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Recommendations for quality development in university continuing education programmes

Master of Advanced Studies – MAS
Diploma of Advanced Studies – DAS
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Produced in partnership with the Center of Accreditation and Quality
Assurance of the Swiss Universities (OAQ)

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Foreword

The approach to quality development on which these recommendations are based is intended to stimulate discussion and offer a set of benchmarks to those responsible for university continuing education (UCE). They are the result of cooperation between Swissuni (Swiss University Continuing Education) and the OAQ (Center of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss Universities). The quality concepts proposed here reflect Swissuni's member institutions' shared view of quality in continuing education. They are based on the experiences of various institutions in relation to university continuing education and rely primarily on quality models and initiatives developed at a national and international level (see References).

The originality of this approach to quality development lies in the fact that it reflects the main key processes in the lifecycle of a continuing education programme in chronological order. The approach takes into account the various different emphases a programme can have, each of which corresponds to a specific set of values. The focus is on quality points: as on a geographical map, the model sets out the shape and features of the UCE landscape, but does not mark out a route as such.

The model includes four key "moments", which are also pertinent to other quality systems in the area of education and training and which are therefore widely recognised:

Impact: the aim of a UCE programme is to build and develop knowledge, and competences in both objective and subjective terms. The knowledge and competences acquired by students have an impact on their professional and social lives.

Target group: the programme is 'made to measure' for the target group in terms of aims, organisation, methods and learning culture.

Flexibility: the programme is dynamic; its ability to adapt to the constantly changing needs of students and new conditions that arise on an ongoing basis is persuasive.

Relevance and partnership: the programme reflects the current state of research and the opinions of specialists in the field, primarily as a result of involving relevant stakeholders and specialist organisations.

Although created as a quality development tool, the model can be used in programme management or by continuing education centres. It can thus be used:

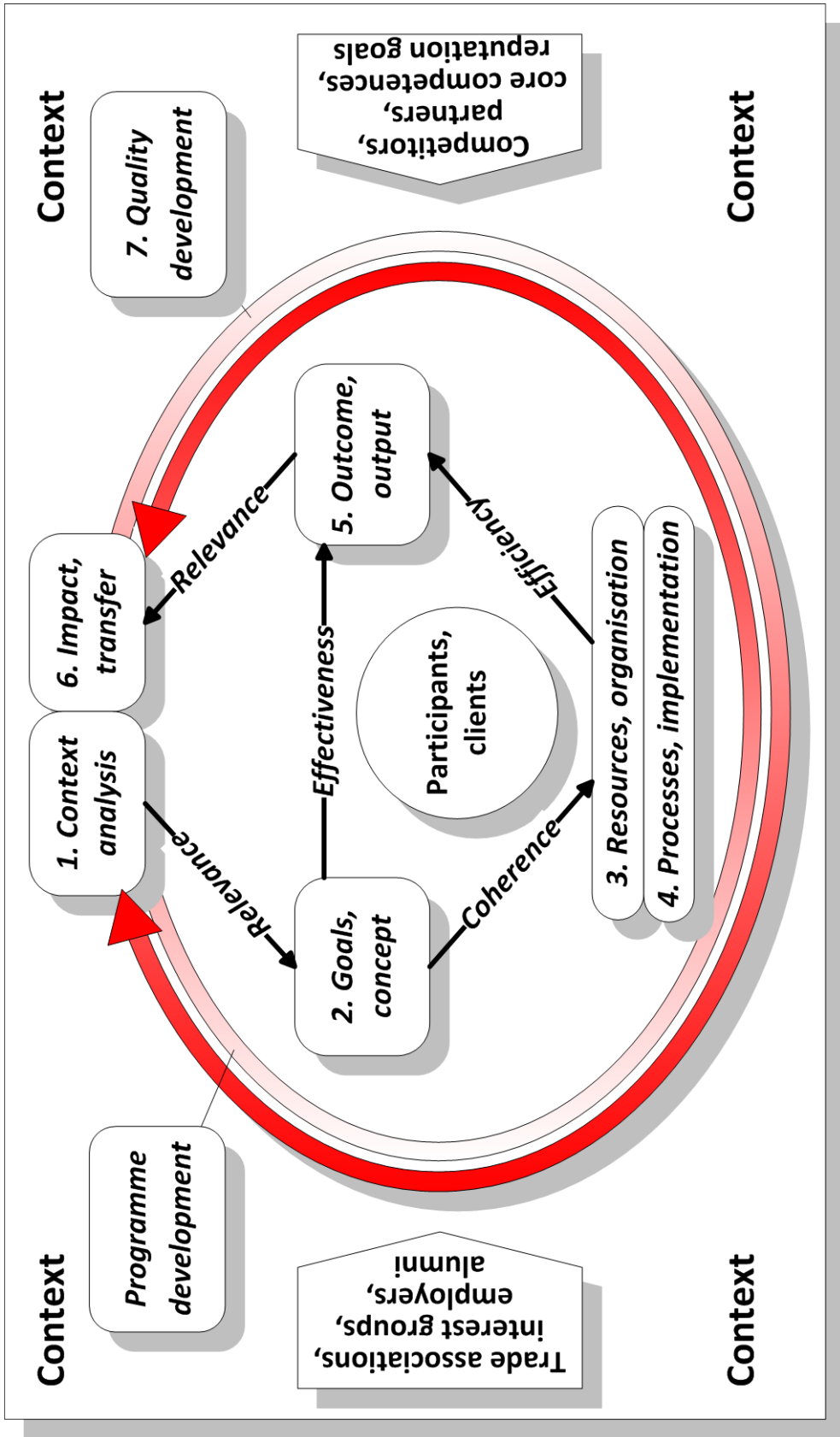
- As a guide for discussing, planning and managing quality, for example in terms of focusing on certain quality elements in programmes, when preparing for a quality assessment of an existing programme or when developing new programmes;
- As a benchmark for managing and describing performance areas in a continuing education programme, or more tangibly, for example, when drafting a job description;

