

Case study 6: Setting up quality systems for German language courses at the Österreich Institut

Brigitte Ortner, Austrian Institute, Austria

Summary of the case study

The Austrian Institute (Österreich Institut) has the state-appointed task of running extra-curricular German language courses abroad. The centre in Vienna, newly created in 1997, was designed to restructure the language teaching branches of the Austrian Culture Institutes. The previously decentralised language courses were brought into line with consistent, internationally recognised standards. Through continued further training, the teachers were given the means to put these standards into practice in the education they provide. A meaningful information and evaluation system was created, which highlights strengths as well as areas for improvement. Steps for the development and safeguarding of quality are constantly discussed, both internally and externally (www.oesterreichinstitut.org).

Description of context

In 1997 the state-led language-teaching branches of the Austrian Culture Institutes abroad were separated off into a privately run organisation and given the official task of overseeing German language courses at an international level. In 1997, Die Österreich Institut GmbH (Austrian Institute) took over five independently acting organisations with approximately 3 400 course participants a year. Subsequently, the number of institutes rose to nine (2005) and the number of course participants rose to around 10 000. Each year, there are currently around 65 000 modules taught and 3 500 examinations for the Österreichisches Sprachdiplom Deutsch (ÖSD) (Austrian Language Diploma in German) are taken.

What we needed to do and why we did it

- The decentralised language courses were brought into line with consistent, internationally recognised standards (EFR).
- The teachers had to be given the means to put these standards into practice in the education they provide.
- A meaningful information and evaluation system had to be created, which highlights strengths as well as areas for improvement.

Main purpose (what we wanted to achieve)

The unification of the structures which had developed independently from one another was essential. This was achieved through simultaneous observance of cultural differences in markets and in key people. Our goal was – and is – to offer the current public an attractive extra-curricular German language programme which does not shy away from international comparisons.

Action taken (stages)

- Development and communication of action plans both internally and externally (Payerbacher Positionspapier, 1998).
- Development, implementation and communication both internally and externally of a binding curriculum across all institutions supported by progression tests and recommendations for teaching material (start: 1998; implementation: 2002; adaptation ongoing).
- Development and implementation of a course of study for the further training of the Austrian Institute teachers (start: 1998; graduation with certificate: 2002).
- Development, implementation and communication of a quality charter (accompanying the course of study for further training: 2002).

Parallel to this was development and implementation of:

- guidelines for teacher employment discussions;
- structures for transparent communication of the requirements of teachers;
- a job profile for teachers including a self-assessment test;
- guidelines for teachers' personal development in accordance with the medium-term development plans of the whole institution as well as individual institutes;
- guidelines for the annual employee reviews;
- customer satisfaction evaluation forms, which include the reflections of the individual learner on the achievement of his learning goals;
- the acquisition and documentation of statistical data pertaining to the age and occupational background of course participants, their reasons for learning German and the level achieved.

Job profiles, guidelines for employee reviews and further training programmes were developed for institute leaders as well as administrative staff. They are constantly adapted to meet changes of all kinds.

All measures towards quality assurance are communicated externally (website, quality charter, descriptions of learning goals, etc.).

Action taken (procedures)

The establishment of a learning organisation, in which each individual in his/her own area feels duty-bound to fulfil the organisation's goals thereby making small-scale checks unnecessary, yet guaranteeing constant further development, required the inclusion of all people, in all areas of the quality development process.

The action plans were prepared in conjunction with the institute leaders as follows: the quality charter came from the cross-institutional course of study for further training; before its implementation, the curriculum went through an intensive process of suggestion, trial, reworking etc. Also the evaluation by the course participants gathered from the evaluation forms for customer satisfaction, which teachers find especially tricky, went through a series of discussions and adaptations, taking teachers into account.

Main outcomes

- Satisfied and successful learners: high take-up rate, low drop-out rate, high success rate (measured by graduations); international comparability (EFR) of the achieved language level paired with an education which puts the interests of the learners at its core.
- Engaged teachers who are interested in further training and see themselves as playing an important role in the organisation. "When I teach well, I assure the good reputation of the organisation and my job too!".
- Strong identification of all employees within the organisation. Low staff turnover, openness towards new programmes, high level of initiative, mutual self-evaluation, good team building.

Main conclusions

Through a complex combination of in-service teacher training with measures to define, develop, assure and evaluate quality standards at the organisational – as well as the teaching – level, it has been possible to establish the Austrian Institute as an organisation with a reputation for modern teaching standards and quality assurance.

The key points of the organisation's development process were: the qualifications of the teachers and their continued further training; the implementation of quality standards in the educational sector in the form of an independently developed curriculum; and the implementation of feedback processes for customer satisfaction that provide regular information about product acceptance as well as participant-focused indications for quality improvement. This process, as far as an innovation is concerned, combines technical content with the main requirements facing the development of the whole organisation.