

PROMOTING A QUALITY CULTURE AT GRASSROOTS LEVEL IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses questions such as: how can we improve quality and promote consistency of approach at various levels in a Higher Education (HE) environment? What systems, processes and instruments are available in order to involve teachers and students alike in promoting a quality culture in HE for business and economics? To illustrate some of these aspects related to distributed leadership and empowering professionals in team endeavours, reference will be made to the QualiTraining Guide and projects, developed within the framework of The European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) / the Council of Europe – www.ecml.at.

Readers will be invited to experience the integrative approach to quality culture adopted throughout the guide and to reflect on how principles of “transformational leadership” and quality management can be applied to concrete language teaching and learning contexts. Further questions for reflection include: How can we induce a culture of sharing, piloting and experimenting? How can we evaluate the impact of such a cascading process?

Keywords: quality assurance, quality management in education, professional development, leadership styles, quality culture, evaluation, self-assessment, institutional self-evaluation

BACKGROUND TO THE ECML PROJECTS ON QUALITY ASSURANCE

One of the key targets of the Bologna reform to be achieved by 2010 is the implementation of “credible systems of quality assurance in accordance with the best practices at European level”, as highlighted in the latest strategy and policy study carried out within the framework of the European Institute of Romania. (Vasile et al., 2008: 239)

Besides top level decision making and quality assurance documents to be produced, of growing importance are also processes to be introduced in order to ensure the ‘credibility’ and ‘workability’ of institutional systems. This paper aims to highlight the added value of interdisciplinary approaches to quality assurance and to show how procedures and instruments developed in a domain such as language education can be relevant to HE in general, in order to involve the grassroots level – both teaching professionals and students – in quality assurance processes.

What enhances system credibility is a coherent Quality continuum approach to education, which encompasses multiple layers and components, such as (a) the individual level of self-assessment – to be understood also as self-assessment undertaken by all the individuals in an institutional environment, according to the same criteria, (b) the organizational level of institutional self-evaluation, in preparation for (c) the external evaluation (at national and/or international level) to be carried out by an accredited body.

Capitalising on the outcomes of Council of Europe projects on quality management and training for quality assurance, this paper will illustrate how a holistic approach to quality in education can work in practice, while encouraging a culture of sharing and of empowering individuals – teachers and students alike – to contribute in innovative ways to quality development. This will be achieved through examples of linking generic aspects with reflective activities designed for the analysis of concrete educational contexts, on the one hand, and with case studies illustrating successful management of change and “transformational leadership” in action.

The first two European projects referred to here – both of them initiated and unfolded within the framework of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) of the Council of Europe – are:

- “Quality Assurance and Self-assessment for Schools and Teachers” (2000 – 2003), launched in September 2000 through an ECML regional workshop organised at the Bucharest University of Economics and PROSPER-ASE Language Centre; finalised with a CD ROM in English and French on Quality Management in Language Education (Muresan, Heyworth, Matheidesz & Rose, 2003); European Label Award 2002 for innovation in language education received from the EU Commission for Education and Culture;
- “QualiTraining; – A Training Guide for Quality Assurance in Language Education” (2004 – 2007), finalised with the QualiTraining Guide – book and CD ROM – in English and German (Muresan, Heyworth, Mateva & Rose, 2007).

Both projects were co-ordinated by multinational teams and involved co-operation among experts from over 30 countries throughout Europe and beyond. Participants in these projects included professionals from the Bucharest University of Economics, the Ministry of Education and Research, the Romanian Association for Quality Language Services QUEST Romania, the Goethe Institut Bukarest, L’Institut Français de Bucarest, PROSPER-ASE Language Centre, as well as teachers’ associations, inspectorates, universities and teacher training colleges from all over the country.

The two projects and their outcomes (the books and CD ROMs) include presentations of underlying principles and concepts of quality management in language education, standards and procedures developed at European level – on the example of EAQUALS, as well as numerous case studies from a whole range of countries and organizational frameworks, from all strands of education. The QualiTraining Guide consists of four main sections (as shown in the diagram below), followed by 6 case studies for exemplification.

To illustrate the methodological approach taken in the Guide, a selection of aspects and activities will be presented and discussed.

Networking with experts in international, regional and local environments within the framework of these projects, as well as feedback gathered at various events on quality assurance in education revealed continuous efforts in national and regional contexts for improvement and standardisation of approaches to quality assurance in education, alongside a growing interest for consolidating local expertise in this field. At the same time, small scale surveys, carried out internationally with the help of the ECML QualiTraining-network, have shown that the whole area of quality assurance in education still needs more awareness-raising among teaching professionals and education institutions, as well as among decision makers.