- As a strategic tool for refining the profile of a continuing education programme and guiding self-evaluation or developing an internal quality assurance system.

The diagram on page 7 provides an illustration of the model. It shows the cause-and-effect relationships, interactions and processes in an optimal resolution of the system. It is neither too detailed nor over-schematic, but can be used to identify the key dimensions of quality in the process and prompt discussion. This generic approach consists of seven key dimensions, with a description of the quality objectives of each. The model operates as a feedback system. Evaluation criteria are formulated for each quality objective (how is the achievement of objectives measured?) and possible sources of data proposed (what documents are available to demonstrate that objectives have been achieved?). Each of the seven dimensions is illustrated by a non-exhaustive list of keywords.

The involvement of the OAQ in the creation of this approach to quality development is an added advantage insofar as the quality concepts used can be incorporated in future external assessments or accreditation procedures in the area of continuing education.

Quality development diagram



Quality development diagram

The diagram illustrates the multidimensional system of quality development in its context. The key elements of quality are relevance (alignment with needs / importance / significance for stakeholders), coherence (coherence of resources in relation to objectives), efficiency (results of the programme in relation to the resources allocated) and effectiveness (the degree to which objectives are realised).

The curved arrows symbolise the systemic boundaries between universities and the environment. Within the system are the four aspects of quality that can be directly influenced by the programme, namely (2) Concept and objectives, (3) Organisation and resources, (4) Implementation, (5) Learning outcomes and output (competences developed and quantifiable results) once the programme has been completed. These are relatively easy to measure and lie at the heart of numerous quality development and accreditation models.

The following two aspects are particularly important for UCE: (1) Context (analysis of the context) and (6) Impact and transfer. These are often neglected in traditional approaches to quality, because they fall outside the boundaries of the system and can often only be measured indirectly. Even more than in undergraduate studies, the groups concerned assess the quality of a programme in relation to its impact on productivity at work, career development, personal development and prestige.

The key stakeholders and contexts that need to be taken into account are the participants or clients (central circle), external groups such as alumni, employers and professional associations (arrow to the left of the circle) and the basic skills and expectations of universities and their potential competitors and cooperation partners (arrow to the right of the circle).

The seventh dimension of quality (7) is a meta-dimension. It provides a guarantee that learning outcomes have been systematised, incorporated and implemented in a continuous improvement process.

Quality development operates in the opposite direction to programme development. The programme development process (shown counter-clockwise on the diagram) starts with an analysis of the context and ends with an evaluation of impact, the results of which are then incorporated in the next contextual analysis. The quality development process begins with the impact and is therefore shown in the diagram as running in the opposite direction, i.e. clockwise. It is therefore less about the impact of certain learning outcomes and more about the outcomes needed to achieve a certain impact. The same applies, of course, to all the previous steps.

