

Title of example of practice:

Exploring quality in literature teaching in a University Department

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Institution and initiating department/faculty:

Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Education, University of Malta

Departments/faculties in which initiative implemented/to be implemented:

Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Education, University of Malta.

Abstract

My belief is that in an educational institution quality assurance is achieved both by formal and informal measures. It could even be the case that in some institutions the latter are more important than the former, in the sense that while formal measures (such as audits) may be followed as a matter of routine, informal measures (such as high expectations) may be more powerful and effective in ensuring quality. My objective therefore was to look for examples of both formal and informal measures of quality assurance in a particular literature teaching context.

Background – contextual issues giving rise to the initiative

My objective, in more specific terms, was to explore measures of quality assurance within the Department of English at the University of Malta. In this Department, literature features prominently in the taught and research modules. The Department caters for BA (Honours), BA (General) and MA degree courses. It also supports M.Phil and PhD research studies. In addition, the Department delivers teaching units in other courses, such as that of Bachelor of Education to students taking up English as their future teaching specialization.

I selected this Department because, though it appears that there are no special measures of quality assurance in place, it enjoys a very good reputation among stakeholders, including academics, students and the press. This may imply that any informal measures that are 'in place' are evidently working, and helping to maintain the good standards of this Department.

My focus was therefore not a specific practice, but rather a wider-view snapshot of quality measures in a particular university department concerned with teaching literature.

Description of activity or initiative

Information was collected through interviews with the Head of the English Department and a full-time member of its teaching staff. The interviews focused on measures of quality assurance that were in place, planned, or desired. I prepared a number of questions beforehand to help me get the desired information.

The interview questions are reproduced below. Responses obtained from the two interviews were collated and presented in the next section.

Interview questions

Question 1

In the field of literature teaching, are there any documents in use that may promote quality assurance in your department? (eg. course programmes, course guidelines to lecturers, lecture feedback forms to be filled by students, record of work forms, annual reports...)

Question 2

Are there any formal processes or procedures that should promote quality assurance in literature teaching? (eg. obligatory department meetings; training, seminars, reviews, evaluations, internal or external audits).

Question 3

If not already in place, are there any of the above, or others, planned for the future?

Question 4

Can you identify any informal processes that are 'in place' that may promote quality assurance?

Question 5

Do you feel the need, or any pressure, to set up more measures of quality assurance?

Evaluative comments

The following is a synthesis of the information drawn from the two interviews.

There are no regular external quality assurance processes in operation in the Department of English. However, since 2004, there have been two internal audits conducted by the Faculty of Arts, of which the English Department forms part. The Department is considering a Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the near future in order to evaluate its performance and identify its needs.

The Department makes it a point every year to bring in external examiners both for undergraduate and post-graduate level assessments. These examiners are typically experts from foreign universities who take part in the evaluation of final-year dissertations and viva voce sessions with students.

Respondents reported that there were a number of formal processes and measures in place. These were not formally designated as quality assurance measures but on reflection one may conclude that their operation, carried out in a professional manner, no doubt contributes to the consolidation of standards. These measures included monthly department meetings, the provision of student feedback forms; and detailed course descriptions containing information on content, reading lists and modes of assessment.

Each semester the Department organizes a one-day seminar during which lecturers discuss teaching methods, modes of assessment, course programmes and student feedback. Also, there have been instances of training and mobility exchanges with reputable universities such as St Andrews, Heidelberg and Essex.

Concerning less formal measures, respondents reported that department staff make it a point to

meet other lecturers with whom they may be sharing modules. In such informal meetings, teaching objectives, methodology and student feedback are compared and discussed.

Respondents also reported that many of their students were highly motivated and had high expectations concerning the quality of their lectures. Lecturers strove to satisfy these high expectations and this in turn created a cycle that helped to maintain standards. They explained that the prospect of student attendance diminishing in their lectures on account of the poor quality of their delivery was a nightmare they actively sought to avoid by keeping up high standards.

It was also stated that the introduction of more formal measures would probably involve department staff in more paperwork and this would not be welcomed by the personnel concerned, in view of the already heavy requirements that are in place. However, the Department feels there is both a need and a statutory obligation to introduce more formal measures.

The Department considers maintaining standards as a key priority and the staff concerned believes this is being achieved. At the same time they stated that one had to be careful not to alienate prospective students who may perceive standards as too high.

Advice to others

Without wishing to undermine the efficacy of formal measures of quality assurance, I believe that one should acknowledge and underline the importance of informal practices, processes and conditions that contribute to the maintenance and enhancement of quality in teaching and learning. Consequently, in trying to establish formal measures, authorities should ensure that if and when these are implemented, they do not stifle the development and operation of beneficial informal conditions.

Reflection/any other comments

Reading the above sections, it appears that the sum total of the English Department is greater than its parts. The largely routine formal measures that are in place still cannot adequately reflect the high quality of the teaching and learning that is characteristic of the Department.

A number of factors may be at play and helping the department maintain its good standards. What was not mentioned in the previous sections, but what may be relevant to the topic under study, are the high qualifications of the department staff. University regulations require full-time lecturers to have a doctorate in their field of teaching. The 'tradition' of the English Department is for its lecturers to have studied abroad and obtained qualifications from the UK and other English-speaking countries. In fact, all the present full-time lecturers in the Department have doctorates from reputable universities in the UK and other English-speaking countries.

Another factor that may be related to the provision of quality is the relatively small size of the Department. There are only seven full-time lecturing staff, and the Department usually caters for around 140 students (General, Honours and Masters degree courses). This facilitates a more personal and individual approach to teaching, one in which personal needs and strengths are more easily identified and addressed. At the same time, the smallness of the teaching cohort is conducive to ease of communication among staff and increases the likelihood of collegiality.

Further details

The University of Malta web address is <http://www.um.edu.mt/about/uom>

The Faculty of Arts web address is <http://www.um.edu.mt/arts>

The Department of English web address is <http://www.um.edu.mt/arts/english/>

The following document, which contains sections on Quality Assurance, was published the National Commission for Higher Education (NCHE):

Further and Higher Education Strategy 2020 – Recommendations of the National Commission for Higher Education (Malta: 2009).

It may be accessed by following the link on the NCHE home page at <https://www.nche.gov.mt/default.aspx?pageid50>