

QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION RECONSIDERED: THE SPEAQ PROJECT

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the main goals, as well as the planned and actual output of SPEAQ (Sharing Practices in Enhancing and Assuring Quality), a two-year European multilateral project. The paper offers an overview of the project's unique approach to the issue of quality and explains its special reflection-based research methodology, as opposed to 'official' quality assessment procedures. Furthermore, the paper describes key project activities, and outlines some future implications of the project.

Keywords: quality, quality circles, sharing practice, reflection.

1. INTRODUCTION

What is quality?

It is well-known in educational circles that quality in higher education is a problematic issue with many specific features. Firstly, this is because quality is a loan word in education and it is not always clear what it means in this new context. In its broadest meaning, quality is a generic term used to describe the 'goodness' or 'badness' of a product. In the educational context it describes several things: the practice of checking the standard of teaching at an educational institution, or, alternatively, the 'quality' of its staff, students, programs and infrastructure. It can easily be seen from the above that quality in higher education cannot be related to one tangible product. Another problem is that quality in higher education is retrospective, meaning that it refers to past achievements and practices by building on statistical data describing past performance. However, it is agreed by educational researchers that education – primarily higher education – should instead be part of the future, emphasising elements of improvement, enhancement and change for the better.

Another problem with quality assurance in higher education is that it mainly represents an external top-down approach; in this procedure, quality assurance agencies/organizations formally check whether or not the given university is fulfilling its main roles as educator and research centre. In these formal quality operations the actual teaching practice and learning experience as well, as the flesh-and-blood players of the educational process, get lost in the labyrinth of a too-distant and too-complicated bureaucratic procedure.

Doubtless, higher education needs to be the flagship of innovative and creative work and new approaches. But there is not much room for innovation and creativity in a formal, standardised quality procedure. Considering all the above problem areas, it has become clear that new approaches and novel methods are needed in the area of

quality assurance in higher education; joint efforts need to be made toward this goal institutionally, nationally and internationally, as well.

2. QUALITY AND THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATIONAL AREA

The European Higher Educational Area (EHEA), with its 40 states, is characterised by diverse social structures, different higher-educational systems, cultural traditions and a multicoloured linguistic scenery, all this meaning that – although, comparability is a significant issue – no single monolithic approach to quality assurance and no strictly unified standard can be applied to universities in Europe. This feature was taken into consideration by European experts when, in the Berlin communiqué of 19 September 2003 [1], the ministers of the Bologna process signatory states asked ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) members, in cooperation with the EUA (European University Association), the EURASHE (European Association of Institutions of Higher Education) and ESIB (National Unions of Students in Europe), to develop a more personalised set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance.

The speciality of these new standards lies with diversity and an emphasis on institutional characteristics. Being aware of European diversity, experts agreed on the importance of a possible bottom-up approach and diversity, as well as creativity, being building blocks of quality in higher education. The ministers stressed that 'consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself.' [2]

3. THE SPEAQ PROJECT

The SPEAQ project aims to fulfil this new approach to quality in higher education. The project, as stated in the project application, [3] uses a much needed and unique

approach, which will investigate and collect data from groups of different stakeholders within the university. As a result, people representing different areas at the university will think together and work closely together for better **future** results. Our project, unlike formal quality procedures, represents a **bottom-up approach**, leading from student level through course teacher level to quality management levels. Using a **reflective practice approach** adapted from methodology, these quality groups explore their own insights into quality issues; group members share ideas and practices, and then the groups are brought together to think and work cooperatively on new mini-projects in the area of quality.

Thus, the Sharing Practice in Enhancing and Assuring Quality (SPEAQ) project aims to bridge several gaps, typical of traditional quality assurance procedures. Firstly, it intends to link external and internal quality assurance procedures, and bring them closer to practice, including everyday teaching and learning experience. Also, it incorporates and adapts the idea of quality circles from the world of industry and production. Instead of the traditionally used statistical analyses, the SPEAQ project takes advantage of the new method of reflective practice, typical of the methodology of teaching.

4. QUALITY CIRCLES

Quality circles are essential to the success of the project. They have become important for us because quality circles, in general, represent **participatory** management techniques. They are primarily used in industry to help employees with improving quality and solving problems related to their own work. Quality circles are usually small; their members regularly meet, brainstorm and share ideas related to their own work including product improvement and working conditions. Members are also engaged in problem-solving activities. It is important that the primary aim of quality circle activities is not to describe the actual quality of any product or, anybody's work, but to improve these.

