

European Quality Observatory

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INTRODUCTION: QUALITY AS A EDUCATIONAL LEITMOTIV

Quality has become a major factor for concern if e-learning should have its final breakthrough (Danish Evaluation Institute, 2003; Dondi & Moretti, 2004; Friend-Pereira, Lutz & Heerens, 2002; Frydenberg, 2002). This is the reason for the great variety of concepts and suggestions. One can regard quality more and more as a subjectively individual and collectively influential category. How should learning opportunities look like and learning environments be structured, now and in the future? How do we meet the demand for building high quality learning capacities in higher education—as an important contribution to transform our societies into learning societies?

The concept of quality in the public perception and debate today has gained the significance of a leitmotiv for the educational field in all European countries, having gained a similar importance like “equality” or “scientific orientation” in the educational debates of the 1970s in some European countries (Terhart, 2000, p. 809). It becomes clear that the debate on quality is a debate about how learning and education should look in the future.

The concept of quality does not appear as empirical accurately defined and operationalised notions but are rather constituted by a dense bundle of a broad range of arguments, objectives, convictions and procedures (Terhart, 2000, p. 809). Quality in e-learning in this sense has become a leitmotiv for educational policies, a slogan for practitioners, and a huge demand for learners. Achieving high quality is a hotly debated and much-sought-after goal in all segments of society and education. It is less characterised by its precise definition but rather by its positive connotation.

What is so difficult with quality, that everybody wants to achieve it and nobody can really define it? The very nature of quality is that it is a multidimensional concept and it is not possible to generally define a set of quality standards applicable to *all* countries and all educational sectors.

Quality embraces all the main functions and activities of higher education: teaching, research, staffing, students, infrastructure, and the academic environment (Crosby, 1980; Danish Evaluation Institute, 2003; Deming, 1982; Frehr, 1993). It is the relation between the expectations and

expected outcomes and the observed results. Continuous and permanent assessment and improvement are necessary to reach this objective. Quality—as much as education—is rooted in cultural values and traditions. Therefore quality strategies and definitions always have to be specifically taking into account the very context of their application.

To find a suitable model for quality development is of crucial importance for quality development in higher education. *Accreditation sets a frame for quality development which needs to be filled with more elaborated macro and micro strategies.* Due to the enormous variety of strategies in the field of quality development, it is difficult to tell which of the available concepts fits the specific needs in the given context. It becomes clear in recent debates that achieving quality is not only about finding a strategy but rather about filling this strategy with life, and stimulating processes of pedagogical professionalisation. Living the quality ideal is thus much more important than a criteria-oriented checklist like mechanistic quality understanding. It is about integrating professionalisation processes of the educational actors, like teachers, trainers and other stakeholders into strategies and reference models which are existing already.

The task to develop or to provide a high quality educational experience is, however, an extremely difficult challenge. The article suggests bringing together the *two* key aspects of quality development in higher education:

1. finding a strategy for quality development and
2. implementing it as an ongoing professionalisation process

For this purpose three developments are described: The quality development cycle which describes the quality development process from the needs analysis stage to the stage where the new values and processes are incorporated into the everyday work of all stakeholders. Second is the concept of quality literacy which is necessary for a continuous quality improvement in an organisation. Third, the European Quality Observatory, a decision support concept (an Internet-based database) is described, which can help educational actors to find a quality strategy which fits their specific purposes.

THE QUALITY DEVELOPMENT CYCLE: COMPETENCES AND PROCESSES

Modern quality development moves from input oriented approaches to a process oriented philosophy of permanent improvement. It involves the student not as a passive receiver any longer but as an active producer of his/her own learning process. To view quality development as such—an active process of participation and negotiation—means to challenge beliefs and existing values of all actors involved. The nature of quality development is then a constant adaptation process of the offered educational services to the target groups which are to be educated. Newer approaches highlight this aspect already, elaborating negotiation as important for successful quality development (cf. Ehlers & Fehrenbach, 2004). Quality development understood in this way goes the whole way of structuring educational activities and processes AND at the same time aims at having an impact on the learning process. Only if this goal is achieved can quality development be seen as education oriented quality development—as opposed to the often implemented model of (only) organisation oriented quality development.

This relates especially to the open nature of quality which in itself is not a normative definition but a relation between the perceived and the offered provision. Within this open concept of quality development, we can identify four steps educational actors have to engage into, to develop quality. For each of these steps which can be conceptualised as a cycle of quality development, certain competences are necessary to perform the intended processes of analysis, selection,

adaptation and so on. We suggest therefore in this article to bring together a process model with the concept of quality literacy (see Chapter 3) to describe the necessary components for successful quality development. In the context of the quality development cycle, the dimensions of quality literacy apply to the different steps of quality development (Figure 1), described as follows.

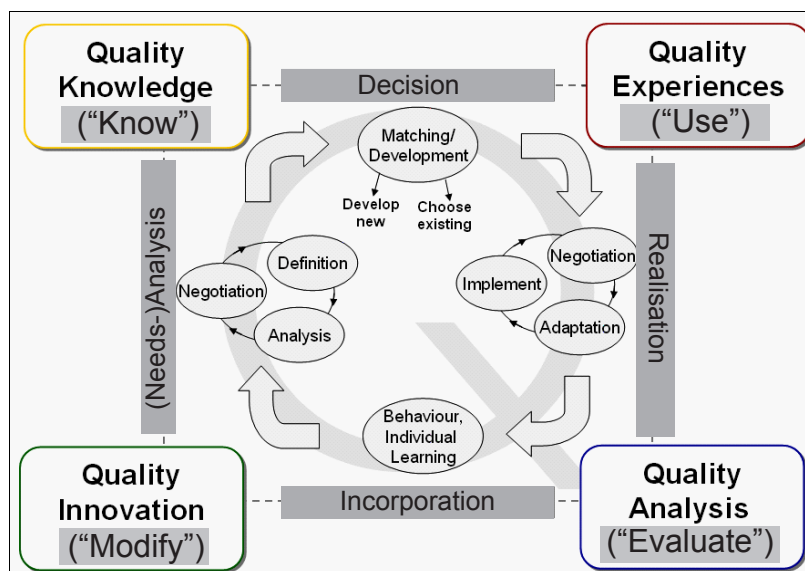
According to the presented model (Figure 1), quality development takes place as a sequence of four steps which involve (a) a needs analysis, (b) a decision process, (c) a realisation phase and (d) an incorporation phase.¹

Needs Analysis

In this phase the needs for quality, the situation and the context of the educational scenario are subjects of examination. The needs analysis phase includes in itself an iterative cycle which consists of an analysis phase of the current situation, a negotiation process between the involved stakeholders (e.g., learners, teachers, administration), and a definition phase where the needs are finally defined.

Stakeholders who are involved in these processes need the ability to evaluate and define the needs of all stakeholders which are involved in the educational scenario and negotiate between them to achieve a high quality of the offered learning environment (quality analysis). Additionally knowledge about the possibilities of quality development and about quality strategies or good practice examples could be of help in the needs analysis phase.

Figure 1. Quality development cycle (Adapted from Ehlers & Pawlowski, 2004)



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