

HOW TO INCREASE FACULTY SKILLS FOR A NEW APPROACH TO TRANSFORMATIVE EVALUATION IN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Quality assurance systems in higher education have developed over the last twenty years under the pressure of an international and national policy to promote the pursuit of common quality improvement objectives and which allow the comparability of qualifications between the various countries. Faced with this important turning point which has strongly marked the development of higher education, individual institutions have activated important internal changes in the effort to adapt to accreditation, self-assessment and evaluation models. The experience of countries that have long developed internal quality assurance systems, such as the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, demonstrates how the effectiveness of such systems owes much to the maturity of the system, which over time has therefore permeated processes, tools and skills in the culture of the organization. The culture of quality is an essential factor to enable the effectiveness of internal, but also external, improvement processes. The culture of quality is an essential factor to enable the effectiveness of internal, but also external, improvement processes. Through phenomenological research, it was possible to grasp the main elements - both organizational, managerial and of a value-based and cultural nature - which characterize a culture of quality in a university organizational context. It was also realized that many of these elements characterizing the organization's quality culture are directly correlated with the main points of Patton's theory of transformative evaluation (defining the evaluation question, reflexive function of the evaluator, usefulness and current use; link between leadership and evaluation; continuous evaluation). The objective of this research is now to outline, starting from the elements identified as foundational for the pursuit of quality and for the ability to generate a transformation of reality, how they can be developed by the people who work within the system of both internal and external QA, especially those responsible for carrying out the assessment. It is thus possible to define a competence profile of the evaluator and what knowledge, skills and competences he must have to carry out his work in the best possible way and how they can be transmitted, through a specific training curriculum that could be made available to the evaluators operating at international, national and local levels. Similar, albeit more limited, skills must be disseminated throughout the educational community of an institution in such a way as to increase the faculty's ability to know, understand and use the evaluation practice in a positive way, in order to better deal with the moment of "being evaluated" and recognizing the benefits in the correct use of the results of the evaluation from a transformative perspective.

Keywords: *Quality assurance, transformative evaluation, evaluator skills, higher education.*

1. Introduction

The increasing development of internal and external quality assurance (QA) systems in the university systems of various countries worldwide has been driven primarily by regulatory requirements, but also by the need to make the quality levels achieved evident to external and internal stakeholders. The goal of continuous improvement in the university system brings with it the concept of raising the quality of university education and scientific research, which entails knowledge of the quality goals to be achieved, as well as awareness of the critical areas on which to work and the techniques and methodologies for measuring and analysing them (Freed et al., 1997).

The gradualness with which QA systems are implemented requires careful reflection on how these responsibilities are assigned and how these competences are disseminated and ensured. The scale of implementation starts at the international level, with the supranational accreditation agencies, moving at the national level to the national external evaluation agencies, at the institutional level with the evaluation commissions and the promotion of internal quality culture, and then moving on to the level of the individual teaching or research structure (Rose, 2005).

The experience of countries that internal quality assurance systems long before these were made compulsory by legislation, such as the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (Maassen, 1998), shows how

the effectiveness of such systems owes much to the maturity of the system, which over time has therefore allowed processes, tools and competencies to be become established into the culture of the organisation. In fact, an important concept that has been introduced in the international debate, subsequent however to the definition of QA systems, has been that of the "quality culture" which, in addition to foreseeing organisational and process elements necessary for the achievement of quality objectives, also incorporates within it factors of a value-based nature of attitudes and, indeed, cultural factors, as they are equally fundamental for grasping aspects of meaning and depth in evaluative action (Ehlers, 2009).

2. Design

Typical elements of the culture of a complex organisation such as a university cannot be understood *a priori*, without investigating the experiential experience of the operators within the QA of a university. This is why a previous phase of research of phenomenological analysis (Mion, 2023) made it possible to grasp a framework of elements characterizing the quality culture of an organisation, both from a system and a value point of view, comprising different perspectives of lecturers, students and technical-administrative staff, as well as different levels of experience: national (Italian), local University and local individual course or department. The different perspectives of these figures intersect in a holistic view of a culture of quality, which is expressed through constant learning and the incorporation of 'quality thinking' into practice (Yorke, 2000).