From a historical perspective, quality circles are usually associated with Japanese and American management and production systems of the post-war era. The idea of quality circles was introduced by W. Edwards Deming [4], the father of modern quality control systems, a statistician for the U.S. government. He based his proposals on the war-time experience of American companies. In his view, when controlling quality, the balance of sharing responsibility within a company is problematic. (Line managers: 85%, workers: 15%) In his opinion, this proportion should be reversed, and he argued that workers should get a more substantial share of quality and be made responsible for quality control. They also should be educated in quality control techniques. Rather than inspecting ready-made products for defects, he suggested to use quality circles to prevent defects during production.

Deming – who also worked and taught in Japan – made quality circles play a significant role in Japanese

economy. His quality circles were means by which workers were encouraged to use their knowledge and practical experience for the benefit of the whole company. After these early beginnings, quality circles spread rapidly – primarily in the U.S. and in Japan in the 1990s.

5. QUALITY CIRCLES IN SPEAQ

Through various project activities during the lifetime of the SPEAQ project at the participating universities, three quality circles were formed and linked from the bottom up. Students, course teachers and quality managers were given the opportunity to share ideas and practices and reflect on quality issues of their own area, from their own perspective, and to make suggestions for improvement. In the next phase, the three quality circles were connected by organizing a joint workshop, and the links between them solidified by the project findings and the development of joint mini-projects in the project's second year.

The SPEAQ project is truly international. It is coordinated by experts from the University of Southampton (United Kingdom), and project partners include the University of Aveiro (Portugal), Babes-Bolyai University (Romania), Copenhagen Business School (Denmark), Deusto University (Spain), Innsbruck University (Austria), University of Jyväskylä (Finland), University of Trento (Italy), University of Szeged (Hungary), and the European Students Union (Brussels).

6. PROJECT ACTIVITIES

The first project activity was data collection concerning stakeholder views on quality assurance and enhancement within their own circle. Thus, questionnaires were designed and focus group meetings were organised for students and course teachers and an interview was made with quality managers at each participating institution, in each participating country. These events were followed by an interactive workshop, with the aim of connecting the three quality circles and facilitating fruitful discussions between students, course teachers and quality managers.

At the University of Szeged, Gyula Juhász Faculty of Education, three project events – the student and the course teachers focus group meetings and the interactive workshop – have been organised, so far. Furthermore the outcomes of these events will be detailed.

Student focus group

The student focus group meeting was of key importance in the quality project. It was organised by the European Student Union (ESU), and the event in each country was mediated by an ESU student representative. This arrangement made it possible for students to formulate their opinions about their university and training programs independently of the official viewpoint. The 13 students of the University of Szeged who were selected to participate in the focus group discussion, represented various levels and university programs. Of these 10 students were in their 2nd year in the Environmental

Studies BSc program and 3 students represented a higher vocational training program in Banking and Finance. Representatives of the institution's students union were also invited. This composition of the group, we believe, gives a good overview of the quality issues at our whole university, since all the above-mentioned participants actually represent three university faculties, the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Economics, and the same students also had an insight into the quality of teaching and learning at the Faculty of Education, since this latter institution is responsible for the language modules of these programs. Firstly, students were given questions to prepare and guide them; the warm-up soon evolved into a free and heated discussion on quality. Ultimately, students were asked to fill in a questionnaire. Those, who wanted to, could complete it in English, but those who were less confident, could use their mother-tongue. Actually, there were several students who combined the two languages quite naturally when answering the questions. The questions were aimed to elicit personal viewpoints and responses based on reflection. Sample questions included the following: Is your opinion considered at the university? Is there any follow-up? In what context is the issue of quality raised at the university? Do you ever discuss quality issues with your peers in informal contexts? Do you get any motivation/help from your institution to improve?

Most students thought that the quality of education is teacher-dependent, thus simplifying the issue of quality to having 'good teachers' and 'bad teachers'. They pointed out that communication between teachers and students could be problematic and students were to be blamed for that, too. Many students did not know, for example, when their teachers office hours were nor what exactly the system of office hours meant.

When asked if their opinion of higher education was considered by people in the management, they answered that teachers and administrators were always busy, and they did not have the time to deal with issues which were really important for their students.

When talking about student organisations, participants did not seem to know what student union members were doing nor why.

They added that in quality, it being a very complex issue, the students' well-being is influenced by the so-called 'comfort' factors, such as well-equipped classrooms and libraries, sports facilities and quality cultural programs.

They also agreed that it would be important for the institution of higher education to map student opinions on a more regular basis, and to establish closer links with university management and the world of work.

