

e-QUALITY, PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES

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Abstract

Quality of higher education is a central part in the Bologna process, starting 1999 and intending to implement the EHEA by 2010. In this presentation special attention is paid to online learning, what professional competencies are needed, particularly the e-competence and quality of university staff when embarking on new practices. An international case study will be presented, where a special course in Pedagogy for Online Learning (POL) was designed to qualify university professors for the new challenges. The course has received very positive attention in the Global Virtual University, a part of the UNU, as a key effort to implement e-learning at Universities in developing countries.

Introduction

Quality in online distance learning depends on several key factors. Course developers, providing institutions, tutors and students all play central roles to make the study a success. If courses or study programmes are intended to reach out beyond national students, further attention has to be paid to the quality. Recognition of competence after completing a study programme is a related issue that requires functional tools.

In Europe around 30 Ministers of Education signed Bologna Declaration in June 1999. (Ministers of Education, 1999, p 8). The declaration is an attempt to implement a system for higher education which is recognisable throughout Europe. The first attempt was to adopt a system of two main cycles (undergraduate and graduate). Further it intended to establish a system of credits that could easily be interpreted, offering a possibility to compare grades and degrees. European co-operation for quality assurance in higher education was mentioned, and efforts to facilitate student mobility were outlined (ibid, p 8).

The Bologna Declaration has been part of a continuous development, the Bologna Process. In 2001 the Ministers of Education again made a commitment to the objectives in the Bologna Declaration, and every second year afterwards they have met in order to reach the overall goal: to establish the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. During the period from 1999 till 2005 different Communiqués added important aims for the EHEA. The Prague Communiqué in 2001 added issues like lifelong learning, attractiveness of European education to students both from Europe and other parts of the world (European Ministers of Education, 2001, pp 2-3)

In 2003 the Berlin Communiqué added other issues, e.g. to have closer links between EHEA and the European Research Area and to include doctoral level as the third cycle in the Bologna Process (Minister of Education, 2003, pp 7-8).

Until now, the Bergen Communiqué is the last one. In the Bergen summit in 2005 status for the work was summarised and the intentions are still to adopt standards and guidelines; facilitating student mobility; international exchange and improved academic standards (Ministers of Education, 2005). The Bologna Process with communiqués and commitment from Ministers in charge of Education has had an impact; at least to a certain degree, on development and daily life in higher educational institutions.

Impact of the Bologna Process

To change a university system takes time. Even if the university board and leaders want a change, the professional staff may not be willing to go in the same direction - or vice versa. Some countries, e.g. Norway, were early adopters of the three cycles; bachelor (3 years), master (2 years) and doctor (3-4 years) (KUF, 2001). Norway also formally adopted the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), a system that builds on the principle that credits are based on measured workload. The system also provides a grading scale which ranks the students

on a statistical basis.

These two principles, the three cycles and the ECTS should for most countries be quite simple to adopt, and can pave the way for a European Higher Education Area where standards contribute to easier student mobility and recognition of competence, nationally and across borders. But even if ECTS should be easy to apply, misinterpretations are frequent, so much that the Directorate-General for Education and Culture in the European Union (2005) published ECTS USER'S GUIDE – European Credit Transfer System and Accumulation System and the Diploma Supplement, in order to avoid different practices.

When changing a credit system it takes time for all parties involved to be familiar with the new codes, credit allocations, filing systems, certificates etc, but looking at several project, we see that applying e.g. ECTS is a valuable step towards exchange of students, expertise and know-how between institutions (MENU, 2002; UNU/GVU, 2005), but also needs extra attention to change staff traditions.

Experiences

The Bologna Declaration, the communiqués and other spin-off documents in the Bologna Process have put focus on standards, quality, lifelong learning, common criteria etc. for higher education in general. New Information and Communication Technology (ICT) was not in focus initially, but is gradually taking on an important role in order to reach the set goals. With the open access to distant study offers through e-learning, we see a tendency to use more multilateral agreements between universities while bilateral agreements used to be the 'rule'. Networks of universities working collaboratively – or cooperatively - to develop study programmes, can be a way to enhance recognition of competence and student mobility. One example here is the United Nations University/Global Virtual University, UNU/GVU. This global virtual university is a network of well established universities from developing and developed countries. One of the intentions this network has, is to join forces and to develop joint master degrees. This effort may enhance quality, make studies recognisable and thereby contribute to equality among students from different countries.