“QUALITRAINING AT GRASSROOTS LEVEL”

In response to these concerns, interests and needs, a new project was initiated - “QualiTraining at Grassroots Level” (2008-2009) [\[1\] – within the framework of the 3rd medium-term programme of the ECML “Empowering Language Professionals: Competences – Networks – Impact - Quality”](#).

"QualiTraining at Grassroots Level" is intended as a follow-up to the previous ECML projects on quality assurance. The main goal of the new project is to take QualiTraining processes and products further to various national and regional contexts, while adapting workshop materials and supplementing them with further case studies, for customised implementation in a wider range of educational environments.

This will be achieved through:

- the consolidation and extension of the ECML QualiTraining network,
- the identification of active members willing to contribute to national events,
- the development of procedures and tools for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the QualiTraining Guide and related processes in specific educational contexts,
- professional development events for trainers and multipliers, to set off a cascading process.

By developing the web-based component and targeted networking, the project will also offer the framework for sharing best practice at various levels.

This project will help trainers to better understand the inter-relatedness between generic QualiTraining concepts and Council of Europe education instruments (e.g. the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the European Language Portfolio) and educational practice, and to link these to their work in real educational environments.

The target audience for project activities includes teaching professionals working as multipliers, practitioners in leading positions in national/regional associations and networks, teacher educators, inspectors and inspector trainers, multipliers conducting educational management seminars, as well as professionals with an interest in quality assurance. Sectors of education addressed include: colleges, universities, teacher education, adult education, continuing education, associations of language educators, quality assurance bodies (such as national associations of language schools), cultural institutes involved in the provision of language courses, having or introducing quality assurance systems, and their networks, etc.

To ensure the project's sustainability, the co-ordinating team will seek to publish action research outcomes in journals, to contribute to a quality assurance culture in education, while consolidating a network of networks. A final report on

challenges and opportunities associated with the implementation of QualiTraining, will inform further dissemination strategies as well as transferability endeavours of the QualiTraining Guide and related processes to new educational domains and contexts.

A FLEXIBLE, INCLUSIVE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Outcomes of surveys carried out within the abovementioned ECML projects have indicated the differing educational cultures, ranging from those that wish for more input and less practical self-investigation to those who will need to use the materials within a self-evaluative framework.^[2]

The methodological approach, therefore, needs to acknowledge these challenges and to allow for a flexible integration of generic aspects with reflective activities and illustrative case studies, depending on the development needs of various training environments and the professional interests of the human factors involved in the process.

In what follows, we shall try to illustrate both possible lines of action and the added value these can bring to the process of awareness-raising and active involvement of practitioners and students in quality assurance endeavours.

Multiple functions of (pre-training) reflective tasks

Pre-training reflective questions may serve multiple purposes, e.g. helping practitioners relate the theme of the training event to their professional environment, facilitating their sharing of views regarding various quality issues, and last but not least, empowering them to have a voice in this process, so as to start thinking of possible solutions. Reflective/group activities based on such an exploratory question, carried out also as a small-scale survey regarding facilitating and inhibiting factors for quality initiatives in language education (within the framework of several training events, involving altogether over 100 participants) revealed that despite some country specific differences, most of the practitioners' concerns are similar, almost irrespective of the national/local context, and the solutions they suggest are also heading in the same direction, as shown in the synthetic table below:

Positive Factors	Negative Factors	Possible Ways forward
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public demand for foreign languages, as a key to success in life; • Student entitlement to language learning; • European mobility programmes; • High focus on quality assurance in education – at least at the level of public 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Predominance of English over other foreign languages • Not enough motivation for plurilingualism • Lack of clarity in government policies in some countries • Limited funds related to quality, innovation, technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> è Co-operation among different organisations è Further development of public-private partnerships è A more systematic focus on innovative approaches in Teacher Training / Teacher Development è More consistency of approach in Curriculum design and implementation; è Clearer correlation between theory & practice, between the

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • declarations; • <i>CEFR</i> and the <i>ELP</i> – as pan-European reference documents and the commitment to implement them in national educational contexts; • EU-accession related developments in countries in Eastern Europe • ...etc.... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflicting goals at various levels • Limited human resources with relevant qualifications and expertise in the field • Lack of clear systems for feedback gathering • Uneven distribution of resources; • Competition between private and public sectors • ... etc.... 	<p>decision-taking level and the operational / implementation level.</p>
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Building in space for such comparisons can have a reassuring role, and their methodological dimension can trigger positive problem-solving attitudes, especially if we regard the university as a “learning-oriented” academic environment, a “rational-biologic model”, with dynamic human resources, having the resourcefulness to bring about positive change (Rosca and Moldoveanu, 2008).

