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An online interactive monitoring system as an instrument for data-driven self-reflection on education policy and quality assurance processes at faculty and study programme level

Ilse De Bourdeaudhuij[1], Hilde Van Puyenbroeck[2], Janis Vanacker[3], Sien Uytterschout[4], Joke Claeys[5], Katrijn De Cock[6], Nele Mahieu[7]

Department of Education Policy, Ghent University
Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 33
9000 Gent, Belgium

Abstract

Future-ready universities take into account the challenges posed by a "VUCA World". The question, then, is how to prepare study programmes for such an uncertain, complex and rapidly evolving future. Ghent University considers adaptability, co-leadership and self-governance as crucial aspects of study programme management. It has recently developed an *online interactive monitoring system* for faculties and study programmes that supports self-evaluation and stakeholder engagement. Via the "education monitors" of this system, faculty and programme management can document, argue, and reflect on their mission/vision, processes, actions, quality indicators and results. The structure of the monitors is based on the PDCA principle, and allows detailed reporting on each of the pre-determined topics' vision and policy (PLAN), implementations (DO), monitoring (CHECK), and improvement actions (ACT). This paper gives an insight into how the monitors are built, how they operate technically, how they stimulate self-reflection and monitor quality, and how they go beyond learning and teaching.

1   Introduction

Ghent University is a top 100 university and one of the major universities in Belgium. Our 11 faculties offer more than 200 study programmes and conduct in-depth research within a wide range of academic disciplines. Ghent University Global Campus is also the first European university in Songdo, South Korea. In the context of changing legislative contours in Flanders, Ghent University policy-makers saw a window of opportunity to take significant and daring steps towards a fully-fledged university-wide quality culture. One of the crucial elements in this cultural shift has been the development of the education monitor: an online interactive monitoring system for faculties and study programmes, which facilitates data-driven policy-making and stakeholder engagement. The monitor also allows faculties and study programmes to monitor and enhance education quality on a permanent basis.

1.1   The Education Monitor: WHY?

Legislative changes in Flanders (2014) gave higher education institutions the opportunity to take quality assurance of study programmes into their own hands. A new Quality Code

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[1] ilse.debourdeaudhuij@ugent.be
[2] hilde.vanpuyenbroeck@ugent.be
[3] janis.vanacker@ugent.be
[4] sien.uytterschout@ugent.be
[5] joke.claeys@ugent.be
[6] katrijn.decock@ugent.be
[7] nele.mahieu@ugent.be

suspended the external quality assessments of study programmes that had been customary up until then, and in its place introduced the institutional review. Supervised by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), the institutional review and its concomitant procedures aim at gauging the HEI's policy and quality assurance conduct. The new legislative contours provided the incentive for the development and implementation of Ghent University's internal quality assurance system. Some of the important basic principles that underlie the quality assurance system are "trust in the expertise held by faculties and study programmes"; "shared ownership" and "continuous improvement". The new internal system will contribute to installing a fully-fledged university-wide quality culture, "in which all stakeholders naturally strive for continuous quality assurance as well as quality enhancement."[8] To live up to this aspiration, and to support study programme management, Ghent University needed a new and efficient quality performance tool. Given the fact that education management increasingly has to contend with an ever-changing, highly dynamic and unpredictable context – the current pandemic has taught us that much – the new tool had to allow quick and accurate analysis of education quality, and facilitate reflection and joint decision-making at faculty and study programme level. More than ever, future-readiness equals being able to adapt to changing conditions.

1.2   The Education Monitor: HOW?

Since 2019, Ghent University has started to implement education monitors for every faculty and every study programme. These education monitors are built in a SharePoint environment. The backbone of each monitor is a set of operational objectives; the objectives for faculties and study programmes are aligned with university-wide strategic educational goals ("the Six") and with (the framework of) the Flemish Quality Code and the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). In the SharePoint environment, the operational objectives are arranged into thematic clusters (e.g. "learning outcomes", "programme", "assessment", "internationalisation"), each corresponding to an overarching chapter.