The great advantage of this approach is that quality criteria are not only adopted for evaluation after the event, but can also be used early on in the process as guidelines and tools used to develop new programmes. If these criteria are taken into account consciously when planning and implementing a UCE programme, it will also be easier to meet quality criteria.

Dimensions of Quality

Keywords

Quality objectives

Evaluation criteria

Suggested data sources

Dimension 1: Analysis of context and environment

Keywords

Professional and social environment, labour and educational markets, trends, needs, profiles, facts and figures

Quality objective

Continuing education programmes are geared to the current and future needs and expectations of participants, employers and professional associations. They take into account the continuing education markets, the interests and core competences of the university and the economic, social and cultural context.

Evaluation criteria

- 1.1. The stakeholders concerned (for example: responsible departments, participants, alumni, professional organisations, employers and research centres) are identified and according to the need involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of the programme.
- 1.2. Programme managers identify their main competitors and potential partners.
- 1.3. The programme aligns with the mission and strategic direction of the institution.

Suggested sources of data

- Planning tools
- Strategy documents and business plans
- Market analysis
- Evaluations
- Needs analyses
- Survey/consultation with business, professional associations and key contacts
- Representatives of the university and partners on management committees and commissions
- Survey of participants and alumni.

Dimension 2: Concept and objectives

Keywords

Planning and concept, good governance, corporate guidelines, business plan, goals, objectives, contents, target groups, admission, selection

Quality objective

UCE programmes are based on a clear and coherent concept that defines the target groups, the learning objectives, the competences to be developed, the impact goals as well as a business plan. These are based on the analysis of the context and market and geared to the needs and expectations of participants, society and the economy. They fall within the core competences and interests of the university. Programmes meet the recommendations of the Rectors' Conference of the Swiss Universities in relation to university continuing education.

Admission conditions and selection processes are acceptable, understood and complied with.

Evaluation criteria

- 2.1. The programme meets the recommendations of the Rectors' Conference of the Swiss Universities in relation to university continuing education.
- 2.2. Target audience and learning objectives have been defined. The objectives are formulated in terms of professional competences, associated with a particular function, or personal aptitudes.
- 2.3. Admission conditions are clearly defined and based on principles of non-discrimination. They are published and applied.
- 2.4. The study plan/curriculum accords with the learning objectives (content, methods and assessment of knowledge).
- 2.5. The programme is designed to be dynamic and adaptable.
- 2.6. Programme financing has been defined.

Suggested sources of data

- Concept, executive summary
- Business plan, budget
- Directives, regulations
- Study plan, curriculum, competences to be developed
- ECTS documentation
- Admission requirements
- Outline of didactics and content

Dimension 3: Organisation, resources

Keywords

Organisation, human and material resources, good corporate governance and citizenship

Quality objective

Programmes have an appropriate organisational structure, sufficient and appropriate human and financial resources and infrastructure, and a competent teaching staff - both in their field and in pedagogical terms.

Evaluation criteria

- 3.1. Programme managers have the necessary skills.
- 3.2. Teaching staff are academics or expert practitioners. They are competent in the fields concerned. They use appropriate teaching methodologies, particularly in the field of adult education.
- 3.3. The programme's financial, infrastructural and didactic resources are appropriate to the objectives set.
- 3.4. Decision-making processes, competences and responsibilities are defined and communicated to all interested parties.

Suggested sources of data

- Rules, continuing education regulations, programme rules and directives.
- Business plan, list of teaching staff, specifications on infrastructure
- Statistics on participants
- Quality management concepts and tools
- Results of evaluation (participant satisfaction)
- Qualifications of teaching staff

Dimension 4: Implementation

Keywords

Implementation, didactics, exams, processes, client relations, professional and teaching competences

Quality objective

Programmes are academically rigorous and geared towards professional practice. The structure of the programmes, didactics, assessment of learning outcomes and administrative processes are appropriate to the participants and reviewed according to the need. They meet the programmes' learning objectives.

Evaluation criteria

- 4.1. The programme meets academic standards and is geared towards professional practice. It is based on current academic research and up to date professional practices.
- 4.2. The structure of the programme is appropriate to the target audience (full-time/part-time programmes, modular options, etc.).
- 4.3. Teaching methods are appropriate and take into account the diverse competences of the participants and their professional backgrounds.
- 4.4. The assessment of learning outcomes refers to the learning objectives and competences to be developed.
- 4.5. Participants receive supervision and support throughout the course. They are able to locate themselves within the learning process.
- 4.6. Up to date information on the course is publicly available.
- 4.7. Administrative procedures are efficient and client-oriented.

