

EQUIPE – Case Study: University of Graz, Austria

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1. Topic, theme or focus of the quality project

Quality management in university continuing education through “agreement on objectives” – Is the University of Graz on the right way for more quality for the learner?

2. Rationale and motivation

University continuing education (UCE) in Austria is to a large extent not part of the mainstream of the provision of universities, for many years it has been not more but “existing” at the edge – with the disadvantage but also advantage of not getting too much attention. Recently, universities (or should we better say university management teams) are discovering that UCE might be not only an important service to the community but also an interesting market for the university as organization. As one consequence they establish offices or centers for UCE to enhance developmental work on policy / conceptual level as well as program level in this area.

Apart from wide definitions (each lecture could be used as UCE for an individual) UCE in Austria means that universities are allowed to offer diploma courses (duration: several semesters; with academic degrees) and all sorts of short courses, workshops, seminars for many different target groups. Seen from an overall perspective on national level the provision is rather small but growing continuously. (There is one exemption: the Danube University in Krems which is the only state-subsidised UCE – institution in Europe.)

Quality was an issue to be dealt with within the single program, it was not an issue the universities as organizations really paid attention to. UCE programs were single initiatives by university staff members. For UCE diploma courses academic directors are nominated and taking over this function they are considered to guarantee “quality” (this is also the case for short courses). This – for the universities – comfortable model which has functioned – as far as we know – for a long time produced obviously good programs – some very successful and well established for over 20 years. Therefore we might assume that the “market” cares for quality.

So why bother? Why did the University of Graz start a quality project in UCE?

1. The new rectorate which started in 1999 declared the promotion of the idea of continuing education for external target groups. Until recently, on university level there was no awareness that UCE could/should be an integral part of a university strategy (an integrated and coordinated program policy still does not exist). With the introduction of the function of a Vice-Rector for Research and Knowledge Transfer who is also responsible for the enhancement of UCE and the establishment of a Lifelong Learning Support Office in 2000 (now Center for Continuing Education) as part of the central administration this has changed: UCE has become part of the strategic development process of the university, there are more UCE programs, some important issues such as “quality” or the profile of the new Center for

Continuing Education have been – in a structured way and university-wide – discussed. Also financial investments have been made. Inevitable the question of “quality” has to be part of the development of an institutional lifelong learning policy / of a coordinated developmental work in the area of new programs. A more “organization- not to say enterprise-like management” has more need for monitoring.

2. External pressure “to prove” quality is rising: UCE programs can be very expensive and participation is often paid by employers. Participants and / or their employers want profound evidence that the specific program they are interested in is of top-quality. In this context institutional quality management can be viewed as “consumer protection” (in the CE jungle) on the one hand but also as an important marketing instrument on the other hand. Moreover, UCE has to provide evidence (and to communicate) what is its “unique selling proposition (USP)” (the “USP of UCE” so to speak) in comparison with non-university continuing education provision.

3. Due to the new Universities Act 2002 each Austrian university is obliged to establish an overall quality management system for all parts of the university. At the University of Graz all developmental work, all initiatives are compiled right now.

4. UCE has finally got more “official” attention within the university because recently some new UCE projects were in danger of being rejected with the argument that they lack quality.

Process of accreditation of UCE diploma courses in Austria

All UCE programs are financially managed in the restricted legal capacity of Austrian universities to be a subject of legal rights and duties. (With 1.1.04 the Austrian universities are autonomous and may act as an enterprise.) The UCE diploma courses (up to Master programs) have to be accredited by the Faculty commission and/or the senate and the Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture. In principle, a member of the university staff is allowed to propose a new UCE program to the senate without any steps beforehand. The academic director is nominated by the rectorate and responsible for all aspects of the academic and economical performance of the UCE program. (For short courses, workshops, seminars there is no accreditation process at all. Departments are free to offer what they consider to be interesting.)

To conclude, the above mentioned reasons altogether resulted in action but without doubt the pressure to start the project in 2002 came from raised the problems with single new UCE-projects which had to deal with the reproach of not being able to guarantee quality. There was also the argument that the university cannot afford (image, costs, etc.) that in the end the market would decide upon quality.

In my view this “we have to do something” became a prerequisite for success of the following quality project – the university itself wanted a structured discourse on quality, wanted a model that would improve quality and procedures.

3. Objectives

The objective of the quality project was to develop a model for the evaluation of UCE diploma courses (including measures for an ex ante – evaluation). This objective was achieved.

4. Model

Although various existing quality models were taken into account the University of Graz decided to create a tailor-made model.

The main features are:

- focus on curriculum approval and evaluation,
- being a framework rather than a strict “model” and allowing various approaches on quality for single UCE programs,
- including peer review / external evaluation,
- allowing international accreditation where appropriate,
- strong focus on the key processes of teaching and learning,
- quality management through “agreement on objectives”,
- development of written support material (manual) to enhance the quality of the development of new programs and to provide a guideline for the evaluation process.

