Co-operation in quality assurance in teacher education: the role of the 'foreign expert' in raising standards

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Abstract

The research for this article occurred as a result of working with, and chairing several international teams undertaking reviews/validations of teacher education courses in a variety of Eastern European Countries. The work over two and a half years centred on improving teacher education quality. The results showed that empathy, good listening skills and dialogue allied to firmly set goals could help individuals and organisations to face up to the challenge of change and themselves bring about changes in thinking and behaviour which resulted in a move from a tutor/instructor dominated model of teacher education to a student centred one.

Key words:- teacher education, quality, change, foreign expert

Introduction

Introducing new education practices, particularly those related to student centred learning have been a continuing theme in Western Europe in the last decades. There has been an attempt to shift the focus from teaching to a one based on learning and the learner. This has brought change in curricula and in the amount of contact time devoted to students by tutors in HE institutions. The necessity of examining and reflecting on one's own abilities, strengths and weaknesses and becoming autonomous as a learner have been challenging for many students, who have had to become more active in their approaches to learning. This change has also challenged teacher educators who, in many cases, have been directed by government agencies to deliver a set curriculum and have found the letting go of control over student learning difficult. Lumenberg and Korthagan (2005) discovered that teacher educators in The Netherlands were not leading the change from the didactic model to one of student directed learning, The authors’ conclusions were that to achieve this change of focus, teacher educators needed a higher level of professional development to help them to alter their approach to teaching. It was essential that teacher educators modelled the student centred approaches.

The move towards a more student centred approach in Teacher Education has not been an easy one for many Easter European countries. Ideas such a critical thinking, group work, staff research published in international journals have been difficult, as has the provision of resources from the west and ICT equipment (Vebratre, 2005; Giedraitis, 2005), though success in providing distance education has been highlighted in the OECD reports on the Baltic States, particularly Estonia (OECD, 2001). In this light the willingness of many of these entry countries to put themselves forward for judgement against Western European standards using foreign advisors is indeed brave. Cerych (2002) raises questions about the use of foreign education advisors in countries emerging from communist regimes. He suggests that such aid is useful, but advisors need a good understanding of the country they are visiting and also working use of the language. This author was a Czech national returning after the velvet revolution so his comments, though they raise interesting points, may be somewhat biased. It is possible that on issues of quality assurance in education there are some pan-European standards that can be applied and that foreign experts, with empathy towards issues of change and development, can provide a more objective viewpoint than insiders. The
language problem however is harder to overcome as finding foreign experts with a command of eastern European languages, as well as specific subject expertise presents considerable difficulties.

Research background
The research was carried out as a result of working with, and chairing several international teams undertaking reviews/validations of teacher education courses in a variety of Eastern European Countries. The work involved examination of documents relating to self-evaluation, and validation reports, observations of student course work and meetings and discussions with tutors, managers, students and employers from a variety of higher education organisations in aspiring and new EU countries. Informal and formal discussions also occurred with the members of teams undertaking the quality assurance visits and with representatives of education ministries and quality assurance personnel. The research duration was two and half years and involved revisits to many organisations where only limited approval for courses, or course closure had been initially recommended. It was possible therefore to observe the patterns of emerging change. The HE organisations involved were all training pre-school or primary (basic education) teachers not those in the secondary field. In the countries visited there were different systems for the training of teachers for these sectors. In some countries all such training took place in universities whilst in others, a two tier system university degree or college diploma was in place. Lengths of training also differed between institutions and between countries but commonly students without a university degree were offered the opportunity to further their qualifications at university on a part time and generally fee paying basis.

The prevailing culture
In all of the institutions visited the predominant student and staff gender was female, echoing trends across the rest of Europe. This was especially true for the pre-school sector and in most cases the reasons given for this gender bias by staff, students and employers was the low pay and status of teachers and teacher educators. There was a further problem in that in some countries students were allowed to progress to teacher training and receive government financial support if they passed the secondary school leaving examinations. In these two tier systems universities tended to take those with the better academic results. The prevailing culture amongst students was one of a lack of self-responsibility and a tendency apparent in both staff and students, when put under stress, to find someone else to blame for failure. The idea of self-evaluation, where both good points and problems are pointed out and solutions suggested, was very difficult for many employed in the organisations visited. As summed up by one Dean:

We are afraid you see to admit we have problems. It would have got us into serious trouble in the past so we find it very difficult to be open with you.
It was always important to present a very positive picture. The idea of admitting our problems openly is very frightening.

