

The Need for a European Federated Quality Mark

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1. INTRODUCTION

The long term perspectives of ICT use in learning systems, by individuals and organisations, are frequently questioned with little or no perception of very substantial -although not so noisy as in the past- developments taking place in all parts of education and training systems, with an increasing understanding of ICT potential when fully integrated into the innovation processes of organisations and the change strategies of teams and individuals.

However, it cannot be denied that eLearning is suffering from a lack of credibility to the eyes of most learners, their families and social context, teachers, and ultimate decision makers in the education sector. While even “traditional” delivery of teaching is now subject to new requirements in terms of quality assurance and external evaluation, it seems that much more is required to eLearning provision in order to be recognised as an equivalent provision of education and training.

Low quality of first generation eLearning -especially when compared to exaggerated promotional campaigns and consequently unrealistic expectations generated- to a large extent explains and justifies the observable but fortunately not generalised lack of confidence of many potential “adopters”. At the same time the belief in the potential of ICT to enhance and improve learning has not disappeared as a result of often disappointing reality: most people would agree that -under certain conditions- eLearning might fit their needs with acceptable quality of the learning experience, but simply they do not know how to be sure that a learning programme or learning resources or an eLearning provider are to be trusted. The phenomenon is typical of any innovation which does not succeed to become an immediate and undisputable success, and we have to admit that eLearning belongs to this category.

Not only quality (lack of quality) is recognised to be an inhibiting factor to large scale up-take of eLearning, but approaches to quality of eLearning are many and contribute to confuse even more any quasi-convinced adopter. First of all existing approaches tend to refer to different models and areas of eLearning -from distance education to work-based learning applications- and bring with them the quality culture of their context of origin. Secondly different “ideologies of quality” can co-exist in the same eLearning territory and further complicate the understanding and the orientation of even the most willing candidate to become an eLearner.

Amongst its objectives, the European Foundation for Quality in eLearning has that of establishing a European Quality Mark initiative that, while respecting the different positions on the issue and the variety of eLearning applications responding to different aims and contextual needs, would bring some synthesis and clarification to help learners, buyers, suppliers and regulators to share a common culture of quality.



The enterprise is difficult -given the differentiation and scepticism elements described above- but is highly required in order to stimulate a second phase -broader and more mature- of ICT adoption and integration in “mainstream” learning practice.

And an important caveat should be considered: re-assuring by guaranteeing minimum standard is not enough . While Public Authorities’ approaches to quality of eLearning tend to extend the classic approach of inspection -authorisation- accreditation to deliver education and training (defining and documenting minimal requirements of infrastructure, staff competence, administrative compliance, technical standards, previous experience), we must recognise that is certainly not the approach that can encourage innovation and innovators in a field, such as eLearning, that still has to gain its full credibility as a catalyst of innovation processes.

In spite of these challenges, it is EFQUEL’s view that the development of an innovation oriented and multi-sectoral quality mark initiative deserves to be undertaken and supported by all relevant stakeholders.

2. WHY A EUROPEAN QUALITY MARK IF A EUROPEAN ELEARNING MARKET DOES NOT EXISTS?

Education and training are mainly organised and delivered at national or regional level in Europe: very few exceptions can be found to this general rule, and even eLearning -the learning without frontiers by definition- is to a large extent a national industry in most EU countries.

In fact some countries (the UK, Germany, Finland and -out of Europe- Canada, for example) have developed their own Quality Marks for eLearning, but these are not yet fully deployed nor can they be considered full-scale successes; so, if this is the situation, why to undertake an even more difficult task, that is to develop a European Quality Mark initiative?

First of all, the existence of a European initiative may help to create that European eLearning market that does not exist yet: the existence of a credible European quality assurance system may help to build cross-country confidence on what is provided and general institutional and customer/learner awareness on what is quality of an eLearning experience.

Secondly, the EU Quality Mark may become a reference point worldwide much more than a respectable mark coming from a single country of the EU: the value of the European Union experience in trans-national cooperation, inter-cultural communication and adaptation, mediation among different approaches is an asset that we Europeans tend to underestimate but many non-Europeans appreciate as a characterising success factor. In fact, we believe that this element can be extremely important in a global environment that is becoming more and more reluctant to import “one best way” solutions and looks for comprehensive, context sensitive and articulated approaches to complex problems.

