FOSTERING QUALITY IN CONTINUING EDUCATION

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Abstract: This paper presents the quality development initiative set out by Swissuni, the umbrella organisation of the continuing education centres of Swiss universities. It describes how continuing education networks can influence national policies with regard to quality, despite the fact that they may only formulate suggestions for government agencies and for their own members. Swissuni’s strategy rests on two foundations: the anchoring of university continuing education within the Qualifications Framework of the Swiss Higher Education Area (NQF-EHEA) and the building of common quality guidelines for university continuing education programmes. This paper discusses the particularities of the Qualifications Framework and the basic principles of the quality model.

At Swissuni’s instigation ‘continuing education at the university level’ has been integrated into the National Qualifications Framework as a fourth level alongside Bachelor’s, Master’s and doctoral programmes. In so doing it was possible to concretise university continuing education in its content, anchor it in the university system and communicate it clearly at the international level. University continuing education is oriented towards university graduates (and generally, those with Master’s degrees and professional experience) and is conceptually positioned at the interface between theory and practice, and between research and problem-solving. This positioning has engendered specific target competences, which in part differ greatly from the Dublin Descriptors of the other three levels.

The relevant quality development criteria are based on the National Qualifications Framework and were formulated in cooperation with the Center of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss Universities (OAQ). Here principles of flexibility, impact orientation, multidimensionality, client feedback, stakeholder involvement and constant quality improvement are accorded more weight than in the guidelines for Bachelor’s and Master’s degree programmes. Swissuni is convinced that the quality of continuing education is only revealed in its effects in the workplace and on the career and personal development of the participant, with the caveat that this quality may only be steered through goal-setting, resources and processes. This requires rapid feedback mechanisms, periodic context and impact analyses, and the inclusion of the relevant stakeholders in planning, implementation and evaluation.

Keywords: Continuing education, quality assessment, quality development, quality criteria, qualifications framework, impact orientation

1. Introduction

This paper presents the quality development initiatives currently being launched by Swissuni, the umbrella organisation of Swiss university continuing education (UCE), among its members [1]. Some quality enhancement and benchmarking projects
tackle the UCE delivery system from an institutional perspective [2]. Swissuni, however, focuses (1) on the quality of individual programmes and (2) on the proper positioning of UCE within the National Qualifications Framework (NQF-EHEA). Swissuni chose this particular approach because of the highly decentralised nature of UCE in most Swiss universities, which renders an institutional approach very difficult, and because of the special role assigned to UCE by the Swiss Rector’s Conference, which is to serve academic elites who already possess a university degree.

The Rector’s Conference positions UCE to take advantage of universities’ research orientation and academic excellence in comparison to other providers (polytechnics, universities of applied science, private providers). UCE is focused on professionals with academic qualifications, a target group with a particularly high demand for continuing education. Issues of social inclusion and wider participation, frequent topics in the ‘lifelong learning’ discussion [3], are generally left to other institutions better equipped to address them. Swiss universities do offer senior and children’s university programmes, course auditing, public lectures and general-interest courses, but these are not regarded to be UCE.

The reasons for this positioning of UCE are found in the history and structure of Swiss education. Switzerland not only has a dual education system with strong professional training provided at the secondary level II and the tertiary level B, but also a dual university system (tertiary level A) with polytechnics and higher-level (research) universities [4]. All three areas – universities, polytechnics and advanced professional training – are active in continuing education at the tertiary level, but they have distinctly different admission requirements. This paper is mostly concerned with research universities.

2. Qualifications Framework of the Swiss Higher Education Area

In 2009 Switzerland launched the ‘Qualifications Framework of the Swiss Higher Education Area’ (NQF-EHEA). On Swissuni’s initiative ‘continuing education at university level’ was integrated as an independent fourth level into the National Qualifications Framework next to Bachelor’s, Master’s and doctoral programmes (Figure 1). This provided an opportunity to pull together the content of UCE, embed it better in the national university system and communicate it more coherently at an international level [5].
The Qualifications Framework defines programme titles, the scope of the various programme types and the respective admission requirements. It differentiates between the Master of Advanced Studies (≥ 60 ECTS), the Diploma of Advanced Studies (≥ 30 ECTS), the Certificate of Advanced Studies (≥ 10 ECTS) and further training courses (1-10 days). The admission criteria for the Advanced Studies Programmes at universities are usually a Master’s-level degree plus professional experience, or the equivalent. The basic concept of UCE was also taken on by the polytechnics, although their formal admission criteria are somewhat less stringent.

