

# **SPEAQ**

## **Sharing Practice in Enhancing and Assuring Quality**

### **Quality Manager Interviews: Questions, Data Summary and Conclusions**

Table of Contents

I. Introduction

II. Methodology

III. Data Summary

IV. Summary

V. Recommendations

#### **I. Introduction**

The SPEAQ project aims to fulfil a new approach to quality in higher education by collecting and investigating data from different stakeholders (quality managers, course teachers and students) within the participating universities. These data did not and did not intend to reflect university statistics, but they were based on personal reflection and experiences within each quality 'circle'. Quality managers, as well as representatives of students and course teachers made up these quality circles and during the first year of the project they participated in various project events, including focus group meetings (students and teachers), interviews (quality managers) and interactive workshops (all three groups). Quality managers' interviews took place in the period from May 7th to September 13th, 2012.

Quality managers represented a special case in the group of stakeholders. On the one hand, by embodying official policies and procedures they represented an 'external' point of view; on the other hand, by being part of the university staff and working closely with people from their own university, quality managers were also able to give an 'internal/insider' point of view. They formulated and described their personal opinion and experiences, which were all embedded in their colleagues' everyday teaching and the students' learning experience. This duality was seen in the set of questions, used by the SPEAQ coordinators in each participating institution; the concrete answers of quality managers also reflected the above-described speciality.

## **II. Methodology**

Quality managers' interviews were conducted by the individual coordinators at each participating university. Interviews were timed to take place at the end of the academic year of 2011/12 (May, June, July and August), or the beginning of the academic year 2012/13 (early and mid-September). Prior to the interview quality managers had been contacted by the institutional coordinators via telephone call or email. In some cases preliminary meetings were set up to clarify the aims and methods of the interview.

Quality managers in general were pleased to do the interview, to be able to tell their opinion and to become part of an international project on quality. The interviews were based on a previously agreed set of questions. The questions were translated into the national language if it was necessary and some questions were tailored according to each institution's specific quality needs. In several cases the interviews were loosely structured around the three sets of questions. When summarising the outcomes of the interviews, in some cases other supplementary material was also used to clarify certain issues or to give more relevant data. These supplementary sources included questionnaires (Cluj, Romania), the Institutional Quality Handbook (Szeged, Hungary), or, occasionally, since quality is a very complex issue, the opinions of two quality persons were included in the data collection process. (Southampton, Aveiro) The duration of the interview was 90-145 minutes. Some quality managers preferred to remain anonymous.

Prior to the interview quality managers were given information (written or oral description, or both) on the previous LANQUA project and its quality model. Also, they were explained the main goals and objectives of the SPEAQ project, the purposes of the interview and they were given information on the preceding project events (In most situations it was the Student Focus Group). The interview itself was occasionally preceded by one or two brief meetings between quality manager and project coordinator, and in some cases the briefing sessions were used as a warm-up activity to introduce the interview questions.

The quality questions were grouped into three broader areas, which were as follow:

1. What does quality mean to you?
2. Quality culture at your institution
3. Improving quality.

The managers' answers varied by length and the level of concreteness. These facts demonstrate that the institutional, structural quality systems as well as the background of the individual quality managers show diversity in the individual partner countries. Despite this feature it was possible to map common areas, practices and concerns in the field of quality. Occasionally, instead of answering the individual questions one by one, some quality managers (Hungary, Spain, UK, Denmark) preferred to speak freely about the broader areas (see above) to avoid repetitions.

### **III. Data Summary**

#### *III.1. What quality means to you:*

##### *a) What in your opinion are the elements of a good institution/programme/course?*

Several interviewees (4) agreed that the clear description of aims, procedures and responsibilities, partnerships, transparency and a proper feedback culture can be identified as descriptors of quality in higher education. It was also added that quality is a process of self-questioning and self-assessment which occurs on a continuous basis. Two institutions (Trento, Aveiro) placed a special emphasis on the importance of student-centredness in institutional quality procedures. In Finland it was emphasised that institutional quality is twofold. First it means the quality of operations and activities and, second, it is the quality of results and outcomes. The complexity of good quality was described in Southampton as follows: 'To sum up, good quality involves having clear

guidelines, a clear set of rules and regulations, space for flexibility, good communication and mutual trust/understanding.' The Copenhagen Business School was represented by the Dean. He added that in a business school context quality has some additional descriptors; these schools concentrate only on social science subjects and they do not have the possible challenges associated with quality across very diverse teaching areas and disciplines. It also means that these schools have to be exceptionally competitive and go through an very strict quality procedure.

