

QUALITY ENHANCEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH SELF-EVALUATION AND TARGETED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. Considering the strategic importance of quality assurance and enhancement in higher education, this paper aims to address questions such as: How can we improve the quality of educational processes and outcomes? How can we involve the grassroots level - both teachers and students? Which is the role of reflective practice and self-evaluation in this endeavour? Reference will be made to the "QualiTraining" projects and materials - developed within the framework of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), the Council of Europe (accessible on-line on the ECML website: www.ecml.at) [1]. To illustrate the value of self-evaluation and targeted teacher development for the consolidation of a quality culture, examples from practice have been selected from the interdisciplinary Masters programme "English Language Education and Research Communication in Economics" (the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies). Special features of this Masters programme include innovative methodological approaches, characterised through reflective practice, 'out of the box' thinking, project work in interdisciplinary teams, a.s.o. Self-assessment of communication competencies is based on the *European Language Portfolio* [2] and the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* [3], as English language proficiency and improving communication skills for academic and specialised professional purposes are key-priorities for the participants in this Masters programme. Even if several examples reflect developments in the field of quality assurance in language education, most of the concepts and processes discussed are relevant and applicable to other educational domains as well.

Keywords: *Continuous Professional Development, Teacher Development, Quality Assurance, Self-evaluation, European Language Portfolio, Self-assessment.*

1. INTRODUCTION

With developments in higher education (HE) at European level over the last two decades in the area of standardisation and quality assurance, also in local contexts there is growing preoccupation for improving quality standards and finding new ways for attaining the key targets of the Bologna reforms until 2010. One of these highlights the importance of having/implementing "credible systems of quality assurance in accordance with the best practices at European level", as shown in the latest strategy and policy study carried out within the framework of the European Institute of Romania. [4]

The current article explores what can be achieved in this sense and is within our reach in an academic environment - through trainer training, teacher development, self-evaluation and peer-support. After a brief outline of generic issues regarding

self-evaluation and its relevance for quality assurance and enhancement, reference will be made to the *QualiTraining Guide* [1] and the "QualiTraining" projects, with a special focus on the methodological approach adopted throughout the Guide and the project. A further example is taken directly from educational practice: the Interdisciplinary Masters programme specifically designed for academics/teachers of various specialisations at the Academy of Economic Studies, with a focus on the reflective dimension of self-development and self-evaluative practice.

The overall aim is that of illustrating how involving 'the grassroots level' in an integrative approach - however small-scale - and a collegiate, co-operative atmosphere can contribute to quality enhancement at different levels.

2. SELF-EVALUATION AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

Self-evaluation has gained more and more importance in a number of educational contexts, both as self-evaluation at an individual level and as institutional self-evaluation:

- a) **self-evaluation at an individual level**, for teachers, for instance, is often associated with or complementary to: reflective practice and action research, class observation and peer review (e.g. in the context of participative self-evaluation), professional development (e.g. in a teacher training and development situation).
- b) **self-evaluation at an institutional level**, e.g. of a project or a programme, of the institution, of a national or international organisation.

Institutional self-evaluation is defined as *participatory evaluation initiated in the institution (school, language centre, programme) by the school / centre personnel or project team to facilitate periodic or continuous improvement of the teaching operation / language services / the overall activity* [5].

When it was introduced as an evaluation instrument for programmes and projects (as an alternative to evaluation by external experts), it was perceived as a novelty [5, 6]. In those early days, the efforts of introducing self-evaluation as an instrument of analysis that would be perceived as valid and accepted were not just of methodological nature, they were meant to illustrate the advantages of this type of analysis, bringing arguments in favour of its objectivity and credibility (esp. in the eyes of external bodies).

In the course of time, international experience and practice have proved that this type of evaluation allows for a well-documented analysis, and in addition to this, it relies on motivation that is intrinsic to the programme or the school.

The functions and aims of self-evaluation may differ according to the context and the evaluation focus, e.g.