3-steps-model for the development / evaluation of UCE - diploma courses

The lead idea is “quality management through agreement on objectives”. The three steps are:

1. ex ante – input evaluation

internal evaluation through academic director
(in cooperation with the scientific advisory board)

result: self-evaluation report

and

external evaluation of the input (targets of the UCE program) through a team of 2 peers

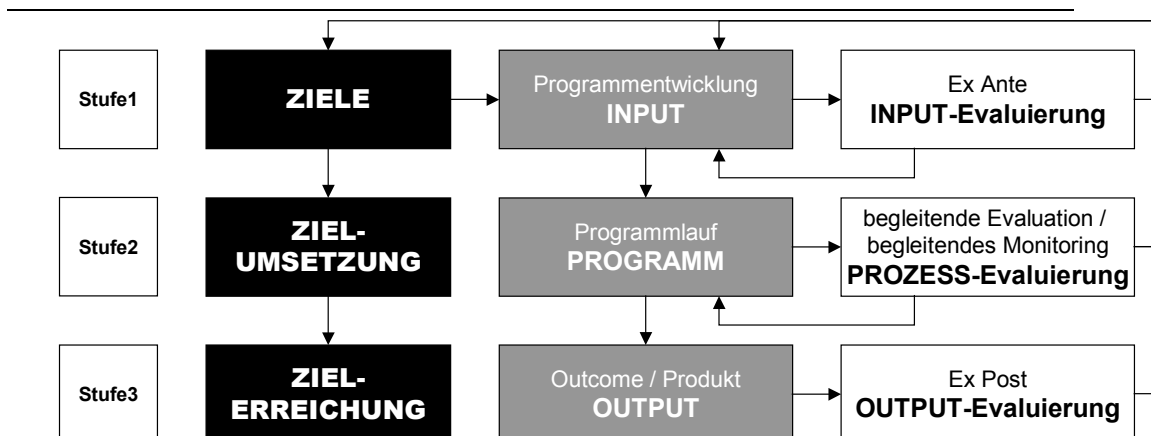
result: evaluation report
(has to be taken into consideration by the decision making committee, i.e. faculty commission or senate)

2. accompanying evaluation – monitoring: process evaluation

3. ex post – output evaluation

Within 2 and 3 the concept designed in the development phase has to be followed; e.g. the quality assurance methods agreed upon have to be used.

3-Stufenmodell der Evaluierung für Universitätslehrgänge der Universität Graz



Pfeile stellen jeweils die zeitliche Reihenfolge der Stufen bzw. Einflusswirkung von Evaluierungsformen dar

Reporting:

Option A: Report by the academic director (guidelines have to be followed).

The report includes answers to:

- Targets of the UCE program?
- Description of the needs analysis for this specific program, description of the target group
- Measures to reach the targets?
- Measures to evaluate that the targets have been reached?
- Main results of the evaluation procedures?
- Consequences?

Option B: New internal and external evaluation including evaluation by participants.

Option C: Accreditation by an international well-known accreditation agency.

Manual for the Development and Evaluation of UCE diploma courses

A manual was developed to help the academic director to develop the program and to write the self-description in the developmental / evaluation process. It consists of the following chapters:

- A. The development of the UCE diploma course
- B. Design and Organisation
- C. Teaching and Learning (including curriculum)
- D. Resources (staff, infrastructure, etc.)
- E. Expression of opinions / evaluation (by teachers, participants, etc.)
- F. Financial Aspects
- G. Quality Management
- H. Overall assessment/evaluation (including strengths – weaknesses; next steps).

5. Organisation

Levels / groups / commissions involved

The senate asked the rectorate to deal with the question of quality / evaluation of UCE diploma courses to avoid that not well enough prepared proposals are being proposed directly to the senate.

The rectorate agreed to develop a model and asked the Center for Continuing Education to design the project.

The Center for Continuing Education – Profile

We are

- the coordination center for continuing education at the University of Graz
- an important link between scholarship and the community
- a meeting point for institutions and people interested in continuing education

We aim to

- develop the role of continuing education within the framework of the University of Graz
- offer continuing education of superior quality
- create and maintain an up-to-date link between scholarship and professional practice

We are offering

- to everyone interested in continuing education and to business and industry
- information and guidance on continuing education at the University of Graz
- an innovative program of continuing education
- a service for “made-to-measure” continuing education.

to University Faculty and Staff

- strategic and quality development in the area of continuing education
- public relations and marketing
- coordination
- expert advice
- joint-organisation of continuing education courses
- a seminar-room with top-facilities.