The elements that emerged from this research can be partly traced back to Patton's transformative evaluation theory, in particular: i) the importance of defining the evaluation question (Patton, 2010); ii) the reflective function of the evaluator, who within the organisation in which he or she operates must promote the sharing of evaluation results with decision-makers and other stakeholders (Patton, 2010); iii) the importance of the evaluation being guided by its usefulness and current use (Patton, 2015); iv) the close link between leadership and evaluation (Richardson & Patton, 2021).

3. Objectives

In order to concretely disseminate a culture of quality in the context of higher education, after outlining its founding features, it is necessary to identify the enabling factors, i.e. how it can actually be generated through the competent human action of all the players operating in the university system.

Since people are the 'raw materials' of a university, and of any other enterprise providing a public service to the community, raising and developing a culture of quality necessarily entails working on people. The development of competences, through the application of knowledge and skills, is an important opportunity to be seized by faculty development, so that culture of quality becomes part of university *knowledge management* (Tadesse, 2014; Vidal, 2003). The aim here is precisely to:

- identify the elements characterizing the culture of quality in the university system that can be developed through the skills of the individuals working there;
- grasp what are the main competences that need to be developed to promote an effective QA system;
- at which levels they can be developed, considering the gradualness with which QA systems can be implemented: international, national, local university, individual course or department.

4. Methods

As described above, the first phase of the research concerned the definition of a quality culture framework starting from phenomenological analyses, conducted by means of in-depth semi-structured interviews and a subsequent codification and categorization process, by means of classification reasoning and the use of tacit and intuitive senses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In fact, the phenomenological style allows one to enter the context being studied with a naturalistic approach, building a theory from the context and without being influenced by pre-constituted theories. This approach is therefore indicated for research that deals with a complex phenomenon such as educational relations (Mortari, 2007).

The results of the phenomenological research are thus the basis for a construction of a set of competencies graded on different spatial and vertical levels, according to the instructional designer competencies approach.

5. Discussion

From the framework of elements characterizing quality culture studied in a previous research phase, it was possible to identify the consequent competences required to develop these elements and to ensure that they are disseminated in the university community (Stitt-Bergh et al., 2016). Considering the

organisational complexity within which these competences have to be included, one cannot but operate a sort of "hierarchization" of these competences, based on the one hand on the type of competence, considering Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) on competences, and on the other hand on the different organisational levels at which they are to be applied - from the international level, to the national level, the local level of a single institution, or of a single teaching or research structure, to finally arrive at the most basic level of the individual. Due consideration must also be given to the role of the various figures operating within the university system, which for this research are differentiated between those who hold top political positions, at various levels (Ministers, National Agency for Evaluation, Rectors, Directors, Presidents of Courses), those who hold external or internal evaluation or self-evaluation positions (external evaluators, Evaluation Committees, internal self-evaluation committees) or lastly those who have no role of the previous ones.

5.1. Competences for the generality of those working in the university system

Considering the broad spectrum of the subjects, it is possible to identify a first batch of basic skills which should be broadly disseminated to all people working in the university system, and which mostly refer to conceptual knowledge (Table 1).

Table 1. Competences for the generality of those working in the university system, using Bloom's taxonomy.

remember	Knowledge of the university system (or of the local university in which one operates)
	Knowledge of the QA system (subjects, roles, processes, tools used to ensure quality in one's own entity), both the current one, but also its history; understanding the various stages of evolution of a system allows for a better grasp its current peculiarities and the efforts made to build it
apply	Knowledge of the quality vision of the organisation; to achieve quality, it's necessary to know its definition, what objectives are to be achieved, and the principles of quality as internationally recognised by quality standards and in their application in the context of a given institution.
	Ability to listen to and pay attention to different people according to their role, as well as to involve the various stakeholders according to the different QA processes (this consequently implies good communication and interpersonal skills, co-matching)
	Ability to direct one's choices towards the interest of the institution, i.e. to act in order to pursue quality objectives, thus applying the quality principles and values of one's own organisation
evaluation	Ability to grasp the opportunities for improvement arising from QA work, which involves espousing the transformational approach to quality management work, including evaluation activity. When experienced in a passive sense, evaluation activities should be experienced positively, and their outcomes used for the purpose of improvement
	Ability to evaluate the activities carried out and identify actions for improvement (self-critical capacity), since in all university QA systems, individuals are also called upon at some time to exercise a kind of self-evaluation (either for the purpose of obtaining forms of incentives and rewards or for reprogramming their teaching and research activities)
	Ability to identify the elements that determine a suitable working environment and try to realise them, as everyone is a proponent of a favourable working climate, albeit conditioned by organisational factors and availability of resources determined by the top management of the organisation
	Ability to organise time properly and distribute work correctly, so as not to be adversely affected by the various tasks required, on different fronts

