NetworkQA
Networking for Quality Assurance

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Introducing NQCA

The ultimate aim of NQCA is to

- Design,
- Develop and
- Implement

A model of Interagency Working

Which focuses on

- Quality Culture and
- Quality Assurance

Across the VET Journey.

Anything else is just not good enough.

Spring 2016

Background to NQCA

Preamble to This Exciting New European Project

Networking for Quality Culture and Assurance (NQCA), co funded by the Erasmus+ programme, has its roots, as many European projects do, in developments at policy level in Europe. Like its predecessor 'Education and Training 2010', 'Education and Training 2020' envisages a Europe filled with opportunities for further training and up-skilling, geared towards an active workforce and a realistic labour market. For our purposes, the most important aim appears to be the second strategic objective; 'Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training' across Europe.[1] From these aspirations on a European agenda, it appears that there is scope for a project that focuses on quality assurance and developing a quality culture across the entire journey of individuals engaging in Vocational Education and Training (VET).

The impetus for NQCA began from its parent project, Equal Youth, which discovered that a method of interagency working that involved building a network of the most relevant individuals, who work in the area of VET, could better facilitate the client in achieving their desired ends, than could working in isolation. Net-working for Quality Assurance (NQA), a follow on project from Equal Youth, attempted to apply the good practices learned from its precursor to the area of quality and quality assurance in the VET sector, attempting to bring a conscious recognition of the importance of quality processes from both management level and also equally from the perspective of the student or learner. This project was driven by the influence of the Bruges Communiqué, which advocates the progression of individual citizens through the creation and delivery of quality assured VET initiatives.

From the success of NQA, NQCA is attempting to broaden out the interagency groups to include the entire VET journey; engaging with not only organisations that are involved in the provision of VET, but also the organisations the feed into and out of education and training, such as the guidance services and also employers. This will ideally facilitate these organisations in bridging the gaps between services across the learner's VET journey, through an interagency network approach. Overall, this would hopefully lead to an improved quality journey that would narrow any gaps that the client could potentially fall through.

NQCA partners at the project launch event in Dublin December 4, 2015

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[1] European Commission (2009). *Education and Training 2020*. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/index_en.htm [Accessed 02 February 2016].

The NQCA Interview

Nuala Whelan, of the Ballymun Job Centre, shares her experiences of developing an Interagency Model on the original NQA project.

As we sit in her office, one of the few in the building with a coveted window to the outside world, Nuala, in her usual energetic and passionate way, describes how the NQA project unfolded.

Q: As someone who was instrumental in bringing the original NQA project to fruition, would you be able to tell us a little about how it all started, and the eventual progression of this earlier project?

Nuala begins by explaining how the Ballymun Job Centre was involved in the QALLL (Quality Assurance in Life Long Learning) project, of which our Eguide project was one of thirty-nine good practice projects selected for recommendation. This began a dialogue on Quality and Quality Assurance in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector. When applying for funding for courses, it was unclear whose Quality Assurance you were working towards; was it the FETAC policies, the Local Employment Centre's Quality Assurance procedures, the Governmental Department of Social Protection, or the VET providers such as FAS or the Education and Training Boards. There was much organisational confusion, and when this was discussed with other organisations in the sector, they were coming back with similar experiences of ambiguity.

Nuala explains that it was envisaged that an interagency network model, such as that developed in the Equal Youth project, would be really beneficial for discussing the issue of quality in the area of VET. When the issues surrounding Quality and QA in Ireland were being discussed with partners from across Europe, it was realised that what appeared lacking was a consistency of approach, and that different organisations from diverse partner countries had the same confusion. All of this pointed to a good case for a project that had as its main focus the practice of Quality and Quality Assurance.