- analysing project activities or measuring progress within a programme and its outcomes as compared to the initial objectives;
- diagnosing existing problems in an institutional SWOT-analysis, in order to document the need for change and innovation [7];
- as instrument and exercise for internal quality management - as quality assurance by 'insiders' - for instance, when preparing for an external inspection (quality control by 'outsiders'), for instance in preparation for a quality audit by national or international accreditation bodies, or when applying for membership

to a national or international quality organisation (e.g. in language education, when applying for full membership to EAQUALS, the European Association for Quality Language Services - www.eaquals.org), or when applying for awards such as the “investors in people” award in Great Britain.

- a formative role in a "learning company" approach, enhancing development opportunities for all, both at an institutional level and at a personal level for all the participants in the process [8].

The figure below illustrates some of the interactions between institutional self-evaluation and self-evaluation at an individual level.

Interactions between Personal Self-evaluation and Institutional Self-evaluation	
<p>At a personal level, self-evaluation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can be initiated either by the individual or through the institutional S/E process • can be integrated in the collective S/E exercise • can become an important motivation factor • its results may have an essential contribution to the overall picture 	<p>At an institutional level, self-evaluation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • may provide the framework for personal self-evaluation • may trigger individual S/E exercises • is closely related to professional development of both the team and individual staff members

Figure 1: *Interactions between personal and institutional self-evaluation*

More recently, organisations such as the Council of Europe and the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz (ECML - www.ecml.at), for instance, have introduced a system whereby project co-ordinators are requested already in the project proposal stage, to indicate what instruments and criteria they intend to use for self-evaluation of their project outcomes and processes, in accordance with initial goals and action plans. This self-evaluation exercise, carried out both as progress evaluation and as end-of-project evaluation, integrates feedback from participants in project events and becomes then the basis for evaluation by an external consultant. The outcomes of this process are made available on-line both to the co-ordinating team of the project and to the Governing Board of the ECML (on the internal section of the project web site, for instance).

In what follows, to better illustrate the link between the various types of self-evaluation and the connection between these and quality assurance, we shall consider examples from the *QualiTraining Guide* and on-line resources available on the project web-site [1].

3. QUALITRAINING

Within the framework of the ECML/Council of Europe, there has been a series of three projects focusing on Quality Management in Language Education [8] and Quality Assurance. "QualiTraining" is the acronym for two ECML projects, as well as for the main project outcomes. [1, 9].

The overall aim of these projects has been to familiarise language professionals with the quality assurance dimension of education and to contribute to consolidating a quality assurance culture in language education across Europe and beyond, through producing a range of resources - book, CD ROMs, web resources [1, 8, 9] - and providing training for trainers and multipliers.



Figure 2: The QualiTraining "quality circle" on the project web site

The project outcomes contain

- a. generic aspects regarding self-assessment for learners and teachers, as well as regarding quality management in language education
- b. quality assurance standards and procedures developed at European level
- c. case studies from various national and institutional contexts, both from the state sector and from the private sector, as examples of good practice (representative of over 20 countries)
- d. instruments, e.g. questionnaires for awareness-raising, self-reflection and self-assessment, checklists for internal and external quality assurance
- e. interviews with experts to reflect the latest developments in the field
- f. links and contacts for further information.

An important feature of the *QualiTraining Guide* [1] and on-line resources is the methodological approach promoted, which is reflected through elements such as: alternating *questions for reflection* with *input*, glossing of concepts, where necessary, allowing for some variety in terms of sequencing of the component elements and activity types within the units; illustrative case studies and additional resources (on the CD ROM).

To illustrate the inter-connectivity between various aspects of quality assurance, the "Quality Continuum" section of the *Quality Management in Language Education* CD ROM [8] includes sub-sections focusing on Self-assessment at an individual level (for learners and for teachers), Internal/institutional Self-evaluation, and External Quality Assurance (as quality control through inspections) - all these with examples from both the state sector and the private sector.

