RETHINKING EVALUATION'S PRACTICE IN ACADEMIC TRAINING TO MEET DAY-TO-DAY CHALLENGES: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY

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Abstract

Evaluating a training offer has been seen as an evidenced practice in higher education for a long time in France. Its objective has been mainly the same: meeting both students' demands and market demand. But this objective has been hardly achieved because solutions and recommendations for implementation often come late and prove inadequate for the changing needs. A qualitative study conducted for ten years shows that the evaluation grids and methods had been routinely applied without carrying out a flexible, standardizing and adaptable evaluation process. The results of this study will be presented and discussed in this paper.

Introduction

It is quite frequent that I build evaluation grids and implement methods without any preliminary attention to the term, as if its meaning was obvious. It is the case of the evaluation principles and practices that have been seen as evidence in higher education for a long time in France (Jeanne, 1988).

However, it seems simplistic in the current French context of higher education especially where teachers are meeting hard time. I can quote mainly here, the deficit position of some universities or the melting pot policy adopted by other universities to resolve this problematic situation. These challenges require rethinking about evaluation practices to: (a) determine whether the training is what it is expected to be, (b) see how goals and objectives are effectively accomplished over time, and (c) identify the strength and weakness of this training offer.

These are some appealing topics that concern many teachers in higher education today that I will study in this paper. How well is training in higher education performing? And what makes training effective according to market demand?

I address these questions in this paper basing on the case of the Book Trade Information and Communications Department in the University of Clermont2. The purpose of the paper is twofold: identifying the principal evaluation processes and criteria to establish according to the state of the art and studying the degree of these processes are used in the context of training in higher education.

The paper is divided into three parts. Part I deals with the main characteristics of an evaluation process that could fit with the French context of higher education. Then, it analyzes the expertise and practices pursued for evaluation, describing the institutional evaluation actors involved in this practice and determining their target values and their used methods. Part II deals with the impact of this process on teachers who follow it and complete the required data. Based on the results of a survey described in this part, I carried out a diagnostic in Part III that could support the university to deal with the challenges of the 21st century.

What are Training's Core Values in an Ever-Changing World?

Several theories and disciplines call into question the definition of evaluation and accord to this concept a central place in the performance improvement process, each one according to its angle of approach. Also, the literature reveals that evaluation is part of another concept rich in sense - that is value. In the following section, I will determine the possible values that academic training could have. I do not intend being exhaustive nor presenting these approaches in detail, but I intend to present significant examples to fully illustrate the complexities and the intricacies of the evaluation exercise.

First of All, Let's Talk About Values!

Etymologically, the concept of *value* whose use dates back to 1080 is defined as the quality attributed to a particular object. Thus, a valuable object is appreciated by its scarcity and its utilitarian dimension (Rey-Debove, Rey, & Robert, 2013, p. 35).

Through the evolution of philosophical reflections on this concept (from Plato to Heidegger going through Kant), I see that individuals are not dissociable from their universe and can only make plausible judgments. Also, philosophers considered that facts give meaning to values, which are naturally normative and common.

The semiotic approach contests metaphysical thought by questioning the power of individual's intuition and the ability of knowing the absolute alone. This approach shows the plurality of meanings of the same sign and notes that the words are in themselves neither true nor false because their meaning depends on the contexts to which they refer.

I base our thoughts here on the work of Eco that consolidated the assumptions of CS Peirce (as cited in Everaert-Desmedt, 1990), who takes into account the context of signs' production and reception. In this regard, Eco and Sauvage (2010) explained that the value of an object is determined by its *volitional* and *representative content*. Thus, a sign has ultimately a sense within the context in which it forms part. Eco and Sauvage indicated that it is the role of culture that determines the meaning of signs defines its content and sets its value.

In other studies value is essential and has a specific role, but remains relative and even ephemeral. In a sociopolitical approach, for example, the value is considered as an end point to which individuals refer as it takes the form of

prescriptive codes that describe the real world and direct the actions of these individuals (Bougle, 2033).

According to Sfez (1996), the relationship between governors and governed arises from a common consent on the immanence of values and a reciprocal attachment for their applications.