The Center for Continuing Education is linked to the “Integrated University Commission for Research” and proposed that this commission should establish a “Project Group University Continuing Education” which should firstly develop a profile for the new Center for Continuing Education and secondly develop a model for the evaluation of the UCE programs. This project group was established and met twice (two well-prepared workshops, each lasting one day).

The Center for Continuing Education developed a concept for the quality project and employed a project assistant from April until the end of November 2002 (8 months).

The concepts consisted of the following main approach and features:

1. Approach: The development of the evaluation model should be embedded in a process of organizational development and based on the state-of-the-art in quality literature and approaches and best practice / benchmarking examples.

2. Project steps:

a. Review of the State-of-the-Art literature / approaches / concepts on quality in Higher Education / UCE.

b. Assessment of the ongoing quality culture (concepts, approaches, procedures, instruments, experiences etc.) in the UCE programs at the University of Graz.
Method: interviews.

b. Ideas and suggestions of the internal UCE experts and providers for a quality model for UCE at our university.
Method: interviews.

c. Quality initiatives / models in university teaching and research at our university to be studied. Internal quality experts to be consulted.

d. Overview over and contact with well-known accreditation agencies. Assess to what extent they could/should be involved in the new quality management model / procedures at our university.

e. The results of the fact finding mission and finally the first version of the model should be presented and reviewed in two workshops (May 02, October 02) with members of the "Project Group University Continuing Education". The final version of the model should be presented in the university commissions / on the levels according to the formal decision making process within the university.

All these steps were performed according to plan. The final version of the quality model was presented as outlined in the following time line:

Senate (April 2003) → Rectorate → Center for Continuing Education → Integrated University Commission for Research → Project Group University Continuing Education → Center for Continuing Education → Project assistant / Project group University Continuing Education (April 2003 – end of November 2003) → Integrated University Commission for Research → Rectorate → Senate (on the agenda for June 2003)

Furthermore, the model was presented and discussed in a working group on quality during the 14th meeting of the Austrian Universities Continuing Education Network – AUCEN in Vienna (10.3.03).

6. Results

The results / products of the project are:

- 1.) a quality management model with which the university can work from now on (including a manual which is useful for the development of new projects and for the evaluation respectively);
- 2.) an important organizational process which means that
 - there has been a discussion about quality in UCE and the model on different levels, with different people / functions involved,
 - those who are mainly affected were involved from the beginning,
 - what has been done so far to improve quality in UCE has – for the first time - been compiled and honoured (which in consequence meant that only a framework – model had to be designed because there was evidence of a high level of “quality culture” and plenty of internal expertise);
- 3.) to a large extent common ground for a new (quality) strategy in UCE was created.

7. Implementation

The decision making process on the model has not yet finished. The model has to be discussed and decided upon in the senate (on the agenda for June 03). Nevertheless not many changes are to be expected because the model has been discussed and decided upon on all other important levels beforehand.

Apart from the formal decision making process the model is already part of the expert advice service the Center for Continuing Education provides. First reactions and feedback to the model / the manual were positive because university staff considered it as useful.

In the long-run the quality model will be part of the overall quality management system of the university. To enhance the discussion about quality the rectorate initiates a series of events on quality which can be considered as staff development events (May/June 2003).

A short version of the model / the manual has to be developed also for the short courses / workshops / seminars. (A draft has already been worked out.)

8. Strengths of the case study

In my opinion the strengths of our quality project are:

1. it produced concrete results, concrete tools / procedures for a better quality management of UCE on the levels of development, provision, monitoring and evaluation in our organization and a support structure (consulting on quality by the Center for Continuing Education) was established that UCE programs are developed more professionally from the beginning;
2. quality in UCE was discussed on program level as well as on other university levels;
2. the process as such which was designed to allow participation of all involved, on different levels, in a creative and motivating way. The process therefore became a learning process for all involved and can be seen as a model for future organizational development in UCE.

9. Weaknesses of the case study

One could argue that

1. the process took too long in comparison with a simple top-down process and the model is accompanied with new bureaucracy;
2. the model did not (yet) answer some important questions in relation to the UCE diploma courses, e.g. How many UCE diploma programs can be directed by one person? What are the prerequisites for becoming an academic director of a UCE diploma course? Do we need a qualification profile, should the university provide training? How to we find excellent, independent peers for evaluation? Should a university really outsource the discussion about new UCE proposals to peers (in the senate there is no time for intensive discussions)? What role can an organizational unit like a Center for Continuing Education play in providing a forum for an academic discussion on new proposals?
3. a Lifelong Learning Policy for the University of Graz has not been developed yet which means that the quality model cannot be seen in an overall policy context of UCE at our university.

Now, finally, is the University of Graz on the right way for more quality for the learner?

Yes, I think so because feedback from (prospective) learners / their institutions is an integral part of all phases of our quality management model.