E-QUALITY: TRAINING TEAMS TO IMPLEMENT QUALITY IN ODL AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL IN EUROPE

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Quality: a need for improving ODL development in higher education

Quality assessment is becoming a strategic issue for ODL (Open and Distance Learning) service providers and users. As the market for ODL services is opening up in Europe the number of ODL services in the field of higher education is growing, but end users actually have no ways of assessing their quality.

The implementation of ECTS system will facilitate a new type of students and of student mobility: students will be able pick up courses and training programmes here and there according to their specific objectives and criteria; the opportunity to attend courses in a different linguistic environment without the cost of "physical mobility" will also attract students.

In this context it is of major importance that European universities can enter the "competitive education market " through a "quality approach " and guarantee that their ODL services are conform to an explicit quality standard. For university staff, it will equally be important to rely upon the quality of the ODL services proposed by other universities to validate courses followed there by their own students.

It is assumed that quality will reengineer activities, information channels and products in the forthcoming period, or in other words quality will modify the organisation's structure to incorporate the expected and needed improvements.

End users and companies looking for their staff's continuing education have the same quality requirement.

The e-Quality project: a contribution for improving quality in ODL in higher education in Europe

On going normalisation has still quite a work to do on ODL services. Nevertheless, the on going work on normalisation is mainly centred on technical issues as the interoperability of the systems; our approach is – on the contrary – centred on the learners and on the learning process.

The **e-Quality** project, partly funded by the European Commission under the Socrates/Minerva Programme[1], while deep rooted into the on going normalisation work, proposes to offer a ground for practical design and implementation of a quality methodology, a training package for staff in charge of its implementation, a validation field and a knowledge data base for results and best practice dissemination.

The pedagogical approach puts the student's needs at the root of the ODL quality process. This approach is comprehensive: It encompasses all the processes needed to validate in real situation the produced methodology and documents.

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The **e-Quality** project starts with the comparative analysis of the partners' context that permits to be aware and detect a set of existing blocking factors in the implementation of quality. Different approaches from different scenarios were the base for the development of a common model; "The Student Life Cycle". It aims also to build a methodological guide based on an abstract model of the ODL quality in Europe. This conceptual model contains a common reference and variations core appropriate to the cultural countries context of the project partners.

In the frame of the **e-Quality** project, through a collaborative work a set of criteria and indicators are being developed. The idea is offering guidance enhancing the improvement of ODL higher institutions in quality terms. Furthermore this information may be considered as key success elements when implementing quality methodologies.

The project supplies core methodology and tools, as well as accompanying interactive documents and resources (guidelines, best practices, models...) which explicit the use of the methodology and tools. Our references are mainly the EFQM model and partly the norm ISO 9001, in its version 2000, as it is applicable to services and focused on "clients' satisfaction".

It produces a training package to train, in face to face and at distance, several teams of concerned staff (both trainers, technicians and administrative, with students as observers) to understand changes, to use the resources and apply the methodology. We focus our work on training teams working in ODL as we agree on the need for an institution that has to develop ODL to organise its ODL service on a collaborative base between all actors concerned: teachers but also technicians and administrative staff.

The methodological guide is exploited to build supports to form the teams FOAD in the quality, to experiment these supports in actual ODL training, to estimate his efficiency during the actual implementation of the quality by experimental ODL teams (with at least one "team" in each of 5 partners' Universities). In every stage, the guide is revised to take into account the training sessions and observations results of the experimental teams implementing quality in the ODL. The test results are re-invested into the project production process, to adjust the methodology and the core documents.

A political European vision

As European Universities have a key role to play in on normalisation and quality, it is important not to leave the leadership to North American organisations. The communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin 2003 is the corner stone of this construction and give us the background of our project. One paragraph is dedicated to "Quality Assurance".

The Ministers declare first that « The quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area" and they "commit themselves to supporting further development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level." The first issue the Ministers stressed is "the need to develop mutually shared criteria and methodologies on quality assurance."