Nuala recalls that when one opened up the conversation about Quality Assurance to organisations that were involved in the delivery of VET, there was this almost negative sense that they had of QA as this heavy administrative burden and a seemingly onerous and laborious task, rather than the positive feeling that one gets when they really experience Quality for themselves. The task of quality assuring Quality almost seemed to diminish the true sense of quality that individuals, especially the clients and learners, experience when engaging with an organisation. Once the Assurance was added to Quality it seemed to alter the whole sense of the term; there was an apparent disconnect between the feeling of Quality and the assurance of quality. In the interagency meetings, it was asked what Quality was, and for Nuala it is definitely that feeling one gets when they experience it from a service from the ground level upwards. If this is there at all, it necessarily permeates the entire organisation. It was discussed in these meetings how one knows quality when they are faced with it, and while there can be measurable indicators, what it comes down to is a genuine sensation that is felt from within. This feeling is almost intangible but is still present.

When policy makers implement policy initiatives to ensure Quality Assurance, then organisations do not feel the same sense of Quality. In this case it feels more like a bureaucratic task seemingly

enforced from above, rather than a complementary addition to improve the services provided that emerge internally in a more organic way. In this sense it almost overshadows the real experience and feeling of Quality; in the attempt to acquire the proof of quality, Quality itself is almost lost, or at the very least diminished.

What is important for Nuala is to feel this inherent sense of Quality again, especially in relation to the clients. When does this sense of Quality drop? Does it exist in this way for the clients involved? These are the most pertinent questions for the organisations involved. The stakeholder service providers are all doing different things; some are involved in guidance, others involved in training or on-the-job work placements. Each step along the path needs to be quality assured, so as not to undo the good work that has gone before.

Over the course of the original NQA project, in December 2012, the amalgamation of FETAC, HETAC and the other QA institutions in Ireland into one overarching body, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), appeared to come as a happy coincidence. The time appeared apt to be working on a project focused on Quality Assurance. Initially, it was difficult to get a foot in the door with policy makers, but once this footing was established it was beneficial for both, according to Nuala. The newly established organisation needed to reengage with FETAC providers, so that they were intending to form collaborative working networks, and NQA seemed to be doing something similar. It was a project specific to VET on a European platform. For the Job Centre, and the project in general, there was an opportunity to influence a policy level engagement with the Community and Voluntary Sector, especially in relation to smaller institutions that were providing a real quality driven service to specific client groups, but that had no capacity to be a Quality Assured centre. This led to almost a fear of Quality Assurance on the ground level, as under-resourced organisations failed to fulfil the resource requirements necessary to achieve certification. The uncertainty regarding the stability of the organisation was only balanced by the need of the particular service by the client. In this fear, the quality that made the organisation what it is was seemingly lost. With regard to the other European partners, many organisations had a similar experience with regard to attempting to engage at a national level, there was a perceived block when organisations at the bottom attempted to feed back up to policy level. Can this be regarded as a negative view about policy? Nuala would argue that the potential for damage when there appears to be a lack of understanding from policy level about the ground level services, outweighs any benefits of a rigid QA system. Ultimately, it will be the clients and learners that will lose out.

Q: What were some of the challenges that you faced at the time?

Nuala maintains that while there were challenges at the level of policy implementation, the initial stages of building the interagency group and developing a shared sense of trust between the participants were vital to the success of the project. It was thus necessary to find the commonalities between the different organisations present. Together they recognised that the client was the common denominator between all the services, and once they brought it back to this level they could find the common ground between the organisations. Genuine Quality Assurance can only begin to happen once people get into this comfortable head space to develop this shared frame of mind.

In addition to this, engaging in an interagency way on the national level needed careful consideration. Organisations at this level were necessarily focused on implementing Quality Assurance from the top down. Engaging with policy makers was therefore central in the effort to overcome old obstacles. Nuala explains that, very much like our own systems in Ireland, bureaucratic procedures at policy level seem to be based on a system of path dependencies, in which decisions being made are based on the decisions that have gone before. This differs largely between cultures and is usually culture specific. Therefore, the model that was developed needed to be general enough to accommodate the different styles of working within diverse partner contexts. In this regard, engaging with the different cultures across the partnership could be quite interesting and was often rewarding for all parties. Adjacent to all this, engaging on the level of the client or learner posed no difficulty for the project partners. Learners were delighted to engage and have an input that they felt was taken into consideration. This feeling of quality in the learner was a real achievement for NQA.

