

HOW TO MEET QUALITY ASSURANCE STANDARDS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL – THE BULGARIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

The Department of foreign language teaching at Varna Free University has been an accredited member of OPTIMA – the Bulgarian Association for Quality Language Services since 2008. It has undergone a serious accreditation procedure in four areas – administrative and academic management, teaching standards and general conditions. As a result Varna Free University Language teaching department was awarded OPTIMA’s certificate and the Quality Label. The benefits of OPTIMA accredited membership include acknowledgement of the good practices in the field of language teaching and the broad opportunities to approach new areas of activity both at institutional and professional level.

Key-words: university language department, quality assurance, measures, opportunities

Introduction

Quality assurance in higher education has become a major concern in the European context especially with the Lisbon Strategy and the Bologna Declaration. The increased interest in quality and standards relates to the public and private demand for excellence and expertise in the knowledge-based society and the need of universities to respond to the demand by uncovering the means of assuring and demonstrating quality (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2005). Some authors, however, refer to quality assurance in higher education as ‘superfluous’, or ‘an illusive, undefined butterfly’. They argue that the process of quality assurance focuses more on assurance and less on quality and consequently is asking the wrong questions (Harvey, 2009).

In my paper I will outline a set of issues relating to the need of university language departments to undergo quality assurance procedures, and to the outcomes that have an impact on both the institution as a whole and the learning/ teaching process. In providing answers to those, hopefully correct questions, I will try to find evidence that quality assurance can improve processes and/ or build values and attitudes.

The Context

Central to my paper will be the Department of foreign language teaching, which operates within the structure of Varna Free University, one of the first private universities in Bulgaria established in the early 1990s. The Department provides language education in eight foreign languages: English, German, Spanish, French, Russian, Turkish, Latin, and Bulgarian as a foreign language. This involves delivering language courses to all full and part-time students in the Bachelor's, Master's and PhD programmes and assessing their communicative competence and skills. As part of an academic context the Department meets all the legal requirements set by the institution and the Ministry of Education in terms of academic staff appointment, development and performance, curriculum and syllabus design, premises and equipment, fees, etc.

The Department of Foreign Language Teaching at Varna Free University has been an accredited member of the Bulgarian Association for Quality Language Services OPTIMA since 2008. Two years before the accreditation, in 2006, the Department became an associated member of OPTIMA. This created conditions for actions to be taken to ensure that the Department operated at high quality standards. These efforts were in line with the University's mission to comply with quality assurance standards in the field of higher education and to be a student-oriented institution. It was in the same year – 2006 – that Varna Free University was awarded second institutional accreditation by the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency for a period of six years. In February 2010 the University was recertified for the third time under the international standard ISO 9001:2008.

Meeting Standards

In the pre-accreditation period – between 2006 and 2008 – the Department started a procedure of monitoring the educational process. The aim was to make sure that the

Department operated at high quality standards, that it would attain effective quality management. This meant that all involved in the educational process – management, teachers, learners, administrative staff – were made aware of the goals of the quality assurance system within the Department. The monitoring procedure included:

- gathering information in relation to OPTIMA's inspection scheme and criteria;
- analyzing and interpreting the information gathered;
- taking action for improvement;
- starting on-going monitoring of processes.

Four seminars were organized by the Department to reveal and discuss facts and to take measures. The data collected covered all aspects of quality in language education, i.e. management, syllabus, classroom dynamics, learners' needs, expectation and satisfaction, teacher development, equipment, safety, etc. After the analysis and interpretation of the facts, a mission statement of quality assurance was **defined**. This is a document which describes all the activities of the Department in terms of procedures, rules and measures that would be taken to improve quality of the language services provided. The whole process of language teaching and learning was **refined**. This covered better lesson planning and more dynamic and learner-oriented classroom procedures. The educational process became more **standardized** as teachers started using the same lesson plan structure and completing the same forms for students' attendance. Each course's syllabus referred to the CEFR levels and the assessment criteria were based on the 'can do' statements. Learners' needs, expectations and satisfaction started to be measured not only by the rather general university questionnaire, but also by two specially designed questionnaires covering the main aspects of language learning and teaching. These are submitted for completion by the students at the beginning and end of each course. Teachers' peer observation started to be considered an instrument and exercise for internal quality assurance.

In early April 2008 the Department was ready to undergo a serious accreditation procedure in four areas – administrative and academic management, teaching standards and general conditions. Information was collected from various sources – documentation, interviews, observations, etc. More than 90 percent of the language seminars were supervised by OPTIMA inspectors, meetings were held with the Department staff and focus groups, and with heads of the major university departments. Inspectors' report systemized the multitude of

data into a coherent document, which contained the areas of good practice and recommendations. The results, expressed in figures showed that the areas of good practice outnumbered in times recommendations. The inspection was considered a success because of another important factor: there were no referrals to standards not being met. As a result the Department was awarded OPTIMA's certificate and the Quality Label.

Continuous Self-evaluation

As an accredited member of the Bulgarian Association for Quality Language Services the Department's main goal now is to provide quality language services consistently and continuously. Quality control has embraced such issues as ongoing evaluation and assessment and ongoing development, both at institutional and professional level. Although inspections are an important part of any quality assurance system, there is a steady shift towards self-assessment. In this respect the Department is very active making use of two mechanisms which proved to be relevant to the context. One of them is class observation, which by tradition involves development of a lesson plan, observation of the lesson, report on the observation, and feedback on the results. Class observations are carried out once in a semester, while the results are summarized by the academic coordinators and discussed at the annual seminar of the Department. Although such a procedure is time consuming, it develops a better understanding of the aims and stages of the lesson, as well as meaningful implementation of methods and approaches. Therefore class observation can be considered as a way to integrate institutional improvement with personal professional growth.

Another instrument of objective self-evaluation, which aims at continuous improvement of the teaching operation in particular, is teacher ranking. Institutional self-knowledge is the starting point for effective quality assurance. It is important to have the means of collecting and analysing information about your own activities. Teacher ranking is based on these underlying ideas. This is a mechanism which involves information about the profile of the student population, students' satisfaction with their language courses, the learning resources available, and most importantly the effectiveness of teachers. The data is collected from the students' questionnaires, completed at the end of each course, and analyzed by an academic coordinator from the Department. The ranking itself is discussed at the annual seminar of the Department. It shows who has been working well during the academic year and what needs attention, or the results of innovatory practices. Teacher ranking provides

relevant data about the teaching practice existing in the Department, measures commitment to quality and outlines the directions of professional development.

Conclusion

Aiming to meet quality assurance standards as part of an institution which has already proved itself to be abiding to such standards might really seem superfluous. But there are specific advantages for the Department of Language Teaching at Varna Free University of being accredited by the Bulgarian agency for quality language services. These benefits can be found in a number of important respects. Firstly, OPTIMA inspection scheme is designed to assess quality in the specific field of language services. Thus accredited membership is associated with acknowledgement of the good practices of the Department in the area of language teaching. Secondly, it establishes a framework for development of a system for an ongoing improvement of the teaching/ learning environment. Thirdly, holding a quality label opens broad marketing opportunities both inside and outside the university context. Also, working within an organization committed to quality assurance provides for building attitudes and values which contributes to self learning and professional growth.

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