However, the overall impression of these organisations gained by the visit teams was of willingness of teacher educators to welcome international teams of assessors and generally a pride in their achievements. The resulting criticisms listed below and the subsequent failure and closure of courses initially resulted in resentment and an atmosphere where again attempts were made to shift blame onto specific others, for example; individuals in the organisation, the international assessing team, national members of that team or the government. It was notable that though all the assessed organisations reported distress,
argument and recriminations as the result of adverse reports, those that quickly accepted the findings and started to move on achieved the most progress. On return visits it was good to observe that even in those institutions where initial rejection of findings had been the norm, final acceptance of the assessment reports had resulted in a real effort to improve and to change practice, attitudes and behaviours.

Results
The general findings are reported below and are a summary of the issues raised in many of the organisations visited presenting an overall picture as opposed to detail of individual organisations or countries. The initial findings are given together with the changes to practice noted on return visits.

a) Lack of a holistic course structure.
Study was often subdivided into many separate parts, frequently related to the interests of staff or historical planning. In many cases there was no comprehensive progressive feel to courses; they were more a collection of disparate units. This led to stagnation and in many cases a separation between subject matter taught and the practical use of that knowledge in the classroom situation. For example, economics was on the study programme of primary teachers in one university. This was more about economic theory than the economics of education in the country and how schools were affected. It was taught by an economics lecturer who was not a teacher and who had never worked in schools.

This proliferation of small courses with very low credit points was echoed in the provision of degree/diploma courses themselves. In one university there were eight separate courses for primary teachers rather than one with eight separate specialisms. The paperwork as a result was daunting in complexity for the teams of reviewers. The advice of the review teams was in many cases to consolidate and slim down the many courses on offer to give more viability to courses with few student participants. Class sizes as a result of the wide course provision were often very small. In Western Europe these classes would probably have been considered economically non-viable. On subsequent visits it was apparent that as a result of recommendations of the teams great efforts had been made to slim down the numbers of courses and to combine elements to make a more holistic programme. However, it was suggested that this could, in many cases, go further.

The problems of low numbers on courses still exists, despite cuts by governments in the numbers of teachers in training and of financial support. Many of these countries are still producing too many teachers for whom there is no possibility of employment. There is an urgent need to use the demographic changes as an opportunity to raise the standard of entrants into teacher education.

Often it was difficult to discover a clear link between the course aims, subject aims, those professed by self-assessment/evaluation documents, learning outcomes in subject areas and assessment. This was related to the lack of holistic thinking in course design and though there was some improvement observed on return visits this is an area that needs considerable revision and further work.

b) Subject content
In many cases this was historical and related, in colleges in particular, to the cultural strengths of the area including local craft work and a strong emphasis on music. This resulted in some students, particularly in colleges or higher education institutions, as opposed to universities, being expected to learn to play an instrument and also to be able to sing, often as
an entrance requirement. The creative and joyful areas of the curriculum observed by the teams raised envy and nostalgia for those members who had seen such curriculum elements almost disappear in England after the 1988 Education Reform Act. Foreign language provision was low and for students who were not proficient in the mother tongue of the country (common in Eastern Europe) little extra provision was offered. So those with a mother tongue which was not the main language of the country were struggling to succeed in higher education establishments where little support was offered. Lack of foreign language ability to a great extent also hampered both staff’s and students’ ability to read foreign textbooks, journals and the internet. Such was the awareness of this problem in some quarters that one member of staff had herself translated six books from English into the national language for the use of students. Students and staff realised that a lack of proficiency in English was severely limiting their access to Western journals and books and so to information. Some colleges and universities have responded well to the desire for proficiency in languages and an increase in students following language courses for primary teachers being evident on team return visits.

