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Building trust and enhancement: from information to evidence

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Proposal

Title:

Initiating a new external QA methodology: the key role of evidence to build trust. Three voices tell the lessons learned from a pilot phase

Abstract

This paper illustrates how HEIs, experts and a QA agency addressed the key challenges of building trust among stakeholders, and explores the role of evidence in fostering confidence in the experimental “learning by doing together” process.

AEQES was entrusted to design and implement a pilot phase. The conditions of trust (clear “rules of the game” of the long-running external QA activities and co-constructed project) were met before the pilot began. But uncertainty is intrinsic in any pilot scheme. We learned that the provision of evidence, as highlighted by the three stakeholders, is a critical foundation for confidence in transparency, relevance and fairness. We also learned that trust is a complex phenomenon that requires understanding and taking into account the various assumptions and expectations of all actors involved. The authors will invite participants to discuss the process and exchange experiences.

Text of paper

Based on the first feedbacks from HEIs, experts and the Quality Agency, as well as their own experience, the authors reflect back on a pilot phase carried out in French-speaking Belgium in order to initiate a new EQA methodology. The experimental “learning by doing together” approach was designed to ensure the institutional review relevance and to build trust among stakeholders. Particular attention was paid to documenting each step of the process, thereby building a body of evidence to support both decision making and change management.

After presenting the context of this pilot, this paper questions the notion of trust by pointing out, successively, the challenges met and the expectations of three stakeholders: the quality assurance agency, the higher education institutions (HEIs) and the experts. The conclusion points out some parameters of trust and transferable lessons learned

1 INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT OF THE PILOT PHASE

In the Belgian [French-speaking] situation up to now, *the formative¹ EQA methodology was exclusively focused – by law – on cyclical programmes evaluation. “However, regular feedback, impact analyses and international trends showed that a shift towards a more holistic approach would enrich the EQA processes, by focusing on the quality policies that are part of the strategic management, and strengthen the HEIs responsibility and autonomy”².*

After a widespread consultation, the Agency issued in October 2017 a thoroughly documented report³. In December 2017, the Government amended the AEQES decree to entrust the Agency with the task of designing and conducting a three-year⁴ pilot phase of institutional reviews and of reporting back to the Government and Parliament.

PURPOSE, SCOPE AND FRAMEWORK OF THE PILOT

¹ AEQES carries out a formative, programme-based evaluation process in the WBF, in a context where an authorisation is granted ex-ante by the Government. The results of the evaluations conducted by AEQES therefore have no formal effects in terms of an institutions’ funding or authorisation to operate. AEQES is not an accreditation agency, in other words. Moreover, it does not carry out any scoring or ranking of institutions.

² See <https://www.eua.eu/component/attachments/attachments.html?task=attachment&id=1056>

³ <https://aeqes-coconstruction.be/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/20171030-Rapport-de-IAEQES-version-finale-sans-annexes.pdf>

⁴ Because of the unexpected Covid pandemic, the pilot-phase was extended on 4 years, i.e. 2019-2023

The purpose of the institutional review is to “reinforce the capacity of the HEIs to implement a fit-for-purpose quality system and develop a quality culture and by doing so, strengthen ownership and autonomy” (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008).

The scope is Teaching & Learning addressed, in a comprehensive and systemic way, i.e. how an HEI develops, manages and assesses its education mission. ESG part 1 was used as framework.⁵

From the very start, the Agency that initiated this EQA evolution wanted to achieve ownership of this transformation and trust among stakeholders. This is why it chose to develop the new method in a dynamics of co-construction (“learning by doing together”). However, in spite of this collaborative approach, a pilot phase and the perspective of significant changes may also bring uncertainty and even mistrust.

2 TRUST IN A DYNAMIC AND VIRTUOUS SPIRAL?

This pilot institutional review is a new EQA activity, introducing a significant paradigmatic change as compared to the well run programmatic evaluations. This creates uncertainty for the HEIs and some kind of risk taking; besides not all of them were convinced of the relevance of such new EQA procedures. Trust is a complex phenomenon with several dimensions. This paper will focus on two points. First trusting is never an absolute decision but specific to some expectations. In our case the question is “how can the pilot phase can contribute to build trust among all stakeholders and support the HEIs confidence in their capacities to benefit from an enhancement-led process?”. Second, another key notion regarding trust is that it is a dynamic process built on verification i.e. evidence. Indeed trust derives from the verification that an initial assumption (what is expected will happen) is true. But this verification is mediated by individual (person or institution) perceptions of the facts. In this paper, based on the first feedbacks from HEIs, experts and the Quality Agency, as well as their own experience, the authors depict 3 perspectives, agency, HEIs, experts, on what kind of perception is needed to maintain/build that trust.

