



People consultation to construct the future: A Delphi application

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Abstract

This work presents the Delphi method, in its Policy Delphi variant, as an efficient mechanism for carrying out consultations regarding regulatory actions that affect professional bureaucracies, and also, in the last analysis, for forecasting and constructing their future. The Delphi application presented here incorporates some specific characteristics which are aimed at making the plurality of opinions in the organisation under analysis visible, facilitating reasoned debate, minimising the risk of manipulation by study leaders, and maximising the generalised acceptance of the results by the whole collective.

This study was performed on the university community of the Basque Country, prior to the enactment of the Act which was to organise the Basque university system. Its results, which were accepted as being representative of the real dissensus existing in the community, constituted a valuable input for the final drawing up of the Act, and for its acceptance without conflict.

This Delphi application cannot be classified within its traditional field of exploratory forecasting, but it *can* be situated within the normative sphere, geared towards the construction of a desired future.

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1. Introduction

The Delphi method is a well-known social research technique, the object of which is to obtain a reliable group opinion from a group of individual experts who can each make valuable contributions in order to resolve a complex problem. It achieves this by structuring the communication between the members

of the group and integrating their contributions (Linstone & Turoff, 1975).

The method was conceived in the 1950s for military purposes (Dalkey & Helmer, 1951), and from the 1960s onwards it was also used in academic and entrepreneurial spheres (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963; Linstone & Turoff, 1975). Since then it has increasingly been employed in technical and scientific investigations as a valid vehicle for obtaining and processing the subjective information amassed by experts (Gupta & Clarke, 1996; Keeney, Hasson, & McKenna, 2001; Landeta, 2006; Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004; Ono & Wedemeyer, 1994).

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The method has been used continuously since its introduction, principally as a technique for prediction and consensus in contexts of uncertainty, in situations where it is not possible to have recourse to other techniques which are based on objective information. Long-term technological, economic or social forecasting, the hierarchisation of objectives or social alternatives, and the supply of quantitative models and their growing application within the framework of health research can all be categorised within this objective (Cramer, Klasser, Epstein, & Sheps, 2008; Landeta, 2006).

The Delphi method has also been used, to a lesser degree, as an instrument for consultation and participation, geared towards securing the involvement and participation of individuals who are affected by a particular situation or problem in their solution processes (Buck, Gross, Hakin, & Weinblatt, 1993; Fedor & Pavol, 1987; Landeta, 2002; Turoff, 1970). This line, the origin of which lies in Turoff's Policy Delphi (Turoff, 1970), opens the way for applications which are aimed more at becoming acquainted with and exploring different existing positions in relation to a complex problem (dissensus) than at arriving at a consensus or single opinion.

In this case, the successful execution of a Delphi exercise of these characteristics calls for the incorporation of specific measures and precautions, to guarantee the quality and acceptance of the process and its result by the participating group of experts and those they represent. These measures are assumed to be particularly necessary when there is great knowledge, autonomy, tension and power accumulated by the collective under consultation. This occurs, for instance, in professional bureaucracies, and generally in normative, politically charged, and pressing decision-making contexts. A professional bureaucracy is an organisation which relies on the standardisation of knowledge and skills, rather than on processes, and which has a highly decentralised and autonomous structure, where the professionals work with a great deal of independence and are essential to the organisation, because they occupy positions from the operational to the strategic spectrum, and because they are the ones who control selection and training, and therefore wield great power (Mintzberg, 1984; Mintzberg & Rose, 2003).

The Delphi proposal we present in this work is tailored to this purpose and to this kind of collective and context. We adjusted the characteristics of the Delphi method to meet our objectives and employed it as an instrument for consulting a university community, prior to the enactment of an act for organising the university. While decisions within the university field have often been made based on this technique (Judd, 1972; Kruss, 1983; Wright, 2006), we have no evidence of other cases where the technique has been used as the basis for a social consultation process prior to the drawing up of a law of this nature and reach.

By the autumn of 2002, this Delphi consultation had obtained its results, which were a core input for the ensuing dynamics of the political, administrative, parliamentary and negotiating processes. On 25 February, 2004, the plenary of the Basque Parliament passed the University Organisation Act for the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country, which is still being developed, producing effects that can readily be perceived by both the university community and society (bonuses, autonomous evaluation agency, researcher posts, etc.).¹ In our opinion, the Delphi application that we present constituted an efficient vehicle for constructing the future that was desired: the passing of a quality university act, which was accepted and approved without conflict.

In consequence, this article presents a modified Policy Delphi proposal which is appropriate for use in pressing decision-making contexts as an instrument for consultation and participation concerning *professional bureaucracies*; that is to say, collectives with a high degree of autonomy and professional power. In short, the problem is to demonstrate the capacity of this technique to construct a desired future by forecasting the behaviour of the “administered” through the facilitation of social debate, and by capturing, as well as possible, the sensibilities, opinions and interests of the social agents who are most involved or most affected

¹ Six years have passed since the passing of the Act, providing sufficient perspective and distance for us to be able to distinguish the most important keys to the success of the consultation process. In this sense, some of the consequences of the Act (the evaluation of the teaching staff, setting new contract models in place, etc.) have recently been implemented. Meanwhile, one of the authors, who shared political responsibility for the project with his technical design, has given up his political post and returned exclusively to academic activity, which therefore provided him with the independence required to draft this research study.

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