Q: What were the main successes and achievements of the project?

According to Nuala, the main success of the original NQA project was, first of all, establishing that quality was a relevant issue to be raised on the agenda, both locally and nationally, and then, keeping this focus on quality on the agenda, through the interagency group. It facilitated the process whereby organisations were consciously thinking about quality, and this provided a certain legacy through the NQA interagency model.

Due to the success of this interagency group, the idea was developed to turn the NQA logo into a quality label; where organisations could become part of this label by striving for quality in their services. But Nuala is adamant that the label be based on the feeling of quality that one gets from the service, not another administrative task that may potentially defeat the purpose. It is important to separate quality as an end in itself, from the processes of Quality Assurance. Kim Faurschou's report, *Reflections from a critical friend*, highlighted the fact that the NQA project had indeed filled a space in the European arena that was necessary. There seemed to be a definite need for quality and the related focus on quality that NQA contributed to the area. It was an important contribution that, at the time, was not in such sharp focus. This European agenda necessarily filtered down to the level of the learner.

Q: Out of all this, how did the conceptualisation of this follow-on project, NQCA, come about?

The original NQA project was very much specific to the VET sector. However, Nuala felt that VET was only one possible intervention across a continuum of services within the client's own journey. Across the entire journey there needs to be a conscious commitment to quality, otherwise the good work done by the previous organisation could potentially be lost. What happens prior to and after VET along this path? There are a range of routes into and out of training, and each step along the journey needs to be quality driven. The guidance services want to know that the training that the clients are referred to has a focus on quality, as does the training provider in relation to the employer. After a course, is there any continuity between services? How does the student know what step to take next? There needs to be an experience of quality across the whole journey for the learner.

Nuala cites Donald E. Super's *'Theory of Career Development'* as inspiration for her approach. Different aspects of the journey fulfil different needs of the client at different stages of their lives. In the Job Centre, guidance officers need to have a sense of the entire client journey. Thus they will facilitate their clients in making the next step into something meaningful. Hopefully the client will then be in a position to take the wheel to steer themselves through their own journey. Therefore, there needs to be an awareness that a VET course is only one step in a longer journey. All parties can of course benefit from a greater focus on quality. The guidance services need to provide the right advice and support, the course needs to contain the right content and the right trainer, and the job needs to be the right one for the individual who has come through this journey. Otherwise, the person could fall out of the system at any of these stages. Once the staff within these organisations become committed to quality, then the results should filter through the whole organisation itself and ultimately onto the client. NQA seemed to have a wider applicability, so NQCA was developed to achieve this.

Q: What do you ultimately hope will be achieved within this new project?
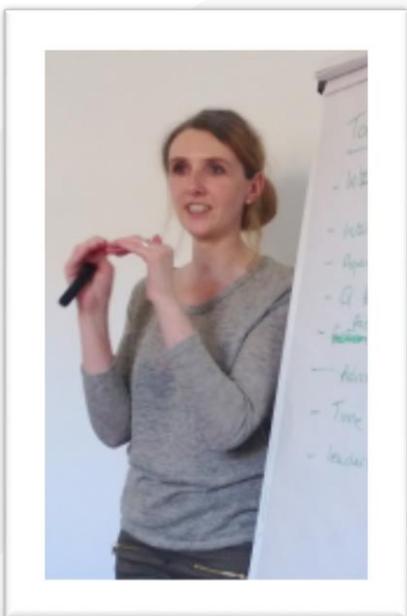
Similar to NQA, the main achievement for Nuala would be an understanding of, and a commitment to, Quality. It is important that all services be quality driven, and that there is a shared commitment between them in relation to the client. In order to get an ostensible "disadvantaged client" into a quality job, it takes the combined efforts of a lot of different services with which the client will need to engage. There will need to be a combined sense of commitment.

