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Taking stock and looking forward

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Author(s)

Name: Alexandre Wipf

Position: Policy and communications officer

Organisation: EURASHE

Country: Belgium

Short bio: Alexandre Wipf is policy and communications officer at EURASHE. Within the secretariat he is in charge of supporting the implementation of quality assurance-related activities (policy, projects, events, representation, etc.), next to the general execution of the communications strategy under the yearly work programme. He is managing the PHExcel project (Testing the Feasibility of a Quality Label for Professional Higher Education Excellence) on behalf of EURASHE and has been involved in various other projects of EURASHE under the Lifelong Learning and Erasmus Mundus programmes. Alexandre Wipf is currently a participant in EURASHE's working group on quality of higher education (quality assurance, transparency tools, recognition etc.). An alumnus of a triple qualification degree in Languages and Business studies he is fluent in French, English and German.

Name: Dr Carol Hall

Position: Associate Professor

Organisation: School of Health Sciences, The University of Nottingham

Country: United Kingdom

Short bio: Carol Hall is Director of Undergraduate Education in the School of Health Sciences at The University of Nottingham, UK. This includes co-ordination of professional undergraduate courses in Nursing, Midwifery Physiotherapy and Sport Rehabilitation. She works extensively with nurse educators in the UK as Chair of the Education Forum within the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) UK and as a member of the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) Education Advisory Group. Carol supports nurse educators across Europe as Vice President of the Federation of European Nurse Educators (FINE). She has contributed chair and panel memberships to quality assurance programmes in the Middle East and in a number of countries in Europe as well as development of nursing education internationally in China and Sub Saharan Africa. Carol is leading the nursing partnership between FINE and The University of Nottingham within PHExcel project.

Name: Linda Messas

Position: General Manager

Organisation: Association Européenne des Conservatoires, Académies de Musique et Musikhochschulen (AEC)

Country: Belgium

Short bio: Linda Messas is General Manager of the European Association of Conservatoires (Association Européenne des Conservatoires – AEC). She is running the association together with the Chief Executive Officer. Since October 2014, she is also coordinating the newly established Foundation for Quality Enhancement and Accreditation in Higher Music Education, MusiQuE – Music Quality Enhancement. Since 2007, when she joined AEC, Linda has been supporting the development and formalisation of AEC's quality enhancement and accreditation activities through the coordination of various projects and activities, including AEC Quality Enhancement Processes and joint accreditation procedures with quality assurance agencies across Europe. She has also participated as secretary in several review visits of higher music education institutions. Linda is coordinating the PHExcel project on behalf of AEC.

Name: Lars Ebert

Position: research and development advisor

Organisation: ELIA- The European League of Institutes of the Arts

Country: The Netherlands

Short bio: As an advisor to ELIA Lars Ebert (Heidelberg, Germany, 1976) is concerned with the implications of the (post-)Bologna process in Higher Arts Education. He e.g. chaired the working group 'theatre/dance' drafting a Sectoral Qualifications Framework (2011-12) on behalf of Tuning Educational Structures in Europe. He has developed and implemented various EU-funded LLP projects such as artsnet.europe (2007-2011). Currently he represents ELIA in the PHExcel project and advises ELIA members and staff on the development of and engagement in the EHEA. Lars is a founding board member of EQ-Arts, the sectorial quality assurance agency for higher arts education across Europe. He is an experienced reviewer for various national accreditation agencies and a trainer for QA reviewers. Lars holds a degree in theology (Drs./NL). He is programme co-ordinator of the cultural centre Castrum Peregrini in Amsterdam and a permanent fellow of the Vienna Conversations at the Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue.

Name: Regitze Sparre Kristensen

Position: Advisor for Research and Development

Organisation: SPACE Network for Business Studies and Languages (SPACE)

Country: Denmark

Short bio: Regitze Kristensen is the Advisor for Research and Development of the SPACE network after having been its secretary general for 4 years (2009-2013). SPACE is a network of European higher education institutions sharing knowledge on business, communication and

tourism programmes and on entrepreneurship and innovation. Her valuable experience includes her work as director of international relations from her home institution TietgenSkolen, Denmark, where she currently is a consultant and has been a senior lecturer for years. She is currently part of the management group of several European Union-funded projects, including PHExcel where she represents SPACE. She has experience as project manager of many European projects in the field of Socrates, ERASMUS, Minerva and Leonardo and DANIDA projects. In addition, she is also vice-president of the ULIXES network.