In public policy specifically, values represent the references that public policy should apply. These references define the cognitive dimension of leaders' actions for which citizens had voted. Then, failing to reach a conviction policy, problems may lead to the dissolving the reference's system in force. In other words, the absence of values could cause serious repercussions on citizens themselves that may evolve in an uncertain and complex environment.

From an economic perspective, values form a part of ethical principles that are shared by employees. These values that direct the decisions to take and the actions to implement are embodied in an organizational system. This system gathers all the objectives that should be reached from the long-term to the short-term (Crowther-Heyck, 2006). Then, values are not determined immutably because the meaning of an object differs from one context to another. This is due to the evolving nature of the facts that are in a perpetual motion according to Simon as cited in Fiol (1993).

Finally, the notion of value is defined and discussed in information sciences. Many researchers have argued that it reflects the challenges of information society (Hassan, 2008). Since the revolution in information technologies, other researchers have examined information systems and proposed different methods and recommendations to evaluate these systems. Some researchers talk about information practices to substitute the way the set of sources, tools and cognitive skills work. These latter are effectively mobilized in the process of production, research and treatment of information (Chaudiron & Ihadjadene, 2010). In addition, Halavais (2009) showed how to use search engines and analysed the social and cultural values that might have an influence on the access to information literacy.

This state of the art shows us that value systems are complex constructions that would vary across space and time (Brisson & Meyrestein, 1995). So, one could not assign them a metaphysical or final foundation. However, the analysis of Boudon (2007) leads to the conclusion that the founding values are possible if the judgments assigned to an object or a fact are based on a deep knowledge of the context and an agreement with the group to which individuals belongs.

Accordingly, I can suppose that the evaluator cannot appreciate a training offer until he/she has properly determined the sense of this practice, that is to say, the values of training. I presume also that it has no meaning to evaluate an academic training offer without having a common agreement about the objective of this practice. So how is evaluation effectively carried out in France?

A Short Account of the French Higher Education System
For a long time, the French higher education system was heavily centralized as most of French universities have been funded by the state budget. These universities are mainly public institutions and the state controls almost all the activities such as the duration of studies, the titles of awards, the appointment of teaching and the administrative staff (Comité national d'évaluation, 2004). Besides, these universities work closely with the Ministry of Higher Education and Research.

Other French prestigious colleges called the *Grandes Ecoles*, have their own governance structure and depend on other ministries (Agriculture, Culture, Defense, Equipment, Industry, Justice, Health, Prime Minister)

In addition, there are two main offers that characterized the French higher education system: (a) traditional academic studies that offer a full range of academic qualifications up to, and including doctoral studies, and (b) professionally oriented programs that provide long- or short-term training. I can quote here, the Instituts Universitaires de Technologie that offer a two-year short cycle higher education program leading to the award of a *diplôme universitaire de technologie*, called DUT.

Also, students can enroll as full-time or part-time students in French universities. Depending on their situation and knowledge, they can follow either initial research training (specifically intended for young people) or lifelong learning and career training. The latter offer includes unemployed, officials and temporary staff in active employment and retired officials with different career profiles.

Recently, the Universities Freedom and Responsibility Act passed in August 2007 has provided essentially new governance and greater financial autonomy to universities (Aghion & Cohen, 2004). So these institutions have full responsibility for managing their personnel and their buildings and get funding through a block grant. Meanwhile, the state continues to control the activities and the results and outcomes of universities in France.

The Academic Training's Core Values in France
The goals of French universities are multiple[1]: (a) carrying out research, (b) producing knowledge, (c) training the elite, (d) supporting research of quality, and (e) replying to a real need in training and recruitment policies (Schwart & France, 1987; Fautrat & Toulgoat, 2003).

These goals represent the main values of universities in France. Thus, training evaluation should be closely linked to these values. However some economists such as Aghion and Cohen (2004) believe that the role of the university is to support economic growth. They propose to stop the assumed separation between research and education, and to give universities the means to support innovation. This position was more or less assumed by the governments of the last twenty years.

Conversely, student or teacher unions defend a vision of the [2]university as a place of knowledge open to all, a place where knowledge should remain open and democratic. They must become harbingers of the new paradigm of knowledge and citizenship. In addition, universities are mainly public institutions in France that have a set of public values[4] which are the direct use of public benefits, created by the government, the impartiality and equity of the production and distribution of service, and the guarantee of citizens' satisfaction.