The Ministers fixed a very precise agenda, arriving at its first rendezvous this year 2005. During this year our national quality assurance systems should include:

a) A definition of the responsibilities of the bodies and institutions involved.
b) Evaluation of programmes or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results.
c) A system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures.
d) International participation, co-operation and networking.

e-Quality project: in line with the Berlin Communiqué

ODL, as part of the teaching activities of some higher education institutions, must follow the same rules. Our project is directly addressing theses four issues above:

a) ODL is not an individual project, managed by a sole teacher; it implies that all the "student life cycle" is focusing on the student's success, starting with the welcome and advise before the registration to the exam assessment, through all a tutoring and monitoring follow up. Such process involves several bodies and needs several roles to be played by teachers, administrative and technical staff. This point refers also to a basic requirement of norm ISO 9001: management of the organism must be engaged in the quality step.

b) Our project includes a training session of teams – at least one in each partner's country - responsible of development and delivery of an ODL course to implement quality in 2 sub-processes (resources production and student support). The way these teams will apply their new competencies in quality will be evaluated later on, including the participation of students.

c) We define quality indicators and criteria to measure quality implementation in the 2 sub-processes mentioned above, practical and adapted to the different possible roles played in the teams.

d) The international partnership allows us to build a representation of the sub-processes – called e-Lup – based on a comparative approach of models, associated with a Best Practices database. We also elaborate an analysis of the situation of quality representation and implementation in our 5 countries, including a synoptic table of blocking factors from the different cultural and organisational environments.

Within the project, we keep aware of the evolution of norms and standards in the quality field as well as we keep in touch with the other European projects working in the same area as EQO (European Quality Observatory) project.

Intercultural approach

The project tries to conciliate an apparent contradictory goal. It should try to build a global vision, with the risks that standardisation of processes could flatten the original vision of the 5 different countries which take an active part in the project. Every country has its own vision, its own characteristics, its own goals and attends for an efficient e-learning application. Thenceforth the leaded researches within the project have to be organised to smooth the whole e-learning process without excluding the countries particularities and cultural specificities.

To fulfil this objective different measures have been taken:

a) Develop every project's block integrating a participative, collaborative approach. Every participant is asked to get involved into every work package and has to give his own vision of the current developed tasks. This has a strong impact on the project, with sometimes difficulties and pulling that enrich the whole project vision.

b) Use of a common platform to exchange resources, remarks through forums and directories

c) Implementation of a survey gathering different countries' e-learning policies

d) Switzerland (HEVS) is in charge of collecting and pointing the specific intercultural nodes, contributions and inputs particularly during the future training session testing the e-quality method

The consortium intends to build a coherent vision including a horizontal method based on the systemisation of collected best practices and introducing vertical elements belonging to cultural aspects. The systemic vision that underlies the project helps not to move away from the initial objective: include differences without erasing it.

The national environment: cultural and organisational issues

National studies have been conducted in the 5 countries and reports have been written on the situation of quality implementation, especially in higher educational institutions, including cultural and organisational factors able to influence such implementation. They also gather statistical data e.g. on rates of equipment and access to Internet.
The analysis of the national reports show some similarities, for instance, in the evaluation process of universities, which can be seen as a favorable factor for quality implementation:

- a compulsory process in all the countries
- a process defined by the state
- a process including a national agency
- internal & external evaluation
- quality is an explicit or implicit objective

In terms of blocking factors, some of them are common to the 5 situations, for instance:

- High focus on teaching instead of learning
- To design quality ODL material is time consuming
- The quality system is not integrated in the management system of the institution

But some other are concerning only some countries but not all:

- Lack of technical assistance for the staff (Fr, Pl, Sp)
- 'you can teach face-to-face when you know the content, and you can teach at distance when you can teach face-to-face ' (Fr, Pl)
- Teachers are reluctant to be evaluated (Fi, Fr, Sp, Sw)

These similarities and differences will be taken into account when preparing the training material.

The "lifecycle student" model

After considering 5 European country scenarios plus the state of the art underlined by the EFQM and ISO background, from different approaches "The Student's Life Cycle" was obtained. The model considers the student needs in a timeline, from the very beginning until the end of the training actions and it is focused to facilitate the optimisation of quality in two senses. On one hand the maximisation of student's satisfactions with a wide range of issues such as communication with counsellor, tutors, peers, administrative and technical staff etc., or having excellent learning materials, educational resources, etc. On the other hand "The Student's Life Cycle Model" contributes to establish key success recommendations through a set of quality criteria and indicators for the learning effectiveness. In this sense, another remarkable output is the elaboration of charts that interconnect four main categories, which are roles, activities, artefacts and additional elements. The idea is to show how to face actions, in quality terms, for the continuous improvement of ODL trainings.