Proposal

Title: Challenges and Barriers to Assessing and Recognising Excellence in (Professional) Higher Education

Abstract: After 10 years of intensive developments in European quality assurance and in the year of the adoption of the revised European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) this paper will ask whether excellence is the way forward and how to address excellence in (professional) higher education.

We will present the experience gathered in pilot assessments of excellence in institutions offering professional higher education and explore approaches to recognising their claim for excellence. We will examine the genesis of the tested quality framework for excellence and assessment methodology. We will reflect on the successes and challenges of the pilots and outline the possible way forward to recognise excellence.

The paper is built on the activities of the PHExcel project (Testing the feasibility of a quality label for professional higher education excellence) by EURASHE, AEC, ELIA, SPACE, The University of Nottingham with FINE, Jagiellonian University and KIC-Malta.

Text of paper:

Challenges and Barriers to Assessing and Recognising Excellence in (Professional) Higher Education

I.   Introduction

As excellence is gaining ground in higher education debates in Europe, the PHExcel initiative has been aiming at developing a tool for institutions offering professional higher education that enables them to assess their excellence and at the same time be recognised for their achievements.[1]

Before testing this process in four pilots, several aspects of the tool had to be defined. Irrespective of terms, national contexts, system settings and names of institutions, the focus of PHExcel is on the intense integration of education with the world of work that underpins the definition of professional higher education.[2]

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[1] The PHExcel project runs from October 2013 to December 2015, more information at www.phexcel.eurashe.eu.
[2] The definition reads: Professional higher education is a form of higher education that offers a particularly intense integration with the world of work in all its aspects, including teaching, learning, research and governance, and at all levels of the overarching qualifications framework of the EHEA. Its function is to diversify learning opportunities,

Addressing excellence is also a challenge on its own, especially when quality is also undergoing a paradigm shift.[3] Whereas excellence might be generally addressed as 'being the best', these characterisations shy away from defining 'at what'. A review of the literature on the topic[4] showed not only no specific and generally accepted definition of excellence but also a tension between 'excellence' and 'quality'.

Assessing and recognising excellence is becoming vital after 10 years of quality enhancing initiatives. More so as funding authorities are using excellence as a basis for additional funding, especially in research; with recent developments showing a similar push in teaching and learning.[5] The global competition for talent between higher education institutions, both for staff and students, has also given rise to the phenomenon of rankings - that, for better or worse, are believed to show excellence.[6]

The principle of the PHExcel initiative, which aims at testing the feasibility of a quality label for professional higher education excellence, is to propose an innovative process to assess and recognise professional higher education excellence. Analysis of existing quality tools (labels and models) reveals that: a) none fully address excellence for professional higher education/integration with the world of work, b) there seems to be no clear tool addressing excellence in a systematic manner,[7] and c) a tension exists between quality criteria, quality thresholds and quality characteristics.

The activities presented in this paper have been conducted in the framework of the PHExcel project, an EU-funded initiative by EURASHE, AEC, ELIA, SPACE, The University of Nottingham with FINE, Jagiellonian University and KIC-Malta. The project includes four stages: a) research of existing quality tools, b) development of a quality framework and an assessment methodology for excellence, c) test and validation of the process, d) recommendations for deploying the process. This paper concentrates on phases b) and c).

II.   Assessing excellence

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enhance the employability of graduates, offer qualifications and stimulate innovation for the benefit of learners and society. The world of work includes all enterprises, civil society organisations and the public sector. The intensity of integration with the world of work is manifested by a strong focus on the application of learning achievements. This approach involves combining phases of work and study, a concern for employability, cooperation with employers, the use of practice-relevant knowledge and use-inspired research.

