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5. THE CHALLENGE OF MAKING QUALITY ASSURANCE SUPPORTIVE THE EUROPEAN INNOVATION AGENDA: THE CASES OF VET AND ADULT LEARNING

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Abstract

This paper proposes an approach to the quality in VET and Adult Learning supportive of the European Innovation Agenda and based on the main assumption that the quality is not “a one best way” but it is the integration of the quality system of the visions of different stakeholders on quality perception. All the stakeholders’ visions are legitimate and the Quality should be a continuous process of negotiation. The proposed approach integrates the concept of Quality Assurance based on the past best experience with the concept of Quality development embedding the criteria related to innovation, relevance, risk-reward in order to make Quality assurance supportive European innovation agenda.

Keywords: *Quality, Innovation, VET, Adult Learning, e-Learning*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The VET systems in the different European countries are characterised by different practices, ideologies and philosophies. In some case VET systems are market oriented, in other ones VET systems are strongly linked to the school system.

In this context the European policies and strategies have been aiming, since the Lisbon Council, at guaranting a high quality European VET area in which qualifications and skills acquired in one country are recognised in the other ones in Europe.

The objective to be not only a competitive and knowledge based economic but mainly to build inclusive and cohesion society is based on the adoption and implementation of a common quality framework and recommandation.

The Bruges Communiqué on enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training for the period 2011-202 (December 2010), strategic objectives for the period 2011-2020, stressed the importance to improving the quality and efficiency of VET and enhancing its attractiveness and relevance.

High quality of VET provision is a prerequisite for its attractiveness. In order to guarantee improved quality, increased transparency, mutual trust, the mobility of workers and learners, and lifelong learning, the European countries must establish quality assurance frameworks in accordance with the EQAVET Recommendation.

Concerning the Quality of teachers, trainers and other VET professionals the European Commission asked the countries to improve initial and continuing training for teachers, trainers, mentors and counsellors by offering flexible training provision and investement. The ageing European teacher and trainer population, changing labour markets and working environments, together with the need to attract those best suited to teaching, make this objective even more critical. Traineeships for teachers and trainers in enterprises also were encouraged.

European policies also stressed that the labour market relevance of VET (both I-VET and C-VET), and the employability of VET graduates, should be enhanced through various measures:

1. Authorities in the participating countries - at national, regional, or local level - should create opportunities for enhanced cooperation between schools and enterprises in order to improve teachers' knowledge of work practices on the one hand and trainers' general pedagogical skills and competences on the other;
2. VET curricula should be outcome-oriented and more responsive to labour market needs. Cooperation models with companies or professional branch

organisations should address this issue and provide VET institutions with feedback on both the employability and employment rates of VET graduates;

3. To improve the quality and relevance of VET, participating countries, and particularly VET providers, should make use of feedback from guidance services on the transition of VET graduates to work or to further learning;
4. Work-based learning carried out in partnership with businesses and non-profit organisations should become a feature of all initial VET courses;
5. European countries should support the development of apprenticeship-type training and raise awareness of this.
6. Finally European countries should promote partnerships between social partners, enterprises, education and training providers, employment services, public authorities, research organisations and other relevant stakeholders, in order to ensure a better transfer of information on labour market needs and to provide a better match between those needs and the development of knowledge, skills and competences.

The New Skills Agenda for Europe (2016) stressed also the need for more effective education and training policies. High quality education and training systems and Lifelong Learning strategies which are both efficient and equitable are crucial for Europe's success and for enhancing employability.

Attractiveness, quality, efficiency, innovation, flexibility and creativeness in VET programmes are some of the key elements to promote Lifelong Learning, social cohesion and improve vocational and geographical mobility.

2. QUALITY AND INNOVATION

Many visions exist on what is quality in VET, they may be the expressions of different categories of stakeholders, but people within the same categories (e.g. two trainers or two employers) may consider important certain aspects that other consider irrelevant. It is intrinsic in the concept of quality to dig deeper into people's visions of the world and related values.

The European literature recognized the legitimacy of a pluralistic approach to quality and the negotial nature of the definition process of quality approaches, a necessary condition for them to be considered as relevant. It should not be forgotten that also standards are the result of a consensus building process.

