QAU organizes the external quality assurance, the universities and university colleges are in charge of the internal quality assurance of the programs, which includes writing a self-evaluation report, that serves as input for the panels' assessments. The assessment report, listing quality judgements and improvement measures, the output of a panel assessment, is subsequently used as input when submitting an application for accreditation.

Every study program assessment envelops three phases: firstly, the preparation (the provision of information to the programs for writing the self-evaluation report), and the assembling phase where the selection of the panel's members and the formulation of a discipline-specific reference framework takes place; secondly, the visiting phase: the actual in situ visits of the programs, including formulating quality judgements and improvement measures by the panel; thirdly, the reporting phase: the writing of the assessment report. Generally, this whole process takes about two years. The process is described in a protocol[2], developed to make the assessments run smoothly and to make sure that all actors involved (like the QAU staff, the panel members and the program representatives) know what is expected from them. This protocol also contains information regarding the assessments, like for example the actual assessment framework and the decision rules to assess the programs, the panel's assembling procedure and guidelines for writing the self-evaluation report.

For every assessment, the QAU staff must carefully monitor the independence and expertise of the panel members and the consistency of the quality judgements and improvement measures formulated by the panels. The QAU is convinced that high levels of trust among the different actors involved in the assessments are crucial to make these assessments equitable to all actors involved. Consequently, the QAU's functioning, and more specific, the selection of the panel members must be transparent. This brings us to the checks and balances which make the whole assessment process equitable. However, let us examine very briefly the notion of trust.

THE NOTION OF TRUST

Trust could be described as to believe in the honesty, or the worth, of someone of something. Basically, trust is synonymous with confidence. In socioscientific research, trust has become a key notion, given that in modern society confidence or 'belief' can no longer be taken for granted and that actors must have trust in others to reduce contingency.[3] Trust, in short, makes actors to deal with complexities, that is to make future actions predictable. This entails that the actor whom is trusted will do what is expected, without being certain. Without trust contingency spirals, giving way to paralysis. In the social sciences, the subtleties of trust are a subject of ongoing research. Much research focuses now on trust in, and the equitability of social systems, like nuclear power, health care, or information technology, or… (and why not!) quality assurance.[4] Thus, the degree to which one actor trusts

another is a measure of belief in the honesty, or worth, of an another actor, or more generally speaking, the benevolence, or equitability of a social system as perceived by different actors. Research shows for example that perceptions of risk are correlated with the equitability and trust in a social system.[5]

Research not only shows that trust is a construct (or something 'relational', that is that all actors converge about what defines this relationship), but also that trust has a circular relationship with perceptions. In other words, perceived equitably leads to trust which, in turn, promotes future perceptions of equitability. This opens a venue to analyze the amount of trust different actors have in the equitability of a social system and how trust can be lost or regained. Once trust is lost, it is very hard to regain. Actors that are in relationships characterized by high levels of trust are more willing to share, or deliver information openly.[6] As such, trust, is an alternative to control, in which an actor is for example obliged to give information. The contingency of the future creates dependencies between social actors, and specifically that the trustor (the one who trusts) becomes dependent on the trustee (the one who is trusted). Trust is seen as one of the possible methods to resolve dependencies, being an attractive alternative to control, which is the direct or indirect intervention of one actor in the 'terrain' of another actor. This, however, does not imply that all actors in a trust relationship have the same 'amount' of power.

Trust relations are not by definition symmetric, let alone absent of power. If control obliges actors to deliver information, trust makes actors willing to exchange, or deliver trustworthy information. Trust thus implies that all actors involved perceive that there is a mutual benefit of sharing, or delivering information. Once the received information is perceived as not trustworthy, a social system will no longer held as equitable and the trust relationship will be jeopardized. Betrayal, in sum, will be sanctioned. In line with this reasoning, and from an economic perspective, it could be argued that trust is a lubricant, reducing the cost of transactions, enabling new forms of cooperation, as for example by exchanging trustworthy information.[7] Economic modeling demonstrates – and in accordance with the idea that a trust relationship is something 'relational' - that the optimum level of trust that an actor should exhibit in a transaction is equal to the trustworthiness of the other, and the other way around. Such a level of trust leads to an efficient market (like for example an efficient exchange of information). In effect, trusting less leads to opportunity losses, trusting more leads to unnecessary vulnerabilities.

