Quality Assurance: A Balancing Act

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Abstract: Language Centre Quality Assurance can be used for a wide range of purposes, from audits of services and procedures to reflection on best practices and improvements of language education. Quality Assurance systems across Europe differ considerably. The Czech Republic, unlike the UK or Spain, applies no unified national standards, and therefore, the Masaryk University Language Centre (CJV MU), in compliance with the Masaryk University strategic plan, is obliged to set its own standards and procedures. In order to achieve desired goals, CJV MU has adopted Quality Assurance systems developed, tested and used by University Language Centres associated in CercleS and focused on three major areas: the learner, the teacher and the Language Centre management. While the learner area follows a traditional path of standard questionnaires and the management quality is assessed in collaboration with external auditing companies and professionals, the teacher area represents a considerable challenge to the CJV MU. This paper shares our experience with the Quality Assessment of teaching. It overviews areas incorporated and strategies applied in CJV MU in the period 2012 to 2014, such as self-assessment questionnaires, course and individual lesson plan analyses, observations and feedback. It shares experience with some critical moments that threatened to undermine the usefulness and credibility of the whole process and lessons learnt from that experience. Finally, it identifies current results, concrete benefits and possible directions that could guarantee a high-quality teaching in a long-term perspective.

Key words: quality assurance, quality assessment, feedback, observations

Abstrakt: Tento příspěvek podává přehled hodnocení kvality kurzů a výuky na CJV MU v letech 2012–2014, představuje různé typy dotazníků, pohovorů a náslechů ve výuce, a hodnotí jejich dosavadní přínos pro zlepšování kvality jazykového vzdělávání v souladu s dlouhodobým záměrem Masarykovy univerzity.

Introduction

An international drive towards quality improvements in and transparent comparison across universities has recently placed a great emphasis on Quality Assurance (QA) in the field of tertiary education. Although the term QA has been widely referred to by academic and non-academic staff, student, government and other stakeholders (ISO9001:2008; ENQA, 2009; CELT Galway[1], 2015), understanding exactly what QA means in the complex and diverse world of Higher Education continues to be a considerable challenge (ENQA, 2009). This challenge becomes even greater when we bring into focus university language centres and their multiple roles.

The position of language centres is often rather specific because they cater for not only linguistic but also transferable and employability skills, and as service providers, they base their reputation on the quality of activities and services they provide. This

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[1] http://www.nuigalway.ie/celt/

is why 'Language Centres at Institutions of Higher Education are committed to the effective implementation of quality assurance procedures. They support their parent institutions' existing quality assurance procedures but also aim to develop additional measures that relate to their specific operational needs' (Vogel et al., 2010).

Such QA procedures differ considerably. However, Masaryk University Language Centre (CJV MU) follows best practices based on research results (Moise, 2011) and policies of experienced university language centres and associations (such as Helsinki University, CELT Galway and CercleS), and adopt QA in the form of a combination of external audits, evaluations and reports and Institutional Research. By Institutional Research we mean 'the practice whereby an institution assesses itself, its activities and its position within a given milieu…' with the aim to monitor specific and explore potential issues in order to be able 'to inform an institution's decision-making with regard to its own development' and to provide 'a comprehensive resource for information about the institution…' (O'Flanagan, 2005).

This paper focuses on the QA practice adopted by CJV MU during the Impact Project[2] in the 2012–2014 period. The first section of the text briefly touches upon the diversity of approaches to QA in language education in the European context and offers some insight into the QA situation at Masaryk University and CJV MU. The second section provides descriptions and analyses of QA and Quality Assessment methods, techniques and procedures of the CJV MU. The third section focuses on the lessons learned and the final section comments on possible future steps to be taken.