ICT as a subject or course was provided for the students in most institutions, but as a means to help students themselves become proficient in the use of Microsoft programmes, not in the pedagogical implications of ICT in the classroom. The response to queries about this was initially that there was little or no use of computers in school classrooms and teams found little understanding by staff of the potential for the use ICT as a learning tool for school students. Tutors, in many cases, were not themselves proficient in the use of computers and in often had great difficulty in gaining access to hardware. However, on return visits, the use of computers in universities and colleges had grown immeasurably and this was also beginning in schools. Joining the EU had in many cases provided sources of funds previously unimagined. However, generally new teachers were still not being prepared for this change in pedagogy, as the content of courses in most areas did not include the pedagogical aspects of ICT and its impact on curriculum and lesson planning. Occasionally there was a beginning of provision of software for use with children, but there are considerable problems remained with obtaining requisite software in the countries’ languages.

c) Special needs
Training teachers to work with children with Special Needs was only just beginning. There was a tendency to see these children as a separate body to be taught outside mainstream education. One college was, on our return, validating a new course for teachers in special schools. Little was being covered on the philosophy or practice of inclusion and the researcher was taken to visit ‘special schools’ rather then see children with special needs within mainstream provision. The idea of inclusion is only now beginning to gain acceptance and there is still little preparation for mainstream teachers on the education of children with special needs.

d) Pedagogy
The lack of development of students as autonomous learners was a real concern on initial visits. Linked to this was a lack of knowledge of learning style theory and little in the way of reflective practice. Tutors appeared to believe that the education of teachers should be content driven and assessed in most cases by written examination. This conviction led to long teaching hours, eight till eight being common, and tutor work overload. Lectures were common and there was initially, little evidence of students being asked to research, work in groups or cover topic work themselves. On subsequent visits and on the advice of the visiting
teams some progress towards more autonomy had been made but the culture was proving hard to change. Tutors complained of student ‘spare time’ between classes and students that they were not told what to do in self-study periods. Obviously more work has to be done in this area. This lack of self-responsibility for learning resulted in dissertations (final course papers) at college and university undergraduate and graduate level being of limited standard with little evidence of an understanding of research theory. On return visits there was still deep concern over the lack of depth and rigour in Master’s theses. Referencing was limited and the material used tended to be based solely on locally produced papers published by universities in that country. There was very little evidence of the use of journal materials. Much of this is of course linked to language problems and the availability of foreign journals due to cost. Some improvement in the provision of these by paper or electronic means was subsequently seen but at present this had not appeared to improve the quality of final works. The main problem seen on both visits was the almost complete lack of critical analysis of students’ fieldwork findings against the literature surveyed. Triangulation of methods was limited, though on return visits some institutions were teaching introductory courses on research methods, this provision was patchy the standard often being low.

It was good to observe however, on return, a great increase in the use, by some tutors, of active learning techniques including discussion and group work; a change much appreciated by the students. Some had found this change difficult to adjust to but most saw it as a positive step and had enjoyed the collaborative class atmosphere created by such an approach.

e) Assessment
There was a tendency to give very high grades to work which did not merit it. To some extent this appeared to be related to the lack of co-operation or idea transfer between institutions and the absence of a consistent use of external examiners. In many cases the concept of student failure, even on teaching practice was not considered as they had paid fees, worked hard and had been well tutored. Assessment was very exam oriented. In some courses students were expected to produce a ‘final paper’ (a dissertation) but in many colleges this was not expected or was optional. Attitudes to this are now changing and in some countries all students are expected to work towards a final independent dissertation. Concern was also expressed by a lack of consistency and variation in feedback provision between institutions in a country and between individual tutors, sometimes to a worrying degree. Often there were no links to specific criteria or learning outcomes. This made some students complain that the assessment process was arbitrary and not helpful for improvement.

f) Qualifications
A two tier system existed in some countries with both universities and colleges providing courses in early years and primary (basic) education. Employers stoutly defended the institution which provided them with the ‘better’ teachers. In one area employers, students at undergraduate and postgraduate level and tutors highly praised the university, the school teachers and the students. On further enquiry by the review team it was discovered that those concerned had received all their education, had students on practice, or employed teachers trained at the said institution; hardly the allowing for an objective consideration of standards. There was in these countries, a divide in the type of teacher education provided and students, staff and employers spoke freely about this difference. In the colleges it was highly practical in nature with some good examples of progressive and supported practice, whilst universities professed their superiority due to the higher theoretical content of courses. Qualifications too were different, with students from the colleges in many cases only gaining a diploma not a degree. This led to the need for further study lasting up to two years in order to obtain the
desired Bachelors qualification and government financial support is rapidly declining. This was causing rifts and division between colleges and universities. The Bologna agreement (Europa, 2004) is proposing a graduate profession and is strongly supported by OECD so the decision now of one country to revert primary teacher education to colleges alone is hard to understand, as at present colleges cannot award degrees.

