Approaches and Methods for Quality Assurance

Quality Assurance procedures are a pre-requisite for the recognition of Maltese qualifications abroad and for Malta to become a centre of excellence in education and research. Malta is also committed within the Bologna Process [1] which necessitates the development of a quality assurance system. Malta has also agreed to the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance [2] in the European Higher Education Areas (ESG) (ENQA, 2005) adopted by the ministers responsible for Higher Education within the Bologna Process in Bergen 2005 by which Malta is expected to be part of the process in the near future.

National Commission for Higher Education (NCHE)

To further develop the Government’s strategic objectives for higher and tertiary education the Education Act [3] established the National Commission for Higher Education [4] (NHCE). The setting up of the Commission was aimed at proposing a clear vision with sustainable targets and objectives for higher education. The mission statement for NHCE is “to promote more and better further and higher education to empower all students with knowledge and skills for the future” (NHCE, Annual Report, 2009 [5]).

As specified through the Act, the Commission is responsible for:

- Promoting structured dialogue between all Further and Higher education institutions;
- Supporting all stakeholders with research, data and information about the sector;
- Maintaining a register of authorised and accredited institutions and programmes available in Malta;
- Developing a National Strategy for Further and Higher education;
- Preparing key performance indicators and benchmarking the sector against international developments.

Numerous reports [6] and frameworks have been set up since the inception of the National Commission for Higher Education.

In December 2007, the report A Quality Assurance Framework for Further and Higher Education in Malta [7] was published with recommendations regarding quality assurance for further and higher education. These recommendations were identified through a process of consultation, research and analysis of the local situation and also of the international context. The NCHE identified two priority areas -

- the need to reform licensing regulations for public and private further and higher education providers and
- the need to build an accreditation and quality assurance framework for such providers and their
On the 28th January the NCHE held seminars for state-funded and private institutions of further and higher education in which student and staff representatives were also invited to participate. The main purpose was to explain the proposals and obtain preliminary feedback and to launch the consultation on the NCHE proposals.

In May 2008, a consultation report was published outlining the feedback from public and private providers of further and higher education as well as various other entities. Consultation meetings were held abroad with the European Commission [8], the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education [2] (ENQA), the European Students’ Union [9] (ESU) and the European University Association [10].

Following this extensive consultation and after receiving feedback from the various stakeholders, the original proposed recommendations were revised. The amended proposal submitted to the Minister of Education on the 14th May 2008 was accepted through a general consensus.

Since then a number of policy statements have been made on the requirement for a new Further and Higher Education Act and for the need of establishing a Quality Assurance Agency in Malta to implement an external Quality Assurance process. In July 2008 and 2009, the NCHE submitted its requirements to develop the capacity to provide for Quality Assurance.

In April 2009, the NCHE held a national conference and launched its recommendations on a Further and Higher Education Strategy 2020 [11]. Quality Assurance was once again identified as a key priority for the sectors following extensive consultations with all stakeholders of the sector.

In 2010 the NCHE and the MQC worked closely on several issues of common concern. In April 2011 the MQC held the Kick Off meeting for the European-funded project: EQAVET a project aimed at developing a Quality Assurance tool which will help Vocational Training Institutions verify the different aspects and requirements for Quality Assurance of their institutions and their courses and this as indicated in the EQAVET [12] documents and as specifically stated in the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework [13] (EQARF).

The Process will involve the participation of four Maltese vocational institutions which will review their own Quality Assurance systems with regards to 30 vocational training courses. Together with other European partners, the project will involve the development and piloting of the Quality Assurance Tool. A multiplier effect is expected from this project as

- The institutions involved in the project will reform their quality assurance systems for the programmes involved; and
- The manual, which is the main project output, will serve as a Quality Assurance tool for VET Programmes and Institutions and will provide an opportunity for other institutions to review and restructure their Quality Assurance systems for the learning programmes which they offer.