Language Teaching QA Approaches Context

When QA is considered in the context of language education, we need to understand that the existing QA systems across Europe vary considerably. According to the findings of the Grundtvig Learning Partnership, Quali-T and Quality in Language Teaching for Adults Projects, QA systems have different degrees and vary from monitoring learning satisfaction to the strict assessment of teachers and institutional performance. Countries such as the UK or Spain have their national systems of inspections and assessment procedures; others have QA systems that are respected on a national level but function on a voluntary basis; some other countries, such as Austria, Germany and Sweden, encourage standardization of QA but the actual system used is in control of each individual institution; and, finally, in countries such as the Czech Republic (or Estonia), no national standardization exists and each institution can develop its own quality standards (Benndorf-Helbig, 2011).

When we take a closer look at the Czech Republic, standards differ across the country to a similar degree the national systems do on the European level. However, recent

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[2] http://impact.cjv.muni.cz/

studies and reports indicate[3] (Roskovec, Šťastná, 2010; Šebková, 2012) that higher education institutions use QA standards in different ways: most institutions respect their normative character but some use them as a type of minimum level below which it is impossible to descend. QA standards can also be considered a starting point for future developments or, alternatively, they can concentrate on already existing routines and processes. Some institutions emphasize their achievement orientation and deal with their QA standards in terms of results, outputs, performance or specific goals. Each type of QA standards has its own advantages and disadvantages and therefore a combined approach is preferred by large institutions such as Masaryk University.

Masaryk University (MU), the second-largest university in the Czech Republic, is the leading higher education institution in the region. Strategic plans for Masaryk University include improvements in the quality of educational and research activities among its priorities, 'which is the reason why it closely monitors and evaluates both the internal and external aspects of them. The methodological management of the mechanisms for monitoring and ensuring quality is the responsibility of the Quality Centre, the Strategy Office and the Research Department.'[4] The internal evaluation of the study fields has been continually developed since 2008 'as one of the means of supporting the development of quality assurance mechanisms at MU' (MEAQ, 2015), while external feedback has been gathered since 2011 when MU joined the Institutional Evaluation Programme offered by the European University Association. The evaluation report completed in July 2012 'contains a critical description of some priorities, potential for improvement and especially recommendations for Masaryk University as to where and how to direct the development of a variety of activities.' (MEAQ, 2015).

Masaryk University Language Centre, the largest language centre in the country, provides language-focused services and support to the whole University, and enhances international cooperation and a continuous exchange of knowledge, ideas and information on a worldwide scale. CJV MU attempts to commit its work to the Wulkow 2010 Memorandum, which states that: 'The quality of language education, and consequently quality management in Language Centres, depends on realistic requirements and standards. These have to be negotiated responsibly with stakeholders in the global labour market, with political decision makers, with authorities in higher education and with students...' and that 'Language Centres at Institutions of Higher Education are committed to the effective implementation of quality assurance procedures. They support their parent institutions' existing quality assurance procedures but also aim to develop additional measures that relate to their specific operational needs...' (Vogel et al., 2010).

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[3] http://www.msmt.cz/vzdelavani/vysoke-skolstvi/standardy-a-smernice-pro-zajisteni-kvality-v-evropskem

[4] http://www.muni.cz/general/evaluation?lang=en

Quality Assurance at the Masaryk University Language Centre

Despite the common view that it is teachers who are the most responsible for the quality of education (Benndorf-Helbig, 2011), CJV MU understands that the success of any language centre activities depends on collaboration among all its stakeholders, most importantly on collaboration among teachers, learners and the university management and colleagues. This is why CJV MU appreciates the complexity of combined feedback and recognizes its importance. The following section presents results of external evaluation bodies, comments on a QA system related to the learner's perspective and finally analyses QA in the context of CJV MU teachers.

Feedback from external bodies

In order to increase and develop the quality of its activities, Masaryk University Language Centre can use findings of three external reports from recent years, namely a MU Sociological Survey Report from 2012, The European University Association (EUA) External Evaluation Body Report from 2012 and an annual Alumni Opinion Poll.