3. A FEDERATIVE APPROACH

Launching a European Quality Mark does not mean to ignore what has already been done, what is working and what is in preparation at national, regional or sectoral level. The EFQUEL partnership, within the TRIANGLE Project supported by the European Commission, has conducted a systematic review of quality labels, means and awards existing in the field and has come to the following conclusions: • the Foundation must not reproduce at European Level what is being done at national level, but build synergy and cooperation while challenging the existing initiatives with an innovative approach; • the possibility to federate existing quality marks -offering a double labellisation if desired- under the concept of an agreed “core component” of a European Quality Mark should be explored before any other approach.

The first conclusion has been implemented by launching the eQuality Award, delivered for the first time in January 2007 in Paris, which aims to make visible the EQM initiative of EFQUEL and associate it with an innovative concept -eQuality, that is the use of ICT to improve the quality and organisational relevance of learning-.

The second conclusion has been implemented through the start of technical meetings, consultations, debates and new projects to federate existing quality marks for eLearning and ICT use in learning around a “core component”, the identification of which is in progress.

4. WHAT IS THE CORE COMPONENT MADE OF?

After the first phase of exploration the following elements seems to constitute a valuable starting point for a federative approach:

A set of design principles, characterising the modus operandi of EFQUEL and constituting a reference for any cooperation:

- 1) integration of EQM in organisational and institutional procedures for quality development or quality assurance;
- 2) innovation as embeddedness in transformation processes rather than compliance to a crystallised corpus of knowledge;
- 3) transparency of the process and of the results of EQM (although for the latter the degree of publicity to be given to lack of accreditation should be considered carefully);
- 4) modularity of the QM: not all elements may be chosen to candidate for accreditation (e.g.: institutional accreditation, programme accreditation, competencies of staff, etc.);
- 5) efficiency: avoid unnecessary formalisms and overload of document production: limit the effort to the core elements and make sure that the benefit overcomes the efforts;
- 6) (undisputable) relevance to the quality of the learning experience, avoiding to focus on peripheral good practice elements typical of any organisations, but not determinant to quality of L.E.;
- 7) context sensitivity, building on what is accepted in the local/sectoral context as good practice while proposing some new elements;

- 8) scalability of the model from pilot phase to full deployment with decreasing unitary running cost of accreditation process;
- 9) adaptability to future needs and changing conditions (technological, but also institutional, organisational, economic, cultural and pedagogical) for the use of ICT in learning systems.

B. An agreement to take the quality of the learning experience as a whole (not only resources, not only processes ...) as the core object of EQM accreditation.

C. A common focus of innovation, including organisational transformation, a commitment to a “competent customer” or “quality literacy of eLearners”, the eQuality concept and other aspects to be still agreed with the “federating” entities.

D. A principle of negotiation and, wherever possible, a full inter-cultural consensus building among partners, without imposing the point of view of the most “consolidated” and “globalisation fit” organisation, that is an authentically European approach, respecting countries of a smaller size and less spoken languages when they propose original and efficient solutions.

E. An agreement on the five steps necessary to come to an accreditation:

1. Definition of criteria and indicators;
2. Positioning, Self Diagnosis and Internal Preparation;
3. Peer review;
4. Improvement Plan implemented and documented;
5. Accreditation (for a limited time).

5. SOME PROPOSALS FOR ACTION

EFQUEL sees the establishment of a European Quality Mark Initiative as one of its fundamental outcomes and proposes the following points of action:

1) to give maximum dissemination to the purpose of and the principles for establishing the EQM, in particular to policy makers and Evaluation/Quality Assurance Agencies of the different sectors of education and training systems, at European, national and regional level;

2) to stimulate and then seriously utilise comments and suggestions from the worlds of innovative practice, research and policy making, while involving those interested in the process of building the EQM;

3) to continue and articulate the initiative of the eQuality Award for the years to come in order to enhance the innovation aspect of the EFQUEL approach and to promote the visibility of EQM to media and relevant stakeholders;

4) to identify and activate possible sources of public and private funding to fully implement the EQM within 2008, in relation to but not depending exclusively on European Programmes and funds;



5) to design a long term sustainability scheme for the EQM, articulated differently in the different parts of lifelong learning, also considering that in some sectors public support in the long term is more justified than in others;

6) to identify and, where already existing, to strengthen the opportunities to collaborate with international organisations (UNESCO, OECD, WBI, etc.) and countries outside the European Union in order to valorise the elements of interculturality, dialogue and mediation of different approaches that have characterised the work of EFQUEL in the frame of the European Policy for innovation in lifelong learning and use of ICT.