(HAPHE) Camilleri A. F., et al., 2014, *Professional Higher Education in Europe: Characteristics, Practice examples and National differences* (Brussels, EURASHE). http://files.eurashe.eu/library/mission-phe/PHE_in_Europe_Oct2014.pdf

[3] Bollaert, L., 2015, *Paradigm Shifts in HE & QA – From Teaching to Learning in Relation to Mission & Vision*, presented at EURASHE's 25th Annual Conference, 16-17 April 2015, Lisbon, Portugal. http://files.eurashe.eu/library/quality-he/EURASHE_AC_Lisbon_16-170415_pres_BOLLAERT.pdf

[4] (PHExcel) Wipf, A., Cloet, J., & Delplace, S., 2014, *Briefing Paper on Excellence* (Brussels, EURASHE). http://files.eurashe.eu/library/quality-he/PHExcel_Briefing-Paper-on-Excellence_2014.pdf
The briefing paper includes a recent selected bibliography up to mid-2014.

[5] Johnson, J., 2015, *Teaching at the heart of the system*, delivered at Universities UK, 1 July 2015, London, United Kingdom. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/teaching-at-the-heart-of-the-system

[6] see *Briefing Paper on Excellence*

[7] (PHExcel) Jørgensen, M. D., et al., 2014, *Quality Tools For PHE Review And Improvement* (Brussels, EURASHE). http://files.eurashe.eu/library/quality-he/PHExcel_Quality%20Tools%20for%20PHE%20Review%20and%20Improvement_2014.pdf

The assessment process of excellence in professional higher education/integration with the world of work is built on a quality framework for excellence[8] and a set of principles and guidelines for assessing and recognising excellence.[9]

Both documents were developed through meetings of an expert group composed of experts representing major stakeholders: Institutions, students, quality assurance agencies, accreditation organisations, business federations, and former representatives of national authorities.

The quality framework for excellence is composed of three domains of excellence: policy and strategy; teaching and learning; and research, development and innovation – the three key domains of any higher education institution. It contains characteristics of excellence and should be used as a reference point as emphasis is given to contextual excellence.

Whilst views were different, all participants could agree on the core principles. The main challenge in the debates was to reconcile the different issues at hand: standards, thresholds, the ESG, and of course excellence; and at the same time not to duplicate existing processes (i.e. accreditation).

In order to test the assessment process, four pilot visits were conducted. The specific goal of the pilots was to identify the characteristics that a process assessing excellence should include and which it ought to avoid.

The next section presents the characteristics of the pilots and lessons learned from the process. The reports of the visiting teams remain at the discretion of the respective units.

Units are the bodies undergoing the assessment; they could be institutions, faculties, departments, and programmes. The team of experts conducting the visit is referred to as 'team of international peers' or TIP.

Table 1 summarises the pilots conducted, the types of units represented and the domain of excellence in focus.

#	1	2	3	4
Unit	V. A. Graiciunas School of Management	Escola Superior de Enfermagem de Lisboa (ESEL), Lisbon School of Nursing	Limerick School of Art & Design (LSAD)	Composition Specialty of the Faculty of Composition, Conducting, Theory of Music and Music Therapy, Karol Lipiński Academy of Music in Wrocław

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[8] PHExcel, 2015, *Draft Quality Framework for Professional Higher Education Excellence* (Brussels, EURASHE). http://files.eurashe.eu/library/quality-he/PHExcel_Draft-Quality-Framework-for-PHE-Excellence-_-Feb2015.pdf

[9] (PHExcel) Ebert, L., 2015, *Principles and Guidelines for Assessing and Recognising PHE Excellence* (Brussels, EURASHE). http://files.eurashe.eu/library/quality-he/PHExcel_Principles-and-Guidelines-for-Assessing-and-Recognising-PHE-Excellence_2015.pdf

Location, date	Lithuania, 16-17 April 2015	Portugal, 6 May 2015	Ireland, 11 May 2015	Poland, 17-18 May 2015
Type of unit	Institution	Study programme within an independent school	Specialist teaching method within an independent school within an institution	Specialty within a faculty of an institution
Domain of excellence in focus	Policy and strategy	Teaching and learning	Teaching and learning	Teaching and learning

Table 1: PHExcel pilots - types of units and domains of excellence in focus

II. A. Methodology

The assessment methodology identified that units should submit a 'claim for excellence' in which they justify their excellence, using the quality framework for excellence as a reference point – not as a tick box grid. The claim could concentrate on one domain of excellence or all three. A one-day site visit was organised in which experts took the role of coaches/trainers rather than evaluators. A final report was issued to the assessed unit.

