

THE QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICY OF THE CENTRE FOR TOURISM TRAINING, FACULTY OF GEOGRAPHY, BABES-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT. - **The Quality Assurance Policy of the Centre for Tourism Training, Faculty of Geography, Babeș-Bolyai University.** The quality assurance (QA) process is a very important aspect in the field of education – including Vocational Education and Training (VET) - where notions like client, market, management, strategy, competitiveness are more and more present. In spite of the minor place it holds in the national educational system, the Romanian VET is centralised, highly regulated and aligned with the EC VET recommendations and directives. The Centre for Tourism Training (CTT) of the Faculty of Geography, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania is functioning under the auspices of both the university and the National Authority for Qualifications and it conducted an *empirical* quality assurance policy until 2012. The year 2012 opened up new perspectives on quality assurance issues and policies for the Centre for Tourism Training once it applied for a Leonardo da Vinci partnership project titled "Towards the Reciprocal Recognition of Quality Assurance Systems in VET for Tourism". The paper presents the challenges that CTT faces concerning the QA activity, the roadmap to setting up a QA system for the partner institutions in the project, and the achievements regarding the improvement of the QA process.

Keywords: VET, quality assurance, EQUARF, CTT, QualVET.

1. INTRODUCTION

The management of the Centre for Tourism Training (CTT) is well aware of the need for an explicit and systematic effort which should ensure quality and thereby increase the attractiveness and competitiveness of the centre and its educational offer. This, however, needs to be a natural and consistent process as part of a proficient education.

In spite of the functioning of the Centre for Tourism Training under the auspices of both the university and the National Authority for Qualifications (former National Council for Adult Vocational Education), which are to a high extent aligned to European quality

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assurance policies, it conducted an *empirical* quality assurance policy until 2012. The year 2012 opened up new perspectives on quality assurance issues and policies for the Centre for Tourism Training once it applied for a Leonardo da Vinci partnership project titled "Towards the Reciprocal Recognition of Quality Assurance Systems in VET for Tourism". The project has, thus, become an opportunity for the centre to carry out research in the field of QA, collaborate with quality assurance experts, draw up conclusions regarding the European developments regarding QA and implement the most suited strategies that could assist the centre in conducting an efficient process and a customer-oriented QA policy.

CTT used to hire staff when new training modules were introduced or old collaborators withdrew or were no longer co-opted. The recruitment process was mainly recommendation- and competence-based and involved submission of an application (including a CV) and conducting an interview. Each trainer, who is either a member of the academic staff of the university (Faculty of Geography) or a tourism professional and who has acquired the quality of qualified trainer and liable for the training he/she performs. However, presently, as a result of the research undertaken in quality assurance and the exchange of experience with other European tourism training centres, the CTT has revised its training policy (including its trainer recruitment strategy and monitoring of the trainers' performance) which is now more market driven and customer oriented. Finally, its strategy is now adapted to the *quality assurance* strategies and recommendations of the European Commission recommended by the CQAF (Common Quality Assurance Framework), the ECVET (European Credit System for VET) and the EQARF (European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET), the tools which have been developed to support national reforms and enhance transparency, recognition and quality in the provision of competences and qualifications' (ENQA-VET, ENQA-VET Indicators, 2009). In addition, all materials and reports issued by the European Network for Quality Assurance in VET (ENQA-VET), a thematic group whose activity is focused on quality indicators, and the CEDEFOP have been examined and followed.

Given the fact that the trainers also carry out research in the fields of VET, adult education, lifelong learning and tourism, the CTT has participated in the *Competition for Excellence* organised by the Babeș-Bolyai University in 2008.

Since the training modules are accredited by the National Authority for Qualifications for a four year period, the CTT has to undergo an accreditation process every four years for the module whose validity expires. The accreditation process evaluates the following aspects pertaining to the training process: the centre and its physical resources, the staff involved in training and their expertise, course curriculum, the syllabi drawn up for the specific curriculum (in compliance with the *national occupational standards*), training support materials, methods of teaching and evaluation.

