

# Quality Assurance in HEIs' Continuing Education Programmes in a European Perspective

## Authors

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## Abstract

*Due to social-economic developments and the march of the knowledge society, the importance of lifelong learning has grown significantly. Continuing education at HEIs plays an important role within the concern for providing adults with opportunities to improve and adapt their competences. Parallel to the growing number of continuing education programmes (CEPs) at HEIs, also the need for appropriate quality assurance systems for this kind of programmes has grown. The project "Quality Assurance for HEIs' Continuing Education Programmes (QACEP)", in which 8 European institutions are involved, aims at developing a general framework for quality assurance of CEPs offered by HEIs, compatible with the specific needs and context of each HEI, and at elaborating practical tools for their quality assessment. This paper reports on the results of the project's first phase, consisting of a comparative analysis of the approach to quality assurance of CEPs.*

## 1. Introduction

Advanced knowledge-based societies require innovative and creative educational systems that are able to answer immediately to specific needs of the continuously evolving and changing labour market and of society in general: appropriate training of adults is required in order to prevent forms of generational discrimination into the employment policies and into societal life and even well specialized and graduate professionals are called to improve and update personal skills and competences. In this context Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play a fundamental role in providing research based higher education for lifelong learners to create opportunities for retraining and/or advanced specialization for all. Furthermore HEIs have the responsibility to grant transparency and quality in this learning offer.

Efforts are still necessary for "a more systematic development of flexible learning paths to support lifelong learning" as well as "to increase the sharing of good practice and to work towards a common understanding of the role of higher education in lifelong learning"<sup>1</sup>. In the pursuit of this aim, HEIs must define articulated strategies for lifelong learning by experimenting specific tools and paths in degree programmes, but also by finding "ways to open up educational services to returning learners"<sup>2</sup>. In the last few years, different surveys, like EUA's "Trends" reports and BeFlex project<sup>3</sup>, have analyzed learning practices in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and have given evidence that one response HEIs actually give to social, cultural and economic challenges, in terms of lifelong learning need, is the provision of continuing education and training courses addressed to post graduate but also to secondary students with professional experience.

The great relevance of this growing offer arises the need to include HEIs' CEPs in the quality assurance systems already in place<sup>4</sup> and to develop appropriate approaches in order to improve these programmes and guarantee their quality. An adapted approach for the quality assurance of CEPs is crucial considering the specific objectives of these programmes, the specific target groups, the variety of stakeholders

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. London Communiqué, 2007 and Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, 2009

<sup>2</sup> Cf. EUA, *Charter on Lifelong Learning*

<sup>3</sup> [BeFlex Project Final Report](#)

<sup>4</sup>Cf. EUA, *Charter on Lifelong Learning*

involved, their specific relationship with labour market and society. Therefore there is clear evidence about the need for creating and sharing practices and tools in this field also in a transnational perspective.

This has been the background for the project "Quality Assurance for HEIs' Continuing Education Programmes"<sup>5</sup>, project funded with support from the European Commission (Lifelong Learning Programme – Erasmus – Modernisation of Higher Education).

This two year project started in October 2009 and is carried out by a Consortium composed of eight institutions, six HEIs, University of Bologna - IT, Aalto University, School of Science and Technology, Lifelong Learning Institute Dipoli – FI, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven – BE, Institute for Lifelong Learning of the University of Barcelona – ES, University College of Cork – IE, University of Warsaw – PL, and two associations representing a large number of other HEIs, Inter-University Consortium AlmaLaurea – IT, Coimbra Group.

The main aim is to develop a general framework for quality assurance of CEP's offered by HEIs, compatible with and adapted to the needs and specific context of each individual HEI, and to elaborate concrete and practical tools for their quality assessment.

The project plan has been developed according to three main phases:

- to carry out a comparative analysis within the partner universities with regard to CEPs and with regard to QA in the field of, and/or relevant to, CEPs;
- to design an overall framework on the basis of the analysis and by sharing and analysing good practices, considering the potential impact of these tools on CEPs quality assessment;
- to conduct a "pilot evaluation" of a group of CEPs in order to examine some operational and organisational aspects and the feasibility of the QA framework.

This paper reports on the first stage of the project: a comparative analysis on the general context and features of continuing education within the partners' institutions as well as on the quality assurance systems dealing with continuing education.

## **2. Main aims of and methodology used within the comparative analysis**

The objective of the comparative analysis was to establish a common understanding amongst all partners about the definition and main characteristics of CEPs, about quality assurance and its procedures and finally to identify the main commonalities and differences with regard to quality assurance of CEPs.

The analysis was based on the pre-studies turned in by the six HEIs that are member of the Consortium. These pre-studies were based on a template that has been designed to this aim and that included concrete questions on the topics to be addressed. Using a template had different advantages: it guaranteed that the information provided by the different universities touched the topics that were essential with regard to the scope of the analysis. Secondly, it resulted in a set of information that was mutually comparable. Finally, it unintentionally resulted in an instrument that can also be used by institutions outside the Consortium to present a general state of the art with regard to its CEPs and the quality assurance system in place.

