

**Inherent contradictions in managing quality of adult education:
A qualitative analysis of reports on policies and systems in European
countries**

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Introduction

In recent years an intensive interest in quality of adult education has arisen as a key issue in the delivery of lifelong learning, which derives either from the need to increase competitiveness in a global economy or from the need to demonstrate accountability in public services and the ability to achieve results. The relative importance of quality is demonstrated by the place it is given in policy documents of many national agencies and international organizations. At the European level, which is of particular interest in this paper, the Commission's of the European Communities (2000) "Memorandum on lifelong learning" recommended the development of standards to assure quality of provision throughout Europe. A subsequent report entitled "Quality indicators of lifelong learning" (Commission of the European Communities, 2002), which presents the work of representatives from thirty-five European countries plus OECD and UNESCO, has outlined specific quantitative and qualitative data which might be used as indicators to support and evaluate planning in lifelong learning activities, which are closely related to adult education. This report followed by the "Common principles for quality assurance in higher education and vocational education and training in the context of the European Qualifications Framework" (Commission of the European Communities 2002), which set principles for quality assurance of

higher education and vocational education and training institutions and their programmes.

These and many other policy documents indicate that the management of quality in education is a commonly accepted principle in Europe but at the same time a careful reading of these and particularly, of relevant national reports brings to light a lot of disparate arguments which are offered for supporting the development of quality assurance standards, systems and agencies. Thus, even unintentionally, it seems that many aspects of quality management in education are confusing and undermine relevant efforts and policies. In this context this paper presents the main conclusions drawn from a qualitative analysis of documents reporting on policies and quality systems developed and applied in many European countries.

Method of analysis

While a substantial amount has been written about quality in education, there is a comparatively small amount of literature that is specifically focused on adult education and the needs of lifelong learners and as Jarvis (1995, p226) has noted:

'whilst the language of quality is appearing in adult and continuing education, the definition of the concept is much more problematic.'

On these grounds, documents reporting on policies and quality systems developed and applied in European Union countries were selected. The data search was systematic within the data pool consisting of

- bibliographic databases (e.g. ERIC),
- major adult education journals (e.g. Adult Education Quarterly),
- conference proceedings (The proceeding as well as the national reports prepared for the 6th International Conference on Adult Education (UNESCO, 2009) were specifically analysed),
- published reports and surveys by international organisations (e.g. OECD, CEDEFOP, World Bank), as well as
- Reports issued by transnational projects and networks initiated or supported by European Union programmes.

In the latest case, the national reports for Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden (Faurschau, 2008), the national reports for Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Romania, Sweden and United Kingdom (Qualc, 2008) as well as the national reports for Germany, Belgium, Denmark, France, Latvia, Slovakia and Spain (Managing Quality of Adult Education in Europe, 2006) were studied in depth, since they directly refer to quality of adult education. Closely related reports produced by CEDEFOP surveys (e.g., 2005, 2007) although concerning the quality of vocational education and training sectors were analyzed and their evidence used supplementary to our analysis.

The technique of "go backward" was consistently applied, that is related references found in any document were searched. The outcome of this search was a preliminary pool of documents reporting on policy or systems aimed at controlling and ensuring the quality of adult education structures or activities in European countries, which are EU members. The selection limited to English-language papers appeared from 1985 onwards. In a second step, the most current publications reporting in the most integrated way on the state of the art in each country was selected.

Two deficiencies of this selection procedure may limit the results of this study:

1. The documents selected do not adopt a common perspective in their approach to, and reporting of quality of adult education in each country, and
2. The data collected is dependent on availability of publications.

Both of these factors are, however, inherent in every study adopting a meta-analysis method aimed to synthesize knowledge by integrating qualitative studies (Turner, 1997), as is our study.

A content analysis applied to these texts elucidated, through close examination of their content and language, how quality issues concerning adult education are conceived and approached. The selected documents were repeatedly studied until themes referring to major questions of managing quality emerged. In a second step these questions were thematically

classified and after themes were identified, they were examined in the light of the aims of our analysis.

The purpose of the analysis was to single out any similarities and especially differences, characterising the concepts and approaches to quality of adult education in Europe and then to trace the emergence of common policy principles, if any, concerning the control and assurance of that quality.