The MU Sociological Survey Report (2012) specified four areas of criticism from students: a lack of language courses, excessive numbers of students in seminar groups, the impossibility to re-enrol on to a course, and immense differences in language levels among seminar group participants. CJV MU teachers and MU students share the same opinion in this respect, as all four areas have frequently been identified as problematic by the CJV MU staff members. Apart from the description of the complexity of the current situation, the Report emphasized an enormous increase in interest in academic speaking and writing skills among students, which was followed by a partial modification of CJV MU programmes and the immediate introduction of academic/scientific writing and speaking courses into MU programmes (MU SSR, 2012).

The EUA External Evaluation Body Report did not focus on language education. Therefore, it only stated that 'while English is already the lingua franca of global higher education and research, significant advantages could arise through the further development of one or two other languages among staff and students, particularly in support of bilateral relations and exchanges. Language supports are already in place but may not be adequate in capacity or suitability in the face of parallel developments and of additional encouragements that may (and perhaps should) be introduced' and later recommended that MU 'measures regularly the effectiveness of language policies and supports' (EUAR, 2012).

Findings of the EUAR correspond closely with the average results of annual Alumni Opinion Polls (AOP)[5] from the years 2010–2014. Masaryk University monitors em-

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[5] http://www.muni.cz/general/evaluation/graduates

ployability and employment rates of its graduates, and gathers feedback on the quality of education received. AOP consists of two periodically implemented questionnaires ('Completion of studies at MU – looking back and to the future' and 'MU alumni employment after graduation')[6] that are 'given to students who are in the process of finishing their studies at MU and making the transition to full employment…' (AOP, 2015). The results of AOP indicate that more than 50% (53–5%) of MU students consider the number of language courses and the extent of language education (Question: How would you evaluate the extent of foreign language education in non--philology programmes with regards to your employability?) as 'slightly insufficient or absolutely insufficient' (AOP, 2014), which is alarming. The only exceptions to this opinion are The Faculty of Business and Administration and The Faculty of Education; their students indicated a relatively high satisfaction with language education (75% and 71%, respectively).

All the external feedback suggests that there is a great potential for CJV MU to improve, especially in the areas of a possible increase in the number of language courses it provides and in better targeting the current needs of diverse groups of students.

Student-related Quality Assurance

CJV MU also attempts to make full use of QA mechanisms that concentrate on student learning processes, results and their satisfaction. This is done by the application of diverse methods in two large areas, in student feedback and language testing.

Internal student feedback is obtained by different ways, where the most general one at MU used by students is a General Evaluation Poll (GEP)[7] in the MU Information System, which is gathered at the end of each course and term. The GEP focuses on areas such as: the teacher's knowledge of the subject matter, learning outcomes, the level of difficulty of the subject, preparation difficulty, sources accessibility or teaching style. Students can give a grade of one to seven and they can also write comments in the 'open answers' space. The GEP could be an effective feedback tool if it were used by the majority of students (less than one third of students usually take part), or if it were more diversified, focusing on specific academic fields. The fact that one type of questionnaire is available for courses as diverse as a lecture in philosophy, practical seminars in chemistry, PE trainings or practical language sessions make it not only too general but also too difficult to interpret. This is why a great number of CJV MU teachers use their own feedback questionnaire forms that target their groups and courses. They also ask for feedback in different ways, such as student panels, students feedback group discussions, reflective essays, internal reviews, teaching observation and research. A closer look at some feedback forms used at CJV MU is presented in the section 'QA Procedure Analysis'.

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[6] http://www.muni.cz/general/evaluation/graduates

[7] http://www.muni.cz/general/evaluation/poll

The second large area of QA related directly to students is testing and the results they achieve. Testing at CJV MU uses a combination of internal and external procedures, such as CEFR implementation (MU graduates need to achieve a minimum of B1, B2 and C1 CEFR levels in bachelor, master and doctoral programmes, respectively), extensive training, cross-national and cross-European benchmarking frameworks and collaborations. The CJV MU focuses fully on standardization because CJV MU, with its 9 000 students each term, needs to have a high level standardization in order to provide comparable results. CJV MU has its own testing unit that concentrates on test development, advice and QA. Findings of the testing unit are accessible to all CJV MU teachers at the CJV MU web pages.[8]

