A POSITIVE CHANGE FOR THE UNIVERSITY. THE CASE OF THE LIFELONG LEARNING QUALITY ASSURANCE IN FRENCH INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

How have the quality approaches specific to lifelong learning (LLL) contributed to positive changes in universities over the last 15 years? This paper aims to offer an answer: by advocating for a particular model of quality approach. If the notion of "quality" has gradually gained traction in universities, it has not done so in a single mode and with a single objective, as illustrated by the example of French universities on which I focus here. Alongside quality approaches designed for "attractiveness" or "excellence," LLL, in my opinion, promotes a "regenerative" model well described by Harvey in his "*Quality Culture: Understandings, Boundaries and Linkages*" paper. Focusing on the internal resources of organisations, this model finds expression in the context of an initiative: the development of a certification emanating from a professional network common to all French universities, known as "University Continuing Education." Promoting a collective approach to quality and encouraging the construction of a professional university network specific to LLL programs, this quality assurance may outline another model: the "relational quality."

QUALITY: A REAL MESS?

How have the quality approaches specific to lifelong learning contributed to positive changes in universities over the last 15 years? This is the question that I wish to examine in the context of this article, with regard to all activities related to LifeLongLearning. Or, more specifically, (to use Harvey's words in his "Analytic Quality Glossary" (2004-2018)), the quality approaches contribution to "organisational standards": "specification of principles and procedures by which the institution assures that it provides an appropriate learning and research environment." Focusing on the case of French universities, and more precisely, on the "Formation Continue Universitaire" (FCU) Quality Assurance, this paper aims to present a hypothesis: lifelong learning contributes to the promotion of a model of university development based on "continuous improvement," – the "regenerative quality culture."

Is this a paradoxical statement? Quality's *raison d'être* seems to be to create connections and optimise the interactions of the various actors involved in an organisation. Or, to quote Lucander, to promote a "collaborative development (...) involving teaching staff as well as other internal stakeholders (students, program directors, and academic management)" (Lucander, 2020, p.137). Therefore, asserting that quality pertains to different models implies that it is also a source of disorder and possible disagreement.

This idea is, for example, at the heart of a Elken and Stensaker's paper evoking a "multitude of concepts," or a "considerable fragmentation regarding the terminology used," as well as a certain conceptual void not filled by "few overarching concepts that would provide a concise analytical toolbox for studying the overall institutional attempts in working with quality" (Elken, 2018, p.189).

Putting aside differences in terms of actors (external or internal QA, see Blanco, 2015) or methods (bottom-up or top-down, see Lucander, 2020), I will focus on the following observation: the university, and more broadly, higher education, is a place where several quality models coexist, among which is the one specific to the lifelong learning activities I intend to analyse here. Based on the abundant scientific literature available, I propose to distinguish three models:

1. A "quality for attractiveness" that aims to enhance the appeal of a university.
2. "Excellence quality" that aims for success and achievement.
3. "Regenerative quality" that focuses on the "continuous improvement" notion.

These three conceptions of quality do not refer to the same objectives, actors and skills, as demonstrated by the French example.

Quality for attraction

Building reputation can here be seen as an end in itself, even if this quest for "university attraction" can indeed be framed (as Biggs suggests) within a "quality as value for money" (Biggs, 2001, p.221): its aim is then to attract students, socio-economic partners or even patrons. Involving strong strategy and communication skills, this model relies on a strong investment in terms of human resources. As Dill suggests, it can be thought of in terms of an "invisible hand" approach to academic quality assurance (Dill, 2000, p.36): administrators sometimes believe "*that academic quality would occur automatically if they recruited the best faculty members and students and left them alone.*"

Attractiveness is indeed at the heart of an ambitious quality approach carried out within French universities starting in 2018: the "Bienvenue en France" (literally "Welcome to France") label initiative. It is based on "five categories, each broken down into four criteria," the latter being ranked from the perspective of the foreign student: "*Some criteria are considered vital to making sure the student immediately feels at ease* [and] *are referred to as "Welcome Package" criteria*" (Campus France, 2023).

Evaluated based on indicators drawn from this framework, universities are subsequently assigned one of three levels of "hospitality" (my words), the highest corresponding to the achievement of all criteria. In this latter case, the attractiveness is real: a university becomes a genuine tool for setting up in a foreign country, offering assistance with employment and support for entrepreneurship.