Main findings

Our analysis yielded many interesting conclusions concerning the management of quality of adult education and several of them are outlined in the following, singled out because, in our view, they reflect inherent contradictions of conceptions and approaches to quality control and assurance of adult education provisions:

- (1) A lack of commonly accepted and applied concepts of quality of adult education is a fact, which seems to be the most prevailing factor of discrepancies between countries, organisations and even concerned participants. Quality is indeed a complex and multifaceted concept and its application to adult education is not a simple and easy undertaking. The quality of adult education structures and activities is, as a rule, defined in a context. Therefore, it is being defined in different but concrete ways in each country, according to particular conditions, which determine the social and educational context. In many countries, for instance, the influence of a strong positivist culture is obvious in the conceptions of quality of education, which is managed and thus understood by primarily using quantitative measures and performance indicators, that is, as a measurable variable. In other countries, however, quality of education is approached by a comparison to the intended features of educational structures and processes, that is, as conformance to qualitatively predetermined specifications, usually in the form of aims and objectives.

The fact of multiple definitions of quality combined with a variation of objectives and approaches in quality assurance appearing within and between European countries, leads to a great number of different methods, tools and instruments used for the evaluation and control of quality in adult education and training. Conversely, it seems quite clear that a considerable degree of convergence and a number of overlaps in approaching quality management of adult education have emerged among European countries, primarily as an impact of common projects financed by EC programmes.

It must be underlined that several terms are used interchangeably to refer to 'quality' mainly in related policy documents. The term 'assessment' is rather the most commonly used term and is referred to educational programmes, institutions or policies. Terms such as 'evaluation' and 'review' have also been used in a similar generic way. At the same time, the term 'quality' when used in adult education is often vague and even inconsistent

- (2) An inconsistency characterises the policies, which promote the establishment of structures for managing quality of adult education. On the one way they are promoted quality standards and systems on a legal and administrative basis, usually at national or regional level and on the other hand, internal mechanisms for adult education providers ensure the quality of their activities on a market-oriented basis, mainly on an organisational level. Thus while quality is seen as an important issue, the relevant policies seems not to be unanimously applied. The main reason stated being the failure of legal and administrative structures to take account of the competing needs and desires of different stakeholders in the development of approaches to measuring quality.
- (3) An impossibility of establishing universal quality standards and uniformly applicable quality assurance procedures, which are functional and effective in any type and form of adult education and training, as well as in each individual structure and activity, seems to be implicitly accepted.

Two prominent and internationally recognised standards seems to prevail today, ISO (International Organization for Standards) and EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management). Both are well established and applied also in the educational sector. ISO defines quality explicitly, as the “totality of characteristics of an entity that bears on its ability to satisfy stated and implied needs” and EFQM employs a similar concept of quality. It seems, however, that the implementation of these two quality standards is not easy for adult education organisations, especially when they are small. Some see obstacles in translating the special language of ISO into their daily work. Some see difficulties in managing their evaluation with EFQM because of the complexity of the process. For these reasons the adult education sector has started to develop their own models which fulfil their needs in a better way. For example, in Germany a mushrooming of models may be noted over the last years, as are the models “Learner oriented quality development for further education - LQW”, “Qualitätsentwicklungssystem - QES plus” and “Development of quality in a compound system of adult education organizations - QVB”, in Denmark the model “Quality tool for developing innovation and competencies - KVIK” and in Belgium the model “European Standard for Training Quality Management - ESTQM” have been developed based on EFQM, in Slovenia the model “Offering quality education to adults” based on the philosophy of Total Quality Management has been developed, in Switzerland the model of “Swiss Certificate of Continuing Education Institutions - EduQua” and in other European countries there are a lot of consistent systems or self-evaluation approaches employed.

- (4) A scarcity of generally accepted, integrated, applicable and effective quality evaluation and assurance models is a fact with negative impacts on the development of systems for management of aspects of quality in adult education. The emphasis on quality has led to the development of many different approaches to its assessment and a number of models have emerged. However an effort towards the harmonisation of different approaches, models and procedures for the management of quality of

adult education on a European level has been developed in recent years. For example, the "EQUIPE - Equal Project" (2000), an EU funded Socrates project, has tried to bring together information about various models and approaches and the "Managing quality of adult education in Europe" (2006), also an EU funded Leonardo da Vinci's project attempted to develop a European framework for quality management systems for small size adult education providers.