5.2. Competences for those with a governance role

People who have governance roles in the university system, being temporally bound to the electoral and appointment mandate, are those who are destined to a more frequent turnover and, therefore, need more attention in the formation of competences, right from the beginning of their mandate. The higher the office held, the more complex are the skills required. It is therefore considered that competences are required first at the international level, then at the national level, at the local level of individual institutions and finally at the level of individual teaching and research units.

Table 2. Competences for governance, using Bloom's taxonomy.

rem.	Knowledge of the founding elements of a governance system in terms of strategic planning (down to the level of the individual institution), i.e. the basic vocabulary that must be learnt and known by those who must correctly use concepts such as 'objective', 'strategy', 'mission', 'vision of quality'
apply	Capacity for team building and open discussion between different positions and roles (at all levels), including the ability to gather ideas on strategic planning and practices and to communicate the outcomes to all
	Ability to correctly attribute to the individuals operating in the QA system activities and functions appropriate to their role and to the competence profile of each (down to the level of the individual institution)
	Ability to give proper weight in one's work to quality management (at all levels)
	Ability to simplify the evaluation system and reduce the different levels of evaluation (down to the level of the individual institution), within the limits of the possibilities resulting from regulatory approaches that translate into an overly defined evaluation system, and the different actors and levels operating within it
	Ability to find strategies to increase the competences of people working in QA (down to the level of the individual institution)
	Ability to relate to external parties and listen to their expectations (at all levels)
evaluat.	Ability to discern daily in one's actions, so as to adopt choices always consistent with the role assigned, i.e. choosing the interest of the institution over the interest of oneself or of a few (at all levels)
	Ability to choose the appropriate tools to achieve quality objectives and try to achieve them (at all levels)
create	Ability to define the strategic planning of its structure (at all levels)
	Ability to have a vision of quality and to apply the necessary actions to achieve it (down to the level of the individual institution); in fact, while the strategy of action can be defined for each individual organisational unit, the vision of quality must be defined by an individual organisation, if not by a national and international policy

5.3. Competences for those with a self-assessment role

Those who increasingly play a central role in internal and external quality assurance are those who carry out the actual evaluation activities. If carried out externally, they usually have a national and

international impact on their activities. On the other hand, if carried out internally, they mostly take on the function of self-evaluation, since they are performed by the same individuals who work in that particular institution or in that particular teaching and research structure'. There are soft skills referring to internal auditors' that consist of the ability to have harmonious face-to-face interaction with clients and other stakeholders, but also other soft skills that do not directly concern face-to-face such as critical thinking, analytical skills and written communication. (Coetzee & du Plessis, 2021) The competences required to adequately fulfil the role of self-evaluation are manifold and mainly concern all the different levels of action (from the highest international level down to the level of the individual teaching or research unit), while in some cases they refer to the international, national and individual institution level.

Table 3. Competences for evaluator, using Bloom's taxonomy.