The assessment heavily reflected an enhancement-led process. As the main goal of the initiative is to support the further development of excellence, the partners took the conscious decision to move away from an 'accreditation mind-set', especially when conducting the site visit. The PHExcel assessment therefore proposes an 'open discussion on excellence'.

This approach was chosen to enable a learning process from both the side of the reviewed unit but also the team of international peers. The TIPs could use the framework as a reference point that allowed both for ensuring minimum threshold achievements and an enhancement-led consultancy about institutional aims and objectives.

Based on exchanges with the various participants, it appeared that the method of an 'open discussion on excellence' was indeed challenging, but enriching. It enabled the reviewed unit to be more open about their experience and really question their challenges with excellence.

However, this brings about important questions: Is this method credible to provide an acknowledged and trustworthy recognition of excellence? And if so, how might review panels best be constructed? In the pilots, this challenge was recognised and the solution was considered to rely substantially on the specific experts involved.

II. B. Experts

The TIPs were composed of three experts: one student, one representative of the world of work, and one academic peer. A partner of the PHExcel project also joined the visits as an observer to report on the conduction of the process and assess whether the tool developed was adequate.

As the four visits conducted were pilots, different variants of the composition of the TIPs were explored in order to make proposals around the feasibility for further development. For example, the TIP that visited the Academy of Music in Poland was composed of experts from the field of music and of a student experienced in generic quality assurance. An important effort of convincing and explaining had to be brought forward to the assessed unit regarding the composition of the TIP. It is understandable that some believe only experts from their own

specific field can properly understand their context – especially when emphasising contextual excellence. However, the experience of the pilots shows that it is mutually enriching and that the members of TIPs from other subject fields can contribute to providing an adequate and pertinent assessment of the claim for excellence.

In addition, two of the three members were not from the country of the reviewed unit. The only 'national' member of the TIP was the representative from the world of work. This was decided because the concept of excellence in PHE was considered to have wide transferability as well as local applicability within the world of work. In practice, the fact that the team was composed of international peers was well received by the reviewed units and can thus be reported as an identified added value.

The visits were organised within a short timeframe due to the project design. Although possible to achieve successfully, this also required some adjustments to the ideal planning. Experts were briefed on the approach taken towards excellence and on the assessment methodology. A limited number of these experts were part of the PHExcel expert group and had intimate knowledge of the process. Yet, it was clear that more training would have been beneficial for all of the experts working together and that this should be included in any future deployment. As most experts of the TIPs have experience in quality reviews, specific emphasis must be put on 'abandoning the accreditation mind-set' in favour of the 'open discussion' method.

Whilst training is envisioned for the deployment of the tool, there is already interest in taking part in reviews from the side of experts. Most respondents to the validation survey of the quality framework and principles and guidelines (conducted in parallel to the visits and without information on their outcomes) show willingness to join a PHExcel pool of international peers.

II. C. Experience

First, one can consider that the assessment of excellence, and even more of excellence at international level, was a new experience for the units considered in PHExcel. Further, as pilots took place in three cases for programmes or specialities, this involved smaller teams than when the whole institution is concerned. Finally, whereas the most widely known quality labels and models in existence are often targeted towards large organisations that have a worldwide reach (e.g. see business studies), the PHExcel tool also addresses institutions of smaller size geared towards their direct regional environment.

The four pilots were conducted in different types of units, allowing for a cross-analysis of the outcomes and assessment of the procedure. This also accounts for the different emphasis chosen by the respective assessed units: the institution in Lithuania chose to put more emphasis on the excellence domain of 'policy and strategy' than the others.

The TIP participants were selected for their different profiles and backgrounds and as experts in their fields of professional higher education; most of them had experience in quality reviews and accreditation processes and also in quality enhancement processes. However, the specific focus upon the assessment of excellence was also a relatively new topic for the experts involved in the process.

