

German National Workshop in Cologne 7-9 March 2004: workshop on quality

- The group's majority view was that quality standards should be set from the bottom up by the providers of learning and by firms involved in VET, involving learners in the quality assurance process.
- The majority of the group saw top-down approaches led by Government as dangerous for the true quality of education, and as an erosion of individual rights and choices.
- There was some acknowledgement by the group that Governments need to take an overview on the nation's skills needs and set an overall strategy, but a concern that the really important life skills are not measurable.
- The context for this dismissal of top-down approaches was a critique of national targets. These were seen as involving a great deal of activity, giving an impression of addressing the issues but essentially empty and just a process of ticking boxes.
- However, the group felt that external inspection regimes had a valid role, at least in relation to formal education and VET.
- If we want to achieve high-quality education, the first task is to describe what it looks like – according to the UNESCO principle that there is a right of access not just to education, but to quality education.
- One good example of such a description is that of the philosopher Morin, published by UNESCO in 2001. He identifies the following strands that need to be covered in a high-quality education:
 - Critical thinking (detecting errors and illusion)
 - Pertinent knowledge: re-connecting knowledge that has become compartmentalised
 - Addressing the human condition (biological, psychological, social) to make us aware of both our unity and our diversity as humans
 - Awareness of the interconnectedness of the world ("earth identity") and its consequences both of unity (positive) and of globalisation (which may be negative)
 - Dealing with uncertainty and unpredictability
 - Understanding oneself and others, and the sources of incomprehension – related to peace and living together

- Ethics, at the level of the individual, society and species – and how ethical values are implemented under democracy
- All these principles of Morin's, though general, apply also to VET because they are closely connected with learning to learn, adaptability, and higher-order skills.
- An example of a local quality initiative in Hamburg, *Flexible Quality Development*, is being implemented with 25 training provider companies. The companies share results and benchmark themselves against one another, take part in optimisation projects and share good practice. Critical success factors are:
 - The group is large enough to be able to cooperate with others but avoid sharing commercial secrets with one's main direct competitor
 - A holistic approach to quality management, with participation across the whole company and involving employees, not just managers
 - A closed group involved for the full duration of the project, and held together by the discipline of a legal contract
 - New quality requirements of the Federal Employment Agency, providing an incentive for companies to improve
 - A well-known umbrella organisation driving the process
 - The process not being linked to certification (though the framework is based on EFQM and LQW)
- Quality can be embodied in a personal portfolio (perhaps an e-portfolio) which remains under the individual's control. A portfolio could also record the achievements of a group.
- It is not always appropriate to see learners as "customers", since learning is a process of co-production not of consumption. However, the idea of a "customer" can be a useful metaphor for putting the learners in control by giving them the power to go to alternative providers.
- The unit of analysis for quality is not necessarily the individual organisation. Quality standards should apply to whole networks of institutions clustered around learning – for example chambers of commerce, museums, and the employment service. Such quality standards help public and private investors know what they are getting in a region.

- The European dimension of quality is a matter of shared values, not an attempt to impose common structures. Subsidiarity should be paramount and quality work should go forward under voluntary agreements, not regulation. An important part is the sharing of good practice and of what a quality adult learning experience looks and feels like.
- There is of course a separate issue about European standards applying to those who want European money, and those standards are quite legitimate (though not always very well policed). Quality awards at European level could be useful.
- Another reason for joining up quality initiatives across Europe is that it would help encourage mobility. We should be creating a true “European Area of Lifelong Learning”, not just aiming to be the most competitive economy as in the Lisbon goal.
- A way forward would be to form a European Foundation for Quality in Lifelong Learning. The timeline could be:
 - Expert seminar Autumn 2004 to exchange quality-related values and standards
 - Memorandum of Understanding drafted by experts, 2005, including draft European standards for LLL
 - Then involve the Commission and politicians in looking at a concrete proposal
- Bringing the accession countries into the wider European lifelong learning scene is a two-way process. There is much to be taught and learned in both directions, especially around the immediate geographical boundaries where actual cross-border work is feasible for citizens in general – on a “cluster” rather than just a “twinning” model. The EU15 countries have already been through many of the possible mistakes, and the accession countries can learn from those or at least move more quickly through their own mistakes and out the other side. There is also much to be learned from the experience of German re-unification. We need an interpretative process that is sensitive to the renunciation of some aspects of a recently-gained sovereignty in the accession countries.
- Local LLL networks should get seed-corn funding from the EU, national and/or local public budgets. Private sector participants (mainly firms) should contribute since they will reap benefits. It is up to these firms whether or not to pass on any such costs to learners. There are potential economies of scale: e.g. the Cologne portal could serve as a base model for portals elsewhere, avoiding an unnecessary and costly duplication of development activity and also helping to ensure interoperability and compatibility.

- National LLL strategies would benefit from:
 - Explicit written national plans, including quality standards [though not targets, presumably, in the majority view of the group]
 - Much wider PR and profile-raising activity, including learning festivals, and an attempt to influence citizens away from the idea that the State or employer should necessarily pay for all adult learning.

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