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## **QUALITY CULTURE IN BLENDED LEARNING: SELF-ASSESSMENT AS A DRIVER FOR CHANGE**

*Hilde Van Laer, Koen De Pryck, Chang Zhu, Yves Blicck, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium*

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### **Introduction**

This paper proposes a methodology for self-assessment of online and blended learning programs (OBL) in adult education at the institutional level. It is based on applied research on the quality of OBL in formal adult education and continuing vocational education training, funded by the Flemish government (Belgium): the ‘Adult Learners Online! Blended and Online Learning in Adult Education and training (ALO!)’ (<http://www.iwt-alo.be>).

Adult education centres in Flanders offer education for a highly diverse audience. Due to its flexibility of access and learning modes, blended learning is becoming more and more attractive for adult learners, especially for those who have to combine their studies with work, family and social responsibilities.

Not only the learners but also the institutions of adult education are characterized by great diversity. The number of enrolled students can vary substantially, as well as the amount of OBL programs they offer. Some centres have more than 10 years of experience with blended learning programs, while other institutions are in the early stages of adopting OBL in their programs. Given this diversity, a contextualized quality approach is required.

In the first section of this paper, we explore the literature on how a quality culture can be supported and implemented in education and how self-assessment procedures can support this implementation. In a second section, the construction of a contextualized self-assessment methodology for adult education centres is described. In the last part of this paper, we suggest future directions for our research.

### **Literature review**

#### **Quality culture**

Since the European University Association (EUA) introduced the concept of quality culture as an important element of internal quality assurance for higher education (Quality Culture Project 2002-2006: EUA, n.d.), quality culture has become a taken-for-granted concept in higher education (HE), although some authors are convinced that the concept of “quality culture in HE settings should be used with caution” (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008).

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The EUA Quality Culture Project states that “quality culture refers to an organisational culture” (EUA, 2006) and exists of two distinct but complementary elements: “shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitments toward quality” and “a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating efforts” (EUA, 2006).

The last decade, a number of researchers started to focus on the conceptualisation of quality culture because they perceived a lack of conceptualisation of the phenomenon.

Harvey and Stensaker explore the concept of quality culture in relation to research on culture and how “culture became the umbrella term for all possible intangible factors” (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008) in management literature on organisational culture. They are concerned with the fact that culture is often seen as something that can be designed and can be imposed in organisations. Harvey and Lee reveal the complexity of quality culture and explore the concept in a dialectical framework with the dimensions *degree of group control vs. intensity of external rules* and define 4 ideal types of quality culture. They conclude that quality culture should be a tool for reflection on “asking questions how things work, how institutions function, how they relate to external influences and how they see themselves” (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008).

Harvey builds on that framework and is cautious about the emerging view that “quality culture is about the development of, and compliance with, processes of internal quality assurance” (Harvey, 2009b). He is holding a plea to “entirely disengage the development of a quality culture from sets of assurance procedures (Harvey, 2009a)” and to develop a quality culture as a “self-critical a reflective community of practitioners” (Harvey, 2009a) and to link quality culture to the development of transformative learning (Harvey, 2009a).

Ehlers developed a conceptual model for quality culture in HE including four important elements: (a) structural elements embedded in the quality system of an organisation, (b) enabling factors which are factors enabling organisations to incorporate quality regimes into their culture, (c) quality culture elements, like symbols, rituals, values, which are often invisible and not necessarily uniform for the whole institution and (d) transversal elements which link different components to each other through communication and the encouragement of participation in order to foster and establish collective commitment (Ehlers, 2009, 2010). In this model, Ehlers includes earlier concepts such as “quality as a process of co-production between all stakeholders involved” (Ehlers, 2004, 2006) and the importance of *quality literacy* (Ehlers, 2007a, 2007b).