*b) What makes your experience as a professor/manager a valuable one?*

In general quality managers believe that the different perspectives present in higher education can add up and work towards a common goal for everybody's benefit. The human factor is also considered important: it was agreed by several interviewees that the opening up of communication channels at the university is a valuable, yet very challenging task for quality managers. It is also equally important to have all participants work together as team members. It was also emphasized that 'quality' in higher educational context is less of an operational term, but it should be an 'action term' instead.

*c) What is the most rewarding learning experience you have had on your programme/course? Say, why it was very rewarding.*

One of the most rewarding experiences is the fact that the students leave the institution with a different perspective than when they arrived. Another example included the realization that quality issues can serve as unifying factors at the university. Szeged mentioned participation in successful quality projects and the inclusion of courses on quality in master-level university programmes. Innsbruck mentioned the positive feedback from staff and students among the most rewarding experiences. In Denmark it was added that a very clear quality structure is needed to maintain the dialogue between the key stakeholders.

*d) What do you understand by the term quality within your university context?*

In university context quality for students means opportunities to gain knowledge, acquire skills and competences, all of which represent value in their prospective careers. For

lecturers and teaching staff internal quality should be about giving them the necessary support to achieve their aims as educators and also about creating an environment in which they can further develop both professionally and personally. Aveiro emphasised that quality is a combination of several factors. Quantitative indicators are part of it, but, as it was added, quality includes social, cultural, economic, human and relational factors as well. In Copenhagen it was added that quality is very much a 'daily business' and also that things not directly related to the teaching, for example buildings, infrastructure, libraries, IT systems, sports and other recreational facilities for students, as well as the availability of support staff are also essential to the experience of good quality.

*e) How do you make sure your courses are coherent within the degree programme?*

This question was not considered relevant for quality managers.

*f) Can you provide any examples of good practice in your institution?*

Some examples of good practice highlighted by the quality managers in relation to quality were as follow:

Deusto: the elaboration of a teaching-learning model, graphically represented by a pyramid that rests on 'learning and learner-centredness'.

Babes-Bolyai University: students sit on different committees and their voice is definitely being heard in quality issues as well. Also, UBB created a database for the management of research.

Jyväskylä mentioned the development of the centres of excellence (FINHEEC system) and HR excellence for researchers

Szeged: the elaboration of a research-based Quality model and its adaptation to the different needs of each faculty. The creation of an electronic platform (COOSPACE) to improve communication between students, teaching staff and (quality) managers. The introduction of a new distance-learning master's program with the aim of training quality experts for primary and secondary schools in the region.

Trento: integrated online system to have improved communication. The improvement of communication channels within the university, which is the achievement of a concerted effort of all stakeholders.

Aveiro gave an interesting example, namely, that the quality manager is also involved in teaching, so he/she has a more complex view of the teaching process and learning outcomes.

Innsbruck emphasised institutional support in the area of CPD (methodology), media, feedback on courses and discussions with students.

In Copenhagen an effort can be made to get the so-called Triple-Crown accreditation, which means an accreditation by three organizations (EQUIS, AACSB and Association of MBAs)..

## **2. Quality culture at your institution**

*a) Do you have a voice within your university? Are you listened to? If so, how is your opinion heard/acted upon? Where is your voice heard? By whom?*

Diverse answers were given to this question. In general, the quality manager is seen as a contributor to the quality assurance systems. In Hungary it was added that the quality manager is considered only a bureaucrat and not really listened to. Other quality managers added that a quality manager is part of a team and quality issues are raised within the team. But, in higher education it is the academics who make decisions. In these circumstances it is only possible to have an influence. As for the role of quality managers in the individual institutions, it can be mentioned, that much depends on the management and leadership. Quality managers are in daily contact with the university's top management. The most typical situation is that quality managers have a voice but it is not always the case that things are done accordingly. They also added that it is difficult for them to reach students and lecturers.

*b) In what contexts, both formal and informal, is quality/teaching practice/learning experience discussed in your programme/institution?*

Quality is prominent and evident in official procedures, but it is more and more frequently discussed in informal situations. The word quality is used very often, but its precise meaning is unclear for many. Students and teaching staff should be explained what is meant by quality and they should be taught about it. More occasions should be created for informal discussions and reflection. These are the opportunities when the sharing of good practice can occur.

*c) Is quality a daily matter for you, or something, which occurs only sporadically?*

Naturally, for quality managers quality is part of their daily work. For other people it should also become part of the daily routine. It is thought by quality managers that quality matters are slowly becoming everyone's concern at universities and there is an increased engagement of staff and students. It is also thought that quality managers can do a lot to raise awareness and develop the proper quality culture at the institution.

