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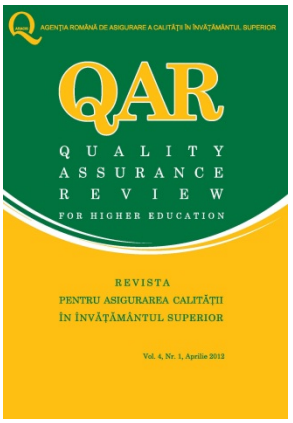

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Mirela Bardi, Laura Mureşan

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Student perceptions of programme quality – a tool for improvement

Mirela Bardi ***PhD Associate Professor, Academy of Economic Studies,*** *Bucharest*
Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication
mirela.bardi@incontext.ro
Laura Muresan ***PhD Professor, Academy of Economic Studies,*** *Bucharest*
Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication
muresan.laura@gmail.com

Rezumat: *Evaluarea programelor masterale de către studenți reprezintă un element structural al procesului de monitorizare a calității. Ea poate fi realizată la sfârșitul programului sau modulelor individuale, cu scop evaluativ final, dar și pe parcursul desfășurării programelor. In această situație, evaluarea are un caracter formativ și este destinată pe de o parte monitorizării progresului studenților, iar pe de alta ajustării și reorganizării programului în funcție de nevoile studenților (lucru nu ușor de făcut în timp ce programul este in desfășurare).*

Lucrarea de față se concentrează pe evaluarea cu caracter formativ desfășurată în cadrul programului masteral Comunicare în Limba Engleză pentru Predare și Cercetare Economică, organizat de Academia de Studii Economice din București. Studiul prezintă datele obținute printr-o serie de interviuri individuale cu studenții la sfârșitul primului an de studiu al masteratului și discută aspecte legate de progresul studenților, așa cum il percep aceștia, precum și aspecte care pot genera schimbări în structura programului în încercarea de imbunătățire a calității. Acest proces, în viziunea noastră, înseamnă conformitatea cu standarde bine definite și larg acceptate, dar are și o latură mai greu de definit, care ține de percepțiile celor implicați în procesul de predare/învățare.

Cuvinte cheie: *managementul calității, evaluare de program, autoevaluare, dezvoltare profesională, percepțiile studenților.*

Abstract: *Student evaluation is a structural element in monitoring the quality of MA programmes. Evaluation can have a summative character if carried out at the end of a module or of the whole programme. When carried out during the course of the programme, evaluation is more formative in character and intended to monitor student progress on the one hand and to adjust the programme (to the extent it is possible) to the students' perceived needs on the other. Our presentation will focus on formative evaluation of the MA programme "Research and Teacher Education for Business and Economics" (EDU-RES) run by the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest as a staff development programme. We will discuss the data obtained through individual interviews carried out at the end of the first year and will highlight issues related to student progress as well as issues that tutors can build on in the attempt to improve programme quality. Apart from compliance to standards, quality is also a matter of perception and the students' perspective needs to be taken into account particularly in the case of internationalized programmes.*

Key words: *quality management, programme evaluation, self-evaluation, professional development, student perceptions.*

1. Introduction

Student evaluation of programmes or specific modules within programmes is a frequently-used indicator of quality, in recognition of the fact that quality assurance and enhancement are essential processes in all learning environments. The understanding of participants in the quality assurance process of the features of effective/good teaching is to be regarded as both a tool for quality evaluation and an exercise in reflection and self – development. By reflecting on the learning experi-

ence within a particular programme, students have a chance to reexamine their learning objectives and to reflect on their own performance and development.

This paper reports on the results of a piece of qualitative research conducted within the wider framework of monitoring the quality of the MA programme "Research and Teacher Education for Business and Economics" (EDU-RES) at the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest. The programme was designed as a staff development initiative meant to enhance academic skills – teaching, research and educational management – and academic communication in English. The students are university lecturers (most of them at the Academy of Economic Studies) interested in strengthening their presence on the international academic field.