Berings advocates the quality culture definition of the Flemish Bologna expert team: “Quality culture is an organisational culture which contributes to the development of effective and efficient care for quality.” (Berings, 2010) and developed a conceptual and dialectical model for quality culture, based on “three pairs of competing values or bipolarities” (Berings, Beerten, Hulpiau & Verhesschen, 2010): (a) innovation vs. tradition, (b) collective orientation vs. individual specialisation and (c) system control vs. self-determination, which lead to six

culture images. On the basis of this model, he developed an instrument that can be useful for reflection on quality culture in HE institutions (Berings, 2009, 2010; Berings et al., 2010).

Some common elements can be identified:

- Quality culture is part of an overall organisational culture and is something every organisation has. In organisations, subcultures can exist, for instance in different departments of an institution.
- Quality culture cannot be imposed from the outside and is contextual. EUA reports that “context has been considered as particularly important” and states that “best ideas cannot always be imported into one’s own institution” (Vettori, 2012). Harvey and Stensaker add “if we understand quality cultures as a matter of context, rather than a set of procedures, then the concept can be used as an analytic tool” (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). Ehlers notices that especially the transversal elements communication, participation and collective commitment “cannot be totally externally steered and managed. Only the conditions for the creating of a quality culture can be management and communication, and participation can be encouraged to stimulate trust throughout the organisation” (Ehlers, 2009).
- Quality culture is related to shared values, beliefs and visions of all committed stakeholders.
  - Ehlers refers to quality culture as “a socially mediated and negotiated phenomenon” (Ehlers, 2009) and in his earlier work he defines quality as negotiated meaning (Ehlers, 2003).
  - EUA states that “effective strategies need to be meaningful by helping to make sense of what is going on, by integrating the meaning and the values that are already constructive for specific culture” (Vettori, 2012).
- All authors link quality culture to reflection.
  - According to Ehlers: “To analyse critically means the ability of differentiation and reflection.” (Ehlers, 2007b, 2009) and quality competence is one of the enablers for quality culture.
  - Harvey and Stensaker argue that quality culture should be a tool for reflection (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008) and according to Harvey, “developing a quality culture is synonymous with developing a self-critical and reflective community of practitioners” (Harvey, 2009a). Berings developed an instrument to reflect on one’s own quality culture (Berings, 2009, 2010; Berings et al., 2010).
  - The EUA states that “the best foundation for future enhancement may well be a reflection of the past and the present” (Vettori, 2012), but adds that this is a complex exercise because one has to be aware of the interplay between formal aspects and informal beliefs and assumptions (Vettori, 2012).

### ***Self-assessment instruments***

A considerable amount of literature exists on the use of benchmarking and self-assessment instruments as valuable tools for improving quality of online and blended learning programs

and a wide variety of tools exists for assessing and monitoring quality of e-learning on an institutional level (Ossiannilsson, Williams, Camilleri & Brown, 2015). In Europe however, a tendency exist to apply benchmark approaches only for internal quality improvement and evaluation. Especially practitioners and teachers regard benchmarking with other institutions or against a standard as not useful, since they perceive too many differences in services and contextual environments. They seem to prefer self-reflective methodologies and processes (Shoesmith & Walker, 2011).

Different authors stress the importance of contextualized quality instruments and procedures according to the context and institutions' specific missions and objectives (Ehlers et al., 2006; Ossiannilsson et al., 2015), which is in line with the way of thinking about quality culture. Nevertheless almost all available tools are developed for higher education and universities, hardly any address the specific context of adult education (AE).

In the relevant literature, different guidelines, assessment and benchmark tools for open and distance education were investigated. The aim of this literature review was not to carry out a profound analysis and classification of all possible instruments, which was recently done by the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) (Ossiannilsson et al., 2015), but to screen instruments on their suitability for implementation in the context of adult education.

For that purpose, we defined a set of criteria:

- oriented towards OBL in AE or adaptable for this context (Ossiannilsson et al., 2015),
- focused on the institutional context,
- foster self-reflection (Ehlers, 2007; Ossiannilsson et al., 2015),
- aimed at continuous quality improvement (CQI) (Ehlers & Pawlowski, 2006a),
- learner centred (Ehlers, 2004; Ossiannilsson, 2012), and
- oriented towards different stakeholders (Ehlers & Pawlowski, 2006a, 2006b; Shoesmith & Walker, 2011).