Similarly, what is innovation (desired change) for some and in some conditions may not appear desirable nor new in other countries; and within the same countries

and the same organizations different people may understand innovation in substantially different ways. That, among other things, explains why it is so difficult to commit people to an innovation agenda that is “not invented here” and frequently proposed by policy makers.

Both quality and innovation are socially constructed concepts, in which the necessary technical and management components must not hide or sacrifice the importance of consensus building to generate the necessary commitment. Only when quality and innovation agenda are recognized as relevant by stakeholders, they are likely to succeed.

Beyond the sharing of their nature of socially constructed concepts, quality and innovation have a common goal at their origin: to guarantee improvements through the mobilization of energy towards certain goals. The continuous tension towards improvement is the essence of Quality Assurance systems, is the core meaning of the Deming cycle that EQAVET adopted as a central element of its approach. Similarly, innovation is not change for change’s sake, but a precise orientation of change to produce some desired improvements.

It is therefore easy to agree that the most “conductive to innovation” organizations are those that have successfully adopted a quality assurance approach.

In spite of these elements of converge in their original philosophy, quality and innovation are sometimes perceived as poles in a dialectic, if not antagonistic view: “teachers/trainers do not like quality assurance” probably meaning that they are not seeing all the benefits of concertation of formal procedures to guarantee the “real quality” of VET provisions, depending, in their opinion, on some essential specific factors that are not adequately covered by the most popular quality management and quality assurance approach. In spite of these elements of converge in their original philosophy, quality and innovation are sometimes perceived as poles in a dialectic, if not antagonistic view: during the seminar the observation was made: “teachers/trainers do not like quality assurance”, probably meaning that they are not seeing all the benefits of concerting of formal procedures to guarantee the “real quality” of VET provision, depending, in their opinion, on some essential specific factors that are not adequately covered by the most popular quality management and quality assurance approaches.

The problem, was recognized, is that the technical and procedural components of Quality Assurance quickly tend to prevail, in practice, on the understanding and negotiation of the “why” to start a quality assurance process with its internal and external components. It was therefore supported that expected results and impact of quality (and innovation) processes –the WHY- should be the starting point of any implementation process, rather than the presentation of the HOW to do it (criteria and processes).

The reason is simple: the WHY is much more “socially negotiable” than the HOW, that is often the result of negotiation processes that took place in advance at higher institutional level. Focusing on the WHY also means to construct a quality culture before developing the necessary knowledge and skills to professionally operate in the field of Quality Development and Quality Assurance.

A specific recommendation emerged in the open discussion was to involve more VET learners in the development of quality and innovation priorities.

Finally, since QA and innovation share so much in their purposes and both need stakeholders input and commitment to be successful, it was proposed that in each VET provider organization (VET organization, Vocational School, but also enterprises) a start-up session to define together quality and innovation agenda should be proposed as a fundamental motivational strategy, but also as a condition to make quality and innovation agendas relevant to the context in which they are expected to produce some impact.

A set of quality criteria and indicators proposed by policy makers (such as the EQAVET ones, for example) and some “Transformation map for VET” to clarify the areas for innovation defined at policy level may (and should) be used to guarantee integration between bottom-up and top-down dynamics.

Provided that sometimes an excessive focus on procedures and documentation may hide the innovation potential of Quality Assurance, what is the specific role played by EQAVET in the relationship between innovation and quality assurance?

While it was recognized that EQAVET, proposing a quality cycle leading to continuous improvement and proposing a broad set of macro-indicators without imposing a given operational approach and specific procedures, is tendentially and potentially an innovation-friendly framework.

However, in the high level of flexibility proposed to match with national QA systems for VET, it may not prevent conservative, conformance-centered QA approaches at national level to generate a negative vision of EQAVET “by association” with conformance-based systems at national level.

It was therefore recognized that “performance-based” approaches, ready to incorporate successful adoption of relevant innovation, should be tendentially preferred to develop the full potential of EQAVET, an innovation policy instrument among the others proposed by the European Union in the field of VET and Lifelong Learning.

3. E-LEARNING AND ICT AS INNOVATION

The radical innovation of information and communication technologies (ICT) has deeply affected VET Systems and Adult Education in all different sectors in European countries.