Their perceptions were recorded through a series of individual interviews carried out at the end of the first year of study with the following objectives:

- To assess progress in relation to initial personal objectives;
- To identify new objectives or changes in initial objectives;
- To reflect on achievements in terms of: skills, knowledge, language abilities, networking;
- To identify necessary/suggested changes to the programme.

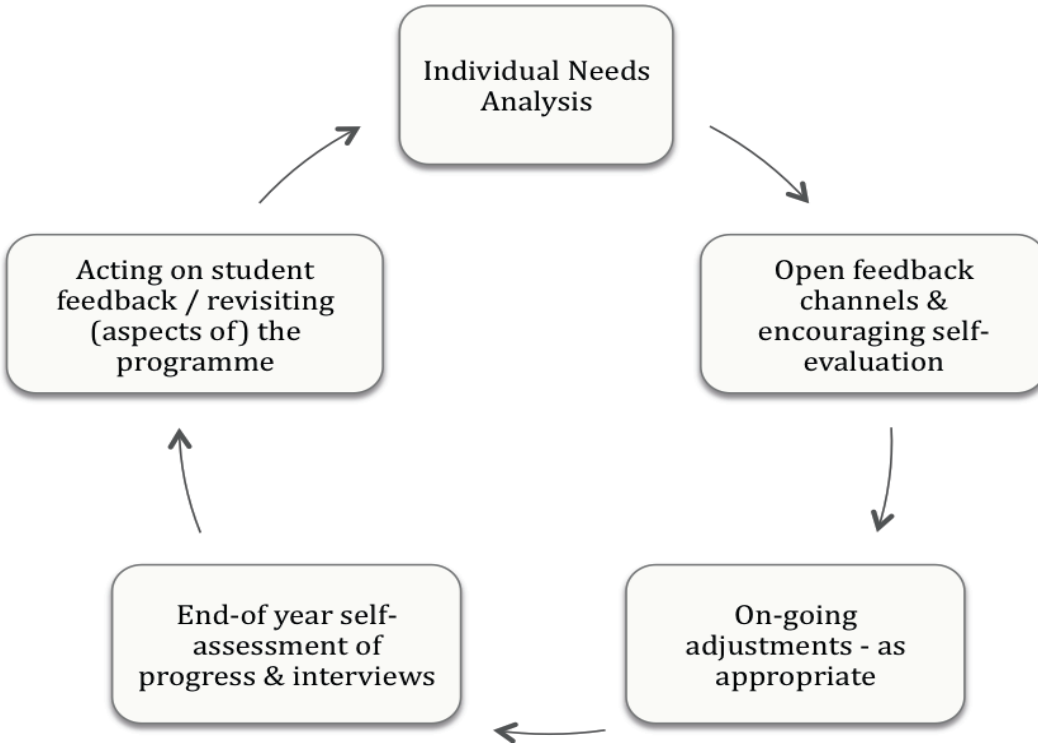
2. Approach to quality management

Recording student perceptions of the programme and of their own study progress is a type of formative evaluation. Notions of formative and summative evaluation are widely-mentioned in the literature (Alderson, 1992, Rea-Dickins 1994) although in practice the distinction is not that clear-cut. We agree with Alderson (1999) who points out that the reality of evaluation is more complex than such concepts indicate:

> '*Formative evaluation is said to be intended to help participants to learn and develop, to improve a project, to adjust its direction and methodology, whereas summative evaluation draws conclusions, makes judgements, has consequences, comes at the end of a project. Formative evaluation is something many claim they do, whereas summative evaluation is something that is done to them by outsiders. I believe that these are false distinctions, far too black-and-white, and obviously value-laden*.' (Alderson, 1999: 3).

To continue Alderson's argument, do we claim we do formative evaluation or do we actually carry it out? Our work with student perceptions of programme quality has consequences and the programme is redesigned according to suggestions and priorities, therefore we can justifiably claim that we carry out formative evaluation.

Our approach to quality management encourages us to link formative evaluation to quality enhancement. Quality assurance, both as a concept and a set of practices, has many practical implications, and in order to ensure its effectiveness, it is essential to integrate both individual self-assessment and institutional self-evaluation with managerial decision taking and external quality assurance. We will argue, therefore, that quality assurance should be analysed in connection with the process of managing quality, and carrying out formative evaluation is one aspect of quality management.