3 THE AGENCY PERSPECTIVE

If perceived as a challenging task, the official request by the Government⁶ of implementing a pilot phase is considered by AEQES as a signal of support and trust. In return, the Government expects an evaluation report (analysis of a body of evidence to takes stock of what actually happened) in order to provide suggestions for the legal framework describing the new EQA methodology. So the trust placed on the Agency is two-fold: AEQES was expected to professionally implement a pilot phase aligned with the general principles of EQA (but open enough to experiment new approaches) and AEQES is expected afterwards to provide the Government with lessons learned that ultimately can lead the authorities to develop a new legal framework that will allow a coherent and adequate new EQA model in FWB.

For the HEIs-Agency relationship, it's fair to recall that the pilot phase was preceded by a large consultation in 2016 and 2017 the results⁷ of which were analysed and published. This extensive information probably comforted the HEIs - that had already worked over a decade with the Agency - to

⁵ To learn more about how the pilot was implemented and where it is now, see annex.

⁶ The article 9bis of the amended Decree quotes “[...] the Government entrusts the Agency ... with the design and implementation of a pilot project for the external evaluation of the institutional component, as well as the transmission to the Government of an evaluation report of the pilot project [...]”.

⁷ https://aeqes-coconstruction.be/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Rapport-intermediaire-Perspectives_20160707.pdf ; <https://aeqes-coconstruction.be/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/20170406-Resultats-Enquete-inst-vf.pdf> and <https://aeqes-coconstruction.be/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/20171030-Rapport-de-IAEQES-version-finale-sans-annexes.pdf>

trustfully apply for the pilot. 23 did, which was an unexpected high number. This “success” speaks for itself. A rather large number of HEIs were willing to move forward in QA.

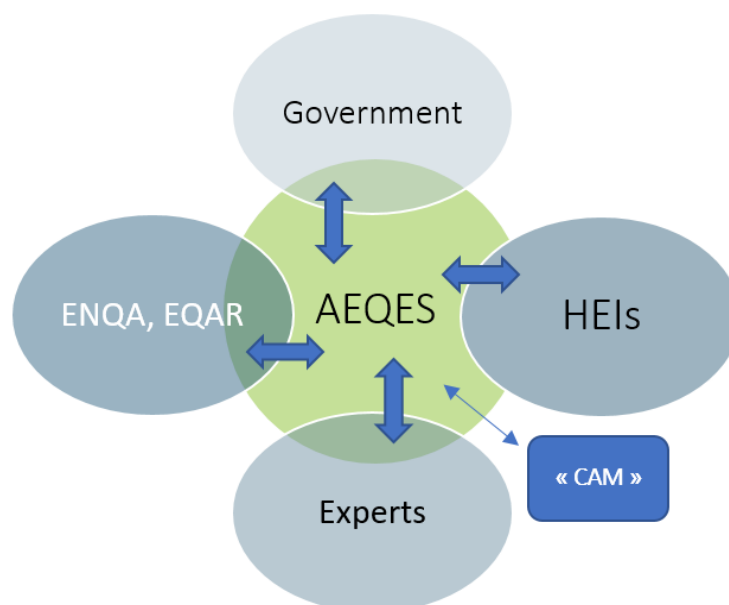


Figure: AEQES IN ITS BROADER CONTEXT⁸:
“Trust requires an evidence-based approach”

As to the perceived impacts of the pilot institutional reviews, the preliminary results are the following: 94% declared it permitted an improved knowledge of their own HEI, 94% viewed a direct impact on the development of their IQA, 76 % testified that their staff showed greater motivation and 82% said the impact would be to better articulate IQA at institutional and programme levels. These results are encouraging. By contrast the pilot dedicated website⁹ – set up to support the co-construction process - shows only 12% of satisfaction.