*d) Is quality something, which is imposed externally? How do you know what works well in your practice? What do you think you do well in your department that other departments can learn from?*

To put it simply, in the common view quality is external. It is imposed externally through the accreditation of the institution as well as the accreditation of its individual programs. Although it should be an internal matter. In Finland the quality manager emphasised that Finnish universities have their own quality systems and decision making power. In Italy from 2013 onward national quality procedures will be introduced. It was agreed that the individual units at universities (institutes, departments) and their heads also play a very important role in assuring and enhancing internal quality. But there aren't any unified procedures to do this; engagement, methods, intensity of work may vary from department to department. In Denmark there is a special quality system for business schools.

*e) Who are the quality managers in your institution?*

The situation varies from university to university. Mostly it is the rector (vice-rector) or the faculty dean who represent top quality management. As for the daily work and administration there is a manager (who may not have a background in teaching e.g. Hungary), and/or a team in charge of quality assurance at institutional level. Examples of quality management bodies include the Centre for Quality Management at BBU, Cluj, Data Analysis Commission (Aveiro), Quality Steering Group, Jyväskylä, the Evaluation and Accreditation Unit in Copenhagen. In certain institutions there is a Committee including someone from the top management, the quality manager, representatives of teaching staff and students. (Quality Assurance Committee, Szeged). In summary there

are structures in place at each institution, but the main question is what responsibilities and authority those structures actually have.

*f) What are the particular features of your institution, which would or should be taken into consideration when dealing with quality issues?*

Several interviewees spoke about the tension between research and teaching at the university and this concern has come to the forefront of quality assurance mechanisms, too. It is very difficult for universities to keep the balance between research-centredness and student-centredness. Other universities had to refocus their teaching profile due to the too frequent changes in their country's educational policy (Hungary, Italy). Thus institutions find it difficult to cope with these sudden changes and the diversity of their own programmes, and this situation has an impact on quality, too. Diversity can be catchy from the point of view of marketing, but it is a difficult issue when considering institutional/departmental quality. Also, in case of several new – interdisciplinary - programmes, new modes of learning, or state-of-the-art learning environments there are not yet adequate quality procedures in place. Another gap in quality procedures is that smaller universities, higher educational institutions of regional importance attracting students from their own province or region might want to focus on local features, including local and/or regional economy, schools, workforce, employment opportunities etc. This feature requires some flexibility in the area of quality assurance.

#### **4. Improving quality.**

*a) How can the learning experience be enhanced?*

It is a difficult question to answer because quality managers are mostly not directly involved in the teaching and learning processes. Better communication and cooperation with teachers might be helpful to link up with students and teaching staff. Networking opportunities also need to be explored. Quality should not be limited to formal procedures and qualitative data analysis. It is necessary to simplify quality assurance procedures on the one hand (To make them more accessible), and to broaden/personalize them on the other hand to make them more attractive for other stakeholders, too, including students and teachers. The learning experience can be enhanced by paying attention to small

details, accommodating student needs, and supporting and motivating both students and staff in their mission of quality. Students must have a solid grounding and must know what they learn and why they need those specific skills and competences. Learning experience can be improved in different ways by using more efficient methods, teaching material of high quality, providing more up-to-date information. Enhancement can also be achieved through structural measures. The key to all this is a solid feedback culture and quality culture. A system of establishing quality labels may be helpful by making quality visible for everyone. Tutoring systems, liaising with other institutions and cooperation in the area of quality can also contribute to an enhanced learning experience. Another important point is to change people's attitudes to quality. In general, more time, more money should be devoted to quality and more attention needs to be paid to it as well.

*b) What can you contribute to enhancing the learning experience?*

Quality managers can ensure good public relations, communicate effectively. They might try to disseminate information, give feedback on a regular basis both formally and informally. They can initiate and do quality projects in order to create a common basis for improvement. It is an absolute necessity for them to listen to others including teachers and students. A quality manager should be willing to learn all the time. It has also been noted that when working in the area of quality it is always a work done by all stakeholders; being an efficient quality manager takes the work and enthusiasm of many people: it is definitely not the effort of one individual.

*c) What is in place for future developments in quality?*

As for the future it is necessary to make quality a habit, to consolidate the process and to be consistent. It is also important for quality managers to obtain more information and concentrate on specific areas to target particular and/or new areas and problems.

*d) What would you like to improve in the study experience and how would you do it?*

Feedback from students is becoming more and more important in the quality process. It is an important quality issue how to handle feedback from students who do not have the desirable attendance or achievements.

*e) What do you think a quality manager does/should do to improve quality?*

Aim at better communication and access and update all relevant information. Should be a good communicator and an excellent diplomat in one person. .

