

Constructing Quality

European university adult and continuing education

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Is there more than one definition of quality? And is adult and continuing education different from mainstream university provision in relation to quality issues? Experiences from six quality projects in six universities and countries suggest that the answer to both these questions is yes. However, those experiences also suggest some common questions that are helpful in developing quality projects.

The first task of the project was to uncover the various definitions of quality in the six partner universities in six countries, Universities of Franche-Comté, France, co-ordinator, Turku, Finland, Porto, Portugal, Barcelona, Spain, City University, London, United Kingdom as well as universities of Lausanne and Geneva, Switzerland, self-financed. The conceptual understandings of the term 'quality' in these different

EQUAL (Educational Quality in University Adult Learning) was a European project funded through the Socrates Adult Education programme in 1998-2000, which grew out of a working group in EUCEN (European Universities Continuing Education Network). The objectives of the project were to evaluate the practice of quality in the partner universities in relation to provision for adults and to produce guidelines and recommendations.

contexts were very diverse. The concepts were not always explicit. Each partner was working on its own quality project during the EQUAL co-operation, which provided the opportunity for us to do this.

The first year of the project was therefore concerned with the development of a framework for the analysis of the diverse quality projects and approaches in each partner university. This framework was then used in describing the projects and we carried out a comparative analysis. This provided the materials for the first draft of a quality handbook.

During the second year, mutual evaluation visits operated as a quality circle: each partner was involved in at least one visit to another partner, and was visited by at least one other. This enabled us to investigate the quality projects in practice in more detail and the partners in the role of evaluators produced a report after each visit. From these reports and the partners' own experience of their projects, we produced a range of issues, questions and recommendations for quality projects in university adult and continuing education (UCE) that may be used in any country. Also a working document of a European quality handbook of university adult and continuing education was completed. It includes good practice as well as pitfalls and case study examples. Importantly, we were also able to explore the different models of quality that underpinned the various projects.

There is a wide range of different approaches to quality, both generally and in the sphere of adult and continuing education, including the EQUAL partners. Some are specialists in the systems approach, structures, modes of action in detail, a clear definition of quality as a benchmark against which to judge progress. In a 'quality as process' or 'quality as a learning environment' approach the nature of quality is determined on the basis of the key functions of teaching and learning. Some emphasise the working practices and the organisational culture of the professionals. The EQUAL approach was inherently case-based and we made no attempt to reach an agreement on a single definition of quality.

The different ideas were not a hindrance for the project, but rather a source for fruitful discussions. The practical aim was the need to build capacity to carry out quality projects in university adult and continuing education.

Is adult education any different?

Some argue that a good quality system should encompass university adult and continuing education and all the other activities that take place in a higher education institution. The case for adult education should be addressed as a separate (but linked) project within arrangements for evaluation and quality development in universities rather.

Firstly, there is no clear single definition of university adult and continuing education, which would fit all universities and countries in Europe – it appears in many guises. It may consist of a range of short programmes (from one day upwards) sometimes in the field of educational sciences but also in a wide range of other subjects for an audience quite different from the mainstream of university provision, i.e. adults and those with working experience. It may be part of diploma provision as a strand in the diploma(s) of the Faculty of Education. The phrase is also used to define a category of student or public, who may, or may not, be in specially designated courses. So it may be a subject to be taught, an approach to teaching method and or it may define a new client group for many universities.

Secondly, adult and continuing education is differently organised in different universities. Sometimes it is managed through an adult education department or continuing education service which offers its own programmes in a range of subjects but also supports, promotes or co-ordinates continuing education courses and activities in co-operation with other faculties. Such departments/ services/ units are frequently also the location for the provision of cross-university services such as guidance and learning support or for the development and dissemination of innovations such as open and distance learning.