At policy level, a focus on the individual client would be an ideal outcome. An elaborate Quality Assurance system looks great on paper, but does it always work in practice? One can raise quality issues from a local perspective, but the difficulty seems to be in feeding this information back up to policy level. There appears to be a figurative block in reaching this level, whether this seems deliberate or accidental. Overall, in relation to the interagency participants, it appears better to work in an interagency way, particularly for smaller organisations that are perhaps unable to survive in isolation.

For Nuala, consistency across the board is central. A wider commitment to Quality across the entire VET Journey is what is required. The NQA label is not supposed to be just another administrative task, but a complete Quality focused perspective. The central purpose is to get quality back on the agenda. The most difficult thing will be to change mind-sets and to alter the organisational cultures already established to include quality. What would be ideal would be to have champions of Quality at a national level, in each partner country, to act as a voice for Quality that cannot be easily silenced.

Nuala Whelan is Assistant Manager at the Ballymun Job Centre

NQCA in Focus

As spring approaches, there nevertheless appears to be an ominous cloud on the horizon for organisations that do not maintain a high quality standard in their daily work, or that fail to actively foster a culture of quality. This is due to the realisation of the Networking for Quality Culture and Assurance (NQCA) project, a project co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme, for which the application was accepted by the Irish national provider, Leargas in 2015. The Ballymun Job Centre are the lead partners in this Pan-European partnership, as it is a continuation of the positive results achieved during the original Networking for Quality Assurance (NQA) project.

Following on from this project, NQCA is dedicated to designing, developing, implementing, and sustaining a model of Interagency working which focuses on Quality Culture and Quality Assurance across the VET Journey. Eight partners from across six programme countries, including Ireland, Northern Ireland, the UK, Germany, Hungary and Italy, will adapt and develop the Net-Working for Quality Assurance model so as to ensure its relevance across a wider VET journey.

While the previous NQA project identified that quality tends to exist within the provision of services, it emphasised that quality can be significantly reduced during key transition points throughout a clients' VET journey. NQCA aspires to remedy this oversight. The proposed interagency approach aims to strengthen the links between stakeholders, particularly in relation to shared goals and trust, and develop a culture of quality which will be strived for by a range of stakeholders representing various stages of the VET journey.

Therefore, there are a number of key outputs expected from the project. It is anticipated that we will adapt the original NQA project results to develop an innovative NQCA model, through a collaborative research process. We will be hoping to agree on a definition of the VET Journey, as well as develop case studies to illustrate the various paths that may be possible across the different partnership countries. As well as the standard website and newsletters, we expect to cultivate the NQA logo as a brand, which will ultimately become synonymous with quality in the VET sector, and will represent a commitment to quality culture in one's organisation. We will also devise a toolkit to be utilised by policy makers and any subsequent organisations that may intend to emulate our good practices, a training process focused on quality in VET, and commission a social impact evaluation to assess the overall value of the project on a social scale.

Nevertheless, seemingly the most important aspect of the project will be to develop and implement a process of interagency working that will hopefully narrow the gaps with regard to the points of transition across the VET journey. This will be actualised on three levels, engaging with the learner and provider alike on both a local and national level. This will hopefully facilitate a synthesis between the respective bottom-up and top-down approaches.

Networking for Quality Culture and Assurance, then, ultimately aims to foster a genuine bottom-up quality culture that does not allow for the most disadvantaged individuals to slip through these crevices in service provision. While this is to be combined with a top-down policy provision methodology, this project attempts to go beyond the seemingly insincere "box-ticking" approach. In assessing and cultivating the existence of a quality culture in Europe, we will attempt to peel back the layers of the concept of Quality, to burrow deep down into the real purpose and meaning of

quality, in and of itself. Working from the good practices achieved during the NQA project, we will thus attempt to develop relevant case studies to achieve our goal of cementing over the service gaps with concrete quality assurance techniques that take into consideration the views of learners and service providers alike.

Specifically, in the Ballymun Job Centre, the staff were busy making preparations for our kick-off meeting that was hosted in Ballymun on the 2nd December 2015. As the lead partner, there is a lot of work regarding the project management side of things, but we are confident that the project will have the combined competence to achieve its aims, as the partners are all enthusiastic about moving ahead. After witnessing the collaboration achieved during our first transnational meeting in Dublin and the success of the first public event in the Ballymun Civic Centre which represented the official launch of the project, all project partners will be conducting the research that will feed into the complied report due in the following months.

