EQUIPE PROJECT

CASE STUDY

Universiteit Maastricht (UM)

Rationale or motivation

National and local contexts:
The **national** system of quality assessment for universities has been carried out since 1986, which made the Netherlands one of the pioneering countries in this field.
The system was at that time the compromise that ended a battle between the government and the universities over severe budget reductions.
It has been documented extensively over the years, both nationally and internationally[1]. Therefore the description of the system will emphasize on some main features:

- six year-cycles in visitations (*onderwijsvisitaties*) by external committees, consisting of peers;
- national programme reviews instead of institutional reviews (eg. Psychology in 1986, 1992, etc.; Law in 1987, 1993, etc.
- the system is 'owned' by the universities, and executed by the VSNU, their agency;
- the results of the *onderwijsvisitaties* are made public;
- The Inspectorate (another agency, independent but acting on behalf of the government) checks systematically what the programme-directors did with the recommendations; and checks whether the VSNU is carrying out the *onderwijsvisitaties* in line with their own standards;
- the government is entitled to cease the funding of a certain programme after several neglected insufficient results. Until now we only have experienced warnings that were made public.

With this system the Dutch universities and government hoped to meet both objectives: accountability and quality improvement.

In theory the reviews meant to complement the **local** quality systems of the universities, but in reality these internal systems developed gradually over the years.

The **local situation** at the **Universiteit Maastricht (UM)** differed from the other Dutch universities in that it had already an extensive systems of various internal evaluations of programme elements prior to the start of quality as an issue in higher education. This was part of the executing of the educational system of problem-based learning.

Dynamics that triggered the quality project:

[1] A.I. Vroeijenstein: Improvement and accountability: Navigating between Scylla and Charibdis

The quality issue (project might not be the appropriate word in this context) is the requirements of the problem-based learning system. This educational approach, as well as other student-centred learning approaches, are well documented elsewhere. A description of the basic outlines could be offered in an appendix.

Sufficient in this context is that PBL at the UM is executed in a form of curriculum alignment, in an interdisciplinary and modular way, for the total curriculum.
The consequence is that departments no longer have a regular slot in the curriculum. And as the curriculum is revised yearly there is the possibility of a continuous power struggle of who teaches what and when and to what extent. Unless there is a new structure where another body (in this case a committee) 'owns' the curriculum and make rules for the implementation.

In our case the starting point was a medical faculty, with 40+ departments. The system that was developed ruled by relevance of the subject in a certain year, and past performance of the department on education. Enter the bookkeepers. A system was developed for defining roles and functions in the curriculum; from designing questions for examinations to co-ordinating a whole curriculum-year. These functions had a considerable side-effect that they produced data. In the years that followed we developed a system which enabled us to include the input in the curriculum, both from the qualitative and the quantitative approach in our yearly talks with the departments on the accountability of their efforts.

Demand for a 'quality' label.
The demand for a 'quality label' has been disappointingly limited so far. Several studies were carried by the UM or by independent researchers, as the Executive Board of the university hoped to find the link between the high scores in the quality-tables and the then yearly fast-growing numbers of new students. However, key factors turned out to be the problem-based learning system, the attractiveness of our new international programmes, the advantages of studying close to home, Maastricht as an attractive city, etc. Quality is usually stalled at number five.

Differences in quality between Dutch universities are small. So, financial matters (within the family), given the high student fees in the Netherlands, will weigh more in the final decision. This situation might change when international students enter the higher education institutions. They have to make important decisions on questions as moving to other countries and paying high fees. For them a quality label will probably be of high importance. But then, in an international market there seems to be only room for accreditation systems. And that's where everyone is the Netherlands is heading now.

The following questions concern the local university system

1. Objectives

- What were the objectives?

The main objectives were running the curriculum. Quality assurance was merely a spin-off?
Obtaining data on the performance of the tutors and other teachers involved;

obtaining data on the planning, implementing and executing process of the curriculum;
obtaining data on the relevance of the questions asked in tests;
obtaining on the functioning of interdisciplinary planning groups;
co-ordination of the process.

- How were they monitored?

Questionnaires filled in by students at the end of each module (4 - 8 times a year).

Tutors and other members of the planning group for the specific module and/or year received different questionnaires.
Centralising the assessment system.
Registration of the hours spent on curriculum parts.

- Were they changed?

Likely. After the curriculum year ended the results were collected, analysed and punt on the agenda of the Curriculum Committee. The decision-making process that followed might involve adaptations or improvements on the collecting of the data.

- Were they achieved?

Yes.
But then it was obvious from the start that they should be, as the execution of the curriculum depended on the data and the overall-assessment.

2. Model

- what model was chosen?

The developed their own model, along with the blueprint for the curriculum-design;

- why was that particular model chosen?

Quality and data are an integral part of the planning and implementing.
The design of the curriculum requires curriculum alignment with the emphasis on interdisciplinary modules. In order to decide on the wishes of the departments, and dealing with questions whether or not all aspects of the disciplines are represented, data on the quality of the programme and the performance are indispensable.

- what are the strengths and weaknesses of the model you choose?

Strengths:

- it is an integral part of the primary process: teaching. Therefore no different procedures are required.
- accepted by staff. No 'quality police' is involved.
- data have a strong correlation with the main processes; so the results are always used as an input for improvement.
- staff is assessed on multiple criteria, so it is less threatening for them.

Weaknesses:

- it is limited to education, so the faculty or the university had yet to develop a management cycle;
- students get after several years weary of filling in questionnaires and have to be motivated sometimes.

- Was it a one-off quality project or part of routine practice?

Routine practice.

3. Organisation

- How was the quality project organized?

By the curriculum committee of a faculty.

- Who was involved in what different roles.

Basically all of the teaching and administrative staff.
The system (Problem-based learning) has a limited number of lectures in its curriculum, but a number of other 'roles'. Staff of a certain department could be tutor in module X, member of the planning unit for module Y, or be responsible for the co-ordination of year Z.
Specialist trainings, coaching, electives and designing questions for assessing students are regarded as well.
All these members are assessed.
The administrative procedures are taking care of by the administrators of the 'faculty bureau', or the Dean's office.

- How much did it cost.

More administrative staff, but the choice for the PBL educational system required that already. Generally, the PBL system is regarded as expensive on administrative support, and chap on academic staff, as they should be able to concentrate more on their research and teaching. Costs for quality are automatically included and not easily to isolate.

4. Results and implementation.

- Did the project have a product (a report, a guide, a manual)

A manual, as well as a guide.

- How important was the process of conducting the process.

Very important. In this whole process one can detect a power struggle between the departments and the faculty. In the end the faculty, or the curriculum committee came our as the 'owner' of the curriculum, and could decide who should teach what, where and with how many staff members.
The quality assessment profited obviously form the outcome of this struggle.

- Were there any unexpected results? Were they positive or negative?

Assessment results became gradually an input for career-decisions. I would file this under 'positive' but opinions may differ here.

5. Implementation

- How were the project results and/or recommendations of the quality project implemented: in the short term? In the longer term?

In the short term, and improved and adapted continually.

- Did it bring significant improvements?

The university started in 1976, and this particular system started shortly after that. So it is not possible to compare. But at least it creates a possibilities to implement changes and improvements to a wider extent.

6. Was it cost effective

We think this is more cost effective than a separate quality model.