Malta Qualifications Council (MQC)

Another resulting setup is that of the MQC [14] which was established in October 2005 through Legal Notice 347/2005. In November 2006 the first draft of the NQF was launched for consultation with the completed report being launched in June 2007. In September 2009 MQC finalised a document on the Referencing of the MQF to the EQF and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area [15]. The document was presented to the Advisory Group of the European Qualifications Framework [16] in September 2009 and launched for further consultation in Malta in

The National Qualification Framework (NQF) was developed within a framework for lifelong learning and focuses on learning outcomes defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competencies. The Framework provides learners with a map of all levels of qualifications, of entry and exit points at every level of qualification as well as the level of qualifications required by sector and occupation. Concurrently the Maltese NQF is meant to be a common reference point between industry, training providers and learners. Over the past three years the MQC has published various policy documents for consultation on the framework of qualifications, quality assurance for vocational training, the validation of informal and non-formal education and a programme of studies of key competences for lifelong learning. It is intended that legislation still to be enacted will incorporate various aspects of these policies such as the validation of informal and non-formal learning.

Courses and programmes offered in Malta are either home-grown or foreign implying that their formal recognition could be different. When a qualification is a foreign one this passes through the Malta Qualifications Recognition and Information Centre [19] (MQRIC) which is the official national body dealing with the recognition and comparability of both academic and vocational qualifications. MQRIC co-ordinates the different agencies and authorities entitled to evaluate and award credentials and licenses. If the qualification offered is a home-grown one, it goes through a level-rating process. Level rating is a procedure that requires an expert in the field to look into the level descriptors of the Malta Qualifications Framework and match the learning outcomes of a programme to such level descriptors. As all qualifications which are level rated to the MQF will be accepted in Europe and beyond through MQF’s referencing to the EQF, MQC must ensure that only quality-based qualifications are level-rated.

The University of Malta

The University of Malta [20] has adopted a self-critical attitude towards its policies and procedures whereby an external evaluation system complements the internal self-evaluation. The University of Malta has in place both internal as well as external quality assurance measures in place. These measures apply not only for the existing programmes but also for the validation of new programmes or credits as well as modifications or amendments to programmes of studies. Although procedures are in place, as yet no policy document exists.

Programme Validation Committee (PVC)

The Programme Validation Committee [21] is the standing committee of the University Senate which has to ensure that the programmes of study are valid and of an appropriate nature and to ensure optimal use of the available resources. It also is entrusted with providing quality assurance mechanisms which are appropriate for its internal and external audit purposes.

Whenever new programmes of study are proposed a validation process assesses whether they are in line with the University of Malta’s overall vision, if they are in line with market demands and whether the quality is comparable to that of other European or International partners. The procedure is a rigorous one which encourages appropriate innovation yet effective quality assurance.

New programmes have to be processed by the Programme Validation Committee [21] so as to guarantee that:

- the academic rationale for new programmes is fully exposed and understood
• the requirements for students to achieve the intended learning outcomes are clear
• resources can be provided to deliver the programme to standards acceptable to the University

The Process is a relatively lengthy one which incorporates numerous stakeholders and external reviewers to validate the whole process. These external reviewers are integrated within the validation process and are experts in their field and who are not affiliated to the University of Malta in any way.

**Academic Programmes Quality and Resources Unit (APQRU)**

The Academic Programmes Quality and Resources Unit (APQRU) is the administrative implementer of the PVC. APQRU is dedicated to the facilitation of quality assurance and improvement activities intent on promoting a culture of commitment to excellence in the provision of academic services. Through this mission statement, APQRU’s ultimate aim is that of supporting teaching and learning so as to ensure that educational services provided to students are of the highest quality. APQRU also assists faculties, institutes and centres in designing their undergraduate and postgraduate programmes of study in line with the general University regulations.

The functions and responsibilities of APQRU are

• To assist the PVC in the validation of new programmes and study-units
• To provide on-site and off-site assistance to faculties, departments, institutes, and centres with regard to validation procedures
• To assist the PVC in its role of providing quality assurance and improvement mechanisms, and of ensuring that academic programmes on offer at the University of Malta are of the appropriate academic standard
• To develop and review quality and enhancement procedures
• To track the implementation of recommendations arising from review processes
• To analyse the outcomes of review processes at an institutional level
• To disseminate good practice arising from review processes
• To ensure that the student experience and enhancement of that experience is a paramount priority at the University of Malta
• To develop and implement policy which enables the University to assure itself of the quality and standards of programmes on offer
• To assist the PVC in its role of ensuring optimal use of available resources
• To help the University prepare for external scrutiny and review

**Student Feedback**

Student feedback is considered to be an integrative and essential part of the quality assurance system, as it helps the University evaluate service provision as viewed by the most important group of stakeholders namely students. As emphasised in the Bologna Process this system requiring student contribution and feedback gives students the power to act as collaborators in the teaching and learning taking place rather than being merely passive receivers of information.