27 experts were recruited by AEQES to review the 17 HEIs. The following expertise was requested: governance, quality assurance, pedagogy, student experience and professional experience¹⁰. That expertise is fully acknowledged¹¹ by the reviewed HEIs in the surveys.

As a rule, agencies need to develop a trustful professional relationship with their experts, but even more for a pilot phase¹². And experts somehow need to trust the Agency to embark in such an adventure! AEQES, for its part, may testify of a remarkable commitment from these experts through the extended

⁸ Actually, trust and evidence are so much interlinked concepts that their inter connexion can be shown in the figure below with double-headed arrows. The figure shows the perspective of AEQES within its broader context and relationships with the Government, the HEIs, the experts the Agency mandated for the pilot phase, the Council for Methodological Support (CAM) and also, ENQA and EQAR.

⁹ www.aeqes-coconstruction.be

¹⁰ For details, see AEQES SAR, page 49

¹¹ 44% of the experts had already worked with AEQES. Besides, the HEIs were invited to submit names and several of them are included in the present list.

¹² A tailor-made expert’s seminar¹² provided them with the specific context of the pilot phase. 95% of the experts who answered the survey declared their satisfaction about the information provided but they also gave AEQES some useful suggestions for the future.

(because of the Covid) period of the pilot phase: beyond the “usual” responsibility of bringing expertise into a review process, they all showed eagerness to contribute to the pilot dimension of the reviews.

So far, the “CAM”¹³ has helped in selecting the pilot HEIs, selecting the experts and approving the composition of the panels, giving advice on the Guidelines and on the future assessment report criteria, implementing the summative judgement procedure. Its committed members hold regular meetings and are constantly reflecting on their own functioning as well as future developments. In return, the Agency provides them with transparent information in order to consolidate their evidence-based practice.

Finally, ENQA and EQAR. The very process of reviewing agencies every 5 years and granting them recognition illustrates the interconnection between trust and evidence.

4 THE HEIs PERSPECTIVE

HEIs applied to the pilot phase after having been informed through various AEQES meetings and annual quality events. One of the features of the pilot phase was to develop quite open Guidelines¹⁴ in order to foster innovation and flexibility and therefore allow room for a ‘fit for purpose approach’.

Guidelines provided a *definition* of the institutional review (object, finality and scope) as well as the *reference framework* to use (namely ESG, Part 1) even if HEIs were allowed to use other sets of standards if they wished as long as they aligned with the ESG. *Principles* were given for the structure and content of the SER. HEIs were invited to suggest names of potential experts and to draft the schedule of the site visit. In addition, HEIs joined the pilot phase with different explicit and implicit objectives and with varying capacities to mobilise human and financial resources.

It is quite early to comment on the achievement of specific objectives even if some positive accomplishments were mentioned supra. With this in mind, we can summarize some preliminary HEIs’ feedbacks as follows.

First of all, there has been no questioning of the experts’ independence and impartiality. The surveys show that a majority of HEIs are positive about the experts’ skills and legitimacy. Opinions concerning the support provided by the Agency were more moderate than usual. The very nature of the experimentation confronts everyone with novelty and uncertainty, particularly in the context of the unexpected sanitary crises that had a significant impact on the scheduling and organisation of the visits.

As explained, the methodology left room for innovation. The degree of freedom given was valued in different ways by the HEIs. For some, it was a methodological opportunity. For others, the uncertainty provoked fears of implicit or even hidden expectations (on the part of the Agency or the experts). Despite the communication on the open nature of the process, some would have liked a stronger explicit guidance.

Another difference of opinion between HEIs was related to both their own objectives and the resources they have chosen (or been able to) to allocate. For example, all HEIs expect an excellent understanding and consideration of their ground realities which requires the provision of reliable information. Some HEIs lack a sufficiently sustainable and integrated information system, making the process very expensive. As M. Martin (2018) points out, there is room for improvement in integrating IQA with overall strategic planning as well as in connecting IQA results with other management areas. Moreover, there is a tension between the willingness to show and promote achievements and the need to report or even prove them in an evidence-based approach.