Thirdly therefore, more than other departments, it has internal as well as external clients and usually also a role as an important interface between the university and other stakeholders. It works not only with individual adult students, but also with public and private sector employers, enterprises (especially small and medium size), professional associations and other organisations to provide training programmes to meet their needs. The starting point for these programmes is the needs of the client rather than the field of knowledge, and the criteria for quality are much more likely to include relevance as a priority.

Fourthly, much of the work of such departments/ services is concerned with projects rather than with courses, especially in the domain of local community or regional development.

For all these reasons the quality systems developed for degree and diploma courses for young full-time students are often inappropriate for a large part of the work done under the heading of adult education. Such systems may leave untouched very important areas of work or may produce misleading evaluation results.

Diversity of context

National context

Quality initiatives vary according to the political and economic conditions in a given country or region, and the existing higher education systems. It is important to know the exact socio-economic and political context in which the university functions. It may be either

- a context in which the State or region exercises strict control
- a context in which the university tends to be market-oriented or
- a context in which the academic world enjoys room for manoeuvre in its strategic choices.

Control and developmental orientation seem to be the two ends of the quality approach, whereas the role of market mechanisms seems to have an ever-growing role in UCE all over Europe. An example of a country where two of the elements mix is Finland, where the national Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) has a clear policy of enhancing quality with major responsibility placed on the universities. At the same time the policy of the Ministry of Education is to give the markets more room in the policies of lifelong learning at the universities.

Institutional context

The institutional context at the university adds a major element in the launching of a quality project. For example, if a university as a whole is committed to a self-evaluation, the continuing education quality project will probably be included in this process. But such a project might also be spontaneously initiated by the service or department of continuing education, without any official or central requirement. The underlying dynamics fall into three broad categories, which may be separate or interlocking:

- ◆ They may be associated with external *obligation*, arising (usually) from the organs of government
- ◆ An *opportunity* may arise from the development of projects and strategic objectives such as university aims or action plans or the availability of new methods and financial and staff resources.
- ◆ It may also start from a *review*: arising from observation of aspects of the environment, such as policy trends, competition, market needs, acknowledged dysfunctions or the results of audits or enquiries.

Quality management may be seen as a marketing tool, or as a means of co-ordinating or harmonising practices within the university. It may also assist in making the continuing education service more visible within the university. The partners' experiences clearly indicate that quality management projects are very often set in motion by more than one trigger and may have a number of different purposes.

Although the success of a quality project does depend on the precision with which its essence and aims are specified, it is also true that continuing education and the people involved in it can seldom be separated completely from other activities and structures. It is thus difficult to draw a clear boundary around a specific focus and ignore everything outside it – indeed important results may be missed if this is attempted. It is therefore important that the boundaries are set but are nevertheless permeable and open to influence in both directions.

Diversity of quality projects

The EQUAL was seeking to find the commonalities and differences between the national and institutional contexts, the models and definitions of quality and adult and continuing education and other provision in the universities and to bring a European dimension to the work through mutual evaluation and shared experience. The ability to manage a quality project should not be confused with the ability to teach adults. If a project is to succeed in practice there must be clear boundaries of time and place and there is a distinction to be made, therefore, between the organisational side, such as planning and resourcing the project, and the educational side properly so-called. Typical examples of quality projects focusing on adult and continuing education in European universities are:

- Production of a quality charter or guide
- Construction of a quality system
- Designing a quality procedure for a specific aspect of UCE
- Carrying out an evaluation project

Naturally, there is a richness of quality initiatives in addition to those named here. We shall briefly describe some illustrations of the types above based on our experience.

Production of quality charters and quality guides

The *University of Porto* analysed four experiences of continuing education courses so as to find key indicators of quality. Co-ordinated by the Central Services of the university, the case study focused on four diverse continuing education programmes developed within four different faculties. The analysis, in each of them, of the different phases of the process, enabled them to have a clear understanding of the different management and organisation methods, which reflected the rationale for the diversity of the educational offer in relation to different target groups. The purpose was to understand how continuing education works, what its goals are, and how its outcomes are assessed. Through this process they were able to find some common indicators of good practice that will define the guidelines for a handbook to be used by all staff in the University. The project was also an opportunity for the people involved in this case study to create the necessary synergies for the development of quality approaches in relation to continuing education.