A process approach to quality management (adapted from Muresan, 2007: 39)

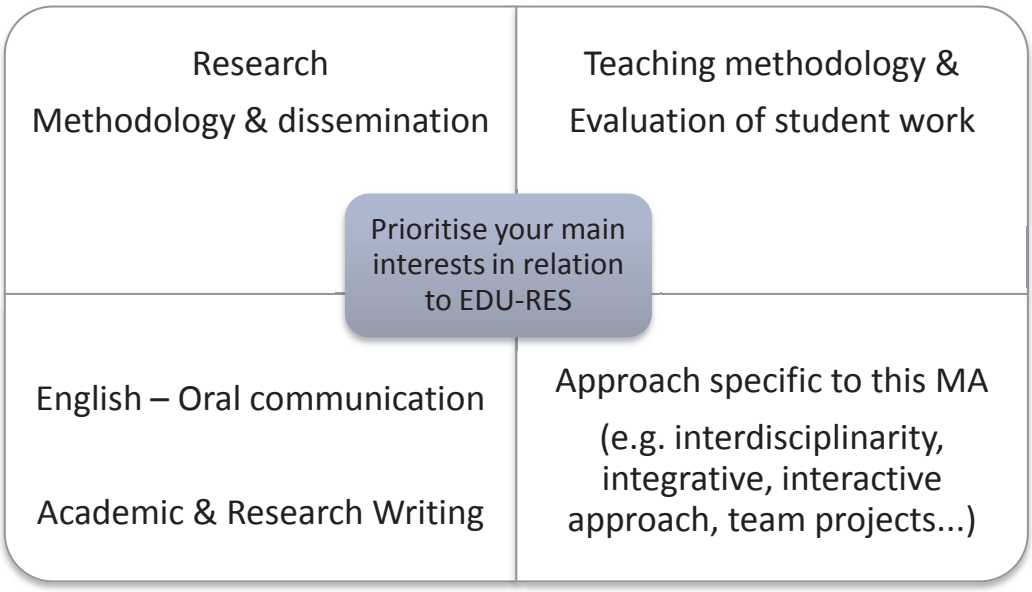
The process-approach to quality management has been an integral part of this Master programme from its inception and has taken various forms in the course of time. It is inspired by the quality assurance system developed by EAQUALS - The European Association for Quality Language Services (Matheidesz, 2010) and builds on the expertise of introducing the European Language Portfolio in language education, as a powerful tool with multiple functions, including needs analysis, goal-setting, monitoring progress through self-assessment. (EAQUALS-ALTE, 2000)

Even before joining this Master programme the candidates were encouraged to self-assess their language proficiency on the basis of the "Self-assessment Grid" developed by Council of Europe experts (Council of Europe, 2001) and to reflect on their main personal professional objectives in relation to both career development and the various programme components. Thus, the 'entrance test' actually included a self-assessment component, as well as self-reflection on needs, interests and objectives. The following diagram - designed specifically for this purpose - illustrates the collaborative approach to needs analysis, intended as a springboard for programme adjustments, depending on the specificity of each series of master students.

Further aspects addressed during the initial (pre-programme) interview included:

- relevance of EDU-RES to the candidates' professional activities;
- motivation to participate in it in relation to career development plans;
- commitment and time availability (considering that most of them were university lecturers with a busy schedule);
- strengths to be contributed to the programme (e.g. participating in group discussions and team projects, sharing knowledge and experience, personal qualities, etc.).

EDU-RES Dimensions & Personal Priorities / Preferences



3. Methodology for collecting student feedback at the end of the academic year

Individual interviews were carried out at the end of the first year of the programme in order to monitor student progress and to make decisions about curriculum design. Although it is often unfeasible to make changes according to students' perceived needs while the programme is underway, in this particular situation the course tutors tend to be very much accountable to students and to the institution that entirely sponsors the programme. We have constantly built in new course elements, redesigned the balance of topics and tried to respond to students' suggestions. It is the tutors who initiate most of the changes but we always make sure that we get student feedback on the new topics or balance of topics.