CHECKS AND BALANCES

Although trust plays a key-role in the Flemish quality assurance system, it is confined by a set (or sets) of checks and balances. Besides formal aspects like the compliance to the ESGs and that the VLUHR is assigned by the law to organize external quality assurance, one can discern two sets of checks and balances in the current Flemish quality assurance system. A first set relates to the position of the QAU in relation to the universities and university colleges on the one hand and the accreditation body on the other hand. It is important to stress that the task division which exists between the institutions, the QAU and accreditation body - each responsible for one of the layers of the quality assurance system, that is internal quality assurance, external quality assurance and accreditation - guarantees that these actors can operate autonomously. This 'chain of tasks', of which the output of the internal quality

assurance (which is the responsibility of the institutions) serves as input for the external quality assurance (organized by the QAU) and the output of the external quality assurance serves as input for accreditation (of which the accreditation body is in charge) creates a 'balance of dependencies'. This makes clear that, on the one hand, the actors involved are dependent, or must rely on the actions of each other but, and on the other hand, that no actor is able to intervene (directly or indirectly) in the actions of the other actors. This presupposes that all actors must have high levels of trust regarding the actions done by the other actors, or to put it differently, that every actor acts accordingly the expectations the others have (and as such reduces complexity). This is not to say that there are no 'checks' in this balance of dependencies that monitor the actions of the other and in effect guard the balance of dependencies.[8] The relationships of trust between the institutions, the QAU and the accreditation body, however, are not symmetrical, given that the accreditation body can sanction the QAU, and that the QAU can sanction the institutions but not the other way around. Equally important to note is that this first set of checks and balances is materialized, or 'inscripted', in the way the panels are composed, constituting a second set of checks and balances, bringing in additional relationships of trust in the assessment process which foster its equitability.

This second set involves the programs, the QAU and the panels. As said before, it is a panel of peers (selected on the basis of their independence and expertise) which carries out the assessments organized by the QAU. Primordial to understand this second set of checks and balances is that the programs have a say in the selection of the panel. The programs of the different universities or university colleges (given that the programs are clustered by domain) are asked to put forward candidates for the panel, and during a selection meeting the programs establish a shortlist of panel candidates - taking in account requirements of independence and expertise.[9] One could argue that with the programs' say in the selection of the panel the Flemish system of external quality assurance situates itself more on the ownership-side of the ownership-independence continuum. This is not surprising given that the VLUHR is still embedded in the umbrella organizations of the Flemish universities and university colleges and that until 2003 the program assessments' main focus was improvement and not judgement. Whilst it is the responsibility of the programs to make sure that a panel exhibits the necessary expertise, it is the responsibility of the VLUHR to check the independence of each of the candidates proposed by the programs. Since the output of the assessment serves now as input for accreditation, also the accreditation body (at the end of the process) and the Flemish government (in the beginning of the process) do a similar check. The expertise is kept in check by the programs, upon which the QAU must trust, given that the QAU has no expertise in the very different disciplines. To be clear, the programs' say in selecting the panels is to increase the programs' and institutions' trust in the assessment process. The very same time, sufficient safeguards are erected to ensure that there is no conflict of interests, that is that the panel members are not allied with one (or a number of) of the assessed programs or the institution(s) that organize the program(s) .

In general, the current sets of checks and balances work well. Some limitations, however, must be addressed too. At least at two occasions, some of the limitations of the current situation have become apparent. Firstly, a questionnaire developed by the QAU of the VLUHR to measure levels of

satisfaction among the different actors involved regarding the assessment process reveals that according to some of the programs the composition of the panel ultimately turned out to be different from what they had expected. This questionnaire also depicted that in some cases the institutions have questions about the independence and expertise of some of the panels. These observations make clear that existing trust relations may be jeopardized in the future. Secondly, an audit of the functioning of the QAU (in order to comply with the ESGs) makes clear that both sets of checks and balances portray some problems regarding independence. The review states that no serious problems regarding the QAU's autonomy are detected and that ownership is an important achievement, but that the QAU must establish an independent steering committee that could serve as 'firewall' against the umbrella organizations. This independent steering committee will be operational in 2012. More important is that this audit states that the panel selection procedure remains a 'black box', despite all efforts to make the procedure transparent. Let us now dig a little bit deeper into the relationships of trust which exists between the programs, the QAU and the panels, and this in relationship with issues of independence and expertise, which could be seen as the key determinants of trust in the whole assessment process.

TRUST, INDEPENDENCE AND EXPERTISE

Given there are three actors involved during the actual assessments, three different trust relationships can be identified. First between the panel and the programs, second between the programs and the QAU and third between the QAU and the panel. Let us take a closer look at the relationships of trust which exist between the programs and the QAU regarding the selection of the panel's members.

Given that trust is something 'relational', the relationship between the programs and the QAU must be analyzed from the perceived trusts (and the way they define trust) each actor has in the selection procedure. This does not only entail that both actors act according to what is expected from them during the selection procedure, but that they converge on the requirements of what is a trustworthy panel. It could be argued that a trustworthy panel for the programs is foremost a panel that exhibits expertise and that a trustworthy panel for the QAU must be a panel that exhibits independence. If for example all candidate members proposed by the programs are withdrawn by the QAU, the programs will lose their trust in the way the QAU defines 'independence' and 'expertise'. Trust, and subsequently independence and expertise, are not one and the same for both parties. If one does not converge on what constitutes trustworthiness, the equitability of the assessment process will be put into question, either by one of the parties or a third one.