Every chapter is built on the PDCA principle. A clear distinction is made between a relatively stable "PLAN-DO phase" on the one hand, and a more dynamic "CHECK-ACT phase", on the other. For every chapter, the faculties/study programmes identify their general policy intentions (PLAN), and describe in broad outlines the actions that are being undertaken to execute that policy (DO). This makes up the relatively stable part of the monitor. The CHECK-ACT phase is highly dynamic: faculties/study programmes regularly conduct a self-evaluation, in which all internal stakeholders (the programme management, lecturers, students) participate. The online monitor also allows external stakeholders (e.g. representatives of the professional field and alumni) to participate actively in the self-evaluation process. During this exercise, all stakeholders reflect together on whether or not, and to what extent, each of the operational objectives is met.

Each objective's "check" is made by means of a four-point scale (ranging from "excellent" over "more than sufficient" and "sufficient" to "not meeting expectations"). Checks can either be substantiated by means of quantitative data or by qualitative data. With regard to the former, it is important to know that the education monitor is linked directly to Ghent University's Business Intelligence System, which contains all data related to student performance/learning analytics, and data obtained from surveys (e.g. course feedback, programme feedback, lecturers' survey, alumni survey). As mentioned before, the "checks" on the operational objectives are the result of a discussion among stakeholders. These checks will reveal whether or not improvement initiatives (ACTs) are necessary. For every operational objective, faculties and study programmes (can) stipulate specific improvement initiatives/actions. The education monitor then generates an automatic quality improvement plan, giving an overview of all the

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[8] https://www.nvao.net/nl/procedures/vlaanderen/instellingsreview.

proposed improvement initiatives. This improvement plan is a useful instrument in the faculties' and study programmes' day-to-day working, and forms the basis of future self-evaluations.

1.3   The Education Monitor: WHAT?

The Ghent University education monitor is a tool that clearly facilitates data-driven education policy: it is a digital dashboard which gives faculties and study programmes up-to-date information on education quality in general, and the extent to which specific education objectives have been attained.

The education monitor facilitates active participation of all the important stakeholders in self-evaluation, and in discussions on improvement initiatives. In so doing, it strengthens stakeholder engagement and co-leadership at faculty and study programme level. At Ghent University, we believe that the principle of co-leadership is crucial to the future-readiness of higher education (management).

1.4   Success factors

A crucial success factor in the development of the monitor has been stakeholder involvement. In the course of the entire development process, every stakeholder group was surveyed to identify existing needs, and was asked to participate in test sessions. The feedback that was gathered at every step of the process was then used to fine-tune the tool further. Finally, this resulted in a user-friendly end product that answers the faculties' and study programmes' real needs. This stakeholder involvement, which will include any possible future users, will continue to play an important part in the tool's continued success.

An important success factor at the moment of introducing the monitor has been the launch of a strong and targeted internal communication campaign and the provision of coaching sessions for faculties and study programmes. Several communication initiatives were set up in order to give the monitor greater publicity among its (future) users. In addition, all faculties and almost every study programme were coached intensively in putting their monitors into operation.

Faculties also fulfil an essential part in education support and quality assurance of their study programmes: they translate (institutional) policy lines into faculty- and programme-specific measures and guidelines, and actively promote professional development and exchange of good practices. Since efficient policy presupposes a healthy amount of introspection, faculties are also expected to regularly (annually at least) carry out a critical self-reflection on their education policies, internal quality cultures and the implementation of university-wide strategic educational goals ("the Six"). Last but not least, Ghent University's critical attitude is also highlighted at the institutional level: the administration carries out a critical reflection at least annually, scrutinizing the university's education policy, the general quality culture and its own operational objectives. Here, too, the exercise is supported by a central education monitor.

2   Conclusions

Future-proof universities pursue an education policy that responds to, and engages with, ever-changing circumstances and challenges. Active stakeholder participation and self-governance are an indispensable feature of any such policy. At Ghent University, the implementation of an education monitor has shown that digital technologies – more specifically, digital quality performance tools – are an absolute prerequisite for achieving this objective.

References

NVAO, https://www.nvao.net/nl/procedures/vlaanderen/instellingsreview