In addition to the permanent monitoring carried out by the management team, the centre is controlled periodically by the Audit Department of the university. The CTT was audited in 2010, whereby several aspects pertaining to quality assurance were pointed out.

Presently, the CTT coordinates a Leonardo da Vinci partnership project which seeks to set up a *quality assurance mechanism* for VET in tourism to be used by several European training institutions. The project is titled *Towards a Reciprocal Recognition of Quality Assurance Systems in VET (QualVET)* and brings together 5 European tourism-

focused training providers. The project also investigates the labour market needs and the responsiveness of tourism training to the market needs. The project survey addresses Indicators 2, 6 and 9 of the EQARF (European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET). Furthermore, the project is expected to recommend *quality assurance criteria and tools* which will grant an efficient, quality-based, outcomes-oriented tourism training.

The CTT is in permanent contact with the local National Authority for Qualifications from which it receives permanent supervision and teaching tuition. Also, the Centre collaborates with the Centre for Quality Assurance of the Babeş-Bolyai University in respect of improving the instruments for the quality assurance tools used.

In spite of the few issues underlined by the auditing bodies, the CTT efforts to pursue a quality assurance policy have not coalesced into a real and effective policy until the involvement of the centre in quality assurance projects.

2. CHALLENGES

In Romania, VET occupies a relatively small niche and is overshadowed by other education levels, including the tertiary sector. In spite of the minor place it holds in the national educational system, VET is centralised, highly regulated and aligned with the EC VET recommendations and directives.

In Romania VET is both

1. regulated by the National Authority for Qualifications (NAQ), which works under the Ministry of Education and Research and Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs. The Authority controls the territorial training activities through its local representatives and evaluators
2. enjoys allowable contributions as to how the regulations and directives may be implemented and what quality level the outcomes may acquire.

The NAQ performs the following roles:

- establishes the national professional profiles (jobs) available in the *Romanian Occupational Code*
- identifies and recommends national learning and performance standards as **learning outcomes** for all professional profiles, which build the skeleton for curriculum design
- suggests teaching methods
- establishes forms of assessment/evaluation- thereby creating a relatively unitary assessment system.

The present global recession, the economic and labour market pressures' influence which affect the Romanian VET providers are reflected in a decreased interest in education as fewer young people are capable of paying for their professional qualification, in less interest on behalf of organisations to support further training of their staff and the nature of the VET leadership has become subject to changes. Thus, educational leadership must be anchored in and accompany market, or opportunity-driven leadership.

The challenges posed by labour market are:

- a notable drop in the work opportunities for young people resulting from a decline in the rate of employment
- reductions in apprenticeships and traineeships following falls in investment by firms in education and training
- major job losses in industries and occupations triggering fluctuations in the labour market.

It has been noted that these requisites threaten the revenue of providers that are highly focused on market-based, fee-for-service delivery.

A key challenge for VET providers, and therefore for VET leaders, is capitalising challenges and opportunities posed by economic slowdowns. In particular, this means:

- to develop innovative programs and teaching and learning strategies
- to assist displaced workers, new entrants and
- to re-train existing workers to develop the skills and capabilities to enter a potentially different workforce as the economy recovers.

The CTT is a small organisation which operates within the University Babeș-Bolyai Cluj. It employs around 20 staff as collaborators, offers 5-6 training modules per year, enrolls around hundred students annually and generates a moderate revenue. The training offer includes tourism-focused professional courses: tourism manager, tourism guide-agent, national tourism guide, receptionist-concierge, guesthouse administrator, train the trainer courses. Delivery strategies range from traditional face-to-face tutorials, workplace delivery, and blended approaches. Leadership-wise, the CTT started from a visionary leadership and continued with a combination of entrepreneurial and educational leadership.

Finally, given the involvement of the centre in projects focused on quality assurance, it is hoped that it will embrace a *quality driven leadership*.

3. QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICY PRIOR TO THE INVOLVEMENT IN EUROPEAN PROJECTS

Prior to the more recent involvement of the Centre for Tourism Training in European projects, the centre conducted an empirical quality assurance policy based only and exclusively on the quality assurance strategies devised and enacted as a result of (1) its national accreditation process and (2) its permanent collaboration with the National Authority for Qualifications.

The *national accreditation* process involves the submission to the NAQ of a complete set of documents which provide information on: the organization, documents that testify for the provider's capacity to develop training programmes, data about the training programme (identification data, type of qualification, level of qualification, objectives, output competences and skills, admission requirements, duration of training, venue, structure of the training programme, curricula, syllabi, number of participants,

evaluation of the programme and the students' work, the evaluation of the participants (initial, ongoing, final), instruments, scale of assessment, human/teaching resources, financial resources. The accreditation is training programme-based, which means that every training programme must be accredited. The accreditation of a training programme takes place every four years.

It is generally assumed that, once a programme of a centre or training provider is nationally accredited, it complies with all national rules and regulations regarding VET, including quality certification.

The second intervention of the NAQ and its local divisions in the training process conducted by a provider is the assignment of a commission composed of 3-5 qualified local VET evaluators to take part in the final evaluation of the students. The commission, which is, thus, an independent evaluation body, evaluates the students' performance. The evaluation is made up of two components: both a written component (test) and an oral presentation of a project. It is thus taken for granted that, if an independent commission evaluates the students, their acquired competences and skills are beyond any doubt and question and comply with the same standards.

A third intervention of the NAQ in the training process of a training provider consists in the feedback questionnaires it distributes as part of the permanent *quality assurance monitoring* it carries out. The NAQ has devised its own feedback questionnaires which are helpful instruments both for the NAQ and the institution to reflect the training outcomes vis-à-vis the proposed national VET targets.

Apart from the work carried out by the NAQ, the training providing institutions do little to monitor the quality of their training.

The CTT used the questionnaires provided by the NAQ which has been slightly adapted to suit its teaching purposes. The CTT then acted upon the received information in that it always looked for ways to improve the conditions and the methods of training. The management talked to the trainers and recommended solutions to the ensuing situations.

The CTT management always used face-to-face/individual interviews and focus groups to find out more about the courses and the teachers' performance.

As stated before, the CTT used no other instrument to check the quality of the delivered courses. Nor did anybody, by which we mean the NAQ or the university Quality Assurance Department, intervene directly or in any other way to help the centre develop a valid system of quality assurance.

4. METHODOLOGY

The roadmap to setting up a quality assurance system for VET in tourism for the Centre for Tourism Training and the other partner institutions was designed to cover several steps. The project-based roadmap for QA included four steps.

1. The first step was mainly focused on research on (1) EU quality assurance policies and (2) national VET policies and their implementation in each country.

2. The second step of the project integrated the collection of feedback on three of the EQAVET indicators (indicator 2, 6 and 9) and the interpretation of the collected information. Thereby three questionnaires were designed (for employers, students and alumni), each targeting an indicator. The results were interpreted and presented by the partner institutions at the 4th project meeting organised by MaiCh and held in Crete, 2013. The Romanian partner integrated the survey results in a comparative study to reflect the level of EQARF indicators' implementation in the partner countries.
3. The next step was to correlate the survey results of with the SWOT analysis. The partner institutions were, thus, invited to reflect on the suitability and efficiency of their educational management policies and strategies vis-à-vis the EU quality assurance indicators. The conclusions were included in the project report.
4. The fourth step was to identify and agree on common quality assurance criteria that could be adopted by the partner countries for VET in tourism.

The resulting quality criteria, which were mainly in use in most partner institutions, were incorporated in a *framework for quality assurance for VET in tourism*. The framework was the outcome of discussions and debates and comprises broadly the following three categories: *design of an integrated VET strategic vision*, *design of training activities*, *monitoring the training activities* and *group dynamics*. In turn, for example, the *training activities* criterion integrates: enhancing learners' participation, content, learner's behaviour, assessment. Each criterion was then broken down into 7-10 sub-items. The framework has become a major project output available as a guide for quality assurance to training providers.

