

A Case for Quality Management in Higher Education Language Studies

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The concept of quality management (QM) originated in the commercial field, where it has two main goals. The first is to assess the value a product or service has for its intended users, and the second is to assess the effectiveness of the means by which the product or service is created and delivered. QM is therefore a process which rests on the application of a set of evaluative criteria against which the effectiveness of actions can be assessed and strategies for improved practice developed.

In general terms, the concept of QM may seem fairly reasonable in the commercial sector. As consumers we would all like to be sure that our toasters do not burn our breakfast slice of toast, and that we do not end up in Llandudno when we have booked a holiday in Tahiti. Certain voices might, however, question how easily the concept can be transferred to the educational field.

To begin with, language education is a far more complex undertaking than producing a toaster or making holiday arrangements. It is inherently more complex because it involves aspects of the personal and intellectual development of our students both as individuals and as members of society. It is also more complex in that educational programmes have to equip students to play an effective role in society and therefore have to take account of society's evolving needs in the design and implementation of learning programmes.

Doubts, or perhaps it would be more honest to say "suspicions", may also arise with respect to the finalities and the locus of control of QM. Some language educators might fear that QM could become an instrument of control for political ends, and lead to extensive and not necessarily productive form-filling and bureaucracy. It would be ingenuous to suggest that this view of QM is beyond the realms of the possible. Correctly understood, however, QM is not about control and bureaucracy. It is rather a concept which can and should be used by language educators themselves for two main purposes. The first is to analyse their own situations and the pedagogical and organisational choices which they make in these situations. The second is to constitute a forum for reflection and debate between language educators themselves and with the other actors involved in the educational process.

In view of these comments, QM in the field of language studies may be defined as a process by which language educators can engage in a structured analysis of the goals being pursued by language study programmes and of the effectiveness of the procedures by which these goals are set and realised. QM is a process based on analysis and shared reflection among the various actors involved in language education - teachers, students, heads of department, administrators, future employers, client faculties, and so on. It is a dynamic process which is geared towards effecting constructive reflection on current practice and identifying avenues for innovation and the development of improved practice in both the design and the realisation of language studies programmes.

QM, then, is first and foremost a process of analysis, reflection and debate among the various actors involved in language education, and language educators themselves must play a central role within it. It is this process itself which lies at the heart of QM. Any instruments which are developed to support the process need to be seen as that - means to an end and not ends in themselves. This having been said, there are advantages in establishing a common framework of reference within which the process of reflection and debate can take place. Firstly, this can provide the various actors involved with a shared set of criteria and thus help to make the process more structured and more transparent. This may involve language educators reflecting on their own practice and introducing changes in response to current circumstances and needs. It can also involve a reasoned debate with other actors, including funding agencies, on the adequacy of the means which are placed at language educators' disposal for achieving the targets which society sets for them and for their students. Secondly, a shared

framework of reference can have a number of advantages within the European context by helping language educators in different countries to share their questions and problems, and to learn from one another's efforts and initiatives.

This article has the goal of suggesting a few elements around which such a framework could be structured. The list of elements discussed is by no means exhaustive, and is meant simply to build on the debate initiated at the meeting of the Quality Management Task Force held in Berlin on the 13th December and pursued in the ELC conference in Jyvaskyla in July.

Effective channels of communication

Tertiary level institutions traditionally have a certain role to play both in the educational process and in society at large. They are not, however, ivory towers which can operate wholly on the basis of their own traditions and preferences. Communication and dialogue between tertiary institutions and the other actors involved in language education is therefore a fundamental component of QM. This allows language educators to gather information on the preparedness and needs of the students they receive, and on the situations in which their graduates will be required to use the language they are studying. It also allows them to communicate their own perspectives on the nature and goals of language education to other actors involved. At least three categories of actors are likely to play a role here.

* Secondary school teachers, headteachers, school inspectors, etc. Although patterns of education are changing, for very many students tertiary studies still form a stage in their educational development between secondary school and the world of work. For students to make the transition from secondary to tertiary education smoothly and to derive the maximum benefit from their tertiary studies, communication in both directions is essential. Firstly, secondary school teachers need to understand the demands of tertiary education in order to prepare their students for the transition from secondary to tertiary education. At the same time, tertiary education has to work with and from the knowledge, skills and expectations that students bring with them. It is therefore in the interests of both secondary and tertiary educators to share insights and to discuss both the goals they are pursuing and the problems they encounter.