The items addressed within the pre-studies included a general introduction to the university/institute, the identification of continuing education within the institution, the identification of procedures with regard to the design of the CEPs, the identification of quality assessment procedures, a SWOT analysis and finally the description of some good practices. The template is based on the concept of the quality cycle<sup>6</sup>. In this way attention was paid to the phase in which CEPs are designed (plan), in which they are implemented (do), in which the monitoring and evaluation of CEPs take place (check) and actions are taken in order to improve programmes (act).

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<sup>5</sup> [www.qacep.eu](http://www.qacep.eu)

<sup>6</sup> PDCA Deming cycle

The pre-studies were analysed by one partner. The first results of the comparative analysis were discussed during a workshop in which each partner took part. Based on the first analysis, the feedback and discussion within the workshop, a report was written and submitted to all partners before it was finished.

### 3. Results of the comparative analysis

All partner universities have a relatively high number of students and offer bachelor, master and PhD programmes as described in the Bologna process. The terminology used however differs (e.g. the use of 'postgraduate').

All offer a broad variety of CEPs. A common definition was achieved using the following elements. Programmes are organised and certified by the university itself. This also implies for example the use of logos, uniform certification, etc. There may be other initiatives or programmes where members of staff may be involved, but they stand outside university, are certified in a different way and their overall quality falls outside the university's responsibility.

Size and credits (two aspects of the same characteristic) are important, in that a minimum critical size is required for continuing education to be considered a programme. Most universities define such a minimum. It didn't seem necessary to agree on a common minimum for the project. Rather than just a minimum in size, also the fact that participants make a certain progression during the programme is considered to be a characteristic of CEPs. Thus a CEP usually consist of several identifiable parts (defined as courses or in another way).

Beyond these items, two more characteristics stand out and are discussed in more detail below: academic level and involvement of the professional field.

The **plan** phase of the quality cycle refers to the process before the programme is running (= ex ante). For the identification of planning and set-up procedures, attention was paid to initiative, decision, design, promotion and marketing and support.

The initiative for CEPs can be taken by a very wide range of persons or units within the university or institution, but is always 'channelled' through internal units. The need for a programme is determined by both central and decentral (meaning at university or at LLL centre level) bodies or a mixture of both. There are many different ways, from needs analysis, market research and surveys to determine internal motives. The institutional units involved range from central services to programme committees and individual professors, but these initiatives are always subject to review and approval by a central body. Since all institutions also offer regular (bachelor and master) programmes, they all have ways of monitoring whether or not the choice for continuing education is the best way to realize the intended goals. Reaching a common set of criteria may not be possible, but it is important that each institution has its own explicit criteria.

The decision to organize a CEP is always taken by a central unit or person. Often but not always there are preparatory steps prior to the final formal approval, which always implies a specific procedure in one form or another, at the institutional level. This procedure, consisting of several steps and requiring specific documents, is widely considered to be a key element in quality assurance. Common criteria for the evaluation of these forms could be grouped into three main categories: economic/financial, academic and market related. At least the importance of some of these criteria is specific for CEPs, compared to other programmes.

The design of the programme is always done internally at the university, even if the idea or initiative comes from outside – though external partners can and will participate. The academic level is crucial and all partners agree that there should be a definition at least at each institution. The degree and nature of involvement of the professional field in designing the programme is very wide: stakeholders, representatives from the professional field, can be members of committees responsible for the programme, they clearly have part in organizing internships and finally also teachers can be drawn from the professional field. Monitoring of the involvement of the professional field is usually done centrally as part of the

approval procedure. Once the programme is organised, monitoring is done more at programme's level, making it more difficult.

Promotion and marketing are organized in the broader context of the institution's communication scheme; support can be drawn from internal units or can be external.

The **check and act** phases of the quality cycle include actions that are taken once the programme is running (= *in itinere*) as well as when the programme has ended (= *ex-post*).

With regard to the official bodies or authorities engaged in the quality management of the programmes and their specific focus of responsibilities, a distinction can be made between the responsibility for the overall quality and daily management of the programme, for the quality of the individual course, for the definition of QA procedures and policy decisions in the field of QA and finally for the administration and implementation of QA procedures and of evaluations.

Depending on the internal organisation of the institution, these responsibilities are attributed to one or more official bodies/authorities, either at the local (programme) and/or the central (institutional) level. Hence a typology was identified for quality management or QA structures related to the type of institutions involved in the project. Thus, in some institutions, responsibility for both the definition of QA procedures as well as the organisation of evaluations and for the overall quality and daily management is situated at faculty and programme level. These universities have a more or less decentralised organisation when it comes to CEPs.

At other institutions, however, the definition of QA procedures and policy as well as the organisation of evaluations are taken care of by separate central units of the university. The involvement of academic staff and faculties in quality assurance of the CEPs is restricted to the daily management of the programme. Thus, in these institutions, the official body responsible for the definition of quality assurance procedures/policy and for the organisation of evaluations is different from that responsible for the daily management and quality of the CEPs.