The mixed results presented in the "2019-2022 report", however, invite us to question the interest of such a "quality for attractiveness" model. As Simon Margison mischievously puts it: "*Although most activity in higher education is nation-bound, a distinctive global dimension is growing in importance, connecting with each national system of higher education while also being external to them*" (Marginson, 2008, p.303).

Quality as performance

The second model I would like to discuss refers to the "excellence quality" theorised by Harvey and Stensaker: it is "*operationalised as exceptionally high standards of academic*

achievement" and "*quality is achieved if the standards are surpassed*" (Harvey, 2008, p.432). Quality takes on a competitive nature here, and its main promoter would be a Europe engaged in a "search for excellence" (Harvey, 2008, p.432) the best examples of which, according to Harvey and Stensaker, are the Bologna process and the work of the European Universities Association (EUA), both concerning the definition of the European Qualifications Framework, and more broadly a redefinition of our university degrees.

To those examples, I would personally add an initiative like the Horizon Europe research program. A success in one of its extremely selective calls for projects constitutes a pinnacle in the careers of the members of a research team (scientists and other staff). Here, quality goes hand in hand with performance, and is measured (to use Goff's terms) by the desire to achieve the "gold standards whatever the discipline is" and indicators such as the "university ranking" or "league tables" (Goff, 2017, p.185).

Rankings and results do not, however, overshadow the role played by frameworks and quality of service indicators. Firstly, service in terms of good management of research contracts, as exemplified in the case of the audit plans of the Horizon 2020 program which gave rise to recommendations (and possibly warnings) in order to obtain a certificate on financial statement (MESR, 2018).

Then, service to staff and research directors certified through a certification awarded directly by the European Community: the HRS4R ("Human Resources Strategy for Research") label which signals a "*commitment to implement fair and transparent recruitment and appraisal procedures for researchers*" (Euraxess, 2024). Deployed from 2018, it is obtained after carrying out an "internal analysis" of the establishment, the identification of "prospects for improvement" and the implementation of an action plan which is subject to evaluation (for a perfect example: EHESP, 2023). In both cases, a quality approach serves a university policy aiming to take a "*place in the knowledge economy*" (Blanco Ramirez, 2015, p.362).

The possible conflicts between these two quality models are immediately evident. "Quality for attractiveness," for example, can be seen as a form of valorisation, and more broadly as a way for a university to establish its place within society through an economy of reputation or media visibility. In doing so, it pursues objectives other than an "excellence quality", focusing on indicators of success determined by structures recognised for their expertise in scientific matters. Are these significant in terms of notoriety building, especially with student audiences?

UNIVERSITIES AS LIFELONG LEARNERS?

Focusing on the economic and social environment of the university, these two models place themselves at odds with the third model: a "regenerative quality" that, according to Harvey and Stensacker (who propose it as one of their four "ideal types" of quality), relies on "internal developments." It is not directly linked to a "reward", as in the case of the "reactive quality culture", and does not intend to respond to an "external demand" (like the "responsive quality culture"). In being "regenerative," one should actually understand an institutional will: mobilising a transformative capacity immanent in the university as an organisation and engaging in a process of "*ongoing reconceptualisation of what it knows, where it is going and even the language in which it frames its future direction*" (Harvey, 2008, p.436-437).

"Regenerative" quality: the lifelong learning model?

Lifelong learning quality approaches in French universities indeed falls under this last model, with an additional specificity – the search for "internal regeneration" (Harvey, 2008, p.437) was a collective effort, shared between institutions grouped within the FCU network (which

brings together all the lifelong learning services of universities). The FCU's president from 2013 to 2017, Alain Gonzalez, presents in eloquent terms a joint work that began in 2010: "At first, it was an informal working group that allowed exchanges between universities that were ISO 9001 certified. By talking and sharing tips and tricks, we realized that our organisations were not so different from one institution to another, that we understood each other and that we could even exchange with the entire network"[1].

Emphasising the informal and spontaneous nature of these exchanges, these remarks stand in stark contrast to the "attractive" or "excellence" quality model and perhaps even outline a new model which I propose to name "relational quality." "Sharing tips and tricks" does not just aim at gaining efficiency: it is also a way to promote a common professional culture within universities and to demonstrate that the professions linked to it are capable of becoming a force for proposal. In this respect, the FCU network can be compared to other organisations. The creation in 2010 of "Cap recherche" (literally: "Heading for research"), for example, brings together "*professionals in research support in charge of supporting projects*" (CR, 2024, *my translation*). Similarly, the "Réseau Qualité en ESR" (RELIER, literally: "Quality Network in higher education"), created in 2012, intends to support "*the approaches of organisation, steering, evaluation, quality, improvement and risk management through quality*" (Relier, 2024, *my translation*).