Above all this value gives new meaning to work, which is defined by the results it produces. As Chênerie said: "Higher education is becoming more and more expensive, and the Government is continually solicited to increase its endowment, hence its legitimate demands to know what is going on in universities and what is the quality service" (2005, p.12).

These experts who really have a focus on this question consider values as a means to promote the participation of academics to achieve the same objective: improving education and research. From this point of view, evaluation will be built around common values shared by all in universities and should not be regarded in isolation. More generally, the implementation of such a system is designed to foster the exchange, to enable an agreement on improvement areas and, ultimately, to facilitate professional development.

The Institutional Evaluation Process: A General Overview

Before describing the organisation of the evaluation process carried in France, I shall note the growing interest of the French government over time about evaluation. This interest was reinforced since its practice became compulsory in universities in 2007. The French government intended reforming the management structure of universities by granting them more autonomy and a new budgeting system[3].

First, it has implemented changes in the university system to bring it up to the highest international level. Second, it has driven a real political assessment and assigned the task of drawing a neutral and unbiased expertise in evaluation instances. I will cite in the following section the main evaluation instances.

Evaluation Instances in Higher Education: History and Current State
The instionnal evaluation started with the creation of the National Evaluation Committee (CNE) in 1987. It reviewed and evaluated periodically the activities of all the universities in the areas corresponding to the mission of public higher education (initial and continuing training, scientific and technological research and the development of its results, dissemination of culture, international cooperation and scientific and technical information dissemination[4])

The CNE' analyses cover all actions and means used by institutions within their scientific and educational policy. These analyses are registered in public reports and presented by institution and by theme.

This Committee's activities are published in an annual report addressed to the President of the Republic. Also, it rises every four years a summary report on the state of the higher education submitted to the president. Then the aim of the CNE is to ensure that the scientific and pedagogic polities carried by universities respect the shared vision of public value as defined and cope with the evolution of needs and expectations.

As a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the CNE contributes to the Quality Convergence Studies (QCS) carried by the European Community and gives its expertise about evaluation.

Over the past years other evaluative organisms part of big research organizations, mainly the CNRS[5] and the INSERM[6], have emerged. The CNRS is the National Scientific Research Council that sets up an observatory of research, development and innovation. Founded in 1939, it constitutes the largest French public scientific research organization. Legally, it is a under the administrative control of the Ministry of Higher Education and Research. Its main mission is to coordinate the activities of laboratories in order to get higher performance in scientific research. Both institutions aim to evaluate the quality of research and the production of researchers.

The INSERM is the Frensh National Institute for Medical Research created in 1964 that is under the dual auspices of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Research. It is recognized by its advancements in biology and biomedical research.

Another organism called C.N.U.[7] evaluates the new candidates appreciating their research activities in order to establish national qualification lists for access to the status of teacher-researchers.

Methods and Tools
According to the CNE, the evaluation process is both quantitative and qualitative and is based on the constant communication betIen evaluator and evaluated. Its aim is to evaluate the pedagogic quality and verify the consistency of courses compared to their objectives. Checking the internal consistency betIen type of training is recommended too.

The CNE offers internal and external evaluations and covers three complementary aspects: the training policy, the scientific policy and the management of the university. It recommanded the following evaluation criteria: (a) the readiness of the course, (b) the rate of success, (c) the professional integration rate, (d) the clarity and relevance of courses, (e) The interest focused on students, and (f) the quality of methodological assistance.

Surely, several interesting initiatives have followed over the last fifteen years to establish the evaluation process at universities, but these are worthy of improvement (Chênerie, 2005). Since the implementation of the law on the autonomy of universities, some fifteen faculties in France faced severe financial difficulties and have massively reduced their means. Indeed, the

crisis of 2009[3] revealed some problems and bad results observed in French universities. IAmong them are: (a) the low success rate of undergraduate students, (b) the difficulty of graduates to find jobs, (c) the disconnection betIen universities and research organizations, (d) the competition between universities and business schools, and (e) the frequent paralysis of universities' management.

