



Quality Assurance in VET and HE – Possibilities for Mutual Learning

Paper for VETNET-Network at the ECER
Conference 2007 in Gent

Erstelldatum

September 10, 2007

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One could say that QA in VET and HE have very different objectives and goals. Higher education institutions are following a very different model of “autonomy” whereas VET institutions are mostly covered in a very strict VET-system. Students in both sectors have a different approach and different expectations from learning. But is this true in the expanding role of VET on systematic level by parallel expanding development of HE?

The Leonardo da Vinci Project DEQU – Development of Elements for Quality Assurance in Practice Orientated Higher Education – made on the one hand a distinction between academic and professional / vocational HE for developing different QA strategies. On the other hand one of the “key processes” in professional / vocational HE is very similar to the “key process” in VET: It concerns the effective contact to external labour market stakeholders. This paper is focussing on the development of quality factors for the contact with external labour market stakeholders in professional / vocational HE and which aspects can be taken over in VET also.

1 Between Bologna and Copenhagen

The Bologna Process (based on the Bologna Declaration from 1999) deals with “academic” higher education in Europe. It is focussing on the de facto reality of differences in structure content and process in HE systems by calling for harmonisation rather than standardisation within a so-called European Higher Education Area.

The Bologna Process is based on the following aspirations:

- ___ That the Bologna reforms are intended to produce harmonisation of HE systems across Europe to establish a European Higher Education Area, attracting students from outside, and facilitating academic staff and student mobility internally.
- ___ That this is in essence a voluntary process engaged in by each nation state.
- ___ That this voluntary harmonisation will be achieved in such a way as to establish zones of mutual trust between signatories with regard to the comparability and compatibility of student learning.
- ___ That this will form the basis for mutual recognition awards.
- ___ And that comparable and compatible national HE structures and processes and quality assurance systems are central to achieving these aims.

QA and mutual recognition are two essential elements in the success of the Bologna process. On the other hand, many of the documents on the official EU and associated web sites briefly acknowledge that there are universities and other HE institutions, or that there is academic and more vocational HE; but then proceed to largely ignore the distinction and its possible implications. The terminology used is also predominantly that of the university and of academic courses, not of HE institutions or of more diversified systems.

A central feature is the university as an autonomous institution, controlling and defining standards of awards; of academic courses (predominantly the terminology used) developed by staff within these institutions or within an academic network across other autonomous institutions; and, as Bologna proceeds, as institutions interpreting emerging national quality assurance frameworks.

The Bruges-Copenhagen Process is to VET what Bologna is to HE. Give its general orientation it was largely ignored by the Bologna Process. Its applied and employment focus provides a useful counterpoint to Bologna. Some of its more concrete aspirations are similar to Bologna, e.g. a single framework for transparency of competencies and qualifications to facilitate mutual recognition of VET; a system of credit transfer for VET; and common criteria and principles for quality in VET.

Bologna and Bruges-Copenhagen appear to be on parallel paths in terms of outputs. What in Bologna is the ENQA Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2005) appears in the Bruges-Copenhagen Process to be a Common Quality Assurance Framework for VET in Europe (June

2004); what in Bologna is the Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (December 2004) in Bruges-Copenhagen is the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (July 2005); and what in Bologna is the Diploma Supplement (2003), in Bruges-Copenhagen is the Framework Euopass.

“Vocational Education and Training (VET) is generally closely linked to the economic life of the country and its purpose is to be directly responsive to the needs of employment. VET tends to be locally grounded and is expected to adapt to local economic trends. Employers and social partners are involved to varying degrees in the development of VET in matters such as governance, regulation, organisation, financing, standard setting, developing qualifications, competencies and curriculum development as well as in the provision of learning.” (C. DEANE and E. WATERS, “Towards 2010 – Common Themes and Approaches across High Education and Vocational Education and Training Across Europe”. Background Research Paper, Irish Presidency Conference, Dublin, March 2004)

In these terms, the characteristics of VET and the concerns of the Bruges-Copenhagen Process have a greater affinity with professional / vocational HE than with the predominantly academic HE that appears to be the focus in Bologna. But many professional / vocational HE institutions are also focussing on Bologna, mostly be ignoring the Bruges-Copenhagen Process, because it is for VET and not for HE. But are Bologna and Bruges-Copenhagen really competing areas?