* When students graduate, they will normally expect to find a place in the world of work. This, however, will depend significantly on whether they have the knowledge and skills which employers are looking for. Tertiary level language educators need therefore to establish a dialogue with likely employers and, in a broader sense, with representatives of the world of work. This makes it possible to discuss the needs and expectations future employers have of graduates, and also to discover employers' evaluation of past students' preparedness for the demands of the workplace. Valuable insights can be gained in this respect by developing contact networks with specific companies and with employers' organisations, as well as by surveys of former students' reactions to their work experience.

* Language studies programmes may also aim to prepare students for further study or for certain aspects of their current study programme (reading specialist material, participating in exchange programmes etc). In such cases, the relevant interlocutors are members of the students' target educational institution, the faculty in which their main course of study is organised, or members of the institution responsible for exchange programmes. These actors are able provide insights which can help language educators to monitor the relevance of their programmes and make appropriate modifications in response to changing circumstances.

The establishment of effective channels of communication with these actors is a basic enabling condition for QM in language studies.

Goal definition

A fundamental question to be addressed in QM is clearly the relevance of the goals being pursued by language studies programmes. No matter what the inherent interest or academic value of a

programme, it is essential for this to be re-evaluated regularly in the light of students' needs and the demands of the social and professional context in which they will be operating. At least three points merit consideration in this respect.

* In which way does a course prepare students for their future professional life? Which skills does it help them develop, and how can these skills facilitate their entry into the world of work? This may relate to specific functional skills that students can use in a particular post, or to more general competences that they can adapt to the demands of the post they find themselves subsequently occupying. This does not mean that higher education institutions are merely training centres for industry, but it does mean that serious consideration has to be given to the professional and social relevance that learning programmes have for students' entry into the world of work. What, in essence, can students do in the language they have been studying? And in which ways do these competences enhance their professional skills and their employability?

* How does a course contribute to the goal of life-long learning? In view of the rapidly changing nature of our societies, students need both immediately useable functional skills and also learning-oriented skills which will enable them to adapt to the changing demands of their working environment and to develop new skills as and when these are required. For example, in addition to a given level of knowledge in a given language, do students possess an understanding of the process of language study that they will be able to transfer to the learning of another language? Have they acquired the ability to use reference materials to help them deal with language tasks in a self-directive manner or as a resource for further learning? The question here is whether the goal specification of a language studies programme incorporates self-directedness as an objective in its own right and, if so, how this is manifested in learning activities.

* Language skills and cross-cultural understanding play an essential role in the goal of European integration. It is therefore important to assess the way in which a given course contributes to this objective. This may involve facilitating students' participation in exchange projects or providing them with language skills they need in order to work in different European countries subsequent to graduation. It may also relate to the broader goal of developing students' cross-linguistic and cross-cultural understanding. This point may, for example, involve provision of joint language and culture courses for non-language specialists, or encouragement of cross-cultural literary projects with language specialists, possibly in collaboration with partner institutions in other countries.

Transparency of goals pursued

In addition to a clear definition of the goals being pursued by a language studies programme, consideration also has to be given to the way in which the relevant goals are communicated to interested parties such as students, client faculties, future employers, sponsoring bodies and so on. To begin with, this makes it possible for these parties to see clearly what a programme has to offer. Then, on this basis, it provides a reference point for the discussion of adaptations or innovation. In practical terms, this involves consideration of factors such as the following.

* The terms in which goals are formulated: Are they clear, relevant and comprehensible to students and to other interested parties?

* The manner in which goals are communicated to students and to other actors: Do students and other interested parties have access to information on programme goals in forms such as a mission statement, course overview or profile of target competences?

* Are goals expressed in terms which allow for comparability of students' skills and competences from one institution, country or educational system to another?

Transparency and clear communication of goal structures is useful in itself for the reasons given above. It also plays a role within the framework of European integration. Institutions that have operated primarily within their local environment may have been able to work with a high degree of shared but implicit assumptions about the nature and goals of language education. With increased

international movement of students and of teaching staff, it may be necessary to make these assumptions explicit and comprehensible to members of other cultures. This facilitates an open discussion of institutions' current approaches to education, and also a sharing of the differing educational traditions of various countries and regions.