Further self-assessment and reflective activities, alternating with input-based group discussions for internalizing underlying concepts and principles, can facilitate the participants’ understanding that there is a role to play for everyone in the educational process, if consistency and coherence of approach are to be achieved.

What is *quality* to you?

Unit 1 of the QualiTraining Guide (Heyworth, 2007: 7-21), for instance, presents some of the principles behind quality management and explains basic concepts related to five “models” of quality: (a) the “client satisfaction model”, (b) the “process model of quality”, (c) “quality based on results”, (d) “quality based on development”, and last but not least, (e) “value driven quality”. Participants in the training are invited to explore how these models can be applied to language teaching and to relate them to their own educational environment and personal experience.

For exemplification purposes, we shall look at the model focusing on quality based on development, according to which “quality is based on the motivation, the attitudes and skills of the people involved. In order for it to help maintain and improve quality, the institution needs to establish an environment which enables staff to develop and co-operate. This can be through staff development programmes, action research, peer observation, encouragement of innovation, quality circles. It implies an open style of leadership, with room for individual responsibility and initiative.” (Heyworth, 2007: 14) The reflective activity attached to this input invites readers / participants in the training to reflect on their own professional experience and to “describe good practice in creating a working environment which promotes quality”.

This model of quality comes to highlight the inter-relatedness existing between professional development and quality assurance (as reflected also in quality

assurance schemes, e.g. EAQUALS, 1999/2006) and, at the same time, brings to the fore-front the motivational aspects associated with the teachers' continuous interest in their self-development, as revealed both by surveys carried out in the Romanian educational system (e.g. Muresan, 2004) and by the seriousness and enthusiasm demonstrated by the participants in the interdisciplinary Master programme "English Language Education and Research Communication for Business and Economics" at the Bucharest University of Economics.[3]

From the perspective of the client satisfaction principle, it is interesting to compare the views of different stakeholders on how they perceive the quality of a lesson. In what follows, we shall synthesise the outcomes of a reflective group activity, focusing on the question "What is a good lesson to you?", carried out in a workshop format, where the audience consisted of both students at the Bucharest University of Economics and academics from different universities from Romania and abroad[4] :

Students' responses	Teachers' responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Teacher to provide theory before the course, during the course to discuss the main points · Interactivity between teacher and students, to increase the students' motivation · Teacher to capture the students' attention, e.g. through "games" · Teacher to take theory out of the class and use class time for discussions, examples, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Students to take initiative for self-learning · <i>(reflecting on classes they had enjoyed as students)</i> The class should be like a good movie, to include theatrical elements, something to remember · When students ask a lot of questions, when there are plenty of discussions · <i>(additional comment)</i> Experimented teachers know "when students are with them"

Comparing the students' responses with the teachers' responses, we can notice that each group of "actors" in the educational process has expectations from the other group – students' understanding of a quality lesson places responsibility on the teachers' shoulders, whereas teachers expect students to take the initiative. While the outcome of this activity is not surprising, as it comes to re-confirm the relativity of the meaning of good, depending on who answers the question and what is at stake, what this experiment shows is that it is worthwhile initiating such a discussion and having such an exchange of views, both at the beginning of a course and during its progress. The value of this endeavour has been exemplified through surveys carried out by academics of different subject fields – e.g. enquiring into the perception of academics regarding the quality and performance of academic research (Zaharia, 2008), exploring the views of students regarding the quality of methodological approaches (Ion, 2008) and their perception of the quality of teacher-student communication (Gyorgyi, 2008), exploring the inter-relatedness between individual learning and organizational learning (Balu, 2008; Serban-Oprescu, 2008) – and turned to the benefit of the educational process at the Bucharest University of Economics.

The central role of people in a quality culture

At the core of the holistic approach to QualiTraining is the key role played by people in a quality culture, which is defined as “ a learning culture in which all members of the institution are involved; a self-critical, improving culture in which all staff are fully engaged. A culture which allows each individual to understand his/her contribution to achieving the shared vision and to answering the question ‘what difference am I trying to make personally?’ ” (Rose, 2007: 25). Unit 2 of the QualiTraining Guide highlights the close link between a quality culture and effective leadership, characterized through multiple dimensions, including e.g. collaborative leadership (based on democratic principles and encouraging the participation of all stakeholders), distributed leadership (based on an understanding of leadership as a function rather than a role; engaging a range of people in leadership activity and extending its boundaries beyond delegation).