The section on Learner Self-assessment, for instance, illustrates how the principles and reference levels in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* [3] and *The European Language Portfolio* [2] have been applied and adapted to different age groups in countries such as Croatia, Finland, Austria, the Goethe Institut Bucharest and the French Institute in Bucharest, Romania.

To illustrate the link between institutional self-evaluation and quality assurance, there are examples of quality assurance systems in language education, both at national and at European level (with special reference to EAQUALS), as well as examples of instruments and case studies reflecting the preparation for an external inspection through self-evaluation at institutional/team-level. This activity combined with class observation and peer review, provides the basis for prioritizing and action taking. One of the great benefits of this approach is that when the moment of the inspection comes, the entire staff is prepared and knows what to expect, as illustrated also in the diagram below:

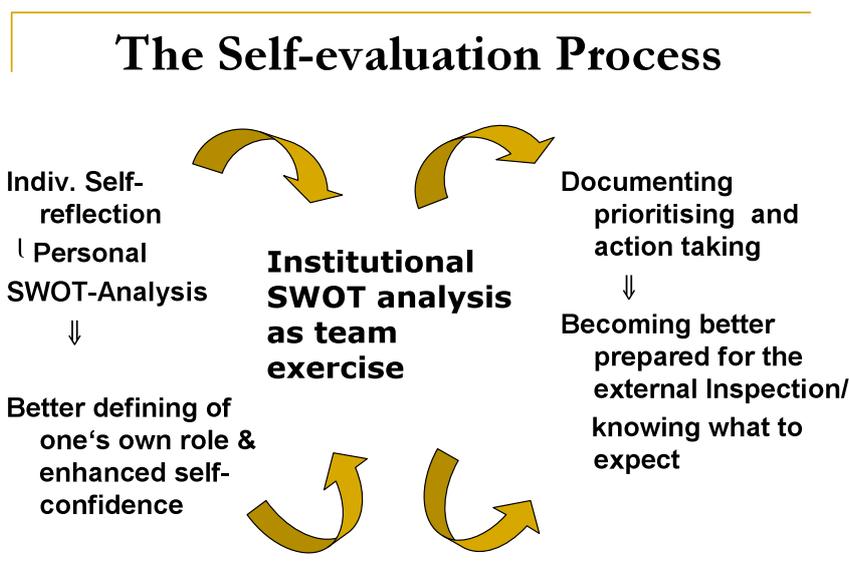


Figure 3: *The Self-evaluation Process*

Self-assessment and reflection is a strategy used throughout the *QualiTraining Guide*, and for better familiarisation with this methodological approach, it is used also in all the QualiTraining events, including the sessions conducted within the framework of the following case study.

4. EMBEDDING REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND SELF-EVALUATION IN THE INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND TEACHER EDUCATION MASTERS PROGRAMME AT THE BUCHAREST ACADEMY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES

As mentioned above, an important function of self-evaluation is its formative role. This is correlated also with the current trend at European level of encouraging Lifelong Learning, as well as empowering individuals to diagnose their own training/development needs in relation to career prospects and professional interests. Improving self-evaluation skills at personal level has, thus, become key to setting realistic priorities for one's own professional development and career advancement. At the same time, (self-)evaluative practice carried out in a collegiate manner at team level can contribute substantially to quality enhancement in an institutional context. In a Higher Education environment, there is also the added value of cascading opportunities: academics/teachers familiar with self-evaluative practice are confident facilitators of their students' developing self-assessment skills as key-skills for career and for life, in general.

Teacher Development programmes, therefore, integrate a strong self-evaluative component. The case study below illustrates how a selection of methodological and awareness-raising ingredients can contribute to increased motivation and higher effectiveness of continuous professional development.