The providers

The providers of study programmes, the universities, have all their own agenda. To collaborate in a network of universities, may influence traditional habits and rules. In the UNU/GVU case a *charter* was signed by all participating universities in order to avoid conflicts. The involved institutions have so far developed and tested a joint study programme within "Development Management". GVU uses the ECTS as principle for the credits and marking procedure, and it seems to be accepted by all partner universities, although the faculties which are not directly involved in the joint master programme still use the universities' traditional systems.

Most of the involved universities have a three cycle system and, therefore no problem to accept a 2 years master degree programme that builds on a bachelor. One of the universities, however, really has a problem to accept a 2 years master degree. Their system is a bachelor of 3 years, an Honours degree of 1 year and then a master degree of 1 year. Total of 5 years, but it seems to be difficult to accept and Honours degree and Masters Degree, each of 1 year, to be equivalent to a two years master. But since this is a recognised and well established university, they feel no need to change their rules, they will survive anyway. May be they will survive or may be they will sooner or later have to adapt to common standards. Time will show.

Qualifying developers and tutors

The university professional staff – the professors, are rarely prepared or trained to develop joint study programmes which shall be delivered online to students from different countries. Our experience from the UNU/GVU case is that professors may be very professional in their lecturing for students in an auditorium, but are less skilled in using technology and making study guides for an online, virtual learning environment. Knowledge and awareness of different pedagogical approaches and the impact these have on the learning outcome, are not themes in everyday discussions, if at all discussed among staff members.

If universities want to use technology and offer courses and study programmes online, they will have to train their professional staff, developers and tutors. This is not an easy task. Professors are subject experts who often have their focus on research, but who also know how to lecture in front of a student audience. Therefore they normally resist other approaches than the instructivist approach. For many of them the use of Internet and online learning environments mean to record their lectures and send it to students via the Internet. However, many of the professors discover that they need some different skills and pedagogical updating before they even dare to start as tutors in a virtual learning environment.

In order to meet some of the above mentioned needs, a course on 'Pedagogy for Online Learning' (POL) was developed. The intention with this course is to give the professors training in the use of technology for educational purposes, as well as theoretical insight. 'Learning by doing' is the approach in the course, which means that the professors are registered as online students and can see problems from the student side of the learning environment, as well as experiencing the need for assistance from a skilled tutor.

Student expectations

Students of today are familiar with technology, interactivity and multimedia. They may be interested in listening to a taped lecture once or twice, but they probably will be tired of a distance education only using this approach. They are aware of the potential existing in new ICT, and expect to benefit from a varied set of learning opportunities. A combination of methods, media, approaches and activities seem to give best results. For the university staff this may seem extraordinary, while the multimedial presentations for young students are both natural and required to catch the interest.

Experiences

A questionnaire sent to the students of the POL course showed that most of them were very satisfied with getting both insight and practice within this new world of learning for the 'professors as students'. For the course providers the textual comments from students are also valuable when it comes to further planning and development. Both positive and less positive comments are worth considering. Here are some quotes from responses to the questionnaires:

- *I thought it would be a more practical course, designed on setting up online learning courses*
- *I think the tasks and activities were appropriate. This is because, as a prospective on line tutor, I need the basic Skills on how to use IT and reach my students.*
- *Wow! Yes! This was a great learning experience for me. I could not wait for time when I would knock off from my regular job to visit the internet café*
- *I met many new friends online in the form of "classmates". We managed to work together as a team in search of a common goal .we met at the virtual café and meta-reflections*
- *Truly this was a community or practice, true collaborative learning.*

As can be seen, there are both positive and negative comments, some sugar and some pepper. To keep up the good spirit it is nice to finish the quoting session with one of the most positive evaluations:

- *I want to congratulate and thank the organizers and tutors of the POL course. They were so supportive and really encouraged the learners in all the ways they could.*

Conclusions

Through three years of running the POL course, feed-back from students and by following some of them in their further on-line tutoring, some interesting findings have been revealed. A questionnaire sent to the 'professor-students' of the POL course showed that most of them were very satisfied with getting both insight and practice within this new world of learning for them. They had, however several creative ideas on how to improve the course and further develop tutoring skills among university staff.

All experiences and reactions point in the direction of an absolute need for introduction and upgrading of university staff, both within technology and pedagogy/methodology, in order to qualify them as tutors and developers of blended or online learning.

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