Figure 1:

Model of Social Cohesion and Market Competitiveness – Two Agendas

Social Model		Market Model
Bologna	Lisbon	Bruges / Copenhagen
Academic Higher Education	Professional / Vocational Higher Education	Vocational Education and Training (VET) (Pre-Higher Education)
Create European Higher Education Area	Create a European Area of Lifelong Learning	Create a European Labour Market
Increase mobility of students and academic staff		Increase mobility of highly qualified labour
Mobility of service recipients		Mobility of service providers
Sell European HE externally		Establish comparability for employability internally
	Generic Frameworks for: Qualifications, Quality Assurance, Credit	
Parallel development		Calls for integration (lifelong learning)
“Fitness for Award”		“Fitness for Purpose”

Source: Final Report on the DEQU-project, to be downloaded from <http://www.dequ-info.net> (October 2007)

2 Quality Assurance in Academic and in Practice Oriented Higher Education

There can be made a distinction characterised in two ideal models of Higher Education – the academic model and the professional / vocational model:

Figure 2:

Ideal Type Models of Higher Education Activity

Academic	Professional / Vocational
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Academically oriented - Discipline based curriculum structure - Long cycle awards / learning - (Academic) Research oriented - Relatively autonomous defining standards of awards - (Emerging) National Quality Assurance agencies defining framework for QA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Practice oriented - Professional field based curriculum structure - Both long cycle and shorter cycle, more frequent learning - Applied research oriented - Referencing stakeholders outside the institution and national QA agencies in defining qualifying standards

Source: Final Report on the DEQU-project, to be downloaded from <http://www.dequ-info.net> (October 2007)

This is a possible distinction within European Higher Education activity. It has been, and in some states still is, a distinction manifest in the national institutional structure of HE (e.g. Polytechnics in the UK, the Fachhochschule in Germany and Austria, the Finnish polytechnics now Universities for Applied Science, and a range of separate professional “schools” in different states).

The nature of the necessary learning experience in professional / vocational HE is such that it poses different challenges for an effective quality assurance system. This can be illustrated by a comparison of the characteristics of the learning experience of Academic and Professional / Vocational HE.

Figure 3:
Characteristics of the Learning Experience

	Academic HE	Professional / Vocational HE
Orientation	Academic	Practical / Applied (Theory and Practice)
Location	Formal HE institution	Various (university, other HE specialist training institution, workplace)
Curriculum design	Intra institutional (academic network)	HE institution / professional body / employers / commissioners
Mode	Predominantly full-time	Full-time / part-time / mixed mode / short cycle / e-based / distance learning
Focus	Fitness for award	Fitness for purpose, fitness for practice (and fitness for award when attached to an academic award)
Achievement	Learning outcomes / transferable skills	Learning outcomes / applied competencies
Learning path	Formal, intra institutional, pedagogically varied (traditional, plus group work, projects, e-learning, independent learning)	Formal, intra institutional and work practice based. HE pedagogy similarly varied. Work based learning both structured learning and informal learning.
Admissions	Formal credentials / qualifications (some APL)	Formal credentials and informal learning. Practice related experience APL, APEL, ACEL more common / given greater currency (not all evident in all systems)
Lifelong Learning	Progression from pre HE. Higher degrees, 'third age' students, leisure learning	Higher degree where relevant, continuing professional development (CPD), professional updating, refresher training, progression from non-HE, accumulated credit.