Teacher-focused Quality Assurance

CJV MU aims to provide 'language education that is fit for purpose' (Vogel et al., 2010) and deliver the highest standards of service to its students. In order to achieve this aim, it regularly monitors the development of its new and innovated courses and reviews the on-going courses. The first systematic QA procedures were applied in the 2009–2011 period, as a part of the Compact Project[9]. In the Compact project, 99 courses were either innovated or newly created, so after the piloting stage it was essential to assess their quality and ensure their continuing relevance. A combination of internal and external QA was applied. For the internal Quality Assessment, a Quality Assessment team was created and structured measures were applied. The results of QA processes had an extremely positive effect and were widely accepted and appreciated across the CJV MU. This was the reason why it was decided that the Impact Project, which followed in the years 2012–2015[10], included a relatively large section devoted to QA.

The aim of the Impact Project QA activities was not only Quality Assessment and QA of the Impact new and innovated courses, but also a sustainable QA system with realistic standards and procedures that could be used even after the project finishes. The following section presents an analysis of the materials and procedures the Impact QA team (Dr. Alena Hradilová, Mgr. Pavlína Dufková and Mgr. Jitka Žváčková) developed.

Quality Assurance Procedure Analysis

New QA procedures were tested on 44 out of 47 new and innovated courses developed and piloted in the Impact Project and involved 33 teachers who had developed and / or taught those courses. The QA procedure was divided into two stages: first, during the term, the teachers collected materials and created a portfolio of their course. This portfolio consisted of eight areas, namely a syllabus of the original

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[8] http://impact.cjv.muni.cz/publikace-a-vystupy/materialy/

[9] http://www.cjv.muni.cz/old/cs/projekty/projekt-compact/index.html

[10] http://impact.cjv.muni.cz/

course, a syllabus of the innovated course, a description of the innovated course, two lesson plans of two different lessons, a description of those two lessons, students' feedback, an observation report, and sources. Second, the teachers presented and discussed their portfolio after the term finished at a Quality Assessment interview. The individual parts of the most important areas are discussed below.

The syllabi of the original and innovated courses were collected in order to identify the extent to which both courses differed. The comparisons showed that individual proportions of changes varied significantly; the minimum change of a course content was approximately 40%, while the maximum changes of course content exceeded 80%. Those changes were not only quantified, a qualitative examination determined where exactly the changes took place and what the reason behind those changes was. The qualitative section identified details in the following areas: first, it was necessary to explain why the innovation took place. The reasons were, for example, outdated materials, change of teaching style or introduction of more technologies. The second area focused on what concretely was innovated. This section was further divided into three areas, namely the teaching style and methodology, materials and activities. The third area concentrated on benefits the innovators believed it could bring to both students and teachers. The benefits included ideas such as easier access to materials, a larger variety of materials or smaller student dependence on the teacher. The final area aimed at expected outcomes, its goal was to make the course authors formulate what they expect of the innovations in general. This whole material was broad and included a great number of theoretical or hypothetical sections.

A more detailed and practice oriented material focused on the description of the innovated course. This was divided into two parts: the first part focused on administrative information such as the course title, the course university code, an academic year and term in which it was piloted or run, the name of the MU faculty or department, language of the course and the names of the authors and teachers. The names of both course authors and teachers were important for the second stage, the Quality Assessment interview, because in cases where they differed, both were invited for the interview. The second part of the description concentrated on the course details from the formal point of view. It included ten areas: (1) The aim of the course as stated in the course annotation; (2) The length of the course, which was important because CJV MU courses vary from one term (12–14 weeks) to four term courses; (3) The number of face-to-face sessions per term – this can also differ, however, the most common system is to have one session per week; (4) The number of minutes per week of face-to-face sessions, which ranges between 45 to 120 minutes, however, most sessions last 90 minutes; (5) An expected student preparation time was a new section that surprised some of CJV MU teachers because it was something a great number of teachers had not thought about before, at least not in a specific or detailed way; (6) A type of student preparation areas caused similar difficulties as the previous point; (7–10) The last four points concentrated on students and their characteristics, they

were namely a target group, a target group needs analysis, expected CEFR level of students and a maximum number of students in a cohort.