A networking Quality Assurance?

Among those, the FCU network stands out for one proposal: the development of a quality assurance system, which was included (alongside ISO21001) in 2016 on the QA national list by the national French authority in charge of vocational education and training regulation (the CNEFOP). According to Alain Gonzalez, this label was conceived as an instrument enhancing the shared development of lifelong learning management skills within universities. "*The FCU certification had a specificity: the framework emphasised continuous improvement. The idea was to establish shared processes and very quickly we formed within the association a support group for the institutions that wanted to enter into a quality approach*"[2].

Seemingly taking Harvey's proposals almost literally, this framework aims to enhance the learning capacities of university organisations. This is first evidenced with the diagnostic phase, which was based on a reflexivity exercise: a self-assessment process which, according to Smutná and Farana (2009, p.122) "*is a comprehensive, systematic and regular review of an organisation's activities and results*" offering the possibility to "*discern clearly its strengths and areas in which improvements can be made*" and that gives way to "*planned improvement actions which are then monitored for progress.*" In the FCU certification case, this process relied on six criteria and a 21 indicators grid which had to be filled by an internal steering committee assigning a score out of 5 and formulating possible improvement tracks for each one of those multiple items.

After reflexivity comes an effort of mutual openness to the different university lifelong learning professional cultures. Indeed, a second phase (halfway through the planned quality process) requires the organisation of cross audits – two universities committed to mutually evaluating each other on the basis of the FCU framework. Enabling the sharing of know-how, experiences (and doubts), the process values the construction of a university professional network. We are still within the "relational quality" model, as shown by these words of Alain Gonzalez: "*The idea was to avoid inbreeding and find an alternative to internal audits in order not to put colleagues in the unpleasant and ineffective position to evaluate their colleagues. We thus played on geographical proximity and on similarities between universities. It is*

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[1] Alain Gonzalez, *my translation*. Videoconference interview conducted with me on June 12, 2004.
[2] Alain Gonzalez, *my translation*. Videoconference interview conducted with me on June 12, 2004.

difficult for an institution that does not provide continuing education in medicine to understand precisely the activity of an establishment that does."

The objective was twofold. (1) To build a collective "quality culture" through the construction of a group of auditors. Having participated in such visits, these staff members were able to contribute to the "shared process" elaboration. (2) To prepare universities for the final audit which was carried out by an independent organisation, the Bureau Veritas. This audit firm also contributed to the construction of the entire process described here in order to have the value of FCU certification recognised at the national level.

CONCLUSION

Although barely known in French universities just 15 years ago, the notion of "quality" has now become mainstream as evidenced by the new framework produced by the HCERES (accreditation agency for all French establishments). Lifelong learning activities have contributed, like other academic fields (e.g., research, student's experience), to this evolution. However, its main tribute to French universities seems to me to lie in the promotion of a quality assurance model that can be presented by taking up Biggs' famous distinction. More than of a "retrospective QA" driven by a demand for "accountability" and mobilising "indicators of performance [that] concentrate on administrative procedures", the FCU certification initiative falls under a "prospective QA" that aims to review "how well the whole institution works in achieving its mission, and how it may be improved" (Biggs, 2001, p.222-223).

In the case of French universities, this "seminal" distinction between retrospective and prospective QA does not seem "simplistic" as Goff (2017, p.182) claims: by "prospective," we should understand the desire to collectively organise an "upskill" of universities' organisations and their personnel. Benefiting from the support of a national network, and opting for an "in-house" certification, French universities have turned lifelong learning education into a genuine learning ground for universities as a whole.

Their "continuing education services" have indeed become resource centres for institutions facing new quality requirements. As Alexandra Bodin, who succeeded Alain Gonzalez as quality manager of the FCU network, says: "*There is new thinking. In some institutions, vocational training departments or services have become models. Within some universities, we see the emergence of "continuous improvement departments" or "quality services," whose agents and staff originally come from continuing education activities management*"[3].

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[3] Alexandra Bodin, *my translation*. Videoconference interview conducted with me on April 25, 2024

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