Three years ago (in the fall of 2006) a new interdisciplinary Masters programme was introduced at the Academy of Economic Studies: **"English Language Education and Research Communication for Business and Economics"**.

It is specifically intended to contribute to:

- ➔ improving teaching methodology and communication competencies, so that teachers/academics of various specialisations can teach their subject via English;
- ➔ enhancing research competencies and integrating professional and English language communication skills for the successful presentation of research outcomes in international events and specialised publications.

Who is it intended for? The target participants include:

- academics of various specialisations (e.g. business management, micro-economics, marketing, agri-business, finance, accounting, cybernetics, but also engineering, mathematics, economic geography, history, etc.) already teaching or interested to teach their subject through the medium of English
- young researchers interested in the interdisciplinary dimension and in improving their English language and communication competencies for publishing research outcomes internationally and for participation in international projects
- philology graduates teaching English for business and economics (or with an interest in ESP teaching and research)
- graduates of various specialisations with an interest in the programme objectives and components.

Content-wise, the programme includes (a) modules with a teaching focus, (b) modules with a research focus, (c) modules aimed at developing advanced communication skills for a variety of academic and professional purposes, as well as

transversal components, e.g. on "Critical Thinking" and "Creative Thinking", on "Educational Management" and "Quality Assurance in Higher Education", etc.

Where does the reflective and self-evaluative component come into play? Key to progress and the programme's effectiveness is the methodological approach, which includes e.g.:

- reflection on one's own teaching context and activity, with a focus on skills improvement and prioritising self-development objectives;
- self-assessment of communication skills, on the basis of the European Language Portfolio and more detailed, relevant reference scales of levels from the Common European Framework of Reference, both in relation to one's own targets and in relation to programme requirements (as this is an English-medium programme);
- reflection on institutional processes through team-exercises, aimed at improving self-evaluative competencies;
- interdisciplinary project work and assignments encouraging reflective practice;
- observation of processes, including class observation and peer-review, a.s.o.

The impact of this methodological approach can be seen at various levels, for instance in the selection of research projects for the dissertations; a good number of participants select topics involving qualitative analysis of student perceptions of teaching or assessment related methodological aspects. In their feedback, most of the participants in the programme indicate that their expectations had been exceeded, especially through the inter-disciplinarity, the networking opportunities, the international dimension of the programme, the reflective and self-evaluative competencies that they developed, and the impact these had on their re-visiting their teaching and research practice. This way, self-evaluative approaches contribute to improved performance of individual teachers, as well as to sharing and team learning.

As multipliers and having had the chance to experience these methodological approaches themselves, most of them enjoy taking these further into class, to their students. This way, in a cascading mode, we can also witness a shift of paradigm, with teachers developing the confidence 'to let go' and to encourage students to voice their preferences, engaging them in new processes.

5. PULLING THE STRINGS TOGETHER

In this paper we have tried to highlight the importance of self-evaluation at individual and institutional level for quality assurance and quality enhancement purposes.

After an introductory section on self-evaluation as a fairly recently introduced practice in institutional environments and educational programmes, as an alternative to external evaluation, reference is made to projects and materials developed within the framework of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), the Council of Europe. The *QualiTraining Guide*, project CD ROMs and on-line resources can be used in a variety of educational contexts to facilitate training and development in the area of quality assurance, as well as to provide sources of inspiration for local contexts through the case studies and examples of best practice from over 20 European countries.

A further example from a post-graduate academic context - the Interdisciplinary Masters Programme at the Academy of Economic Studies - illustrates how self-evaluation and the development of self-assessment skills can contribute to more effective self-development, including targeted improvement of language competencies, as well as for quality assurance purposes. The cascading effect is an important added value of this programme and - hopefully - a contribution, however small, to a shift of paradigm in the way teaching, learning and assessment are approached in higher education.

Even if several examples reflect developments in the field of quality assurance in language education, most of the concepts and processes discussed are relevant and transferrable to other educational domains as well.

6. REFERENCES

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