5. DISCUSSION

From the range of operations and processes that the CTT was involved in, it is worthwhile mentioning the *SWOT analysis* which helped the management of the centre focus on the most important issues that could contribute to an increased efficiency of the teaching process. Thus, the management became more aware of the mission statement it serves in the medium-term and long-term perspective, the stated objectives and current activities and their relevance to the quality of the training process. The mission of the CTT is, henceforth, to provide attractive, flexible, high quality, competitive VET for the tourism sector to meet the needs of a changing and demanding labour market. CTT permanently adjusts its VET policy and initiatives to the training demands of the trainees and the sector. Through the training it provides it improves the quality of tourism training and releases to the labour market highly-qualified professionals.

The objectives of the CTT have been: (1) to permanently grow the range of its training offer, (2) to improve the quality of training, (3) to develop and maintain a coherent quality assurance system, (4) to equip young people or tourism workers with the competences and skills needed on the labour market, (5) to achieve national and international visibility and recognition.

The SWOT analysis revealed the following aspects:

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Building and equipment 2. Recognition of credits in the EU countries 6 accredited courses 3. LCCI courses : English for Tourism courses and examinations 4. IATA courses (2) 5. Qualified trainers – most of which are managers working in tourism 6. International collaborations for training purposes 7. Placement opportunities in trusted and good hotels and agencies 8. Annual practice-related, guided excursion 9. Good visibility at home and abroad 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Administrative staff shortage 2. IT staff shortage 3. Lack of a strategic and operational plan 4. Weak control over the placement/practical activities 5. Lack of a permanent feedback on the employers' satisfaction
Opportunities	Threats
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The existing tourism potential 2. More attractive and friendlier regulations for tourism which will encourage tourism and tourism training 3. The existing QA methods and instruments (BBU, national and international) 4. New collaboration opportunities 5. Relative financial autonomy 6. Development of adult education and LLP 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Competition from other training centres 2. Lack of interest of young people in VET 3. Candidates shortage (because of the financial crisis) 4. Need to raise taxes which, on the other hand, may be prohibitive to candidates 5. Too great a control of the BBU over the administrative and financial resources 6. Scarce links with the labour market

One of the purposes of the project was to identify the common issues of the five VET partners of the project. In this respect, they were asked to expose their strategic goals and objectives and to carry out a SWOT analysis. For the purpose of verifying the consistency of the objectives *vis-à-vis* the goals, brief *TOP - BOTTOM - TOP* analyses were conducted. The question **How can it be done?** was used for the *top - bottom* approach and the question **Why?/To what purpose?** was used for the *bottom - top* approach. The loops were properly closed, which means that the objectives were consistent with the goals. The results of the text analysis of the goals and objectives show that the partners have many common issues and the most important are:

- The goals and the objectives are defined in terms of the observance of the high quality and/or the excellence of the provided educational services.
- Quality is defined in close relationship with the requirements of the labour market, especially with a successful employment rate of the alumni.
- Mobility opportunities and international initiatives are reflected in the institutional goals and objectives.

- The partners' perception of tourism at present is that it is modern and innovative and thus the professional quality of the students is linked with their *capacity of innovation, change, and creativity*.

Starting from the last mentioned issue, the partners were asked to identify some of the specific aspects that bring novelty to the field of tourism today. The identified core issues were: green tourism, online approaches, computer skills for employees, advanced and personalised services, alternative tourism (religious, rafting), new marketing and management approaches to hospitality, packaging of tourism programs.

As a result, a series of new approaches to tourism training were acknowledged: modern content, methods, materials and resources, improved self-evaluation of training providers, more mobility and exchanges, an improved relationship of the VET providers in tourism training with the employers, more practical training for the trainees, foreign teachers/trainers/instructors, where it is possible and necessary.

