Quality Assurance: From Bologna via Prague to Berlin

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In order for the objectives of the Bologna Declaration (1999) to be achieved, quality assurance measures are a *sine qua non*. Today, quality is therefore one of the buzzwords of European higher education; this also applies to the area of languages, including that of translation and interpreting. This article aims at sketching the context in which universities will have to develop their quality assurance measures in the future, and at discussing current developments in quality assurance within the area of languages, including a recent accreditation initiative for translation and interpreting.

One of the objectives of the Bologna process, stressed in the Prague Communiqué (2001) [**1**], is European co-operation to ensure high quality standards and to facilitate the comparability of qualifications throughout Europe. We can probably all agree that we want quality, but how do we define the quality that we seek to assure at European, national and institutional level, and how do we measure it?

Quality can only be defined and assessed on the basis of agreed standards at institutional, inter-institutional, national or European/international level; these standards may not only be defined in descriptive terms, but also in a measurable form, that is, as success criteria. As for the assessment of quality, there are different procedures: evaluation, benchmarking, accreditation[**2**], etc. These procedures can be applied to whole institutions, units of institutions, to study programmes, or to special areas such as internationalisation or the exploitation of ICT.

It goes without saying that the objective and the format of a given quality assessment must be compatible, and the quality descriptors and success criteria must be developed in such a way that the result of the assessment can be communicated to stakeholders in a meaningful way. In order to make sense, a quality assessment must therefore be a milestone in a quality enhancement process; the results must give good advice to the people responsible for the institutional quality enhancement processes, that is, constructively contribute to these processes as well as demonstrate to external stakeholders the level of quality achieved in a given area by the institution in question.

With the development of the European Area of Higher Education and intensified co-operation between universities, including credit transfer and joint degrees, it is more important than ever that the individual universities are able to demonstrate their commitment to quality. In recent years quite a few universities have therefore also undergone different types of quality assessment, and they will undoubtedly also expect their partner universities to undergo similar assessments if they are to continue co-operation in the future.

European University Association

At the European level, the quality issue is being dealt with by a number of institutions and organisations: The European University Association[**3**] (EUA) and the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education[**4**] (ENQA) are cases in point.[**5**]

Since 1999 the EUA (until 2001 CRE) has run the *Internationalisation Quality Review* (IQR) in co-operation with the IMHE programme of the OECD, the Academic Co-operation Association (ACA) as well as the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). This year the EUA, with financial support from the European Commission, has launched a major pilot project to introduce and develop a quality culture in universities and thereby contribute to

strengthening their autonomy and well as their ability to play a role in a European or international context.

Languages in the Bologna process

Languages play a very important role in the implementation of the Bologna process, and it is therefore the responsibility of the European universities to make sure that their language or language-related programmes meet the demand for quality, and that their graduates are able to meet the language needs of the open and international labour market. Thus, they must offer their students the opportunity to develop their language and intercultural communication skills as well as train highly professional language experts, translators and interpreters.

The European Language Portfolio[**6**] has been developed and piloted by the Council of Europe; a very important aspect of the portfolio project is the development of the global scale of proficiency levels within the Common European Framework of Reference. The descriptors used in the global scale and the self-assessment grids not only help teachers and learners assess the individual learner's level of qualification in the different language skills, they also provide the groundwork for commonly agreed standards that may be used in quality assessments within the area of languages.[**7**]

The ELC Berlin Declaration

A number of initiatives have been taken by the ELC as regards quality enhancement and assessment. As most readers of the Bulletin will know, the ELC, in co-operation with the Freie Universität Berlin, staged one of the major events of the European Year of Languages in 2001, viz. the 3rd ELC conference: *Multilingualism and New Learning Environments*. One of the outcomes of this conference was the Berlin Declaration[**8**], which calls upon those carrying forward the Bologna process, including the universities, to co-operate in developing multilingual and intercultural knowledge and skills as a precondition for the creation of the European Area of Higher Education. The Declaration further stresses the need for quality enhancement:

Language teaching and learning in higher education need to have clearly defined objectives related to language use. Objectives should be based on the Council of Europe's Common Framework of Reference for Languages. All language courses and modules should include assessment and have a credit value. This is to ensure transparency and comparability between institutions and languages and to facilitate credit transfer. It will enhance learner motivation and provide meaningful information for non-academic bodies such as potential employers.

University Language Policy

At the same conference, the ELC also published a reference document on language policy, *Multilingualism and New Learning Environments*[**9**]. In order to implement the ideas underlying the Berlin Declaration, universities will have to define their language policy, that is, define their mission, objectives and strategies as regards their contribution to the implementation of the multilingual and multicultural European Area of Higher Education. A pilot project has now been launched, in which a small group of European Universities join forces in developing guidelines for such a university language policy as well as implementing these guidelines at the individual universities, the idea being of course to inspire and learn from each other in the piloting phase, cf. also the report from the president at the beginning of this Bulletin.

Projects such as this one will undoubtedly contribute to the enhancement of the quality of language and language-related programmes in the future if adequate quality assessment measures are established to monitor results.