In summary, on the basis of student feedback, it can be said that students were pleased to be asked and to be able to give their opinion on quality. All the participants shared many ideas and, coming from different university programs, they learnt from each other and, ultimately,

gained a deeper insight into quality matters at the whole university.

Course teachers focus group

In the next phase of data collection, six literature teachers were asked to participate in the focus group. They were from three language departments (English, French and Russian) and they were responsible for a variety of literature courses, ranging from The History of Russian Novel, to the English Renaissance and The Literary Grotesque in French Literature. As a starting point, most teachers agreed on the necessity of the dialogue between management, staff and students. They emphasised the importance of regularly assessing student course evaluations and tailoring their own courses and teaching practice accordingly.

When asked about their most rewarding teaching experience, all participating teachers answered that the most rewarding experience for them was in connection with their students' achievements. Helping students, and the contentedness and appreciation of students were more important for teachers in general than recognition by upper management, or money. Their examples of good practice included updating the reading list under the influence of students' critical remarks and visiting and observing classes of other teachers or other institutions. They also underlined the importance of participation in national and international teaching and research projects which largely contribute to personal, departmental and institutional improvement. Course teachers also valued the significance of flexibility and creativity in quality – features which are traditionally not present in formal quality assessment procedures. Most teachers feel they are listened to in their own departments, but how they feel and their opinions are rarely asked or needed by higher level managers or administrators.

In summary, it can be stated, that there is a tendency for quality to become part of the everyday teaching profession. The heterogeneity of learning groups, crowded classrooms and the lack of proper teaching material and time may all work against this tendency.

Interactive workshop

The third project activity was the so-called 'interactive' workshop. Its aim was to engage all participants, teachers, students and representatives of management in an interesting and meaningful activity and have them reflect on quality in everyday life and their own work. At the same time, it was also an important goal to have them spend quality time together, and share their ideas and practices, first in small groups, and later in one large group. Thus, the three quality circles of students, quality managers and teachers are united.

In Szeged, the 2-hour workshop had a total of 24 participants, 21 teachers, 1 (institutional) quality manager and 2 students. After a brief brainstorming session on the quality of education, the participants were asked to do a

group activity, i.e. work on the so-called 'tablecloths' in small, mixed groups of 5-6 people.



Picture 1. The tablecloth activity.

On their large sheet of paper – the tablecloth – each group was given the pictures of a variety of tangible objects, including a food item, a piece of clothing, an office machine, a piece of furniture, a book and a car. Groups were asked to discuss and write down questions they would have asked about the given product from its owner, had they decided to buy it. After that, the small, mixed groups had to go through the questions again and decide if any of those were relevant to quality issues in higher education. Then the small groups evolved into one large group and selected the most important educational questions from the common reservoir.

This is how workshop participants, teachers, students and managers eventually came to the conclusion that the importance and nature of quality in higher education is not something abstract, neither it is very different from the quality of those everyday objects and simple things that surround us at home, or which we desire in our everyday lives.

Following the interactive task, participants could familiarise themselves with the concrete project aims and activities and each group elicited two special quality questions that interested them the most.

Eventually, participants were given a feedback form and given the opportunity to come up with suggestions for follow-up and mini-projects. Their suggestions included follow-ups of the student and the course teachers focus group meetings. Participants felt they were ready to do mini-projects to measure the fairness of the credit system by comparing student workload in various courses of the same credit value. Also, there were suggestions for data collection concerning educational services at the university. Workshop participants expressed a keen interest in mapping the quality issues in relation to some

special interdisciplinary programs and unorthodox form of teaching, including CLIL (Content Language Integrated Learning) and various forms of e-learning.

7. PROJECT OUTCOMES

The project outcomes will be useful to a variety of stakeholders in higher education, including teachers, students, quality managers and experts of quality assurance agencies, as well.

The mini-projects are expected to embody a joint effort of the combined institutional quality circles; thus, internal quality at our universities can be developed and embedded in concrete educational situations. Very importantly, as the project application puts it, '... The results of the development projects will allow others to learn from and replicate this work as well as contribute to a quality dialogue which involves interactions between the players at all levels.' [3]

The SPEAQ project also demonstrates possible ways of enhancing quality in a variety of interdisciplinary university programs and e-learning environments.

8. CONCLUSION

In summary, it can be stated that the project offers a new approach to quality, which promotes dialogue, engagement, reflection and personal responsibility. Since it is a large-scale international project, it is also expected that participating universities and organisations will continue their networking activities in the future, too, and their cooperation will lead to a wider and more life-like concept of quality in European institutions of higher education.

9. LITERATURE

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