Many reports, such as HCEE's report published in 2002, indicate paths for reflection and action on the evaluation of performances of universities for training to achieve the assigned objectives. But how do teachers perceive the evaluation system?

How is the Actual Evaluation System Perceived?

Despite the growing attention to institutional evaluation, information dealing with teachers' opinions about this system is very scarce. How do they really perceive the system?

I chose to have a focus on this topic because I believe that it is a strategic one: First, teachers participate in the evaluation process, as they complete the grids and provide all the required data for measurement. Second, they are directly concerned by evaluation while being more and more evaluated in their training and research. So, they are in constant contact with institutional and political actors who are interested in the university evaluation. Besides they know the objectives of this process and try to apply the required methods. What does evaluation mean to them? How do they behave with the evaluation process? And do their opinions and practices converge with institutional recommendations and objectives?

Methodology and Protocol of the Research

At the beginning, I addressed three main issues: How is the institutional evaluation system really perceived? How much did training improve through the results of the evaluation in response to the needs of private and public companies in Clermont-Ferrand? How did rethinking evaluation practice make it more effective?

In order to find elements of responses to these questions, I conducted an exploratory study that consisted of interviews with teachers' managers whose role was crucial; they had to gather the data and send the results of their evaluation to the CNE. I wanted to see their real practices and knowledge about evaluation. I also implemented a quantitative study that took the form of questionnaires filled out by teachers and employers of the graduates of the Department of Book Trade Information and Communications. Our purpose here was to see the reality on the ground since the implementation of the institutional evaluation system. I sought to understand what those interviewees thought about the quality of the training offer.

I preceded in this case study by steps:

1. Details are collected on the number of participants and their degree of involvement in the evaluation project.

2. Observations from participants are solicited at each special focus group in which I participated.

3. Feedback was obtained by conducting several rounds of telephone or in-person interviews.

Participants and Process

The study was conducted from September 2004 to February 2015. At the end of each year during this period, 100 persons completed and returned the questionnaire: 50 employers and 50 teachers that gave courses in the department.

The interviews and observation notes were conducted within the department at the place of work of interviewers. I carried out a total of 50 interviews lasting an average of two hours. 40 Teachers and 10 teachers' managers were interviewed. These persons were chosen because they were involved in the evaluation process when they were responsible for doing it. First I transcribed all interviews in Word format and then classified the information by themes. Data coding was done via the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 9. Throughout, I acted as Reeves-Sandy (1979) recommended: "Participant observation demands complete commitment to the task of understanding. The ethnographer becomes part of the situation studied in order to feel what it is like for people in that situation" (p.537).

As I am part of the teaching team, daily immersion into the department facilitated the initial contact with the respondents and the identification of what make sense and determines the practices and representations of our selected sample. Meanwhile, publishing the interviews that I have conducted was problematic because confidentiality was indispensable for information collection. Thus I will only mention in this paper the items collected without identifying authors.

The Main Findings

Evaluation Meanings

According to our survey results, evaluation remains prominent. All the teachers' managers ensure that they are accountable and have to demonstrate the validity of their results in terms of services' quality and management. It is also seen as a set of measurement tools and methods to implement in order to establish comprehensive self-assessment of their training.

In addition, participants attached great importance to the performance evaluation. But mastering performance levels remains problematic for many. They admit that their evaluation approach is empirical rather than scientific. In addition, the evaluation methods used are quantitative rather than qualitative. The frequency of evaluation is constant and annual for the teachers' managers (90%). To their mind, this criterion addresses the issue of student satisfaction and the quality of training and coaching.

Besides, their evaluation approach is based in most cases on previous professional experience, and it is hardly standardized. Their common practice is to write statistical balance sheets and activity reports to justify the validity

of the expenditure management and reporting on the impact of the training on offer to enrolled students.

According to them, the challenges and the major problems encountered in the evaluation are various. First, they lack information and training for the evaluation and management concepts. They admited that they often had trouble completing the self-evaluation records sent by the evaluation's institutions. Then they need support tools that facilitate the task and encourage them to evaluate more frequently.