Conceptually, the Qualifications Framework positions continuing education at the interface between theory and practice and between research and problem-solving. From this it deduces a series of UCE-specific, cross-disciplinary target competences, which differ from the Dublin Descriptors of the other three levels:

- Ability to perform analyses and solve problems in complex environments
- Orientation towards the future, innovation
- Aptitude for communication and negotiation
- Competence in decision-making and management
- Building a professional identity
- High level of specialization or interdisciplinary competence

With regard to the last point on the list the Qualifications Framework differentiates three basic directions, which are mostly defined by the relationship between the continuing education programme and the original course of study:

- Specialisation: continuity with the original discipline
- Change: connection to one or more disciplines unrelated to the programme
- Expansion: interdisciplinary connection to one or more original disciplines

The Qualifications Framework created a common conceptual basis for the further development of quality assurance in UCE. In particular, clear positioning at the interface between the university and the world of work and between theoretical penetration and problem-solving ability is central to defining quality in continuing education.

3. Quality in University Continuing Education

Many evaluation and accreditation models are very difficult to use in UCE because they are mostly oriented towards basic Bachelor’s and Master’s degree programmes:

- They are not prepared to handle rapidly changing needs, fragmented markets, expert client groups and heterogeneous teaching staff
- UCE programmes are often so unique and highly specialized that they defy any attempt at comparative ranking or sectoral standardisation
- Because continuing education is usually self-financing, programmes tend to be accountable to the client rather than to the state, except where the state guarantees the quality of the title
- Participants in continuing education, employers and trade associations assess the quality of a continuing education programme primarily in terms of its effect on workplace performance, career and personal development
To assess the quality of continuing education, classical input- and process-oriented quality models are therefore not sufficient [6]. These models generally investigate the coherence between explicitly defined objectives, resources and processes and assume that the right choice and combination of these factors will generate the desired results; the results themselves are rarely taken into account. UCE institutions recognized this problem early on and integrated results-oriented thinking and indicators into their quality models [7]. Today the key words ‘outcomes’ or ‘learning outcomes’ often crop up in discussion of the issue.

Swissuni differentiates between three different kinds of results, i.e. output, outcome and impact. Output and outcome concern the quantitative or qualitative results at the close of a programme. From the university point of view they lie within the system boundaries and may be directly influenced by the programme. Output is measured according to qualitative indicators such as academic success rate or profits accrued. Outcome refers to learned competences, as may be assessed by good examinations. Impact, however, comprises the above-mentioned effect on workplace performance, career and personal development, i.e. the concrete translation of the acquired competences or outcomes in the ‘real world’. It lies outside the system boundaries and cannot be directly controlled by the university.

4. Quality principles

From as early as 1996 the continuing education units of the Swiss universities have worked on the basis of commonly developed quality principles [8], which fall under the headings participant orientation, academic level, adapted didactics, qualified instructors, quality maintenance and attractive services. In light of the background described in the previous section, however, a thorough revision of criteria now appears necessary. As a prerequisite to this process Swissuni, taking into account the experiences of its member organisations, has identified six general principles to which an innovative quality maintenance and development model must adhere.

Flexibility: A UCE quality approach should be flexible, dynamic and generic and easily adaptable to changing individual competences, needs and expectations.

Multidimensionality: The quality approach should take into account all relevant aspects of a UCE programme life cycle, combining input, process, outcome and impact criteria.

Impact orientation: As already mentioned, impact is the most important quality dimension, even though it lies outside the programme’s direct sphere of influence. An impact orientation also means that input, processes and learning outcomes should be regarded not as followups to goal-setting and strategy but as prerequisites for the actual effects achieved in the ‘real world’ after the end of the programme. This differentiation may seem nit-picking, but it focuses on an important point: an analysis of effects may reveal not only unattained goals, but also unplanned results.

Client feedback: A UCE quality approach should provide the participants with constant feedback possibilities. Only in this way can continuing education programmes react quickly and flexibly to participants’ needs and expectations, and to
individual levels of knowledge. Client satisfaction with regard to achieved goals should be given high priority.

**Stakeholder involvement:** For complex issues and impact evaluation, mechanisms should be developed which involve the relevant stakeholders. These mechanisms include periodic surveys and the active integration of interest group representatives as instructors, advisors, sponsors or project partners at all phases of the programme cycle. Both require subjective appraisal. Quantitative data are often difficult to compile, because participant numbers are too small or suitable control groups are lacking.

**Constant quality improvement:** A UCE quality approach should foster a permanent quality development process over all phases of the programme cycle. It should be simple enough to stimulate programme managers to use the quality criteria, not only for evaluation purposes but also as programme planning tools. It is thus advisable to arrange the quality dimensions in the same order as the programme development cycle.

5. The quality model

On the basis of this quality approach and in close cooperation with the Center of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss Universities (OAQ) [9], Swissuni has developed a multidimensional quality development model. It comprises seven quality dimensions, which are shown in context in Figure 2 [10].