*f) How do quality processes in your institution reflect changes/trends in higher education?*

Quality managers found this question difficult to answer. Through networking and international projects they can learn about the new trends and also they can have access to examples of good practice. So, it is important to internationalize the university because by doing so internationally recognized quality processes and procedures can be implemented. In Copenhagen the cornerstone of CBS's quality policy has four columns. These include Quality Assurance, Knowledge Sharing, Evaluation and Learning. These factors aim to ensure the engagement of several key stakeholders. It is important that the four columns correspond with the 7 European Standards and Guidelines for internal quality assurance. Thus the major quality trends of European higher education are reflected in the institution's quality policy.

#### **IV. Summary**

Having analyzed the transcripts and institutional reports on quality manager interviews, in summary it can be concluded that each institution considers quality assurance an area of utmost significance and there are some mechanisms in place everywhere to control and assess institutional and departmental quality. The significance of quality issues is shown by the fact that it is a top academic from the university hierarchy (rector, vice-rector, dean) who is in charge of quality issues at each institution. Working with quality is team work, so his(her) work is aided by a quality team. Quality assessment is primarily seen as an external procedure, but there is an increasing number of people at the universities, who believe that quality at the same time is soon to become an internal matter as well. Each stakeholder needs to understand that enhanced quality means institutional/departmental prestige. While quality managers seem to be in touch with the university management on a daily basis, in the interviews they regretted not being able to maintain a similar close working relationship with students and teaching staff, although, they agreed, it would be a desirable move and it would result in a beneficial change from the point of view of quality. They said that quality managers usually work behind the scenes and in most cases their work becomes 'visible' in their respective communities only during accreditation or

other periods of official assessment. This situation should be changed and the work of quality managers should become an integral part of everyday life at each university. Quality is a term, as it was said, which has to be translated into structures to support programme managers, teachers and students as well. The scene is also varied when looking at the impact of quality managers on education and university policies. Some quality managers think they are listened to and they have a voice in their communities, while others think - although they are given the opportunity to speak - they are not really listened to in a sense that they cannot influence decision makers.

Quality managers have all called for a change concerning the mentality of people. All stakeholders should make quality part of their everyday professional life and they should understand that through sharing good practice, effective communication and by paying attention to small details inherent in their profession they would be empowered to enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

More opportunities should be given to instructors and students to share ideas on what works well in their own context. Learning experiences can be improved in various ways and by establishing and solidifying a proper feedback culture we can help to use the most adequate teaching and learning materials, methods and environment. Quality managers need to be diplomatic and keep a multilateral dialogue going.

It is important, too, that quality issues come into the foreground and the centre of attention when things go well at the university, in a program, or even in a course, and not only when serious problems arise and criticism or radical changes are needed. Several quality managers commented on the fact that too frequent structural changes, or changes in national educational policies make it impossible for institutions to deal with quality issues efficiently on a long-term basis.

## **V. Recommendations**

- The establishment of a more coherent quality system at European universities where roles and responsibilities in enhancing quality at institutional, faculty and departmental level are efficiently allocated, not only from top to bottom but also from bottom up.
- The motivation of all players of higher education to change their attitudes to quality. They should integrate quality in their everyday professional practice. Sharing good practice, reflection and networking should become important tools in the process of quality enhancement.
- The development of educational and training opportunities in the area of quality internationally, nationally and institutionally. It is necessary to create quality training opportunities not only for quality managers, but also for teaching staff and interested students as well.
- The creation of quality labels at international, national and institutional level. Exceptional quality in all areas needs to be properly recognized.
- The enhancement of quality at all levels; the improvement of communication, bearing in mind that the flow of information is a two-way channel; information should go in both top-bottom and bottom-up directions. In addition, information should always be up-to-date, clear and accessible.
- The implementation of a proper feedback culture at each institution. Feedback culture needs to be improved, too, because regular and reliable feedback is an efficient way of involving all stakeholders in the quality process and also it is a possibility for 'internalizing' quality.
- Liaising with other institutions (organizations) both nationally and internationally is another important move in the process of enhancing quality. Sharing practice with colleagues from other institutions can result in improved quality. It is also a must to launch joint – national and international - projects in the area of quality, which would preferably include different stakeholders, managers, students and teachers.
- Making quality a daily habit and the use of practice-based reflection to assess and improve quality in general, and in particular the quality of specialized programmes, including CLIL, new learning environments, distance learning, blended learning, problem-based learning, cooperative learning, joint degree programmes and shorter programmes for mobility students.

- The regular elaboration and implementation of properly focussed 'mini' projects in the area of quality across the HE institutions, preferably with the participation of all the three quality circles, i.e. quality managers, staff and students.