As noticed before, actors that are in relationships characterized by high levels of trust are more willing to share, or deliver information openly. Exchanging trustworthy information openly is of key importance to demonstrate trust. If for example the programs together betray the QAU by withholding information about the independence or expertise requirements of one of the panel members, this can dismantle the trust relationship which is constructed between both actors. Given that the programs have a decisive role in this phase of the assessment, the QAU is not only highly dependent on the programs to select a trustworthy panel, but also risks to lose its face vis-à-vis other bodies, labelling the current selection procedure (duly or not) as a 'black box'. Selecting a trustworthy

panel, however, is not always easy. Besides some practical issues, like the availability of the proposed panel members (the clustering of the programs can make the assessments very time-consuming), it is possible that a panel member shows sufficient expertise but does not meet requirements of independence, or shows sufficient independence, but does not meet the requirements of expertise. As such, every panel can be situated in a matrix of independence and expertise. It is possible that some panels will show high levels of independence and expertise, while other panels will show low levels of independence and expertise. In fact, it is also possible that a panel reflects high levels of independence but low levels of expertise and vice versa. The least preferable for both parties is a panel that shows low levels of both independence and expertise. The most favourable, at first sight at least, is a panel that shows high levels of both independence and expertise. This, however, does not only depend on how different actors define, and converge on what is a trustworthy panel, but also what the ultimate objective (or primary goal) is of the assessments carried out. In fact, if the assessments aim at improvement, a panel should better be composed of critical friends. If the assessments' aim is on the contrary judgment, a panel should be composed of independent critics, given that with the accreditation of the Flemish bachelor and master programs requirements of independence risk to overshadow requirements of expertise. Ideally, given that a panel must both formulate quality judgements and improvement measures, a panel must act both as critical friends and as independent critics.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have tried to give a short overview of the Flemish external quality assurance system, and the different checks and balances it embodies. We tried to show, through the rubric of trust, that the panels' independence and expertise is the nexus of the equitability of the whole assessment process. We argued that the panels can only be seen as mediators of trust between the programs on the one hand, and the QAU on the other hand, if they portray characteristics of both friendly critics and independent critics. The QAU of the VLUHR believes that, in order to maintain the lasting relationships of trust with the programs, rigorous independence requirements may not be at cost of the expertise panels must exhibit. Or to put it differently, optimum levels of trust must be sought after to make cooperation run smoothly and to warrant the equitability of the whole system of external quality assurance in Flanders.

QUESTIONS

- How does your organization manage existing trust relationships with other bodies and on what are these relationships of trust based (expertise, procedures, affect…)?
- Are policy changes in the (inter)national higher education area creating possibilities and/or posing threats to the trust relationships your organization entertains with other bodies?
- How does trust relate with more formal aspects of power, like accountability, in the daily functioning of your organization?

[1] The Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad (www.vlir.be) and the Vlaamse Hogescholenraad (www.vlhora.be) are the umbrella organizations of respectively the Flemish universities and the Flemish university colleges.

[2] VLIR/VLHORA (2008) *Handleiding onderwijsvisitaties*, Brussel.

[3] This assumption is based on the work of N. LUHMANN (1979) *Trust and Power*. John Wiley & Sons Inc. and P. SZTOMPKA (1999) *Trust: A Sociological Theory*. Cambridge University Press.

[4] On the role of trust in social systems in modern societies see for example U.BECK, A. GIDDENS and S. LASH (1994) *Reflexive Modernization*. Stanford University Press.

[5] About the relationship between risk, trust and equitability see P. Slovic (1993) 'Perceived risk, trust and democracy', *Risk analysis*, 13: 675-82 and D. LUPTON (1999) *Risk.* Routledge

[6] On the relationship between trust and control, see G. MOLLERING (2005) 'The Trust Control Duality', *International Sociology*, 20: 283–305.

[7] See for example S. BRAYNOV and T. SANDHOLM (2002) 'Contracting With Uncertain Level Of Trust', *Computational Intelligence*, 18: 501-14.

[8] Monitoring, or keeping in check others' actions presupposes transparency and accountability, on transparency and accountability in higher education see for example: D. NEYLAND (2007) 'Achieving Transparency: the visible, invisible and divisible in academic accountability networks', *Organization*, 14: 499-516 and M. MURPHY (2009) 'Bureaucracy and its limits: accountability and rationality in higher education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30: 683-95.

[9] Strong requirements of independency and the fact that the programs often by consensus establish a shortlist of panel members' candidates risk to generate mediocre panels in terms of expertise. Although consensus is no formal requirement, most of the shortlists are established in concert, this to warrant trust between the QAU and the programs.