According to the results of the investigation, the practice of evaluation is mostly unsatisfactory (87.9%). Only 12.1% are satisfied with their practice. Some respondents mentioned the need to develop information and decision support that provide a standard range of performance indicators and generate upon request charts and graphs. The requested features are the collection and data processing and the presentation and publishing of results.

On the other hand, I observed that the practice of evaluation focuses on effectiveness. Most of teachers' managers carried out a complete examination of this performance criterion. They selected three main indicators: the success rate, professional insertion and satisfaction rate of enrolled students. They said that they did not look at the other criteria because they had been not asked to do so.

In addition, they did not have information allowing them to evaluate the cost-effectiveness. They explained that they have neither the legitimacy nor the means nor else the time to do it. They also preferred to concentrate their attention to the quality criterion that represents to them the main value at which they are all attached.

Furthermore, they recognized the importance of reflection on relevance and impact of their training offer as they closely follow the political orientations and participate in decisions taken about it. But they placed these criteria in second place, as they did not have enough time. Most of those surveyed highlighted the difficulty in evaluating medium and long terms actions. They spend much of their time to solve everyday problems and therefore lack hindsight to conduct a thorough analysis of the evolution of student profiles' and labor market needs. According to them, the university must recruit competent persons to carry out a great monitoring work that would study the societal, political and economic aspects. They believe that their help will be really valuable.

Finally teachers are wondering about the meaning of their job. They see that the search for performance is a priority today. They require a revaluation of their scientific and technical skills and better recognition about the effort it provides in evaluation practices

Evaluation Practices
The overall evaluation organization in the department is split according to the three sectors of the course put forth by the department: Tourism, performing

arts and book trade. According to the teachers' managers interviewed, the department does not have a unit dedicated to evaluation. The work of collecting and processing data is distributed between them. Each one is free to choose the method and data collection and processing but must follows these criteria: objectivity in the treatment of the results, completeness and newness of data collected.

They said that they behaved differently. The methods used to check the opinion of students on training Are different. Some teachers's managers sent anonymous questionnaires to their students and discussed them with students' delegates to gain more precision about unsatisfied points. Others directly chose the second option. But, all of them applied the same process as they interacted with teachers to get their views on the running of their courses and the difficulties encountered and /or observed in students during each semester. Besides, the most used sources of information are informal. These are mainly feedback from students and stakeholders.

This situation represented a weakness to 90%. They believed that applying benchmarking in this field leads to a better position itself and judged its performance as an expectation of the supervisory authorities. HoIver, the disparities in work habits and in human and material resources prevented them from doing so. The remaining 10% considered this step useless.

Meanwhile, most teachers' managers considered that the practice of evaluation was not inserted fully into the context of a formal planning system in which objectives and timelines are predetermined. They admitted that their evaluation practice was done every time the guardianship required results and that they are less motivated to evaluate themselves. This requires a lot of time. Moreover, they admitted that the evaluation is a difficult practice to be folloId even if they recognize its importance. Furthermore, they considered it a secondary and extra work that obliged them to suspend for a while their main pedagogical activities.

Despite these limitations and difficulties, they think that their current practice led to a prospective reflection on the evolution of their training offer

About the Training Offer
The following highlights survey respondents' recommendations about ways to improve the training in the Book Trade Information and Communications Department.

Nearly half of teachers (65%) and employers (63%) declared their satisfaction with the training offer and students' skills. Both recommended reinforcing the time allocation for general subjects and improving the knowledge of students in communication skills so that they might know how to market themselves. Participating teachers and employers also acknowledged the lack of academic supervision, but differed in their evaluation. In fact, most employers evoked mainly the limited knowledge of students about the current and coming challenges of the profession and problems in mastering methods and professional techniques, while the teachers I surveyed contended that the

training did not inculcate the students enough with a sense of initiative. They believed that the volume of courses devoted to new technologies and methodology are insufficient. This is also true for the number of internships. Yet, they felt the urge to listen and interact more with employers to identify their needs and adapt their offer.

Regarding the outlook for training, the opinions of employers and teachers diverge too. Employees want a better integration of versatility and multidisciplinary in teaching. For teachers, it is essential to improve the scientific and academic research so that it would be better recognized and therefore accelerated

Of the employees, 65% did not know enough the university objectives but they are attentive to the training quality in which they wish get more involved. Of the teachers, 35% required further developing the culture of students self-training while the remaining 45% considered it very important to be more open to the employment market and strengthen partnerships.