The NQCA Partnership at work during the Kick-off Meeting in Dublin 2, December 2015

Official Launch of the NQCA Interagency Network, Dublin 4, December 2016

Over the Dublin Mountains and far away, across the M50 Motorway and through the meadows and boroughs of Ballymun, there was a fabled ceremony that had been foretold within the boundless confines of a humble project application form. This was the first public multiplier event held in the Ballymun Civic Centre on the 4th December where stakeholders at either local, regional or national level, working in the provision of or identified as being part of the VET journey, were invited to attend to gain information about the NQCA project, meet the partnership involved, and start a dialogue on quality and quality culture. This also had the objective of sharing information about the project to a wider audience and identifying relevant stakeholders who will participate in the local and national interagency groups. The opportunity was also used to launch the NQA quality label and define its meaning and significance to potential VET stakeholders. All project partners attended this first event and presentations were made by the Ballymun Job Centre, GEMS Northern Ireland and Turku, who presented their experiences of interagency working from the original NQA project and the value created to date, as well as a presentation from Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) on Quality Assurance in Ireland at a national level.

Máirín Kenny, a member of the Ballymun Job Centre's Board of Management, acted as the master of ceremonies for the event.

Michael Creedon presented on the Ballymun Job Centre, outlining the good work done in the community by the Job Centre, particularly in relation to giving the client a quality service.

Peter Nolan presented on the results of the original Networking for Quality Assurance (NQA) project, and the challenges encountered with regard to establishing an interagency network on quality.

Julie McCafferty presented an overview of the current Networking for Quality Culture and Assurance (NQCA) project. NQCA is a strategic partnership project funded under the Erasmus+ programme. As previously mentioned, it aims to design, develop and implement a model of Interagency working which focuses on Quality Culture and Quality Assurance across the VET journey. Apart from the interagency network, it will develop an NQCA model and toolkit, conduct a social impact evaluation, and develop training that will hopefully all contribute to the sustainability of the project.

Anu Parantainen presented on the City of Turku Education Division's experiences regarding establishing a Quality Assurance network in Finland.

Walter Balfe presented on Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the organisation that oversees Quality Assurance policy and practice in Ireland. He explained the amalgamation of the various organisations that were consolidated to develop QQI, and explained their role in overseeing the QA processes of VET institutions and the most plausible methods for engaging with the organisation, especially for smaller educational establishments that may lack the necessary resources.

Susan Russam, from GEMS, enthusiastically presented on the official launch of the NQA Quality Label, emphasising the bottom-up nature of the label and the commitment to quality that it will ultimately come to imply over the course of the project.

Destination Finland!

During April 2016 The partners will participate in a two-day meeting to iron out the further details of the project on a logistical level for the months ahead.

The City of Turku Education Division is to host a thematic seminar focusing on, ***Quality Culture and Quality Assurance in Apprenticeships***, as Finland's model for apprenticeship training is of a particularly high standard. The event will act as a means to share information with the relevant bodies in Finland.

The hosts will outline the Finnish apprenticeship system, tracing the individual learner's journey from school, right through VET provision, and on into the workplace. There will also be a concentration on Quality, Quality Assurance and Quality Culture within the apprenticeship model and comparisons made between the Finnish system and those of the other participating partner countries.

In the Meantime, …

After the successful meeting in Dublin, the partners will be working on several tasks over the coming months in preparation for the meeting in Turku.

These include:

- Finalising the individual Research Reports of each partner organisation.
- Combining these individual reports into a Compiled Research Document, inclusive of a concise Executive Summary.
- Settling on the case study that each partner organisation will use as the basis of their interagency meetings.
- Organising the first learner, local and national interagency meetings respectively.

We are looking forward to a fruitful and productive project ahead, which will ideally yield real results for the future of VET provision.

NetworkQA
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