Also linked to the consideration of diversity is the risk, pointed out by some HEIs, of an EQA that would increase the impact of their resource differences. To inform the pilot’s assessment on this topic from an

¹³ Council for Methodological support (CAM in French) – set up for the pilot phase

¹⁴ <https://aeges-coconstruction.be/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/20190625-Phase-pilote-AEQES-balises-methodologiques-v4-valide-CoPIL.pdf>

evidence-based perspective, AEQES asked HEIs to quantify the resources actually mobilised. Indeed, the pilot phase took place in a system where coexist different types of HEIs with various characteristics: missions, strategies, resources, size, degree of autonomy, etc. There is a tension between an expectation that these differences will be taken into account and the aim of ensuring, at the level of the sector, an equal approach for all HEIs. This fundamental question is frequently discussed between AEQES and its stakeholders. Its resolution may have an impact on the EQA as a whole, for instance on the scope of the framework.

This overview of the HEIs' experience highlights the role of their specific context and objectives on the meaning they give to the characteristics and events of the pilot. This results sometimes in contrasting views, for instance on what constitutes a "good balance between methodological stability and room for innovation". A shared understanding of the objectives of the institutional review and its "fit for purpose" nature appears to be a key factor to finalise the design of the new EQA method to be implemented. In parallel with, or beyond, the questions of trust and methodological relevance, the issue of adequacy of resources could have a strong impact on the HEIs level of commitment to accept and implement change.

5 THE EXPERTS' PERSPECTIVE

A relatively high number of experts (56%) involved in this pilot phase had never worked with AEQES before. Obviously for them it was a new process even though some had previous experience in ESG-2015 based frameworks and this created uncertainty, also fuelled by the flexibility offered in this pilot. Therefore they also needed to build trust in the fact that the procedure will be enhancement-led.

To get confidence in this new procedure the experts need to be clear about their mission and the independence of their conclusions. Guidelines and contracts are useful evidence that their expectations are met. Post pilot survey show that it has been the case¹⁵.

The experts also need to get the perception that they will get support from the Agency to produce analyses which are comparable between all reports. Evaluation is not exact science and experts need to make sure that the evidence provided is clear and sufficient and that the same conclusions are based on the same range of evidence. Comments from the experts at the end of the process confirm that it has been the case.

The perception that HEIs play the game of an enhancement-led approach which means, in particular, open discussions and self-critical analysis. Survey among experts show that HEI's self-assessment reports almost always included a self-critical dimension and that interviews were very open. The variety of reports and institutional QA frameworks chosen illustrates that institutions owned the process at least to some extent.

Experts also want to contribute to helping HEIs to trust the fairness and formative dimensions of this new EQA process. In that perspective, experts put an emphasis on making clear distinctions and links between evidence, analysis and recommendations so that HEI's understand the conclusions and can get confidence in the relevance and fairness of the process. Another condition is to make sure that HEIs are confident in the panel's competences, feel understood during the visit and are accepting their conclusions. The surveys done during and after the process suggest that these conditions were overall provided for.

The experts are invited to include the formative dimension in the oral feedback and the report. Post evaluation surveys within HEIs suggest strongly that this has been the main perception.

Globally it appears that to gain confidence in the formative approach of the new procedure, experts need clear guidelines which set the expectations and feedback from Agency and HEI's. In short, communication is a critical dimension.

¹⁵ i.e. 95% satisfied or very satisfied with the information regarding the mission or the tools. No report or conclusion modified by the agency, in some cases reports modified by the chair after discussion

6 TO CONCLUDE WITH...

The reflection on the experience of three representatives of stakeholders has highlighted some conditions of trust. In a pilot phase, providing evidence throughout the process is a critical foundation for confidence in its transparency, relevance and fairness. On the one hand, trust building is a dynamic loop fed by evidence and explicit communication. On the other hand, the experience shows that the role of “assumptions” and “perceptions” shouldn’t be overlooked. Individual and institutional expectations as well needs (including resources) have an impact on the meaning given to facts, with a risk of “misperceptions”.

As a matter of fact, carrying out a “learning by doing together” project to design a new EQA methodology leaves room for uncertainty and complexity but more importantly for innovation and flexibility. The main intention was to strengthen the relevance of the future methodology by increasing its responsiveness to a variety of contexts. This paper stresses the importance of also strengthening trust in QA by clarifying mutual expectations between and amongst stakeholders.