This approach is in line with those favouring “transformational leadership” in education, considering that principals or educational managers practising it do not rely only on their charisma, but attempt “to empower staff and share leadership functions (Bush & Coleman, 2000: 22). Similarly, “symbiotic leadership” is characterized through collegiate participation in organizational processes, coherent delegating of responsibilities, team spirit, based on mutual trust (Nicolescu & Verboncu, 2007, quoting Mark Edwards, 1993). According to this approach, innovation employees are prepared to achieve higher performance “when their managers practise a symbiotic leadership style” (Amar, 2001) – and by extension, we can consider that a HE environment with a strong focus on research and development offers ideal conditions for this type of symbiosis, so as to stimulate innovation.

Readers of / participants in QualiTraining are invited to reflect on their own educational context and then to discuss in small groups about the ways in which leaders in their organization build the organisation’s capacity; for example, does the structure of the institution support the functioning of teams? Is team review a feature of working processes? (Rose, 2007: 28-29) The activities and questions suggested can be easily used e.g. in a team or at departmental level, irrespective of the professional domain or subject field, for an evaluation exercise of the quality culture in a particular educational environment, or to generate a discussion of aspects to be improved or changed.

The extremely beneficial effects of these leadership styles on organizational change and improvement are illustrated by real-life case studies contributed by experts / leaders, practising this type of leadership, empowering professionals to take responsibility and to participate in leadership processes, conducive to exemplary quality cultures in their institutions (Boiron, 2007; Turrell, 2007; Hughes, 2007)

How can we know how well we are doing?

The next unit of the QualiTraining Guide focuses on procedures and instruments for internal quality management, exploring their multiple functions, according to the purpose of use and the various stages in a quality cycle (Muresan, 2007: 37-54). Special attention is paid to institutional self-evaluation and class observation, as powerful instruments and processes in any educational environment. Their implementation in HE for business and economics through the interdisciplinary MA programme for teaching professionals and researchers at the Bucharest

University of Economics has encouraged academics of various subjects to re-think the teaching-learning methodology, to pilot new, more participative approaches to economic education and business communication, leading to new developments, such as new textbooks (Ion, 2007), enquiries into student preferences regarding teaching-learning methodology, thus involving them in institutional self-evaluation and decision-making processes (Catargiu, 2008; David, 2008; Gyorgyi, 2008; Ion, 2008).

The Professional Development Programme at the Department for Business English and German of the Bucharest University of Economics has led to a large-scale implementation of self-assessment based on the CEFR “Can-Do”-approach and the European Language Portfolio, as reflected by e.g. business English textbooks produced by members of the Department, including chapters on self-assessment based on European instruments (with a special focus on EUROPASS and the ELP), outcomes of the surveys carried out among students and teachers at the Bucharest University of Economics (Marinescu, 2007; Dellevoet & Muresan, 2008).

More importantly, the re-thinking of assessment and evaluation as a lead-in to participative quality management (Mateva, 2007: 55-66), also reflects changes in attitudes to teaching and learning, an educational process in which the development of key competences (such as communication, entrepreneurship, intercultural competences) take pride of place.

The case study of the Österreich Institut is present both on the CD ROM on Quality Management in Language Education and in the QualiTraining Guide (Ortner, 2007), as an illustration of effective implementation of self-assessment and evaluation instruments for the coherent and consistent involvement of all the stakeholders at all institutional levels in internal quality management. The case study exemplifying new developments in the British educational system reflect the shift from comprehensive external quality control to quality assurance incorporating a strong self-evaluation dimension (Dahl, 2007), while Dimitrova and Tashevskia illustrate the implementation of Portfolio based self-assessment for teacher trainees and junior teachers at the New Bulgarian University (Dimitrova and Tashevskia, 2007).

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

In this paper we have tried to highlight some of the benefits of introducing an integrative approach to quality assurance, for the involvement of both practitioners and students in internal quality management processes, at the same time suggesting that leadership skills can be developed by experiencing distributed leadership and by being empowered to participate in decision-making in various educational processes. Possible methodological procedures, activities and instruments were exemplified by making reference both to ECML projects on quality management and training for quality assurance (with a special focus on the QualiTraining projects) and to developments at the Bucharest University of Economics.

The management of the Bucharest University of Economics have to be commended for linking quality assurance measures and endeavours with consistent support given to the professional development of teaching professionals, to the benefit of students, teachers, and the institution as a whole. At the same time, all academics at the Bucharest University of Economics involved in professional development programmes deserve special praise for their on-going preoccupation for professional improvement and their genuine interest in facilitating their students' developing relevant competences for their future career.

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