The next section of the portfolio was a presentation of two lesson plans. The lesson plan information was formally divided into three time-referenced sections, the introduction, main activities and the ending and each of these parts was further subdivided into four distinct sections, namely teacher-student interaction, methods, materials used, and general aims of the session and particular goals of the activities. The lesson plans included one more section, session results and an evaluation of the session which allowed the teacher to reflect on the entire teaching process, Moreover, it was a place where they could compare what they had planned and how it finally worked.

The observation report material was based on observations in class. The observation process was divided into before-, during-, and after-observation sections. Each observation was always communicated by a member of the QA team at least one week before it took place. The teachers who were supposed to be observed were asked to provide the observer with course materials, teacher's materials and all other necessary information, such as homework, for that particular session so that they could get the whole picture of what was going on in that given session. Then, in class, the observers were usually introduced (sometimes teachers did not feel the need for an introduction, which was accepted) and they did not intervene in the session in any way. After the session, the teachers were given immediate five-to-ten-minute feedback and were informed they would receive a detailed report with complex comments and recommendations. The report was sent by email typically one week after the observation took place.

The second essential part of the QA procedure was the Quality Assessment interview. The interviews were organized by the QA team. All three members of the team were always present at the interviews, each performing a specific role; each member of the team prepared questions from a specific area of the QA process, a member who observed a class of an interviewee informed the other two members of the team about the outcomes and one member of the team was taking notes for the final report. The interviewees were represented either by one person (the author and a teacher in one) or by more people if a team took part in the course development and in the teaching process. Each interview was planned to last between 20 and 30 minutes, but sometimes it took longer, if more information was needed. The first series of interviews took place after the Autumn Term 2013 (September–December 2013) in the January–February 2014 period. This was followed by a collection of recommendations for changes and an analysis of the interview. The QA procedure was renovated and both stages (portfolio collection and interviews) were run again in the Spring Term 2014 (February–June 2014).

Outcomes from the pilot run in January–February 2014

The pilot stage in the September 2013–February 2014 period resulted in two types of outcomes: the first being a set of recommendations from the QA team to the teachers, and suggestions and recommendations for possible changes and improvements of the QA process to the QA team. Both will be discussed below.

Recommendations from the QA team to the teachers focused on details and issues specific to individual courses, course teachers and course authors. Moreover, they identified some procedural areas that could be generalized as recommendations for all CJV MU teachers. The first recommendation suggested that the teachers should work on their portfolio materials (especially their lesson plans and reflections) as soon after the session took place as possible. The portfolio preparation apparently ranged from three to fifteen hours, depending on when it was carried out. Teachers who filled in the forms or made detailed notes immediately after their sessions took place were able to provide much clearer descriptions in a much shorter time than those who prepared their materials after a month or longer time. This was caused by the necessity not only to remember an exact course of activities in that session, but also by going back to look for evidence and materials used. The second recommendation suggested a detailed description of online materials used in sessions. Teachers who used materials freely available online and noted down only their current link found later that if a particular piece of material had disappeared from the web page they had originally used, the time to find such a source again was incomparable to the search time of those links where the description of the content was available. The third recommendation targeted student feedback. Both teachers and QA team members agreed that the Masaryk University GEP provides poor results for the purposes of the CJV MU, so teachers should develop and use their own feedback forms that could match their needs better.

Recommendations to the QA team could be grouped into three broad areas: teachers called for a set of sample feedback forms they could use or work with; asked for a shorter assessment portfolio format; and wished for a new Quality Assessment interview content based on a reviewed Quality Assessment forms. The recommendations resulted in the development of a new Quality Assessment form that could serve as an outline which could prepare CJV MU teachers for the Quality Assessment interview. The reviewed form consisted of eight points: a summary of the piloting process based on the teacher reflection; satisfactions with the innovations made; positives and negatives of the innovations in terms of materials, teaching style and activities; necessary changes that should be made after the piloting; the extent to which the expectations of teachers have been met; student reactions; and recommendations for teachers who should teach the course, a type of teachers' notes and other comments.