The e-Lup editor

Conceptual model is materialised by a general quality process charter, references to norms and standards, a data base of good practices, and a methodological guide of the e-learning quality process. The guide supplies to every actor (the tutor, the author, the administrative staff, the financial staff, the technical staff …) a common methodology and specific guides in their activity. These various resources - guide, charter, norms and standards, good practices are linked together to facilitate a global point of view. Cultural variations are also indicated. The methodological guide is implemented in an interactive document named " e-LUP: e-learning Unified Process ".

The name " e-learning Unified Process (e-LUP) " was chosen by analogy with the Unified Process, implemented in Software engineering for the software development [Jacobson and al. 1999, RUP 2003] based on the modelling language Unified Modelling Language (UML) [Rumbaugh and al. 1999].

The modelling language is very general. As in RUP, activities, roles, artefacts and workflows are used. Activities are described by step by step procedures, artefacts (input data and output results). The modelling language fits our needs: to describe a concrete implementation of a general quality

approach.The E-LUP editor is a collaborative editor helping users to capture and to validate roles, activities, artefacts and workflows.

The Best Practice database

The objective of the best practices database is to offer e-learning designers and developers some references and examples of successful implementation – in term of Quality - easily adaptable and reproducible in other contexts.

A "best practice" can be seen as an efficient solution to a problem encountered in e-learning or an improvement issue. It has been implemented and positively evaluated, demonstrating an effective means of satisfying the users' need, based on explicit Quality indicators. The user may be a student, a trainer, a tutor, or any stakeholder. To be useful, a "best practice" must be described in a way an external reader can understand the context, the conditions of implementation, and receive advice on how to implement it, the needed resources, on what difficulties have to be solved, and how to do it, and what advantages are gained for the different users. Difficulty here means the specific situation that may appear when implementing the "best practice" and that must be anticipated. For each difficulty at least one solution must be available. The advantage refers to an effective solution to a problem widely encountered in e-learning or to an effective improvement.

The training sessions

The main objective of the training materials produced in the project is to enhance the trainees' awareness on the quality issues and their importance in the context of his/her own work. This is achieved with planning and generating materials on two levels, the general and the role-based levels.

At the general level are introduced the core concepts, which are necessary for the understanding and achieving quality ODL. The conceptual clarification aims at the comprehension of the meaning of core concept, like ODL, student-centeredness and student lifecycle, and their special characteristics with implications on quality. Quality is examined on the institutional, national and European levels. On the contextual level the objective is that the trainee understands the impact of cultural and institutional characteristics on quality in ODL. The aim is to combine the general knowledge of quality into trainee's own experiences and contexts. This enables trainee's awareness of special characteristics that has an impact on quality in his/her own institutional setting, and can situate his/her own role/roles into context of the student's lifecycle.

At the role-based level the material describes and defines the essential roles in the ODL. At the focus are different indispensable duties, not professions, which comprise the content of a role necessary for the quality ODL. Roles introduced in the materials can be roles of the one person, for instance a teacher. The roles can also be carried by a group of people, a team involved in ODL process and roles and activities are shared with team members. Important is that trainee understands all the required roles and their relations in implementation of quality learning event. The roles are described with the connected activities and the artefacts to be used in order to achieve good quality. The objective is that the trainees can on basis of the materials identify the necessary roles they have to perform, select the activities they have to take and choose the artefacts to be used to enhance quality in ODL.

Conclusion

Quality is a strategic issue for the success of ODL (Open and Distance Learning) services. In **the e-Quality** project, we aim to build a common model for ODL quality where we unify the core concepts without erasing cultural differences. For this purpose, we are currently building a methodological guide and training materials which will be validated *in situ*. To train the ODL actors, we choose to address the training of both the whole team and specific actors.

We will draw up a first assessment after the training sessions which will take place till June 2005.

The partnership

The project is supported by 6 institutions from 5 European countries:
- The Pôle Universitaire Européen de Montpellier-Languedoc Roussillon (France), that is in charge of the management of the project, on behalf of the UO-MLR (Open University - Montpellier-Languedoc Roussillon);
- The University Montpellier 2, France;
- The UOC (Open University of Catalunya), Spain;
- The University of Tampere, Finland;
- The Technical University of Szceczin, Poland;
- The University of Applied Sciences Switzerland (Haute Ecole Valaisanne Spécialisée);
- The University of Lausanne, Suisse.

The external evaluation is lead by the Belgian company ATiT.

The public project website: www.e-quality-eu.org

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EQO (European Quality Observatory): http://www.eqo.info/

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