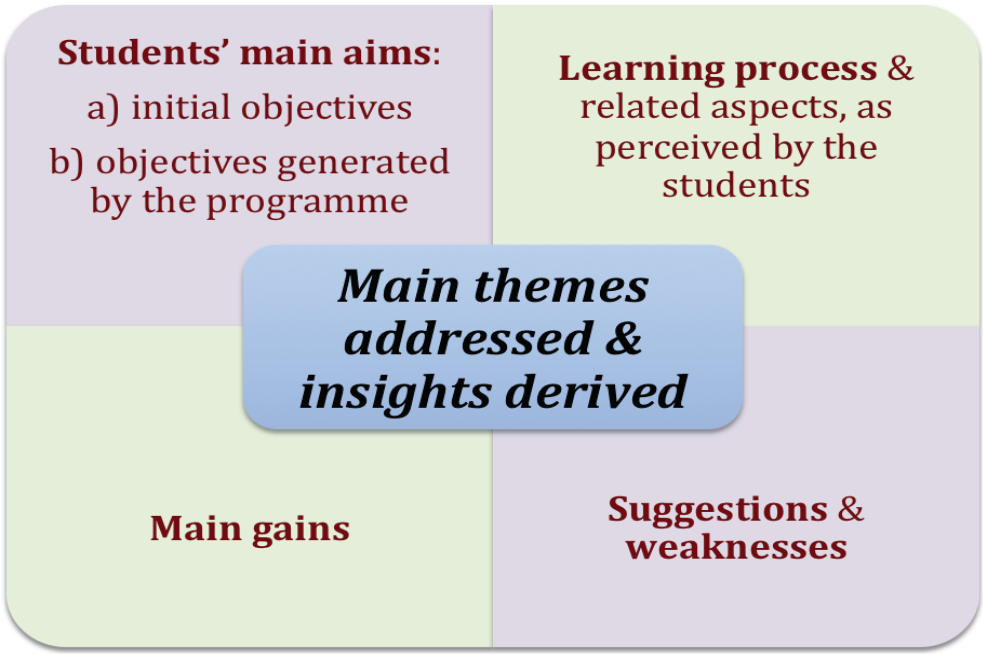
A sample of 18 interviews were carried out by three interviewers. The interview was semi-structured and the interview schedule was organized according to 4 main themes: students' initial and emerging aims, elements of the learning process, gains at the end of one year, suggestions and weaknesses.

The semi-structured interview was chosen as a data collection method because of its suitability to the research objectives. It was important to focus on issues that enabled the course designers to revise and redesign – to the extent it was needed and feasible – the programme, but also to enable participants to express their views openly and to comment on those particular issues that they wanted to highlight, particularly in relation to their learning experience.

The interviews were transcribed and the data was categorized according to the themes highlighted by the interview guide structure (objectives, learning experience, gains, suggestions). We were not interested in how many people mentioned one particular theme but on how we can respond to/ build on their suggestions.

4. Results and discussion

This section will present the main results, organised according to four themes addressed in the interviews, as synthesised in the diagram below.



Theme 1 – Personal objectives

Respondents were encouraged to recollect their initial objectives when joining the programme. Not surprisingly, most of them were interested in upgrading their research skills, learning about more research methods and improving their academic writing skills with particular focus on writing research articles for international publication. Teaching was another area of interest and the students who were mostly interested in diversifying the range of teaching methods were particularly interested in increasing student motivation and improving student participation in class.

The learning experience and self-evaluation of their progress generated new or redefined objectives. Among these were:

- increased awareness of research paradigms (positivism and interpretivism) to be pursued further;
- an interest for understanding better the specifics of quantitative and qualitative methodology;
- more interest for structure over content when writing research;

The new objectives generated by the course experience indicate increased awareness of research paradigms and methods and the need to deepen their knowledge of research options and their ability to use a wider range of options in their own research. Such an interest is not surprising for us because we have seen the same focus with programme graduates in previous years. Students on the programme who were drafting their PhD theses chose to widen the range of methods they were using in their doctoral research (eg, by introducing qualitative research dimensions) as a result of attending research modules in the programme.