Still other institutions, finally, may be situated in between both types, as some general QA procedures for some types of CEPs may centrally be identified, whereas some individual programmes may still have a large degree of responsibility and autonomy.

A distinction may also be made between more substantial CEPs, which often have a formalized management structure and to a certain degree are regulated by central policy, whereas CEPs of a rather small size often are under the responsibility of one (academic) individual and often "escape" any type of policy or rules. The same distinction counts for more or less permanent programmes vs. single, occasional or fluctuous programmes.

It was concluded that the way in which these responsibilities are defined, depending on the internal organisation of the institution, is of no/minor importance. What matters is that responsibilities and accountability are clear for each area of operation in order to have an adequate management process.

When it comes to the involvement of (internal and external) stakeholders in the quality management of CE programmes, it seemed that there was no common denominator: many different stakeholders - in changing composition - are involved. Thus, programme committees usually contain academics, and in some cases also students. External stakeholders, i.e. labour market or customer representatives, are represented in external advisory boards, which also include teachers (academics and non-academics). Labour market representatives tend to have an important role in providing advice on the content of the programme in order to adapt the programme content to special (labour market) needs and changing contexts.

CEPs are not involved in external (i.e. external to the institution) QA procedures, as none of the programmes needs to obtain an official recognition and accreditation by the government. As for the *internal* quality assessment of CEPs, some institutions have standard procedures in place, clearly defined in documents or manuals. Most are reactive quality assurance procedures as they focus on the quality of the

programme that was delivered and take place at the end of the course, module or programme (evaluation by students after the course, by alumni, feedback by the labour market on the effectiveness of the course).

All partners involve the participants of the programmes in the evaluations. Some also include other stakeholders, such as teachers and employees of labour market representatives. Especially for CEPs, the involvement of the labour market in evaluations is crucial.

Apart from questionnaires, also feedback discussions amongst staff, students, employers or within an external advisory board are usual. The evaluation by students concerns both individual courses and the entire programme. Basically, four main groups of topics in questionnaires can be detected in every institution:

- teacher/teaching activities
- coherence and content of the programme
- professional orientation (of major importance in questionnaires regarding CE programmes)
- organisation and infrastructure

Using more or less the same questionnaires for teachers and for students appeared to be a good practice in order to reach a more comprehensive picture of the quality of the programme. It also seemed useful to integrate in the questionnaire a part on the respondent's profile (either of student or staff) in order to contextualise and interpret the results. Using the same questionnaire for all programmes allows for comparison between programmes and for detecting trends; on the other hand, using non-standard questionnaires leaves room to adapt the questionnaires to the specific context and characteristics of the programme.

When it comes to the follow-up phase, evaluation results must be taken into account by both individual teachers and programme direction for updating the framework, skeleton and main lines of the programme and/or the courses. In some institutions, evaluation results are reported to the institutional level and used as input for the central policy. Sometimes, bad results can lead to the decision to remove a programme from the institution's offer of CEP's.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Due to social-economic developments and the march of the knowledge society the role and importance of lifelong learning has grown significantly. Continuing education at HEIs plays an important role within the continuous concern for providing adults with opportunities to improve and adapt their skills and competences. Parallel to the growing number of CEPs at HEIs also the need for appropriate quality assurance systems has grown, be it in an appropriate way adapted to their specific characteristics.

The project "Quality Assurance for HEIs' Continuing Education Programmes (QACEP)", in which 8 different European institutions are involved, aims at developing a general framework for quality assurance of CEPs offered by HEIs, compatible with and adapted to the needs and special features of each individual HEI, and at elaborating practical tools for their quality assessment.

The comparative analysis that has been conducted in the first stage of the project, revealed a great variety not only in the different types of continuing education, but even within the offer of what are to be considered as CEPs. A common set of characteristics of CEPs was defined amongst the partner institutions, namely CEPs are organised and certified by the university itself, have a critical minimum size, participants make a certain progression during the programme and the programme consists of several identifiable parts. The analysis also revealed many differences in the approach to the internal quality assurance of these programmes although also commonalities were detected, be it more on the level of the underlying concept and principles. The main commonalities are:

- The initiative for CEPs is always subject to review and approval by a central body.
- Often there are preparatory steps prior to final central approval, consisting of the evaluation of application forms on the basis of a set of criteria. The common criteria can be grouped in three categories: economic/financial, academic and market related.

- The design of the programme is always done internally at the university.
- Involvement of the labour market in evaluations and improvement of the programme is crucial.
- Most institutions mainly have reactive quality assurance procedures in place.
- All partner institutions involve at least the participants/students of the programme in the evaluations.
- Partners tend to include more or less the same topics in their questionnaires.

#### Questions for discussion:

- being a very important point of attention in the phase of designing a CEP: what makes a CEP an academic programme? (plan)
- which characteristics that are very specific to CEPs should be taken into account in designing the evaluation procedures? (check)
- which role can be assigned to the external stakeholders (society, employers, ...) within the approach to quality assurance (plan, do, check, act) of CEPs and what are the limitations?

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