remember	Knowledge of the available information system and the available data and indicators (at all levels), especially if the evaluation is quantitative
	Knowledge of different evaluation methodologies (at all levels), in fact according to different situations, contexts and evaluation objectives, the methodologies that can be used may be different
apply	Capacity for team building and open confrontation between different positions and roles (at all levels)
	Ability to be involved in the evaluation or self-assessment of different work areas and organisational grades (down to individual institution level)
	Ability to select suitable data and indicators to assess the level of quality achievement of the evaluation object (at all levels)
	Ability to inform and train those involved in evaluation or self-evaluation on the evaluation system or on specific issues which are dealt with from time to time (down to the level of the individual institution)
analysis	Ability to carry out the evaluation having in mind that the purpose of the evaluation is the improvement of the evaluated subject/object (at all levels)
	Ability to adopt evaluation and self-assessment procedures effectively and efficiently, reducing formalities (down to the level of the individual institution)
	Ability to define and manage evaluation and self-assessment processes in a way that is easily applied by all practitioners (at all levels)
evaluation	Ability to make evident evaluation outcomes that are relevant and useful to external stakeholders (at all levels)
	Ability to discern one's own actions while remaining consistent with the assigned role (at all levels)
	Ability to introduce new evaluation practices while maintaining the link with the pre-existing ones that are still in place (at all levels), to understand the evolution of methods and practices and to give continuity to the results so that they maintain a degree of comparability
create	Ability to make value judgements that enable the recipient to understand that value, and find useful points for improvement (at all levels)
	Ability to design an evaluation and self-evaluation system, within a broader QA system, adapted to the complexity of the university system and easily applicable in all university contexts while preserving the specific peculiarities of each entity (at a national and international level)
	Ability to provide outside the organisation with a clear and relevant message about the benefits of work with a view to improving quality and the resulting social impact (at all levels)

It is evident that a large proportion of the competences mentioned are directly linked to the personal dispositions of the evaluator, which in turn are influenced by the values and beliefs of their own organisation. A competent evaluator must be able to manage his or her personal dispositions in a way that allows professional values and beliefs to guide his or her practice (Davies, 2021).

6. Conclusions

The diverse framework of competencies presented in this research, if disseminated and applied across all the different organisational levels and roles, should allow for the effective development of QA systems that enable work towards real continuous improvement in the university system. This entails activating appropriate training initiatives that are promoted at all the various levels, starting from the less complex cognitive and applicative knowledge mentioned above. Training modules aimed at teaching and technical-administrative staff should be provided periodically, with a view to lifelong learning, and attendance must be incentivized, by means of formulas for recognizing professionalizing credits, rewards or recognition for career advancement purposes. These incentives are all the more important for all those who do not have governance or evaluation roles within the organisation and who, therefore, do not see a direct return for such training initiatives in their work. The introduction of systematic QA experiences is capable of changing the attitudes of faculty members over time (Yonezawa, 2002). Similarly, those with governance and evaluation roles at national and local level should also be able to follow training modules, perhaps at the national level provided by inter-university consortia or national evaluation agencies, in order to consolidate cognitive and application skills. The elective nature of the appointments to governance roles cannot mandate the fulfilment of a training obligation. This could instead concern those who are in charge of evaluation, especially external evaluation, at least at a national and international level. Often professional registers of evaluators exist in different countries, whose membership is tied to previous experience in the professional field, but it would also be important that the continued membership of such registers be tied to the acquisition of a minimum number of hours of training, provided by an extensive and varied training plan. Such training could also be included in certain educational pathways for first and second level students, as is already the case in America (LaVelle, 2020), as it would already provide skills required in possible job profiles in the management of quality systems in various fields (McShane et al., 2015).

It is more difficult to envisage 'traditional' training for competences involving cognitive skills of a higher complexity, as it would be more appropriate to set up experimental laboratories to test these competences with adequate methodologies. This should comprise University Centres dealing specifically with Faculty Development. on-the-job training pairing "junior evaluators "with "senior evaluators" is

another way of transmitting these skills. Through field experience and individual training, seniors can transmit the values and the knowledge required to perform their evaluation work to the best of their ability, developing an evaluation thinking that is linked not only to the process, but also to the mindset with which one acts (Volkov, 2011).

A further development of the research could be a comparison of the competence framework outlined in this research, matching the profile of individuals holding evaluation roles at national level with the current requirements for access to the registers of evaluators, with the aim of understanding which competences are not required at an entry level, but which are necessary for the performance of this work and should therefore be acquired to reduce the gap between competences required and possessed (Dewey et al., 2008). The measurement of the degree of achievement of the competences described so far using different levels of evaluation (Kirkpatrick, 1994) would require further developments.

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