Student feedback is obtained mainly through email links where, towards the end of selected study units, they are asked to complete a brief feedback form on an anonymous basis. This process takes place twice yearly at the end of the semesters and focuses on general questions on the study-unit; the comparison between study-unit description and actual delivery; lecturing methodology; lecturer attributes and method of assessment.

Student feedback is then evaluated with results being integrated into the quality assurance process. Feedback is given to the lecturers of the study-units concerned, Heads of Departments, Faculty Deans
and the Rector. Areas for appropriate follow-up action are identified and communicated to the Departments. The results of the student feedback process, as well as the recommendations and the action taken on the basis of such recommendations, are important considerations for the Programme Review which each Department is required to undertake.

**External examiners**

Feedback is constantly received by the University through its external examiners [24]. These are appointed by the university to ascertain that expectations are being met. The rationale underlying the participation of these reviewers, especially at the end of degree courses, is to enhance the quality of the assessment and examination procedures through

- The independent assessment of knowledge acquired by students during the course of their studies;
- The setting of questions in the paper/s of the written examination by a member of the Board of Examiners who does not participate in the teaching of the course
- The views expressed and the advice obtained on the general conduct of the examination and the course in general
- The presence of an examiner not in the employment of the University, during the viva voce and practical sessions of the examination.

Heads of Faculty Departments approach foreign outstanding academics and seek their consent to be nominated as external examiners for specific courses. In general only academics at professorial level are proposed as external examiners. All proposed candidates are considered by a Senate sub-committee that makes its recommendations to the governing bodies. Following approval a formal notification of appointment is issued by the Registrar.

Visiting examiners are usually required to be present throughout the final week of the marking of scripts when various examiners’ meetings are being held. They participate fully in oral examinations, review scripts, dissertations and projects and especially in the final degree classification meeting. In the case of non-visiting examiners, a sample of scripts is sent to them for their review.

At the end of the exercise, the external examiner formally submits a confidential report to the Rector. Apart from providing feedback on the examination session, examiners are also expected to add comments and observations on issues related to the course of studies. After having been reviewed by the Rector, such reports are then sent to the respective Dean or Director of the Faculty or Institute Board Meetings.

External examiners are also appointed on Boards of Examiners for PhD or M.Phil degrees. The external examiner evaluates the thesis submitted and reports to the Chairman of the Board of Examiners. External examiners participate in the viva voce examination of PhD students.

**Malta College of Arts Science and Technology (MCAST)**

MCAST [25] has devised a quality framework which is built on leadership and strategy, teamwork, customer focus, systems and procedures. This has been strengthened through the formation of a Quality Assurance office led by a Director who reports to the Deputy Principal responsible for quality assurance. The office is further supported by two quality assurance officers and a quality assurance manager responsible for short courses. The QA framework follows guidelines established by institutions such as ENQA-VET [12], CEDEFOP [26] and the Malta Qualifications Council [14].
External Quality Assurance

MCAST undergoes external quality reviews by foreign certification awarding bodies since the College offers courses run by entities such as BTEC (EDEXCEL) and City & Guilds for its certificate and diploma courses and Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft for its degree programmes.

In the case of each entity MCAST receives external auditors who monitor the operations of the College in relation to the respective courses. These auditors ensure that procedures established in the respective quality manuals of such entities are being followed. The frequency of external quality assurance by foreign bodies is determined by the regulations set out by these entities, with reviews generally held on an annual basis. Such reviews are conducted by representatives of the respective entity in collaboration with the institute coordinators and other administrative or managerial staff as required. The focus of such reviews is generally on the teaching and learning aspects and these are regularly reviewed and discussed in formal meetings of the College of Institutes and the administrative bureau. Thus when external representatives and evaluators visit Malta, they will look at reports produced by internal verifiers, samples of assignments and records of programmes. The quality of such evaluations is ensured through the positive reputation enjoyed by such international bodies. Evaluation results, which are internal confidential documents, are subsequently given to the Institute to process and take any recommended action. The Quality Assurance office provides any support and assistance to the Institutes should this be required.

