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The e-Quality project: a contribution for improving quality in ODL in Higher Education in Europe

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Preamble

Most challenges are related with management in Higher Education institutions. Quality Assurance is officially part of these challenges, even if there are not particular Quality models fully adapted to the educational reality¹. In some countries, lack of formal regulations considering ODL in the same level of conventional education is also an important handicap. On the other hand, some norms are too manufacturing process-based integrating too many administrative issues, so a need of inclusion of pedagogical approaches is needed.

The e-Quality project aims to contribute to this debate with a European, cross-cultural focus and a concrete experiment.

1. Presentation of the e-Quality project

The e-Quality project, partly funded by the European Commission under the Socrates/Minerva Programme² (2003-2006), while deeply 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. Five countries are involved: Finland³, France⁴, Poland⁵, Spain⁶ and Switzerland⁷.

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.

2. A comparative analysis in 5 European countries

¹ On quality from an institutional perspective, see [Harvey, 2003]; on quality from a pedagogical point of view, see [Frydenberg, 2002]

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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. A questionnaire has been designed and validated by partners, to describe the situation in all participating countries: Finland, France, Poland, Spain and Switzerland.

This questionnaire is built from general information to more specific one:

- **The educational context**
- **Representation and implementation of Quality**
- **Implementation of Quality in the partner's institution**

National studies have been conducted in the 5 countries, using this common questionnaire. Five reports and a synthesis have been written and are available on the project website¹. The synthesis includes also an interesting comparison on blocking or helping factors for quality implementation in Higher Education institutions, in general and for ODL in particular [Dumont & Sangra 2005]. For instance, we have listed a set of common favourable factors such these:

- The new European degree organization (Bachelor Master Doctorate) will lead universities to publicize their training programmes and to facilitate to their students an access to training modules from other universities;
- With an easier and faster access to Internet, the universities begin to face concurrence with other European universities;
- The evolution of technologies, including high-speed access to Internet, development of e-mail communication, forums, videoconferences, streaming video etc., make possible the condition for high level ODL services.

As blocking factors, common to the 5 countries, we have found:

- High focus is put on teaching instead of learning;
- To design quality ODL material is time consuming.

We can mention also blocking factors, common to the 4 out of the 5 countries:

- Teachers are reluctant to be evaluated
- Traditional low consideration of ODL and consequently no recognition of ODL teaching
- Copyright issues are not taken into account
- Low value of the pedagogical issues: when recruiting new university teachers, the pedagogical skills are not a prerequisite.

This collaborative work has been used to elaborate the objectives and to build the material of the training of national teams working for ODL development and delivery.

3. Modelisation of processes

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. Our work highlights the difficulties to build a common model. This is mainly due to the differences between the organizations involved at the national or local level.

¹ www.e-quality-eu.org

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.

From a general “student life-cycle” where the partners have identified roles, activities and tools, we focus our work on 2 main sub-processes: “Learning Material Design and Production” and “student support”. This choice allows us to work on 2 very different kinds of sub-processes, each one being a useful representative of its sort. The first one concerns the production phase of ODL and is merely resources oriented, including technical quality aspects, dealing with issues such as interoperability, metadata, learning objects etc. The second one concerns the diffusion phase of ODL and is human relationship oriented, dealing with issues as pedagogical strategy, communication abilities, delay for response etc.

4. A choice compatible with ENQA standards and guidelines

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”.

The project is perfectly in line with the choice made by the Ministers in charge of Higher Education, adopting “the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area as proposed by ENQA” [Bergen, 2005], stressing that “there is still progress to be made, in particular as regards student involvement and international cooperation.”. From this date, these “standards and guidelines” [ENQA, 2005] must be considered as the main reference for quality assurance in Higher Education at the European level and we consider that they are also relevant for ODL, even if in this case some other criteria have to be taken into account.

5. ELUP: a tool to integrate quality

In order to model quality into ODL processes in every institution, we design a tool the “ELUP Editor” (ELUP: E-Learning Unified Process, by analogy with the Software Unified Process [Jacobson et al. 1999]). ELUP is based on the Unified Modelling Language (UML) [Booch et al. 1999]. The ELUP Editor is devoted to structure, to document and to share ODL concepts. Each user (currently, a participant of the e-Quality project) provides activities, roles, artefacts, workflows to communicate information about quality in ODL in his/her institution. The user indicates who (a role) is performing an activity (including intermediate steps, quality indicators and criteria). He/she precises also which artefacts are needed (input artefact) or produced (output artefact) by the activity. He/she organizes the activities into workflow through UML activity diagrams. The modelling concepts used in ELUP (role, activity, artefact, workflow) can be linked to IMS-LD concepts [IMS-LD]. We implement a web collaborative ELUP editor. Currently, we are implementing a local version to ease separate work.

6. A training action to implement quality and validate the pedagogical resources

The project 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 or to organise its ODL service on a collaborative base between all actors concerned: teachers but also technicians and administrative staff. Training sessions began in September and will go on until the end of 2005.

The methodological guide is exploited to build supports to train the ODL teams on quality, to experiment these supports in actual ODL training, to estimate its 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.

7. Conclusion

At the moment when European Higher education institutions enter a new management era and must take into account quality step, ODL cannot stay aside. Some pedagogical problems are quite similar in traditional and ODL situations, for instance to determine the role and responsibility of teachers when students can access so many informations and pedagogical resources through Internet.

With the e-Quality project, we hope that some useful results will contribute to the implementation of Quality in ODL in Higher Education.

An international conference will be held in Poland in September 2006 to gather experts and ODL practitioners to debate on the project results and to compare similar experiences. Don't hesitate to contact the authors if you are interested in participating.

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