The chances to introduce e-learning and distance learning aroused great expectations as it promised rapid solutions, easy to spread, at competitive prices if compared to traditional education. The actual realization of first e-Learning solutions has however encountered some difficulties not to be undervalued, both in planning and implementation.

The possibility to intervene in designing the process of e-learning introduction in VET and Adult Learning system represents a great opportunity as far as governance and quality of the process itself are concerned.

In 2018 the practice to use ICT embedded in the education and training process is diffused and articulated not only to spread consolidated knowledge (the old vision of e-Learning), but mainly as a driver of innovation and change.

The new vision and solutions of e-Learning allows to generate new shared knowledge, is not delivered by a single provider/institution and is the result of and a tool to support partnership. The new e-Learning solutions allow to overcome the isolation of learner, to create communities and are focused on the learner, on the learner's context and previous achievements and reaches and motivate those who were not yet learning enough.

E-Learning high quality solutions also can encourage the learner's creativity and enriches the role of teachers and learning facilitators. Quality does not mean advanced technological solutions but strong focus on process of learning contents, shared by different actors: the e-Learning system are embedded in organisational and social process of transformation.

ICT and e-Learning are a complex phenomenon, articulated in terms not only of targets but also in terms of vision of the world of the different stakeholders.

Quality of the new e-Learning practices and solutions means lack of clear separation between learning and working process, social aggregation and leisure activities.

The analysis of the state of the art of the debate in ICT in education and training and e-Learning solutions shows that the ways in which stakeholders see quality in e-Learning is different and that quality is a concern for all the stakeholders: in this approach and to be effective we should embed quality into a process rather than apply it after the process.

As above stressed, the visions and perspectives of quality in education and learning systems and process are really complex and it is not simple to provide a shared model and definition of quality in e-Learning: the quality is based on actors visions and perspectives values, roles and contexts and all are legitimate.

The SEEQUEL project created a conceptual framework integrating in a single structure the different values and criteria underlying the different approaches to e-Learning quality. The result is a framework that can be used as "universal lens" in design and develop a e-Learning scheme respecting the different people views

and priorities. The framework was based on the six vision of the world of Boltanski.

4. LIFELONG LEARNING AND QUALITY APPROACHE AND CRITERIA

One of the obstacles preventing lifelong learning to be entrenched on a European level is seen in the lack of permeability and communication at any level of educational programmes with a view to both the national and the international context. Insufficient transparency of qualifications obtained in educational programmes as well as inadequate crediting mechanisms adopted within and across educational systems discourage individuals from continuous participation in formal education making it difficult for companies to gain a differentiated overview of the range of qualifications available. The still underdeveloped mechanisms for recognition of the outcomes of informal learning are yet another hindrance to lifelong learning.

In view of this situation the Bologna and Copenhagen Processes were launched to bring about far-reaching initiatives which have provided the principles, mechanisms and tools enabling the promotion of lifelong learning. Among them, particular attention deserve the activities aiming at the creation of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning, the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF), Europass, and the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET).

As the majority of adults' learning experiences take place in non-formal and informal settings rather than in formal educational paths, it is vital to guarantee the quality of learning that occurs outside formal settings. This is the primary reason for articulating the importance of non-formal and informal learning as an integral part of Lifelong Learning, education and training strategies.

Valorising non-formal and informal learning is an essential starting point in order to develop pervasive and non-prescriptive ways of individual and organisational learning, in tune with a global strategy for Lifelong Learning in any training context. As informal and non-formal knowledge constitutes the majority of the knowledge base of both the individual and the community to which he/she belongs. A quality-based approach that involves knowledge, which is neither codified nor formalised, is key to an efficient knowledge management approach in a constructivist and self-directed Lifelong Learning perspective. Guaranteeing the quality of non-structured learning becomes even more indispensable if we think that it can be extremely difficult to detect and make explicit this kind of learning in

comparison with other more codified, structured and controllable forms of learning (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

The European Commission demands strategies that “adopt mechanisms to maximise the quality of the learning experience itself and also policy/implementation processes and services associated with learning”.