Source: Final Report on the DEQU-project, to be downloaded from <http://www.dequ-info.net> (October 2007)

The educational process in professional / vocational HE is sufficiently distinct to require an additional or different response to assure quality. This is much more comparable to the requirements of VET than academic HE. Especially the relationships to external stakeholders is a common target for professional / vocational HE and VET. These may involve matching curricula and outcomes to labour market requirements and / or professional developments; a rapid and flexible response to changing market needs (short cycle updating, delivery on client premises, producing new curricula for delivery to tight deadlines, etc.); the use of practitioners as teachers to convey the relationship between theory and practice; and responding to national policy and legislative change in professional / vocational areas.

3 Contact to Labour Market and QA

A key characteristic for both, professional / vocational HE and VET is the necessity of effective relationships with relevant labour market stakeholders: Employers, professional / vocational bodies, businesses, companies, agencies, public sector organisations, and government bodies – and they either directly represent the labour market or are essential interpretive intermediaries for that market.

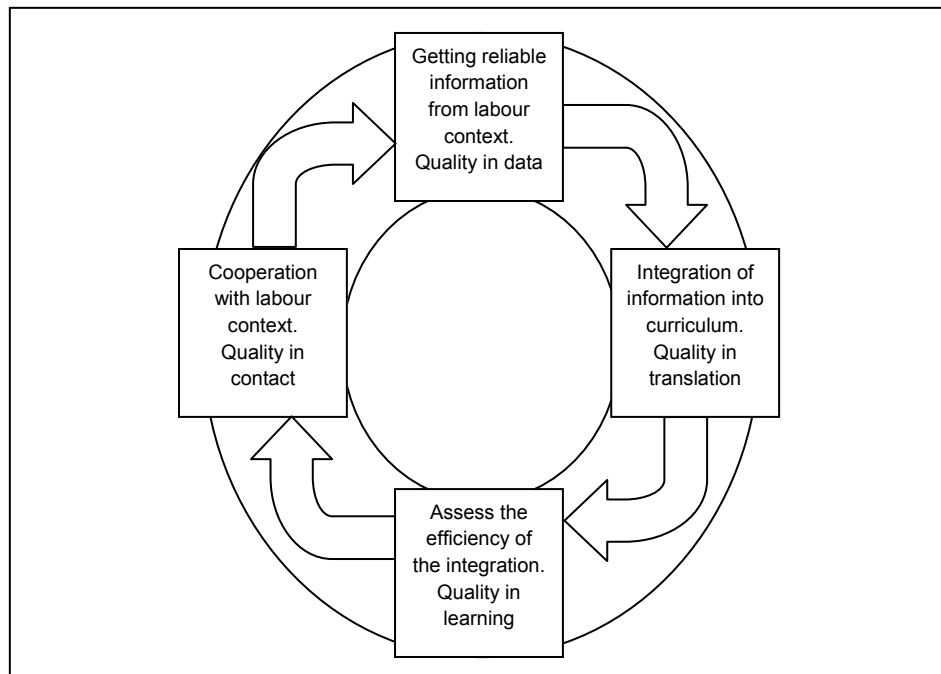
Possible QA fields in the “key process” of effective relationships with labour market stakeholders:

- how to establish such relationships
- how to sustain such relationships
- what are the elements of the relationship which make it most effective (information, interaction, reciprocity, partnership, etc.)
- how to embed or routinise joint working relationships
- how to distil principles and practice to provide continuity and to guide others

Major concerns in the relationship with labour market stakeholders can be illustrated in a cycle of activities.

Figure 4:

Enhancing quality through relationships with the labour market



Source: Final Report on the DEQU-project, to be downloaded from <http://www.dequ-info.net> (October 2007)

4 Building a Development Model

4.1 The Benefits – Added value from Investment in Partnership

If we try to identify the added value for all stakeholders from effective partnership to the labour market, this can be summarised as follows:

Figure 5:

Investment in Partnership – the benefits

For the Student	For the Institution	For the Collaborating Organisation	For the “Partnership”
The application of theory and practice	Essential to fulfil the requirements of professional / vocational education	More information for recruitment of employees	Mutual understanding
Developing reflective practice	Integration into the local / regional community (networks build on associated networks)	Enhancement of practical training of potential / actual employers	Shared experience
Developing generic, transferable skills in practical, ‘real world’ situation	Networks produce new and different opportunities	Renewal / updating of professional approaches through student input	Reciprocity exchange, integration
More effective access to the job market	Provides information / evaluation for quality enhancement of programmes	Challenge to conventions from students	Enhanced public image / mutually reflected status
A chance to test the career choice	A mechanism for marketing institutional programmes	Influence on curriculum / pedagogy	
Develop specific professional competences	Locates the institution at the cutting edge of new developments		
A chance to develop confidence in the professional context – transition from study to work	Provides market research		
A chance to learn by mistakes in a supervised / safe environment			

Source: Final Report on the DEQU-project, to be downloaded from <http://www.dequ-info.net> (October 2007)

4.2 Building relationships – from Interaction to Integration: contact, structure, and culture

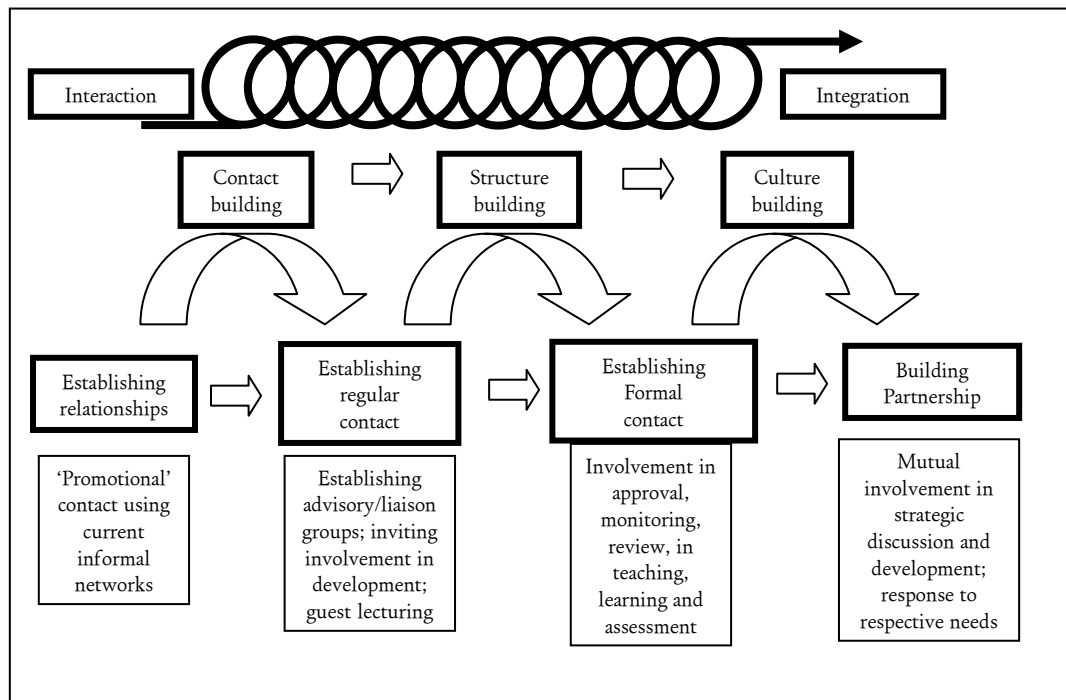
Figure 6 represents the stages in a process by which VET or HE institutions could be seen to develop more effective, systematic relationships with labour market stakeholders. It can also be seen as a “diagnostic continuum” on which VET or HE institutions might locate themselves to assess their progress in developing such relationships. Typically different institutions in the same country, and different professional / vocational areas within the same institution, might reasonably locate themselves at different points on the continuum.

The continuum suggests a process which is seen to begin with simple “interaction” with stakeholders, but can culminate in a relationship characterised by the “integration” of respective aims and activity. It suggests that this process can be seen as a number of phases conceived of in terms of the functional and relational aspects of QA.