The quality project of *University of Geneva* aimed firstly at the development and improvement of the services provided by the Continuing Education Unit to the University and to the City of Geneva. The long-term aim was to reinforce the service-oriented role of the University for the region. This was to be achieved by improving the quality of the programmes in terms of increased the satisfaction of all users (participants, lecturers, employers, the presidency of the University, the UCE Unit etc.), greater consistency in UCE practice within university, and internal and external recognition. Tools for achieving this were: writing and implementing a quality guide, building integrated management tools (data base), opening a new programme on "Management of UCE" and integrating ECTS credits and the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL). Secondly, the project aimed to support the academic integration of UCE and restructuring of the specialised continuing education unit as well as the official boards. The long-term aim was to promote the institutional development of adult and continuing education, to evolve

from a back-up service to a service with an academic development mission. This would mean better links between pre-graduate, post-graduate programmes and UCE, favouring the development of new training programmes specially designed for adults (return to University for a 'second chance') and also research on topics of current interest. The objectives were to assess the impact of the activity over the last 10 years, to write a reflective and prospective report and to set up a new academic structure.

The *University of Lausanne* defined its project as "drafting, dissemination and application of a Quality Charter for continuing education". They wanted to reinforce the university's role in providing a service to the region through the improvement of the value of training systems for the greater satisfaction of all 'stakeholders', including participants, staff, employers, education authorities, Continuing Education Department. The UCE Department opted to create a specific model for the Quality Charter in order to have a document at their disposal, completely adapted to their own situation. The actors involved were the staff of the Department, the Continuing Education Council (consisting of a vice-rector, two members of academic staff and three members external to the University), external quality specialists, continuing education officials from other universities, course leaders and teachers as well as course participants.

Construction of a quality system

In the *University of Barcelona* the Foundation Bosch i Gimpera is responsible for organising continuing education, technology transfer and project management. The quality project was the implementation of the European Foundation Quality Model (EFQM). The reason for the project was the importance of the organisational dimension of high quality provision, the understanding of its complexity from a holistic perspective and the application of management strategies in accordance with this vision. These were seen as the critical factors in the implementation of improvements. The organisational arrangements included an internal team with the academic director and the quality director, an external team with three lecturers from the Faculty of Education Sciences, a self-evaluation team comprising of members of different departments and levels of responsibility inside the organisation. At some point, the whole organisation was involved. The results achieved include: the creation of a quality network, a self-evaluation form with 9 agreed criteria and 32 sub-criteria to identify areas for improvement, a guide for completing the self-evaluation form, and a questionnaire for the members of the pilot test.

Designing a quality procedure for a part of UCE

The name of the project carried out by the *University of Franche-Comté* in collaboration with the University of Bourgogne was *Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning APEL – Quality Procedure*. The APEL arrangements in France allow adults to obtain diplomas by exempting them from the normal entry requirements for a course, or from the assessment requirements for part of the diploma programme, on the basis of professional skills and experience. The project aimed to implement a quality procedure for the process of accreditation in order to develop a more reliable means of access for adults wishing to resume their studies in the two universities. As results they can show testing of the experimental dossier (the application requirements) and the guidance and orientation processes to help candidates prepare their dossier, and a survey of the experiences of the panels set up to judge the dossiers. The project was

seen s as a preliminary or pilot version and will be used as a basis for future work within other departments or services at the university.

Carrying out evaluation projects

Quality arrangements in the Department of Continuing Education at *City University London* are in continuous use and subject to continuous modification. However, a general and comprehensive review was prompted at this particular time primarily by the national requirements. The Department was to be included in the university-wide 'Continuation Audit' (CA) of quality assurance systems across the whole institution, managed by the national Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which was scheduled to take place in 1999-2000.