On the basis of these criteria we selected the E-learning Maturity Model (eMM) (Marshall, 2010).

eMM is originally designed as a quality improvement framework which institutions can use to assess their capability to develop, deploy and support e-learning. eMM describes the e-learning capability of institutions in 35 processes, clustered in 5 process areas (learning, development, support, evaluation and organization) and assesses the capability of each process on 5 dimensions (delivery, planning, definition, management and optimization). Several concrete practices describe each process on each of these 5 dimensions and these practices are assessed on a scale: (a) not practiced/not adequate, (b) partially adequate, (c) largely adequate, (d) fully adequate, (e) not assessed. eMM explicitly addresses the institutional context and is supposed to support self-reflection of different stakeholders in the institution. Therefore, ICDE classifies eMM as an advisory framework (Ossiannilsson, et al.,

2015). eMM pointedly focuses on CQI in the dimension *optimization*. The learner-centred approach is addressed in the process area “learning”.

Due to its flexible structure based on process areas and dimensions, eMM can be easily applied in different contexts and institutions with different levels of institutional adoption and implementation of blended learning (Graham, Woodfield & Harrison, 2013).

### **eMM as a methodology to assess the quality of blended learning**

The literature on quality culture has emphasised the importance of contextualisation, mediation and negotiation and the development of a self-critical and reflective community of practitioners with sufficient quality competences. In line with the findings of literature on quality culture, a new methodology is being developed to foster a culture of continuous quality improvement of existing and new blended learning programs in Flemish adult education on the basis of self-assessments with eMM. All centres engaged in the research are participating voluntarily, which is important to gain sufficient commitment.

In all participating centres, a preparatory meeting with the management of the centre took place in which eMM, the methodology and the assessment procedures were explained and the appropriate contexts were selected. The management of the centre made a selection of the staff members they wanted to be involved and selected the eMM processes to be assessed.

In the next phase self-assessment group sessions were conducted on the selected processes. Each assessor was invited to assess the processes in a self-critical and reflective way on all 5 dimensions of eMM: (delivery, planning, definition, management and optimization) and to support their assessment with evidence. Next, the individual assessments were discussed and the group of assessors had to agree on a final assessment.

The main goal of the group sessions is not to collect conclusive assessments on the different processes, but to foster a dialogue and to set up a communication on common beliefs, values and assumptions and to detect strengths and weaknesses, “since tackling specific problems and finding solutions for them is more likely to attract people’s attention and stimulate their engagement” (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training – CEDEFOP, 2015).

The reflection on the 5 dimensions of eMM can reveal whether an institution is tending towards ad hoc attempts or is mainly focused on procedures without implementation in daily practice or is capable of implementing processes in a full quality cycle and sustains the quality competence building of the assessors and is the building of capacity of the practitioners supported (Ehlers, 2009).

At the end of the self-assessment sessions, the participants developed a concrete improvement plan and follow-up-procedures.

The methodology is conceptualized to strengthen the enabling factors commitment, negotiation and quality competences of Ehlers’ Model of Quality Culture (2009).

## Future directions

The research aim is to further design, tweak and develop and implement the eMM self-assessment methodology in the context of blended learning in adult education centres. The model will be incorporated in a quality handbook for adult education and vocational education providers and will be further implemented in the implementation phase of the ALO! project.

eMM was developed for the context of higher education and universities and particularly address online education. Since no specific assessment tools were developed yet for the context of online and blended learning in adult education, the eMM will be adapted and contextualised to fit the needs of formal adult education.

The adapted eMM will be used for further self-assessments in adult education centres with different levels of institutional adoption and implementation of blended learning.

The expected outcome is a revised model for assessing the quality of online and blended learning for adult education and a supporting methodology for implementation.

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