The partners gathered the lessons learned from the pilots and this has led to first adjustments in the quality framework for excellence and principles and guidelines. Those included the following examples:

a) Be more specific about the envisaged concept of excellence: scrutiny is not applied to a general notion of excellence but to a specific excellence that derives from a broad integration of the world of work and professional practice in academic processes of learning, teaching, assessment, research etc. The excellence scrutinised showcases the interrelatedness of academia and the world of work in an ideal (elegant) way that mutually enhances the students' learning experience, employability and their impact on the sector as such;

b) Possibly propose a 'reversed' process, starting with the visit and continuing with the submission of documents, as the current form may still be too close to a quality review or accreditation process;

c) Provide clarification on the aim of the process: assessing how the unit is promoting and supporting excellence or assessing its excellence in terms of standards and educational quality, with its practical implications (TIP composition, site visit, etc.);

d) Consider the level of unit to be assessed;

e) Excellence may be perceived differently across contexts and sector but this can be positive and negative in terms of expectations and shows great potential for sharing of innovations;

f) Institutions seem to be in need of support in making their claim for excellence (i.e. showing in which way they are excellent in relation to characteristics of excellence). The PHExcel tool could therefore aim at assisting them in this process, differentiating it further from accreditation procedures.

Considering the view of external stakeholders (gathered in a validation workshop), most state that whilst the process may show added value in its enhancement aspect and may open a discussion on excellence in institutions, the long term sustainability of the tool also relies on the way in which the recognition aspect is brought in the process.

III.   Recognising excellence

As mentioned excellence has been a 'hot topic' in higher education for some time, especially with the rise of international rankings. However, the discussions in the initiative concentrated mostly on the potential use of a label. As the processes conducted were pilots, no such label has been or will be awarded during the project phase to the reviewed units.[10]

Whilst the assessment methodology has moved from what is traditionally implemented in most quality reviews, awarding a recognition of excellence through the tool shall follow accepted standards such as independence, publicity, review, appeals etc.

Further to the feedback gathered in the four pilots and in the survey mentioned previously, institutions are very much intent on the actual award of a label of excellence as a culmination of the process. On the other hand, stakeholders are much more reserved on the concept of label itself. This may stem from the understanding of labels as such: seen either as a patronising stamp or as the recognition of achievements. Yet, it may also originate in the actual use of current labels. The review of existing quality tools shows that some labels are widely spread, to such an extent that they may lose their 'exclusiveness', their 'quality', and

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[10] As per agreement with the reviewed units, they can be offered a 'short-track' process to a label in case such a label is deployed upon completion of the project.

especially their 'excellence' characteristic; when others that were developed some years ago may have never been awarded yet, especially in the case of some sector-specific labels.

As the PHExcel project is about testing the feasibility of a label for professional higher education excellence no decision has been taken by the partners at the beginning of the project on whether to go ahead and create such a label upon completion of the project.[11]

One such proposal for the deployment of a PHExcel tool both assessing and recognising excellence in professional higher education could be the conduction of 'reversed' site visits by an enlarged team of international peers, followed by the submission of further documentation, before the issuing of a recommendation as to the award of a title of excellence by the team to a managing group.

IV.   Conclusions

It is important to question whether we should even try to recognise excellence in integration with the world of work. When considering the various challenges it seems a legitimate question. Are there not already tools that propose to assess and recognise excellence?

Based on two years of research, development, test and validation, we can conclude that the assessment process proposed is innovative and shows a potential for units to both showcase their distinct profile in excellence in an ever more competitive higher education landscape and use it in parallel for their ambition to foster and develop an enhancement-led internal quality culture.

It is based on the consideration of contextual excellence of respective units when using the quality framework as opposed to the rigid assessment grid of certain labels. It is based on the respect shown by a team of international peers conducting themselves as trainers and coaches with clear commendations and recommendations issued in the final report.

The process presented has been developed and is led by (representatives of) higher education institutions, has at its heart the need to support institutions in further developing their excellence, in reflecting on their own activities and is based on the necessity to clarify a system-wide debate on excellence.

Yet, the road to excellence is a long one, so let us continue the discussion now.

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[11] At the moment of submission, the partners have not decided yet on the form that the process should take following the completion of the project. Such decision will have taken place by October 2015.

References:

(HAPHE) Camilleri A. F., et al., 2014, Professional Higher Education in Europe: Characteristics, Practice examples and National differences (Brussels, EURASHE). http://files.eurashe.eu/library/mission-phe/PHE_in_Europe_Oct2014.pdf

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