Thematic Network Project

The sub-projects of the current Thematic Network Project in Languages (2000-2003) clearly converge on the issue of quality. All three sub-projects must develop descriptors or reference points for their

respective areas in the coming year, and one of the objectives of the sub-project on Quality Enhancement is to develop a common framework of reference for quality enhancement and assessment. The results of the TNP may thus be considered the basis from which quality assurance within the area of languages may be developed. The results of the TNP sub-projects will be presented at next year's ELC conference[**10**], *The Role of Languages in the European Higher Education Area*.

Accreditation of translation and interpreting programmes

On the basis of a set of recommendations developed in the past year by a special task force, the Conférence Internationale d'Instituts Universitaires de Traducteurs et Interprètes (CIUTI) has decided to establish an accreditation procedure for translation and interpreting programmes. This will be the first international accreditation of language or language-related programmes and may serve as a concrete example of what can also be achieved within the area of languages.

The rationale behind this initiative is, again, the Bologna process and the need for continuous quality development and assessment in this context. In addition to national accreditation procedures, or other national quality assurance measures, there is a need for an accreditation in relation to internationally agreed standards within the professional field[**11**] in order for the individual institutions to demonstrate the quality level of their study programmes on the international labour market.

The CIUTI accreditation will thus have the following objectives:

- To provide market information to students and employers as to which programmes meet international standards for quality providers of professional, academically based translation and interpreting programmes.
- To provide an instrument for comparison and permanent benchmarking. The system should allow institutions to position themselves and their T/I programmes against CIUTI's international standards and encourage convergence on best practice.
- To promote quality enhancement. The system should be designed to encourage and develop sustainable and continuous enhancement
    - o For the institutions, through the process of assessment
    - o For the international system of T/I education, by exchanging experience and disseminating examples of best practice in learning, teaching, and research
    - o For the professions, by promoting the understanding of what is involved in the international practice of the T/I professions
    - o For the international market, by providing an international forum (CIUTI) for reaching agreement on quality standards and T/I practice.

In this way, the translator or interpreter who has been trained in an accredited programme should be certain that s/he has a solid background and training within the professional field, a fact which should also contribute to the fair recognition of the translation and interpreting professions.

In the coming year, an existing set of quality standards will be further defined and described under the following headlines: National standard, Mission, Strategy, Governance, Scope, Resources, Faculty, Students, Student services, Personal development, Programmes, Research, International dimension, and Connections with the professional environment and social and economic partners. One of the challenges of this process will be to make the standards measurable so that they can actually function as success criteria in the accreditation process.

The accreditation will be mission driven, which means that the individual institution applying for accreditation must define its mission and the mission of its T&I programmes. For instance, it must define whether the interpreting programme has as its objective conference interpreting or other types of interpreting e.g. court interpreting or community interpreting. This is important because the whole curriculum, entrance requirements, etc. will differ, depending on the mission. As for the description of the programme content, the accreditation will focus on learning outcomes, professional and personal competences as well as levels of qualifications. Since translation and interpreting programmes are not language learning programmes, and therefore require a solid basis in the foreign language(s), it can

be foreseen that the programmes eligible for accreditation will primarily been second cycle programmes in Bologna terms.

A wake-up call

It is fascinating to see how the Bologna Declaration has functioned as a kind of wake up call for all stakeholders of higher education in Europe. One might actually ask whether anyone had foreseen the rapid development we have seen since, in 1999, the ministers of education across Europe signed the declaration. Not only the European universities (EUA), but also the students' organisations (ESIB) have declared their support for the development of the European Higher Education Area and recognised the quality aspect as one of its key issues.

A few years ago, quality assurance and assessment sounded like management terms in the ears of most academics. Not so any more. Those of us who want to thrive and develop in the European Area of Higher Education must face the challenge and develop quality assurance measures within our individual fields. There is a clear mission for the European Language Council to continue to co-operate with universities and other associations and organisations to achieve the objectives of the Bologna Declaration and to contribute to the developments towards next year's milestone: the meeting of the ministers to assess progress in the Bologna process (Berlin, 18-19 September 2003).

Notes

[1] Major documents of the Bologna process may be found at www.bologna-berlin2003.de.

[2] It falls outside the scope of this article to go into details regarding the definition of these procedures; cf. e.g. the publications on http://www.enqa.net/pubs.lasso.

[3] http://www.unige.ch/eua/.

[4] http://www.enqa.net/.

[5] The quality issue underlies all the activities and Education & Training programmes of the European Commission; however, these will not be covered in this article.

[6] http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio/inc.asp?L=E&M=$t/208-1-0-1/main_pages/welcome.html

[7] Cf. Also the project Piloting the European Language Portfolio (ELP) in the Higher Education Sector in Europe at http://www.fu-berlin.de/elc/en/elpinten.html

[8] http://www.fu-berlin.de/elc/en/berldecl.html

[9] http://www.fu-berlin.de/elc/en/langpol.html

[10] 26-28 June 2003 at Handelshøjskolen i Århus, Århus, Denmark.

[11] Other examples of this would be the EQUIS accreditation for business & management programmes, cf. http://www.efmd.be/