The review was co-ordinated within the university by the central Academic Audit Committee (AAC), responsible for developing and managing the internal quality systems and preparing for the CA. It established a Quality Support Unit to assist departments and employed an external consultant to lead seminars and workshops for staff. The key features of the preparation for Continuation Audit were:

- An internal audit - questionnaire and interview with Head of Department and feedback
- A departmental self-assessment document, following a framework set down by the University, including evidence that stated procedures are in place and are effective.
- Mock reviews – internal (among department staff) and external (with a consultant)
- An 'away day' for all staff in the Department (academic and administrative) to reflect on the way they work together to achieve their objectives

The case study in the *University of Turku* is another example of an evaluation project. It formed a part of the University's evaluation with the theme 'external impact'. The project was carried out following the three stages of a peer audit: production of material, self-evaluation and an international evaluation. The management team of the Centre for Extension Studies acted as a project group. The material included statistical analyses, annual and other reports as well as descriptions of the activities. The self-audit material by the faculties and the feedback from external parties were gathered by inquiries. The analyses of the future contexts were tackled in workshops about the strategic edges. An independent evaluator made a contribution from the viewpoint of lifelong learning. The project covered teaching and learning as well as organisational and other functions: management, funding, marketing, research and development. It did not make use of any particular quality model, rather the structure and process were tailored to suit the needs of the University's culture, aims and future strategy. The evaluation criteria focussed on the concept of 'external impact': networks, innovations, evaluation and future development and following the project the strategic plans for adult education were fundamentally revised. However, since it was a one-off quality project, no permanent structure for quality work was established.

Learning with each other

As an international project EQUAL was fundamentally case-based – it was live and rooted in a range of current and relevant actions in the partner universities. The European dimension was added in the

definition of a common conceptual grid. Also this part of the process followed a bottom-up approach: no normative or theoretical models were used, but the experience and expertise of the partners were utilised in an intellectual iterative process. The feasibility of the grid was tested in the description of the partner projects, comparison of their structures and procedures and finally during their evaluation.

As a learning environment the special feature was mutual benchmarking. Generally, the partners experienced a practical process, which underlined the meaning of a quality project as a chance to reach learning outcomes with practical effects. The two roles of mutual evaluation make a strong combination: being evaluated emphasised the work-based learning context in quality enhancement; being an evaluator brought to the fore the intellectual and analytic processes. Answering the questions of the evaluators was not possible without plenty of effort in reaching a clear understanding of our own activities, whereas formulating the questions to colleagues in different contexts widened our understanding of the various other possibilities. Thus, not only the existing models but also the potential and future models were tackled. We see this mutual evaluation model as a great strength of the project and a useful and innovative tool for co-operation and learning from each other, which may be used in other European projects in other contexts.

From our experience in six different cultural and institutional contexts, we drafted the first version of a handbook of quality management in university adult education at the European level. It is designed for those involved in the organisation of adult learning in European universities, such as departmental managers and administrators and senior teaching staff, who are experienced in the education of adults, but who are not specialists in quality management. It attempts to provide these people with the key concepts and methods needed to set up a quality project but also to name the core issues and concrete steps in the organisation of a UCE quality project. The essentials of a quality project are tackled by a number of practical questions and recommendations that are relevant both at the planning stage and the evaluation phase of the project. Examples of different responses to these questions are provided and a more detailed description of each partner's project is included. Some extracts are set out below to illustrate our approach.

The main features of a UCE quality project – to think about!

What are the reasons prompting you to initiate a quality project?

Are there "hidden" as well as official reasons?

How much room for manoeuvre do you have in relation to the local and national context?

Does motivation come from internal and/or external sources?

Is there a university policy or strategy for adult education? How does it affect the quality project?

Who is the project initiator? Is this person or group also responsible for steering the project through to completion?

Does the quality initiative embody a response to external control or is it geared towards development?

Is there a potential for conflict and manipulation between the key participants?

How will you monitor the process so that it can continually adapt to changing circumstances?