As these patterns of participation become first regarded as legitimate, and second, a requirement for the proper endorsement of standards, the boundaries between the VET or HE institution and the external stakeholder organisation, in relation to the relevant course / programme, can become more blurred; concepts of the course / programme team cross these boundaries to include stakeholders; and respective roles are merged and exchanged. This may lead to further review of the formal processes themselves and the definitive involvement of stakeholders as crucial reference points for relevant learning outcomes / competences.

These processes are of course not automatic or self-generating. They depend upon the purposeful action of institutional actors in VET or HE and in the labour market. They depend upon clear policies and the resources to implement them.

Figure 6:
From interaction to integration



Source: Final Report on the DEQU-project, to be downloaded from <http://www.dequ-info.net> (October 2007)

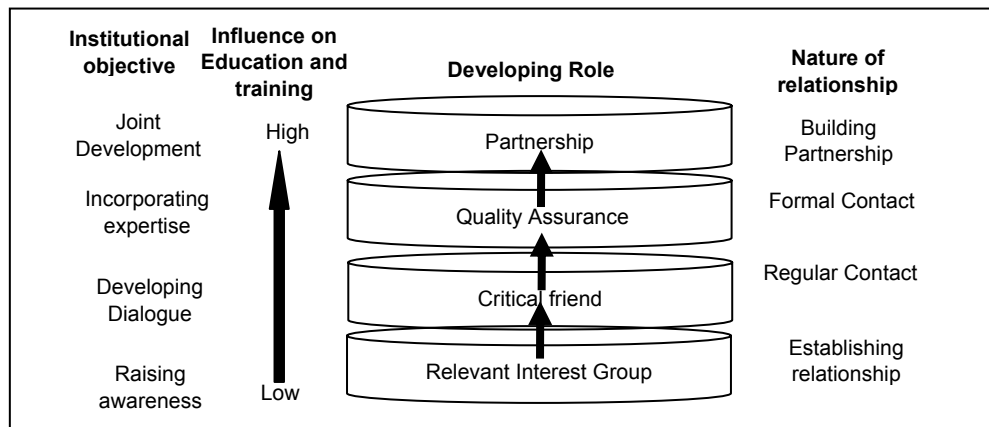
4.3 The Developing Role of External Stakeholders

It is also apparent from partners' contributions to the DEQU project that the process of developing relationships with labour market stakeholders is seen, positively, to be related to progressive opportunities for those stakeholders to influence the educational and training process. For the VET or HE institution the emphasis is on different processes at different stages of development. In the early stages, the aim is to raise the awareness of stakeholders of the relevance of the course / programme to their activity, and of the opportunities and potential benefits of cooperation / involvement.

As the relationship develops, the creation of a dialogue with stakeholders through more regular and routine involvement establishes and recognises the significance of stakeholder input to course / programme development. The more formal involvement by stakeholders in QA processes is effectively the formal incorporation of stakeholder expertise as input to these processes. When institutions enter into partnership type relationships with stakeholders, the process is one of joint development of the programme as one dimension of a more strategic relationship.

Figure 7:

The Developing Role of External Stakeholders



Source: Final Report on the DEQU-project, to be downloaded from <http://www.dequ-info.net> (October 2007)