Theme 2 - Learning process/experience

Participants have found the classroom experience extremely worthwhile. In their responses, they have highlighted the process approach to learning which is organized around discussion, debate, group work and cooperation on tasks. What is more, the content is often approached as process – an example given by one respondent mentions the critical reading of research articles and analysis

of articles from the perspective of the writing process which makes it easier for students to transfer new awareness and skills to their own practice.

The good integration of knowledge elements from different modules is another process element highlighted by respondents, and so is the fact that in spite of many opinions being expressed in the classroom, there is no loss of focus and the discussion stays always on track. As the group brings together academics with mutual concerns (despite various levels of expertise), organizing classroom activity as interaction allows expression of diverse opinions generated by experience and expertise. Participants have developed their specific group roles and identities that are recognized by their colleagues.

In summary, responses highlight the following process aspects:

- integration of elements from different modules;
- critical reading of articles - easier for students to transfer new awareness/skills to their practice;
- analysis of the process of writing research articles (genre awareness);
- open classroom communication - launching new ideas;
- discussion/interaction more appropriate than description;
- capitalizing on all participants' experience and expertise through interaction;
- no loss of focus, staying on track at all times despite debate and discussion;

For the course tutors, such responses indicate the fact that encouraging interaction among participants is indeed the best way to organize classroom activity. In a way, one can hardly do otherwise given the group structure: academics interested in their professional development who take this programme in order to refine their skills. Students and tutors are participants in the learning process and we all learn from each other. It is extremely encouraging that participants enjoy our process approach to delivering content. For example, during the academic writing module we have introduced a genre approach to the discussion of research articles, which highlights text structure and choice of language in relation to the communicative purpose of the text. Respondents enjoy this approach because it presents texts as a set of choices to be made by the writer in order to deliver content more convincingly. Therefore, we have been looking at research articles not as 'finite objects' but rather by highlighting 'the making' of those texts. Students regard this approach as suitable to enabling then to refine their writing skills and would like to continue the analysis of each section in a research article from a genre perspective. The responses we have obtained will inform the organization of the academic writing module in the second year of the programme.

Theme 3 – Gains

The benefits derived from participation in the programme seem to be quite diverse according to the views expressed in the interviews, ranging from increased knowledge and awareness to experiencing new learning processes and redefining perceptions of their own expertise in relation to academic practice elsewhere.

In terms of new knowledge and awareness, participants say they are more aware of the methodology of conducting rigorous research and of the international requirements for publication of research articles. Development of research skills is considered to be directly relevant for PhD work underway. Moreover, by examining their own practice more critically, they have become more concerned about the quality of the argument put forward in their research writing and more preoccupied by structure and form of presentation. It is interesting to point out that students feel that awareness of research practice in international educational environments makes them more confident in their ability to produce high quality internationally acceptable research work.

Conducting good research seems now possible (Respondent 3)
We know less than we thought we did, but we know what we need to do. (Respondent 2)

Respondents have also noticed differences between the local educational environment – with focus on content and transmission of knowledge – and the international environment with much more concern for structure of research articles submitted for publication.

The learning experience itself is identified as a gain, and the theme of interaction comes up again. Classroom interaction has enabled participants to refine expression of their opinions so as to make it clearer and more convincing in the exchange of opinions that is the basis of most class encounters. They enjoy new forms of socialization inside and out of class as well as encounters with peers from other universities in the world.

Theme 4 – Weaknesses/Suggestions for improvement

Suggestions put forward by respondents are very much in line with the themes outlined so far. They require support with introducing new forms of collaboration to be experimented in their own teaching and research practice, such as peer teaching and team writing of research articles. Such a suggestion reinforces the results discussed above, with students emphasizing the value of diverse types of interaction in the classroom.