In this respect, providing clear communication, documentation (surveys, reports, etc.) as well as dedicating time for discussion and regulation is crucial throughout a pilot phase. H-W. Bierhoff and B. Vornefeld pointed out that, with trust, “Objective uncertainty is transformed into subjective certainty” (2004 ; 50). Indeed, building trust is a complex phenomenon that requires understanding and taking into account the various assumptions/expectations of all actors involved. These cannot be reduced to the stakeholders’ categories. Addressing complexity is at the heart of any change process...

Annex

THE EQA MIXED-MODEL

The proposal described the progressive implementation of a mixed-model of institutional reviews and programmatic evaluation procedures.

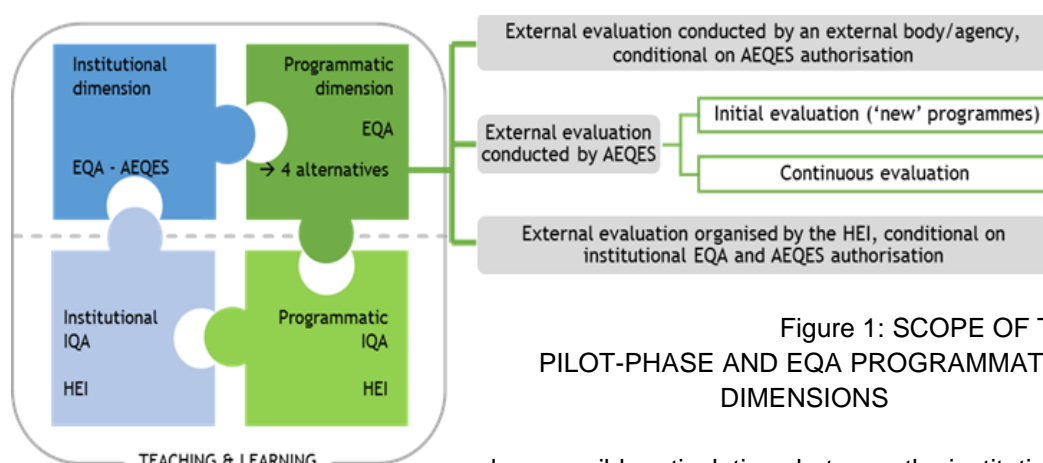


Figure 1: SCOPE OF THE PILOT-PHASE AND EQA PROGRAMMATIC DIMENSIONS

To explore possible articulations between the institutional and the programmatic levels, there are 4 programmatic external procedures:

- Initial evaluation by AEQES of new programmes
- Continuous evaluation by AEQES of already evaluated programmes (lighter process)
- Recognition by AEQES of an external evaluation or accreditation conducted by an external body/agency (automatic if EQAR registered, conditioned otherwise)
- External evaluation organized by the HEI, conditional on institutional review by AEQES and subsequent authorisation (this very procedure being experienced in the pilot phase as well, under the so-called summative judgement procedure¹⁶)

THE PILOT PHASE IN PRACTICE

To operationalise the pilot phase, the Steering Committee of the Agency decided to use existing structures, set-up other ones and to assign all of them with specific tasks.

The existing working groups of the Agency developed roadmaps with some outcomes to achieve (i.e. specific aspects of the new methodology to design).

A *Steering group* (9 members including the Board and the staff in charge with the pilot phase) was given the task of piloting the whole project, making sure objectives and deadlines are respected and due communication is provided to stakeholders. This group is also to write the final report to the Government at the end of the pilot phase.

Noteworthy is the setting of an independent *Council for Methodological Support* ("CAM" in French) composed of six international members¹⁷ appointed for their expertise in quality assurance and analytical skills. The first tasks given to them were to make a proposal for the selection of pilot HEIs and to select to experts to be commissioned by AEQES for the institutional reviews. The Council also

¹⁶ See 2021 AEQES SAR <http://www.aeges.be/documents/20210707AEQESSAREN.pdf> pages 53 and 19

¹⁷ Appointed in 2018 by the Steering Committee of the Agency : Guy AELTERMAN, Patrick BARANGER, Bernadette CHARLIER, Geneviève Le FORT, Jacques MOREAU and Andrée SURSOCK

gives advice on demand or on initiative. It is closely associated with the decisive role in the “summative judgement procedure” and, as a whole, with the final assessment of the pilot phase.