Definition of the aims and objectives of a quality project – some questions

What sort of clientele (internal or external) is targeted?

What is the scope of your project?

What is in the remit of professional skills training and what is the remit of quality assurance?

Are the objectives appropriate to the target client group?

Are the objectives defined in accordance with the rationale of the project?

Is there a need to break down your project into sub-projects?

Are the objectives expressed unequivocally and in a practical way?

What are the concrete results of the project?

What are the short, medium and long-term objectives?

Choice of the quality model – some recommendations

Promote a debate with the different individuals involved in the project to find out what they think.

Do a comparative study of different models and identify which ones include the criteria in your project.

Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the alternatives.

When necessary, do not hesitate to develop your own model (the 'home-made' option) by selecting those aspects from different models that best suit the particular character of your project.

Allow for some degree of flexibility; so as to be able to adapt to changes and unpredictable situations.

Try to involve senior management and other key actors in the adoption of the model.

Evaluate the consequences, impacts and risks that may arise from the implementation of a given model.

Organisation of quality work – mind the gaps!

How to involve the University authorities in order to enhance the probability of success?

Could you use existing structures or is it necessary to create a new working party for the quality project.

Is the quality project organised in a well-structured way (with a chain of command, resources, project team and participants)?

Is the communications network between everybody involved clear and well defined?

Is the action plan sufficiently clear in relation to the agreed criteria of the selected model?

Are the methods and tools well chosen in the light of the action plan and the quality project as a whole?

Have the members of the project team knowledge in quality issues and methodology? Would they need training?

Does the project make good use of the complementary skills of the team members?

Making it useful – Recommendations for the dissemination

Make sure that the results match your motivations and defined objectives.

Beware the risk of carrying out a project that lives 'a life of its own' or one that is experienced as 'additional work' – the quality work can be effective only in relation to the core tasks and activities.

Communicate all the results to everyone.

Make a plan and a budget for the quality project itself, but also for the task of transferring the results into the daily life of adult education services.

Make sure that all the key players can gain from the results of quality work including the students, teachers, tutors, managerial staff, the board of adult education and the university leadership.

In adult education quality can only be permanent when all the staff are committed to continuous professional learning. Making use of the results calls for determined staff development.

Think of the results within adult education as part of the results of university's outreach activities and external impact in general.

Next steps

The European Universities Continuing Education Network (EUCEN) has provided an opportunity to discuss and disseminate the activities during the life of the project as well as providing a forum for the final product. The draft handbook was presented and debated in a workshop in the EUCEN conference in London in October 2000. This was the first activity of the EUCEN Quality Task Force and the first step towards the future. A pre-proposal for a new project network to take forward this work was produced for the Grundtvig programme under the title EQUIPE (European Quality in University Individual Pathways in Education) with around 40 universities from some 18 countries expressing an interest to take part in this new project network. We are pleased to say that the proposal was shortlisted and will go forward into the next round of selection so we are hopeful that it will provide a foundation for achieving new aims and objectives.

The next items on our agenda include:

- Publication of the Handbook and transferring it into the web as a part of EQUIPE. To get a copy of the document and send your comments, contact : eucen.office@uab.es
- Training (e.g. as part of a Leonardo project CEPROFS (Professional Development for Continuing Education Managers) a module called 'Demarche qualite en formation continue' – 28 February to 24 March 2001 at the Université de Franche Comté in Besançon. Contact: martial.thiriot@univ-fcomte.fr or consult the project web-site: www.serfa.fr/ceprofs)
- Seminars and workshops (e.g. a two-day-seminar about quality in UCE in co-operation with ENQA (European Network for Quality Assurance – www.enqa.fi) in the autumn of 2001 in Chieti, Italy)
- Consultancy both face-to-face and web-based as well as audit circles within EQUIPE

Both EQUIPE and the EUCEN Task Force for Quality are open to new colleagues and new ideas (contact Pat Davies: pat.davies@univ-lille1.fr).

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