They require more language input, in spite of the fact that language support is offered throughout the programme with dedicated language classes organized separately for intermediate and advanced students. It is easy to understand why students are so much concerned about increasing their language proficiency. Some of them teach in English and some plan to do so in the future. They need confidence that they can handle language in unpredictable situations generated by interaction with their students. The need to publish in internationally reputable journals is one more reason why they are concerned about English proficiency – one needs complex language resources in order to put forward a convincing argument. Such a requirement came up constantly throughout the years of running the programme and therefore the provision of language support was gradually extended to cover the whole duration of the programme. Moreover, many of these sessions focus on academic language to supplement the module on academic writing which focuses on text structure and genre features. The suggestion needs to be taken into consideration for the following academic year and new ways of providing language support will be identified because, as pointed out at the beginning of this paper, student feedback is acted upon and the programme is redesigned to cater for their requirements.

Weaknesses as identified by students relate to group composition and the diverse needs arising from this. Language proficiency varies and more proficient students tend to dominate discussion while less proficient ones tend to keep silent due to concern for ability to express their views accurately. While tutors constantly try to involve weaker students and help them express their views in English, some of the participants seem to be more impatient with their colleagues' struggle for expression in a foreign language. There are differences in terms of levels of know-how about particular course topics, with the same lack of patience of more experienced students for their less experienced colleagues. The module on "Quantitative Research" is such an example which required a series of extra sessions in order to enable the students with less expertise in this area to catch up. The timing of some modules was identified as problematic, with the suggestion to plan more complex and challenging modules later in the programme.

We have claimed at the beginning of this paper that student feedback is a type of formative evaluation because it informs programme design and action is taken to respond to student suggestions. All these weaknesses need remedial action that will be implemented in the new academic year.

By way of conclusion

As with previous series of master students and comparable also to the outcomes of other forms of evaluation carried out during the year, the results of the end-of-year interviews have con-

firmed to a large extent that the programme has contributed to personal professional growth. The interdisciplinary dimension, the methodological approach, the thematic relevance to student needs and the collaborative, friendly atmosphere were particularly praised. The interviewees have also confirmed transferring some of their learning experiences into their own teaching practice, while adoption of new methods and styles of work are an on-going process.

Feedback regarding improvable aspects will inform future action. Further to suggestions received, changes to the programme in the new academic year will include:

- a more detailed genre-based approach to research writing, with an in-depth analysis of each section of the 'research article' genre, integrating work on authentic articles with the latest research developments in the field (Swales, 2004; Feak and Swales, 2011);
- re-visiting the sequencing and duration of more challenging modules, ensuring that they are not scheduled for the first semester, and/or introducing extra hours;
- dealing with differences in area-specific expertise, e.g. by streaming participants into two groups for the seminars, in response to development needs in a particular area;
- addressing - in a more nuanced manner - differences in English language proficiency, making sure that participants in the specialised language seminars stick to the group they have been assigned to, so as to enhance the communicative confidence of less proficient English language users;
- offering more targeted support for dissertation writing, esuring an even better inter-relatedness among the modules focusing on communication in academic contexts, on research writing for publication, and genre analysis for academic and research purposes, while ensuring an even closer link between "target situation and learning situation analysis" (Paltridge et al., 2009: 50-51).

At the same time, we will continue inviting international guest lecturers (e.g. from universities in Australia, UK, USA), for specific additional sessions, held for both current students and alumni.

In order to close the loop, towards the end of the academic year, we have created opportunities for external feedback gathering within the framework of the inter-university "ASIGMA" project (with a special focus on Quality Assurance in HE Internationalised Master Programmes). Thus, during their visit to the Academy of Economic Studies, colleagues from an "ASIGMA" project partner (Universitatea de Vest Timisoara) had a focus group meeting with current EDU-RES students, in order to elicit the latter's perceptions of the programme.

To extend the circle and the scope of this small-scale evaluation exercise, we have shared its outcomes within the "ASIGMA" framework (ASIGMA, 2011) and intend to take it further, through a comparative study, enriched with the views of external experts.

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