Definitions that the Commission has set for the mechanisms in informal and non-formal learning should include “robust quality assurance tools for non-formal and informal learning (e.g. international and national standards and guidelines, inspection systems, quality awards, financial instruments)”.

According to the Commission increasingly countries established systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. As seen in the context of Lifelong Learning, key components should include flexible qualification structures, which not only integrate the different streams and levels of general learning and education, but also involve the structure of vocational and technical education and training.

5. QUALITY AS NEGOTIATION PROCESS

As above highlighted, in our perspective the Quality approach is not the “one best way” and should be based on the following principles:

1. **Continuous Quality improvement and innovation**

VET Schools and ALCs are considered not only a “*place where people learn*” but also a “*learning entity*” in itself.

A quality system and label should be an accelerator for quality improvement and innovation.

A quality system and label as well as providing an accreditation should also contribute to continuous quality improvement since it is a diagnostic tool for self-assessment of the Vet School and ALC.

Given the rapidity in which continuous learning is changing and improving, the Quality system and approach should encourage innovation and should not be seen as a mechanism that stifles innovation and creativity in learning experience design.

In our perspective, the quality of a VET School or ALC includes two concepts: “*quality of learning*” as well as “*quality as learning*”.

A quality system and approach should include different forms of recognition of learning (recognition and recording of prior achievements, prior learning, etc.) and should be based on the concept of “prior Quality recognition” for the accreditation of an ALC.

A quality system and approach should foster creativity and allow the possibility to make mistakes and to learn from them.

A quality scheme must have, in addition to a respect for diversity, a solid foundation based on a continuous quality improvement process. The quality process does not end once the School or the ALC receives the accreditation and they must be required to work on its weaknesses while maintaining its strengths. The Quality scheme accreditation is not perpetual and re-accreditation is required on a defined periodic basis.

2. Openness and diversity

The quality scheme and label should assure that the learner's voice is listened to (the quality standards are learner focused) and supports the learner to develop a quality culture (making learners capable of articulating what it is that they consider to be "quality").

Compared to other quality initiatives in the area of learning, our approach and vision has a broader institutional approach and the quality process and label should build on broad stakeholder involvement as well as on previous successful projects and initiatives.

Our perspective has built into its overall scheme a philosophy that respects diversity: the quality scheme should not become a rigid, quantitative tool that forces institutions to fit into a common mould. Europe is diverse and this diversity should be reflected in the quality standards, the quality management, and the quality process.

3. Formally structured and transparent:

Our vision of a quality scheme (composed by standards and guidelines) are pre-tested, re-examined, and finalized.

The quality scheme should be open to all Adult Learning Centres who can demonstrate that they meet the minimum defined standards. (eligibility criteria to enter the process).

To conclude, it has to be highlighted that, this meta-model and the QA framework for Adult Learning Centres should be designed and tested through a participative process and a consensus building mechanism involving adult learning stakeholders.

5. CONCLUSION

As above stressed, the visions and perspectives of quality in education and learning systems are really complex and they are continuously changing. By consequence, it is not simple to provide a shared model and definition of quality of Learning: the quality is based on actors visions and perspectives values, roles and contexts and all the stakeholders' vision are legitimate.

"One size fits all" model for quality does not exist. As the SEEQUEL projects results stressed, we have to launch a consensus process building

on a comprehensive analysis framework, encompassing the different “quality cultures”, that are representative of the interest and priorities of the different stakeholders.

Every view of learning quality as well as every approach is legitimate because it is grounded on individual visions and values. No one single vision can be judged as the best one thought with to describe the concept and people can subscribe to more than one vision at the same time.

There is a tension between the concept of Quality Assurance based on the conformance to the existing and/or past best practices and a concept of Quality Development that recognised and is based on the continuous changes that occur in VET and Adult Learning formal and informal practices.

If the Quality systems aim at supporting the innovation changes and at supporting the European innovation Agenda, the new quality approaches must embed space for innovation, creativity and risk-taking. The gradual but systemic introduction of criteria related to innovation, relevance, risk-reward in the existing Quality Assurance approaches will be only opportunity to guarantee the coherence between Quality Development and encouragement to innovation.

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