As a consequence of the involvement of the CTT in the quality assurance project, its management team became more aware and concerned about the issues that are relevant for the process, i.e. the European indicators in the first place. As part of the project activities, the CTT conducted a survey for which three questionnaires were used: one questionnaire targeted the *employers*, one the *alumni* and one the course *graduating students*. Thus, the questionnaires addressed three indicators: indicator 2, 6 and 9.

The collected data were processed and interpreted by the co-opted expert, the expert working for the Centre for University Development and Quality Management of the university. This practice was extremely helpful as it taught the members of the CTT management team to design questionnaires, to use them adequately and to integrate the results in the ongoing training process.

The SWOT analysis of the activity conducted by each partner institution put forward the following common issues of the tourism training programs (some of them resulted from the applied questionnaires to the students and to alumni).

Strengths: (1) the existence of adequate material conditions for studies (venues, equipment, supplies, course support), (2) the high professional expertise of the trainers, (3) a well organised teaching activity, (4) the use of appropriate curricula, (5) the opportunities to carry out practical/placement activities in tourism agencies and other operators in the field, (6) initiation of international collaborations, (7) the development of the linguistic competences of trainers and trainees (except for Umbria Training Center, Scheggino, Italy), (8) local and national visibility and an efficient marketing strategy (except for the Turkish partner, Mugla Ticaret Meslek Lisesi).

Weaknesses: (1) lack of strategic planning, (2) scarce links and relationships with the labour market (especially with the employers) and with other stakeholders, (3) lack of financial support, (4) staff issues (shortage, age, motivation).

Opportunities: (1) The existing tourism potential in each county, (2) The development of LLL and EU interest for VET.

Threats: (1) shortage of candidates, (2) lack of interest of young people, (3) competition from other training centres, (4) the unbalanced labour market and unfair practices regarding the youth employment, (5) influences from national/local institutions (financial, regarding curricula, etc.).

Strategic planning and the relationship with employers and other stakeholders surfaced as common issues that must be improved. In addition, finding solutions for the financial and staff issues, and for the mentioned specific weaknesses (for example, more interactive teaching methods at the Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Chania, Greece; the improvement of the linguistic competences of the trainers and trainees at the Umbria Training Centre, Scheggino, Italy; having more control over the practical activity at the Centre for Tourism Training, Romania) are common traits that should be pursued by each partner institution.

Another benefit resulting from the project was the *common quality assurance framework* designed by the project partner institutions for tourism training in VET. The framework with its debated items and sub-items was agreed on by the partners as they were all more or less in use in the partner institutions. The advantage of the framework over other instruments is that it refers to tourism training and is as detailed as possible in order to cover all aspects involved in the training process. Given the fact that it has not yet been piloted, it stands to reason that in the next few years the partner institutions will implement it and report on its benefits or shortcomings.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Practically speaking, it is expected that if the management of the CTT uses the feedback questionnaires on a permanent basis and seeks to improve them as the case arises, it will be able to rectify all shortcomings that occur in the system and also make clear, market-driven training forecasts.

If prior to the involvement of the CTT in the quality assurance project much of what has been carried out was rather empirical, less planned and quality assured, now the set mission statement and the training objectives will be carefully pursued and corroborated.

Second, it was for the first time that a research was undertaken whereby many documents were studied and reviewed and a scientific interpretation was given to the results of the questionnaires, which brought to light interesting issues that the CTT was only partially aware of. The interpretation of the findings represents an important springboard for the adoption of future training strategies.

Third, the corroboration of the concepts of mission – process - learning outcomes was critically examined.

Fourth, the setting up of the *common quality assurance framework* enables the centre management members to use the criteria on a common basis, which will guarantee an excellent risk management.

All in all, the project facilitated to the project partner institutions a scientific access to quality assurance principles and strategies, a lesson they all learned diligently.

If the project investigated and used three indicators, it may be the next priority of the CTT to look forward to using other indicators or all indicators to ensure an adequate training process.

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