1. Context analysis (clients, stakeholders, markets, university interests, etc.)
2. Concept and goals (competence targets, target audience, curricula, etc.)
3. Organisation and input (structures, resources, admission, etc.)
4. Processes and implementation (learning processes, client orientation, research and practice, performance verification, administration, etc.)
5. Outcomes (competences) and output (cost-benefit considerations, etc.)
6. Impact und transfer (effects on performance and career, university reputation, recognition by trade associations and employers, etc.)
7. Quality development (quality approach, responsibilities, instruments, etc.)
The two curved arrows symbolize the system boundaries between the university and the environment, and at the same time illustrate the close link between the programme development and quality development processes. The seven quality dimensions are selected and arranged in such a way that they follow the programme development process. This makes the quality criteria useful to programme directors not only as indicators for evaluation purposes but also as checklists during the planning process: whoever takes them into account at an early stage will be able to better document and fulfil them later on.

The four quality dimensions in the interior of the system are directly influenced by the programme and can be measured relatively easily. They form the core of many classical quality development and accreditation models, although their weighting may vary. The relations between the four dimensions are analysed according to the principles of effectiveness, coherence and efficiency.

The two quality dimensions ‘context analysis’ and ‘impact and transfer’ extend beyond the system boundaries. They are closely linked, because any evaluation of impact flows into the next context analysis. They are connected via relevance relationships with the dimensions ‘goals’ and ‘outcomes, output’.

The seventh quality dimension is a metadimension: it ensures that knowledge gained is systematized, integrated and implemented in a continual process of improvement.

6. Quality goals and standards

The question now arises as to how the quality principles described above can be translated into UCE-specific quality goals, criteria and standards. Some of these quality criteria do not differ fundamentally from those of normal study programmes, in particular the criteria concerning goals (2), resources (3), processes (4) and constant quality development (7). Some of the other quality criteria of basic study programmes, however, are useless in continuing education, because they work against the principles of flexibility, dynamism and adaptability. Typical examples are
the stipulation that a course be repeated regularly, or the setting of very narrow guidelines for teaching staff, the discipline or supervisory activities.

Of primary interest are those UCE-specific quality criteria which are not generally taken into account in input- and process-oriented quality approaches, namely those concerning the dimensions context analysis (1), outcome (5) and impact (6):

**Context analysis:** To remain true to the impact-orientation principle the quality objective must ensure that the relevant context factors are taken into account in the programme concept. The quality objective identifies the most important stakeholders and framework requirements: “The continuing education programmes are oriented towards the current or future requirements of the target groups, employers and trade associations, with attention to continuing education market conditions and the interests and core competences of the university” [11].

**Impact, transfer:** The quality objective requires that impact be measured among the relevant interest groups, and provides input on how this should happen. Participants and alumni should be able to “confirm the acquisition of competences and attest to a positive influence on competence transfer and on career”. Employers and trade associations should “recognise” the programme and “further it with financial help or other types of support”. For the first, subjective estimations are required, which can only be obtained via surveys or other feedback methods. For the second, general statements or quantitative information suffice as to personnel utilisation, financial contributions or other forms of support.

**Outcome, output:** Here the quality objective relies wholly on the quality development responsibilities of the programme directors. It does not define standards of content but instead simply requires that programme leaders be aware of output and outcome and analyse them with regard to the programme objectives. Leaders should among other things “be aware of costs, and of participant satisfaction”, and should know “whether the learning objectives have been achieved effectively and efficiently”.

**Other UCE-specific criteria:** Further UCE-specific quality criteria are also to be found scattered in other dimensions. For example, continuing education programmes should “combine scientific requirements with a practice and transfer orientation” and “orient themselves structurally towards the requirements of target groups”. The objectives should be “formulated as profession-, function- or personality-related competences” and proofs of performance achievement should be “aligned with educational, competence and transfer goals”.

7. Conclusions

This article proposes an impact-oriented, multidimensional model for the quality development of UCE. While this model was developed for the specific situation of continuing education in Switzerland, it may also be of interest for other systems: every type of UCE must assess its results and take into account flexibility, client feedback, stakeholder involvement and constant quality improvement.
An impact orientation also requires that results be accorded more weight than strategies, and practiced quality culture more weight than formal quality mechanisms. Similarly to EFQM models, which are deployed for evaluation of institutions, in appraising programme quality a new balance needs to be found between results and enablers. Impact is the yardstick, but it eludes direct control. Quality management can therefore only proceed via the enablers (objectives, input and processes).

The article also attempts to show how UCE centres can together influence the discussion of quality, even though they may only submit recommendations to quality control agencies and to their own universities. Now that UCE has been explicitly integrated into the National Qualifications Framework, Swiss universities will try to incorporate UCE-specific issues into the accreditation of UCE programmes, and help individual UCE providers to realise the quality criteria. The most important success factors in this process will also be stakeholder involvement, impact orientation, flexibility and dynamism.

References