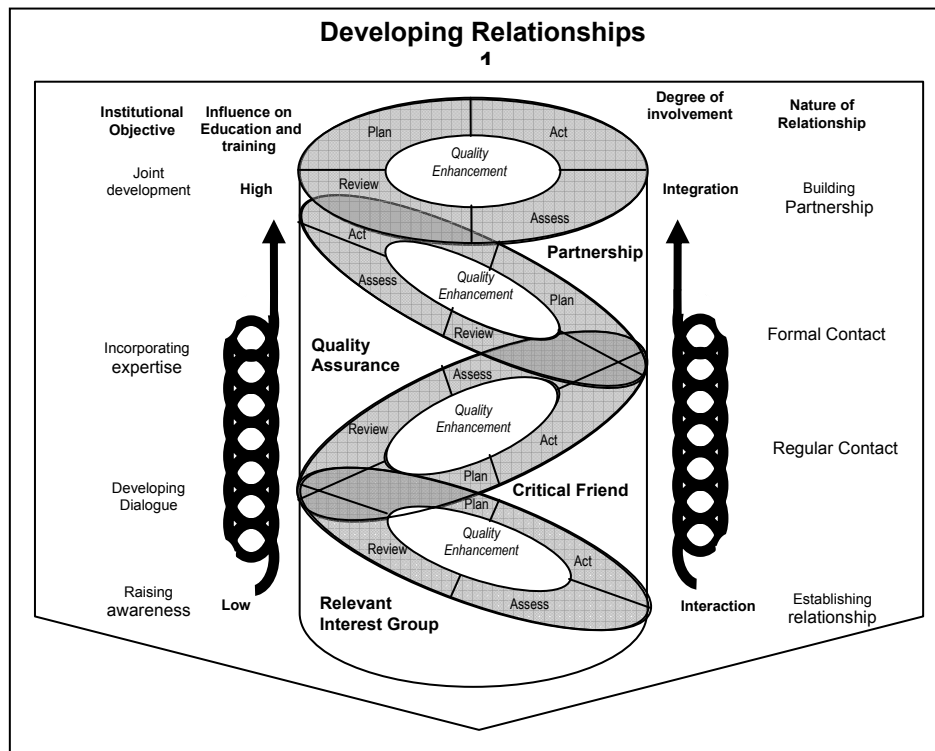
This schematic continuum represents a process which depends upon the purposeful action of institutional actors to develop such relationships. On the continuum also strategies, methods and mechanisms for developing and maintaining effective relationships with stakeholders can be integrated. They can refer e.g. to promotional activity, generating information, institutional promotion / profile raising, curriculum review and development, contribution to teaching and learning, staff and professional activity, approval monitoring and review, work placement learning, and joint ventures.

4.5 A Model of Development

Conceiving of this process as both purposeful and progressive suggests the need for a rational structure of action at each stage. Demming's cycle of quality – planning, implementing and verifying the accomplishment of objectives through changes made – can be combined with the idea of linear progress towards partnership and represent diagrammatically as a spiral reflecting a developing relationship with labour market stakeholders (Figure 8).

It is important to note however that individual institutions and programme teams will also make judgements as to which type of relationship, what degree of involvement, and what degree of influence on education and training is appropriate with regard to the relevant stakeholders. This model is NOT intended to suggest that institutions or programmes which have effective relationships which facilitate appropriate responses with regard to curriculum development are necessarily “less developed” than those with partnership relationships with external stakeholder.

Figure 8:
Model of Development



Source: Final Report on the DEQU-project, to be downloaded from <http://www.dequ-info.net> (October 2007)

5 Summary – Possibilities for Mutual Learning

When looking on the “key issue” of effective contact to labour market stakeholders it becomes clear that professional / vocational HE and VET are placed in similar environments, facing similar problems with sometimes different systemic players. But creating a curriculum / course / study programme, which is meeting the needs of the addressed labour market, is the main issue and gathering information from the labour market a common aspect.

The DEQU-project concentrated on the effective contact to labour market stakeholders, but maybe other “key issues” for both, professional / vocational HE and VET can be identified:

- ___ The ratio between theory and practice within teaching / learning
- ___ The role of workplace learning, its organisation, minimum requirements and assessment
- ___ The ratio between formal learning and informal (especially workplace-related) learning
- ___ The acceptance of persons with non-formal prerequisites (e.g. full-time working students in the addressed professional field but no traditional admission qualification)

Maybe it is worth to establish more contact between professional / vocational HE and VET institutions to carry out common questions concerning these “key issues” – the difference between systems is not as big as it seems. Especially in the last years and in the future the borders between VET and professional / vocational HE will disappear more and more. The institutions will have to act more flexible and market competitive; they will have to find their position in the educational market, which also means sometimes to develop connections to other market players. Professional / vocational HE and VET institutions can find a common basis for association sometimes more easily than institutions within the same sector, because of the substitutional role in professional and market oriented training.

6 Bibliography

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