Decision-making procedures

If the setting of relevant goals is essential, then consideration clearly has to be given to the procedures by which decisions are made and, in particular, how goals are set. In part, this relates to point 1) above. It also, however, has a significant relation to decision making within institutions. The following are just some of the questions that need to be addressed in this respect.

* The range of participants involved in decision-making - heads of department, teaching staff, students, members of client faculties, future employers, etc. The broader the range of participants involved in the decision-making process, the greater the likelihood it has of including a range of informed and meaningful insights into students' needs as well as into the relevance and the feasibility of programme goals.

* The presence of mechanisms for regular reviewing of programme objectives so that programme content and delivery can be re-assessed at regular periods in the light of changing circumstances.

This point raises the traditional tension between the managerial charms of a centralised, top-down decision making structure as opposed to a more "untidy" but richer participative approach to decision making. It is, however, important to bear in mind that the wider the range of actors who are involved in decision making - from outside of but also from within a teaching institution - the greater the likelihood that the resulting decisions will rest upon a broadly based and cohesive understanding of the target situation.

Possibilities for student involvement in the learning process

Students are not simply recipients of knowledge. They are active participants in the learning process, and their learning will be enhanced if they are given the possibility to exercise and develop their reflective skills. Furthermore, the more actively students are involved in their language study, the greater their chance of developing the self-directive skills that are an integral part of the goal of life-long learning. This point calls for consideration of factors such as the following.

* Student involvement in the definition of course goals, eg. by post-course feedback or the participation of student representatives in department planning committees, etc.

* Student involvement in task definition and in the selection of study options with the goal of personalising learning content and developing students' independent learning skills.

*Self- and peer-assessment, or collaborative assessment procedures involving both teachers and students.

* Establishment of learning tasks which require students to make active and independent use of a variety of learning resources such as self-study or reference materials, the Internet, or learning resources available on CDROM. Such activities can help students to develop language resource management and independent learning skills they can transfer to their future professional tasks and to their subsequent language learning.

Teacher education and possibilities for professional development.

There is an increasingly widespread realisation that the quality of language teaching depends less on methods or materials than on the skills and understanding of individual teachers. The skills which teachers bring with them to their task and the possibilities which exist for them to develop these skills

further are thus fundamental considerations in QM in the field of language studies. Factors to be considered in this respect include the following.

- * Basic teacher training programmes - their content and relevance to current demands.
- * The scope for in-service development, including access to educational materials, seminars, IT facilities, and study leave.
- * Contractual arrangements which provide sufficient stability to encourage personal involvement and professional commitment.
- * Incentive- or performance-based systems of promotion to encourage innovation in both teaching and teaching-related activities.

Language teaching is frequently viewed as being "expensive" in resource terms. This is a consideration which cannot be ignored, and may make it necessary to think of using a variety of learning modes in order to keep overall costs within budgetary limits. Taking short-cuts in terms of teacher development and support, however, is a strategy which can only lead to a decline in the effectiveness of programme delivery. Furthermore, as society evolves and greater demands are being made on teachers to respond to changing demands and circumstances, commensurate attention needs to be paid to the means by which teachers can upgrade their knowledge and skills. This is an element which has to be included in any approach to QM in the area of language studies at either institutional or national level.

Sharing diversity

The criteria outlined above are just some of those that could be included in a QM instrument in the field of language studies. They would clearly need to be tried out and refined on the basis of their relevance to the many differing contexts in which language study programmes are organised in Europe. Furthermore, such an instrument should not be seen as an end in itself, nor should it be allowed to become a straightjacket into which to squash the specificities of different situations. It would rather be the starting point from which institutions can initiate reflection both in-house and with interested parties in the local environment. It could also serve as a focal point for the sharing of insights and initiatives among European institutions.

Language study programmes in Europe are organised in a wide range of institutions and reflect a variety of educational traditions. The goal of European integration is not to remove or homogenise out these differences. On the contrary, the strength of Europe lies in its very diversity. In order to capitalise on this strength, however, we need to be able to share our differing insights into and approaches to language education. A shared approach to QM can play a role in this process, precisely by providing language educators with a common framework of reference within which they can discuss their problems, and learn from one another's efforts and ideas

Thus, while each institution will of course retain its own individuality, the presence of a common framework of reference can help different institutions to develop a shared vision of the challenges they are facing and, in particular, of the means by which they can respond to these challenges.