Conclusion

After redefining the exact role of evaluation based on academic works that determined the concept of *value*, I understand that evaluation tends toward a relative objectivity because it is conditioned by the changing values it stands for and facts it represents. This theoretical basis had led us to question precisely about the possible values of the university in France, which I dealt with in the second part of the paper. First I studied the overall context of university evaluation and described the role of French evaluation instances that equipped universities with a favorable framework to follow their policies and improve their training. Then I saw how teachers' managers behave within this framework and what teachers and employers thought about the evolution of the training offer.

Our Diagnosis
While carrying the case study, I learned a great deal about the reality of evaluation practice in universities, and I identified some shortcomings related to this practice. I observed that its use and periodicity stay the same and that this can be summed up in a single sentence: Complete pre-filled forms when national authorities in charge of evaluation and control are asking for them.

Without questioning this fact, I think that It is useful to make an additional effort to demystify the concept to persuade teachers about its benefits. Indeed, I saw that training managers are conscious of the limits of their evaluation practice because of the overwork incumbent upon them and the lack of information about the evaluation system. Thus, their motivation regarding this system was not favorable.

I believe that this fact is due to the difficulty of defining evaluation as a concept, a tool and a product. Indeed, teaching staff need better knowledge about the goals and the potential procedures of evaluation for two main reasons: first, teachers should appropriate the evaluation system to better defend their policy and negotiate new projects, and second, they should

modernize the management of their pedagogic activities to ensure making the right decision. As they did with students, teachers should regularly follow the evolution of the university environment that it is shaken by a widespread economic crisis and deep socio-political changes.

Consequently, I believe that teachers should be formed to practice a *normalized* evaluation process, based on performance indicators, that follows their activities, taking into account the evolution of their environment. They should be sensitive to the benefits of this practice that enables them to identify the Strength, weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) at the right time. In other words, the SWOT analysis enables them to respond to the question: How Ill are I doing?

In addition, teachers should master the performance indicators to:
1. Measure the effectiveness of their services.
2. Measure the efficiency in terms of resource utilisation within the organisation.
3. Recognize in the mid-term the degree of relevance of their actions to the general mission and policy of the university.
4. Know how to measure the outcome of their actions on society.

Moreover, I believe that teachers should consider evaluation as a new scientific know-how to acquire as important as teaching. So it may be more appropriate to include this topic in initial teacher preparation programmes and propose for those who are in practice adequate support for appropriate evaluation principles and tools.

In addition, decision making in universities today, requires the participation of companies. I saw in the case study that employers do not have the same interests or the same opinion on the training and the labor market. The university should associate with them further and not only contact them when they are asked to account for their decisions and actions. This fruitful cooperation leads to ansIrs to these questions: What are the core competencies required in the field at mid- and long- terms? What is the relevant offer to choose?

In sum, implementing structural changes and breaking entrenched patterns will not be easy because there may be resistance from people who are reluctant to change the ways in which they work in order to make more transparent their actions.

If we are to be constructive, we must set up a dialogue with not only all those involved in the project of the evaluation system, but also with those concerned with the training offer's quality. In that regard, instilling a culture of evaluation will entail changing modes of thought, attitudes and action of all the actors.

Furthermore successful collaboration comes from taking time and energy to understand others and be understood. The support of authorities is crucial here so that teachers may embrace change, respond, and adjust their offers to a rapidly changing world while maintaining and refining their values.

Selected Online Resources

1. https://www.u-picardie.fr/labo/curapp/revues/root/28/nemitz.pdf

2. http://sciencescitoyennes.org/

3. http://www.20minutes.fr/france/173269-20070801-loi-autonomie-universites-definitivement-adoptee

4. https://www.cne-evaluation.fr/fr/progra/som_guid.htm

5. http://www.cnrs.fr/comitenational/evaluation/eval_acc.htm

6. https://www.eva2.inserm.fr/EVA/jsp/Glossaire/index.jsp

7. http://www.cpcnu.fr/

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