Suggested sources of data

- Regulations, directives
- Information material, marketing strategy
- Documentation, bibliographies
- Learning portfolio, learning process model
- Study plan, Curriculum, Diploma Supplement
- Results of programme evaluation by the various stakeholders (participants, teaching staff, experts, employers, etc.)
- List of teaching methods
- Process models (administrative)

Dimension 5: Learning outcomes and output

Keywords

Learning outcomes, competencies, skills, abilities, output, attendance, graduation rate, cost-benefit, feedback culture

Quality objective

Programme managers know the results of the programme and analyse its effectiveness (evaluation of results based on objectives set) and efficiency (cost-benefit analysis). They are aware of learning outcomes, the costs of the programme and participant satisfaction levels.

Evaluation criteria

- 5.1. The output of the programme (results) is assessed according to the objectives set (effectiveness) and the resources used (efficiency).
- 5.2. The learning outcomes of the participants are assessed according to the competences to be developed.
- 5.3. Programme managers analyse the level of participants' satisfaction in relation to learning outcomes and the various services offered.

Suggested sources of data

- Knowledge assessments, examinations, average marks
- Learning portfolio
- Self-assessment by participants
- Programme evaluation by participants, including unexpected outcomes and subjective gains
- Business plan, balance sheets
- Participant and diploma statistics
- Diploma Supplement

Dimension 6: Transfer and impact

Keywords

Market value, reputation, transfer, long-term benefit, career, value of the degree, recognition

Quality objective

Programmes are widely recognised by participants, alumni, employers and professional associations. They provide explicit added value for the participants in their professional practice and have a positive impact on their career.

Evaluation criteria

- 6.1. Participants and alumni confirm the positive impact of the competences acquired on their professional practice and/or career.
- 6.2. The programme is known to and recognised by employers and professional associations.
- 6.3. Professional associations, businesses, institutions and other interested organisations support the programme financially or otherwise.
- 6.4. The programme meets cultural, societal, social or economic needs.

Suggested sources of data

- Survey of participants, alumni and employers
- Statements by professional associations and key individuals

Dimension 7: Quality development

Keywords

Quality development, quality concept, monitoring, quality culture, evaluation, self-evaluation, feedback loops

Quality objective

Quality development is an integral part of the programme. It covers all phases of the programme from context analysis through to impact evaluation.

Evaluation criteria

- 7.1. The programme uses a multidimensional quality approach specific to university continuing education with emphasis on impact.
- 7.2. Decision-making processes, competences and responsibilities in relation to quality development are defined and communicated to all interested parties.
- 7.3. Programme managers have appropriate resources to ensure quality development.
- 7.4. The results of evaluations are analysed and taken into account for improving the programme.

Suggested sources of data

- Quality development concept
- Process descriptions
- Internal and external evaluations
- Peer reviews
- Implementation monitoring process
- Implementation review

Glossary

Relevance: The relevance of a university continuing education (UCE) programme is assessed in relation to social demand and the needs of professional environments. Relevance thus forms a link between the objectives set for the course and the expectations of the various parties concerned – participants, the institutions and society.

Coherence: Coherence defines the relationship between the resources allocated and the objectives set for the UCE programme. It thus provides a means of checking whether human and financial resources and infrastructure are sufficient and appropriate to the diversity of UCE programmes.

Effectiveness: Effectiveness measures the results achieved against the objectives previously set. It thus provides a means of assessing the knowledge and competences acquired in relation to the learning objectives and qualifications defined for the programme.

Efficiency: Efficiency measures the results of a UCE programme against the resources used.

Outcome: The expected or actual results a UCE programme. The direct results of a course for students and teachers.

Student Learning Outcomes: A statement of what a learner is supposed to know, understand or be capable of doing at the end of a period of learning.

Output: The quantifiable results of a UCE programme. Examples: number of awards, success rate, number of ECTS credits, average examination scores, programme profit, etc.

Impact: The direct or indirect, expected or unexpected effects of a UCE programme on the performance, career and personal development of the participants who complete the programme successfully. Impact can be measured on the basis of quantitative indicators (e.g. the number of successful participants who have found a job, etc.) or qualitative criteria (surveys of alumni, employers, professional associations, etc.).

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