g) Academic standards
In general there was a worrying lack of progression in academic rigour within the courses. This appeared to be related to the divided, broken nature of the programmes offered the basis of which was knowledge acquisition. There seemed to be little understanding of the need to raise academic demands from one year to the next, particularly in the colleges. The problem was compounded in the colleges, on the initial visits, by low levels of staff qualification and professional development. The rigorous teaching timetable and the lack of staff research time meant many tutors did not possess qualifications beyond or even at Bachelor’s level. On subsequent visits it was observed many college staff were making valiant efforts to improve their qualifications to Bachelor or Master’s level despite crippling teaching loads.

Training students to be critical thinkers was proving to be a problem in all institutions. The previous culture had expected the acquisition of knowledge with little or no questioning. Changing the culture to one where critical analysis was expected proved difficult, though vigorous attempts had been made to undertake course evaluations by staff and students, this culture had not often progressed to analysis of presented theories or course material. The change to more active learning approaches had helped to some degree but much more staff development needs to occur to aid this transition.

h) Student support
In many ways this was outstanding in areas of finance, distance learning provision and accommodation. Students had easy access to tutors and a high contact time with small teaching groups. Many students in Western Europe would be astonished at the breadth and depth of support provided. However, this had led to a culture of dependency on tutors, linked to the knowledge transmission model favoured by many staff and prevented students developing learning autonomy. On initial visits it was clear that little was being done to train school based mentors to help students’ progression and learning during school placements. Subsequently this practice is beginning in some areas, but implementation is patchy and the training of mentors difficult as often there is no time made available for this in school timetables.

i) Course evaluations
This concept had been wholeheartedly embraced in many institutions and a great deal of time was being spent on this. Many institutions had welcomed the idea of democracy and students were constantly consulted and welcomed onto planning boards at all levels. On return visits it was apparent that student input had led to the inclusion of subjects requested by them. Students were eager to take part in the quality assurance process, but on occasions, had yet to learn that tact is required when being critical of others. One group asked the researcher’s opinion on their idea of posting on student boards a league table of student opinions of lecturers’ abilities. Students were highly appreciative of the efforts staff made to support them, but were very critical of methods of teaching and course content. On return visits they were happy to report some progress on changes in teaching approaches but wanted more.
Conclusion

From the initial and return visits the international teams were delighted to see that the advice given had such positive effects on the progression of teacher education courses in the countries visited. There was no expectation that courses provided in the West should be copied; rather we attempted to raise the quality of what was offered whilst being sensitive to the needs of the countries visited. The enthusiasm and eagerness of many colleagues to embrace change and to alter approaches to learning were very impressive. Where problems had occurred some tutors had left the profession and new ones appointed but it was pleasing to see how many, formerly timid about suggesting change were now active in promoting it. There was new enthusiasm and a real sense of achievement in many of the organisations revisited. The teams were, in many cases, humbled by the willingness of the staff to respond to suggestions and to welcome new ideas. The welcomes offered were warm and encouraging and the team members did not feel they were intruding, rather collaborating with colleagues to aid development. There were some problems such as time allotted for team visits and the lack of ability to read student work, but this was helped by the inclusion of national members in the teams and on return visits by time allowance being extended. Cerych’s (2002) concerns over language were overcome by the use of a series of good translators and the willingness of all concerned to pursue subjects until clarity was obtained for all. The results showed that empathy, good listening skills and dialogue allied to firmly set goals could, in a very short time help individuals and organisations to move forward. Sensitivity about the situation of the countries visited was of course essential, but this is also true when making quality assurance visits to organisations in one’s own country.

The teams felt highly privileged to be able to aid colleagues in the countries visited and all agreed that they had too learned a great deal from the experience echoing the ideas of Scott (2002). This proved a useful and worthwhile European co-operation which we would recommend is extended.

References