As part of its strategy the Quality Assurance office plans to develop a student feedback system. This will help the College to feel the pulse of its main “clients” so that it will be in a position to improve the service and the learning experience it offers. The College also is in constant contact with representatives from the industries in which it operates. This also serves as a measure for the College to identify the quality of the students who follow its courses. This is particularly fundamental in courses which involve student placements or apprenticeship schemes. Considering that the College is a public entity, it also needs to constantly report to the respective ministry on various aspects of its operations.

The Quality Assurance office has also recently started a process so that the College is prepared for the accreditation process by the Malta Qualifications Council once the related legislation is in place. This process will duly involve an external review by the said council so as to verify that the whole organisation adheres to certain predefined criteria and standards.

Internal Quality Assurance

One of the main inputs into the College quality assurance system is CEDEFOP. This organisation places a lot of emphasis on the need for self-assessment and internal quality assurance which is one of the most effective continuous methodological tools for improvement (CEDEFOP 2009).

The MCAST Quality Assurance office is currently piloting an internal quality assurance system. Every institute (with the exception of the Maritime Institute) has appointed a quality nominee who will be responsible to periodically conduct a self-evaluation exercise and subsequently prepare an action plan that will be forwarded to the quality assurance office. This process will then be duly monitored by the same office which will conduct its own audits. These audits are more focused on processes and procedures within the Institutes and will serve to verify certain results which were obtained by the quality nominees in their evaluation exercises. The frequency of such reviews is still to be determined as these are currently being tested to identify any potential bottlenecks once the process starts. The methodology piloted so far takes into consideration the following aspects:

- Programme Design – To ensure that programme documentation and design is in line with the
current standards established by the MCAST senior management

- Programme Delivery – To ensure that MCAST students get an optimal learning experience during their studies at the College. This process looks at programme delivery methods, lecturers’ delivery, proper course planning, assessment and assessment schedules.
- Programme Assessment – To ensure that proper assessment methods are being employed thus following programme design and course learning outcomes. The correction methodology and assessment results are also being reviewed.
- Programme Management – To ensure that programmes are made up of the right units and that correct programme procedure is being followed.

A performance appraisal exercise is also being followed in the system. Such an appraisal will involve:

- A class observation visit whereby a member of the QA team will observe a lesson and with feedback to be provided on the teaching methods used
- Reviewing teaching material being used
- Evaluation of interpersonal skills and attitudes. This will be reviewed by the Institute Director.

Other internal quality assurance systems relate to the internal verification of assignments as required by the quality assurance measures of the foreign awarding bodies such as BTEC. Such internal verification is occasionally being replicated for home-grown courses.

Since the College also runs a number of evening courses it has in place an internal evaluation system for these courses which is based on the same standards used by the Malta Qualifications Council. This process is essential preparation in relation to eventual accreditation by Malta Qualifications Council. The Quality Assurance office at MCAST is currently carrying out an appraisal of its part-time courses to ensure that the best possible learning opportunities are being given to learners.

Instead of focusing on input factors such as duration, location and particular pedagogical methods required in view of obtaining a qualification, attention is being directed towards learner knowledge and skills at the end of the learning process (CEDEFOP 2009).

**Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS)**

The Institute for Tourism Studies clearly indicates in its mission statement the importance of quality assurance by stating that it seeks to identify customer needs and that it seeks to develop and use performance indicators to monitor customer satisfaction. It states that it intends ensuring an effective system measuring quality assurance which thus produces continuous quality improvement. ITS strives to continue giving an excellent service to the development of the tourism industry in Malta and its students have been accepted for courses in foreign institutions where they have performed well.

Although some guidelines about internal and external reviews have been established with the intent of providing quality education, most of the quality assurance is being carried out through external quality assurance by the foreign examination boards themselves. The external reviewer visits the Institute and assesses the quality of the course programmes, the teaching and learning taking place and what type of assessment is provided to the students. Afterwards the reviewer provides feedback in the form of a written report.

Existing quality control procedures within the Institute of Tourinism Studies are:

- Specialised training in Quality (Food Safety) for Food Production and Food Service training providers (lecturers).
• FMEA (Failure Mode and Effect Analysis) in the form of **HACCP** and General Quality Improvement
• Regular verification and laboratory testing supported by laboratory analysis
• The ITS Food Safety Team are currently implementing the **PDCAS** cycle on Plan-Do-Check-Act with the scope of improving customer satisfaction, continuous improvement and improvement in efficiency and effectiveness
• Accreditation of Programmes of Studies by the Malta Qualification Council

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