

European Project

– Peer Review as an Instrument of Quality Assurance and Development in Initial Vocational Education and Training in Europe



Bill Stalker is Quality Audit Co-ordinator at Aberdeen College. A former Health Service Manager and Lecturer in Health Care, Bill has been involved in the co-ordination of the college's European activities for the last six years.



Rick Hollstein is Quality Audit Co-ordinator at Aberdeen College. He is an Environmental Microbiologist and has been working in the college's Quality Assurance team for the past eight years. His work in monitoring the quality of all aspects of provision of education has included auditing equalities issues.

In the past decade, quality assurance and quality improvement have become increasingly important for institutions providing vocational education and training (VET) and for education authorities throughout Europe.

Different procedures and practices have been introduced for evaluating quality in VET institutions and providers, including quality management schemes imported and adapted from the business sector (such as ISO 9001:2000 and EFQM), inspections and audits by government agencies and self-evaluation, which in Scotland's colleges is based almost exclusively on published HMIe standards.

We are all familiar with the HMIe statement on its review process:

'HM Inspectors undertake an independent review of the quality of provision in further education colleges on behalf of the Scottish Further Education Funding Council under a service level agreement between the council and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIe).'

Indeed, nearly all of Scotland's colleges have participated in two rounds of HMIe Review where self-evaluation based on HMIe standards has been at the heart of colleges' quality improvement efforts.

One further, particularly promising, instrument of quality assurance and development however is the external evaluation of VET institutions by

true **Peer Review**. Peer Review is prevalent and well established in the higher education sector but, so far, its practice has been marginal in VET. Peer Review can build on existing quality measurement activities, is cost-effective and fosters networking, partnership building and exchange between VET providers.

Aberdeen College has been an operative partner in a three-year project involving 11 European countries, co-ordinated by an Austrian research institute, promoting Peer Review as an innovative instrument of quality development in European VET.

Peer Reviews aim to support educational institutions in quality development and are conducted by an external group of experts, peers ('critical friends'), who judge the quality of selected functions of the institution.

The main roles of Aberdeen College have been:

- Participation in the steering group and the development of a Peer Review Manual.
- To ensure that gender mainstreaming was fully integrated.
- To develop and administer a web-based Peer Review Training Programme.
- To help disseminate project outcomes.
- To take part in Peer Reviews of other partners.
- To be Peer Reviewed by national and international experts.

The Peer Review Manual was published in spring 2007 and is available online and in print in six languages.

The Peer Review Manual was published in spring 2007 and is available online and in print in six languages. It describes standard procedures for Peer Review in initial VET as well as providing guidelines for implementing Peer Reviews.

The two members of Aberdeen College staff involved in the project were Bill Stalker, European Projects Co-ordinator, and Rick Hollstein, Quality Audit Co-ordinator.

A former Health Service Manager and Lecturer in Health Care, Bill has been involved in the co-ordination of the college's European activities for the last six years. These include the acquisition of European Social Funds as well as involvement in projects and partnerships funded by the Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci programmes. He has been invited by the British Council to the Netherlands, Germany and Norway to give presentations on the college's European projects.

Bill's part in the project was to produce the gender mainstreaming guidelines and ensure that these were incorporated in all the work packages.

Peer Reviews aim to support educational institutions in quality development

This integrated well with a two-year European project on gender mainstreaming which the college was involved in along with partners from Germany, Luxembourg and Lithuania. www.muronet.de/ca

Rick is an Environmental Microbiologist who has been working in the college's Quality Assurance team for the past eight years. His work in monitoring the quality of all aspects of provision of education has included auditing equalities issues.

As part of the project, Rick participated in Peer Reviews of VET providers in Vienna and Rovereto (Italy). He also developed a web-based training package to prepare peers for participation in the pilot phase. This is hosted and administered on Aberdeen College's VLE.

Aberdeen College's own Peer Review was undertaken by its critical friends in November 2006. A multi-national team drawn from Austria, Italy as well as Scotland, reviewed five key areas of Aberdeen College's provision:

1. Learning and Teaching.
2. Infrastructure and Financial Resources.
3. Staff Allocation, Recruitment and Development.
4. Gender Mainstreaming.
5. Quality Management.

Aberdeen College's final report showed Peer Review to be a cost-effective operational analysis identifying strengths and areas for improvement, enabling quality improvement-centred action planning to be undertaken, complementary to the college's own robust self-evaluative practices and findings.

Dissemination

The project has been reported nationally to the college's benchmarking partners, the West Scotland IQA (Institute of Quality Assurance), the SFEU Quality Improvement Forum, and trans-nationally to the Lithuanian Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson, the Minister of Equal Opportunities, Luxembourg, and the Mayor of Wolfsburg, Germany.

A European dissemination conference was held at the University of Pecs, Hungary in September 2007. The conference attracted 75 delegates from 14 European countries including representatives from the Education Ministries of Austria, Italy, Spain and Finland.

Footnote

SFEU was represented at the conference by John McCann, and the Depute Chief Executive experienced what he termed as 'Hungarian Delight' in Pecs!

His observations are as follows:

'In the vocabulary of modern Scotland, "outward looking" is commonplace. It is an invitation to go beyond our own perceptions of goodness. It is a call to test ourselves against practice elsewhere – after all, there is the talk and the reality of a global economy. Modern Scotland is a cosmopolitan place.

'There was much talk of an international dimension during the work undertaken by the Joint Quality Review Group of the Scottish Funding Council. The question asked was "How does the experience of learners in Scotland's colleges compare internationally?" It was a question no one could answer.

'So, prompted by an invitation from one of the partners, it was off to Pecs, Hungary, for the dissemination of a European programme which seemed to offer possibilities. And I found countries working to come to terms with the basics of quality assurance, countries dependent on their inspectorates, and countries whose institutions had taken responsibility for quality. There was much talk of balanced scorecard, EFQM and maturity in quality systems.

'And there was Aberdeen College who, as part of the project, had undertaken a review and had included international representation within their review team. And Aberdeen College staff who had acted as international reviewers to review processes in other countries.

'It is a wonderful thing. Whenever there is a policy idea in Scotland, somewhere in Scotland's colleges someone will already be there. And I didn't mind going to Hungary to find out.'

The Austrian co-ordinators have recently secured a further two years funding to enable the project to be rolled out throughout Europe and Rick Hollstein will be responsible for the development of 'face to face' training for potential peer reviewers.

For further information on Peer Review as an instrument of quality assurance and quality development in VET please contact Rick on 01224 612199 or at r.hollstein@abcol.ac.uk