A trend towards development of stakeholders' models is rather obvious in many national efforts. One example of a quality model in adult education, which involves stakeholders in quality management, can be found in the adult basic education sector. The model was first developed and piloted as a result of a European Socrates project involving partners from Belgium, England, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland during 1998-2000). Since then it has been adopted by the National Adult Literacy Agency and embedded in practice throughout Ireland (Doyle, 2001, Mark & Donaghey, 2001)

Although it is not claimed that the documents analysed are absolutely representative of the total literature in the subject matter the conclusions reported in this paper may be considered indicative of the research needed and the debates required for promoting quality in adult education provisions. As put in a report produced by EAEA (2006):

"Europe has the most varied quality assurance practices by country, adult learning sector and provider. However, diversity is not always an advantage." (p. 59).

Concluding comments

Quality of any type and form of education is an elusive concept, which in fact, is difficult to define. It requires different meanings in various contexts and the word itself implies different things to different people. It may be claimed, however, that the different meanings and references of quality that are traced in the relevant documents analyzed stem from two perspectives

towards education (Parker, 2004). The first one views education in a context of welfare service thus educational organizations as public structures and the second approaches education in a market context, thus educational organizations as business. In accordance to these approaches, they are differentiated not only the concepts but mainly the systems and models for the management of quality in education. Approaching educational offers as public services, the quality of the offers and their providers is seen as "excellence", that is as the optimum attainment in a scale of aimed objectives specified on the basis of various criteria. With such viewpoint in mind, quality is a rather absolute concept attributed to educational activities (Sallis 1993). However two issues seem to arise, directly or indirectly, in the documents analysed. The first issue concerns the references of the quality concept and according to the evidence a priority is given to the students and to the results of their participation in educational activities. The quality criteria employed are primarily related either to content, methods, media and conditions of educational activities as well as to the efficiency of teachers or to the effectiveness of educational provisions offered to particular adult populations or social groups. The second issue questions the agents authorized to define establish and control the quality of education standards and procedures and it seems that the prevailing practice throughout Europe is to assign this task to regional, or national, usually state controlled authorities.

On the other hand, in a market context there are the multiple stakeholders of particular educational activities (students, employers, funding institutions, local, regional and national authorities, providers) that are given priority in defining and ensuring quality of education. Since, however, stakeholders' interests, aims and demands from educational programmes vary and in many cases are contradictory, the quality is conceived and applied rather relatively and often on a basis of meeting the needs of those who are considered as customers. It is, as put by Sallis (1993), a "quality of perception" that can be said to lie "in the eyes of the beholders". The above-mentioned multitude of

models and systems for managing the quality of adult education has grown incited and supported by this perspective of education.

Our analysis of documents reporting on quality of adult education revealed efforts, and therefore needs, to develop and apply quality management systems at three different levels, individually or jointly.

First at an organisational level, where quality management models have been introduced into adult education organisations in most countries, many of them adopted from the business sector, such as ISO and EFQM, identically or modified according to the educational organization structure and activities. Second, at the level of the learning individual, where quality standards and procedures which have been applied are mainly concerned to assess and document learning outcomes or meeting student's needs and to make them visible to learners and other stakeholders.

The third level of quality management may be seen at the national system of adult education, which exists in some countries supporting and monitoring dedicated institutes of adult education and learning. Such a system is either government-controlled, as in Finland (Finnish Adult Education Council) or Greece (General Secretariat for Adult Education), or it has the status of non-governmental organization, as in England and Wales (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) or in Germany (German Institute for Adult Education) and its quality management is subject to legislation.

In conclusion, managing quality of adult education is important, as is throughout the educational spectrum and this is taking place in every European country although applying various standards, procedures, systems or models. It seems, however, that due to the distinct, varied, and fragmented nature of adult education provisions, especially in informal and non-formal learning, it is difficult to carry out fundamental quality assurance tasks. Therefore, the question of quality will be inherent in any discussion concerning the main aspects of adult education.

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