A specific change based on the teachers' feedback was introduced in the area of the Quality Assessment process of language choice. The original Quality Assessment pro-

cess took place in Czech/Slovak, the mother tongues of the teachers. However, it was suggested that sometimes it could be easier to carry out the process in the language of a course for the reasons of practical issues such as technical terminology. This was accepted and the second Quality Assessment procedure was open to more languages.

Discussion

The Quality Assessment procedure at CJV MU in the 2012–2014 period was the first complex procedure that took the form of institutional research and attempted to combine different strategies in order to get a complex picture but also in order to be able to generate more practical and useful recommendations for the CJV MU teachers and management. Despite the fact that the majority of those who had gone through the process found Quality Assessment a helpful, positive and necessary activity (26), they found the forms clear and understandable (especially the February–June 2014 period), and they appreciated the Quality Assessment methodology, there appeared two areas that had brought considerable reservations – lesson plans and observations.

The lesson plans were the most disputed section of the portfolio materials. A great number of teachers found the form too detailed and held the opinion that a detailed lesson plan is unnecessary for experienced teachers because, for example, the teacher–students interaction often happens spontaneously and there is no need to plan and monitor that. This opinion was contradictory to the observation findings of the QA team, which showed that the level of experience and teaching skills differed considerably and the detailed analytical approach to the lesson plan development proved to be useful for most of them (20).

The second area that provoked major discussion was the observation part of the Quality Assessment. Despite the fact observations are generally considered as one of the most common and traditional parts of the teaching profession and a necessary part of QA procedures, they were criticized because one group of teachers still considered observations to be a threat and an expression of dissatisfaction with their work and another group, on the other hand, overestimated the possibilities of the observation process and required 'more qualified' observers who were not only language teachers, teacher trainers and methodologists but also experts in their specific academic fields. After consultations with the senior management and explanation of Quality Assessment rationale, the fact that observations form a regular part of the teaching profession and are by no means based on any prior negative expectation, and the possibility to select observers that could satisfy the requirements of their own choice, the Quality Assessment process was better accepted even by those who previously had some reservations.

Despite the criticized sections, the overall feedback on the Quality Assessment procedure was positive and most teachers appreciated the experience. Some teachers even

expressed their satisfaction and willingness to invite more observations in the future. The most positive reactions from the whole Quality Assessment process, however, mentioned the self-reflection section. A great majority suggested they would not do the self-reflection voluntarily, but once in the process, they enjoyed it and realized a great number of significant issues in their own teaching.

From the QA perspective, the most valuable outcome of the Quality Assessment process was the identification of best practice examples. The CJV MU obtained a database of courses, sessions, activities and teachers that can be recommended to others for observations and consultations. The next step towards a sustainable QA at CJV MU is the organization of workshops, mentor sessions and sharing sessions where CJV MU teachers can exchange their ideas, experience and materials on a regular basis. An online platform that can help intensify ideas exchange and best practices sharing within the CJV MU is also being prepared.

Conclusion

To summarize, the Impact Project enabled CJV MU to develop, pilot and run a Quality Assessment process in 2012–2014 that could serve as a basis for the development of a complex sustainable QA process at the CJV MU, complementary to the QA strategies of Masaryk University.

The Quality Assessment outcomes of the CJV MU QA team presented in this paper are by no means an example of a finished product. Rather it is an example of an initial exploratory stage of a continually evolving process that is being constantly refined and improved.

To conclude, the Quality Assessment team experience suggests that the promotion of the QA procedures via various means, such as Quality Assessment, institutional research or external audits, could encourage systematic work and efforts in the areas of self-reflection activities, best practice exchange and ideas sharing among CJV MU teachers, which as a matter of fact could further enrich and enhance the quality of CJV MU courses and services.

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Bionote

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