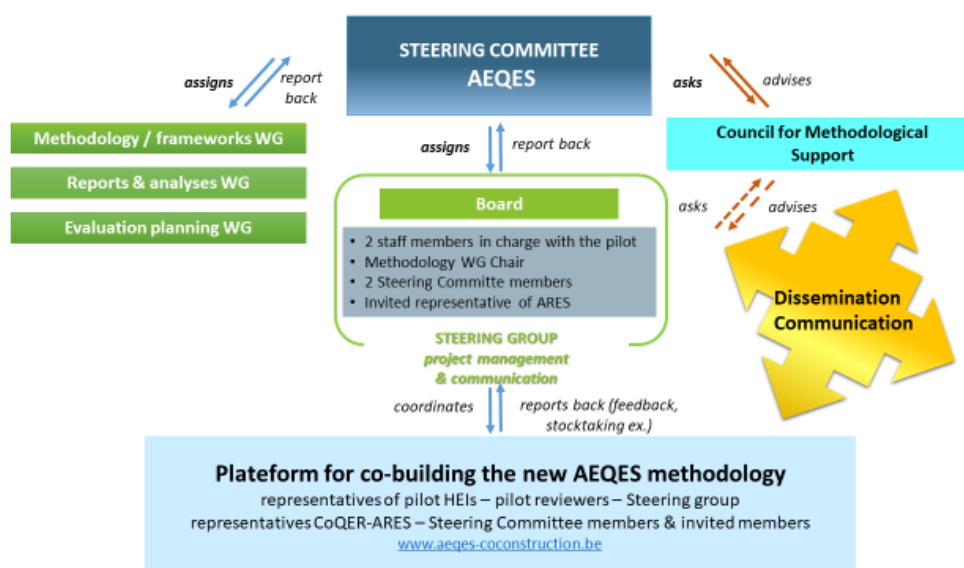


Figure 2: MAPPING OF STRUCTURES AND ASSOCIATED ROLES

A call for pilot HEIs was made and, among the 23 applicants, 17 HEIs were selected at the end of a process including the analysis and advice of the Council for Methodological Support, a study of feasibility made by the Executive Unit of AEQES and the final decision taken by its Steering Committee. The criteria required a sample of HEIs that would reflect a diversity of types of HE providers, of sizes and geographical origins as well as stages of IQA development.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Out of the 17 institutional reviews, the 4 first ones could be made as “face-to-face onsite visits” and 13 others were conducted online, with some delays due to the Covid crisis. As a matter of fact, the Agency had to prolong the duration of the pilot for a further year.

All preliminary reports were sent to the HEIs who had the opportunity to exercise their right of reply. The 8 HEIs who had requested the summative judgement procedure received the decision letter (and were entitled to file an appeal if they wished). All the reports are due to be published concurrently in late October or November 2021. The panel of experts is presently drafting the system-wide analysis of the pilot phase, and, to take stock of the whole experience, the Agency is drafting the assessment report requested by the Government.

From November 2019 to June 2021, several surveys were made in order to collect the feedback of the HEIs and the experts. These are analysed and presented to stakeholders with some themes being further elaborated in focus groups¹⁸. Unfortunately the annual AEQES seminar that gathers a large QA community was cancelled in 2020 because of the sanitary conditions, so the dissemination was reduced to sending the notice of the publication of the documents.

¹⁸ In January 2021, the results of 3 surveys covering the first 8 reviews were published (https://aeqes-coconstruction.be/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/PHASE-PILOTE-AEQES_Doc2_Resultats_3_enquetes_mi_parours_janv2021.pdf) and this led to a first analysis of three dimensions, namely the perceived impacts, the concept of frameworks & criteria and the issue of expectations (https://aeqes-coconstruction.be/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/PHASE-PILOTE-AEQES_Doc3-Synthese-1er-focus-groups_janv2021.pdf)

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Guidelines for the pilot institutional review [in French]

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Half-way survey results (after 8 reviews)

https://aeqes-coconstruction.be/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/PHASE-PILOTE-AEQES_Doc2_Resultats_3_enquetes_mi_parcours_janv2021.pdf

Focus-group 1 (January 2021) and a first analysis of three dimensions, namely the perceived impacts, the concept of frameworks & criteria and the issue of expectations

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