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Obe de Vries

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*Descend, o mild Hyperion and brighten up my way*

## **Presentation at the Final Conference Network for Higher Education Project (ARACIS-NEQ), Bucharest, 9 September 2008**

*Obe de Vries    Higher education Inspector,  
The Netherlands*

### **Introduction**

At the close of this conference I would like to make three concluding remarks: one on the very general subject of “how things change”, one on some specific topics related to the “Code of Good practice”, and one on “what to do next”. The motto of these concluding remarks could well be Eminescu’s poem Hyperion, in particular the lines:

Descend, o mild Hyperion, Glide down upon a ray,  
Into my home and thoughts anon, And brighten up my way!

Lines which - I am told - every schoolboy and schoolgirl in Romania knows by heart. But before I start I would like to express my gratitude for all who contributed to this final conference. Your contributions were open, honest and insightful. Indeed the only way to make progress at all. I am very happy with this conference.

### **How Things Change**

As I told you I spent some 6 years in Africa, and there – more even than in the Netherlands – I saw two different approaches of development: the top-down (downstream) approach, and the bottom-up (upstream) approach. Personally I feel that these approaches are complementary and that any specific situation requires a balance between them. But how to find this balance? Perhaps a bit of theory, in this case from the Dutch scholar Leon de Caluwé might help. In his book “Learning to change” he distinguishes 5 approaches of how things change, each with a different balance of top-down and bottom-up characteristics.

In approach 1 (Leon labels this: the blue approach) things are expected to change when there are clear aims, with a clear plan in stages/phases. Developments are monitored and there is tight control. Catchwords are concepts like: results, best solutions, not words but deeds, if one says A one should also say B.

In approach 2 (the yellow approach) things are expected to change when people combine interests and create win-win-situations. Catchwords are: exchange of views and shared vision. It is important to direct noses in one directions; one plays the ball to one another if needed.

In approach 3 (the red approach) things are expected to change when given proper incentives and rewards. It is important to develop potentials, and to give people something in return for what they did. To have happy people is the most important condition for change.

In approach 4 (the green approach) things are expected to change when people are conscious of their own views and also of their shortcomings. It is important to motivate people to learn new things. Catchwords are reflection and learning community, learning by doing.

In approach 5 (the white approach) things are expected to change when one believes in the strength of people. The world is too complex and too dynamical to control. Removing obstacles and creating meaningful situations are the things to do. And for the rest the way is its own guide.

In these five approaches you find various shades of top-down and bottom-up. And these approaches may be applicable in different stages of development. At this point I cannot say which approach in a given situation is best for you. Probably a mixed approach is in many cases the most successful anyway. But what I would suggest is that you choose your approach consciously, so as to find the largest support from all interested people and institutions and to reach shared aims where possible.

## **Some Specific Topics Related to the Code of Good Practice**

In the course of the conference, we have touched upon a number of topics related to the Code of Good Practice. In these concluding remarks I would like to elaborate on a few of them.

These are:

- Drafting programmes;
- Carrying out programmes,
- Student assessment;
- Evaluation of programmes.

### ***a. Drafting Programmes***

Prof. Mamut Eden quoted a comment by a foreign ICT-company which referred to three different observations by this company: the high level of knowledge of Romanian graduates, the fair level of skills and the poor attitude towards problem-solving. Prof. Dragomir Toma asked for more emphasis on student-centred education. Prof. Socaciu noticed that in Western universities students had more access to media and were given more responsibility to carry out projects and research than in Romania. Also we were told about problem-based education, project-learning etc. This all has to do with drafting programmes: what competencies should students have when they receive their degrees. Do you want them to be open? Do you want them to be active? Do you want them to be research-oriented? All this has a bearing on the way you draft your programmes: if you want students to be open, create educational situations in which they learn how to express their minds. If you want them to be active, design programmes in which they can take initiative. If you want them to be research-oriented let them do research. On this last topic I can tell you quite a typical story. As you know I did my Bachelors and Masters in Chemistry at Utrecht University. At the time in particular the Bachelors programme was fairly dull and not at all spectacular. Anyway, I became a science-teacher and returned to Utrecht University some 20 years later as an educational adviser. I was asked then to assist the chemistry department in designing a new Bachelors' curriculum. I asked them what the problem was and they said: "Well, students say, the programme is fairly dull and not at all spectacular. And therefore we want to change it". And they suggested themselves: "Would perhaps a bit more research-orientation help". "Well", I said, "that sounds alright, so let them do research from the very onset". "Impossible", they said, "how can you let students, fresh from secondary school, do research?" So we compromised and designed a 3-4 week research-project in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Semester of the first year, in which students would join the research-groups to carry out research-activities. And so it happened and it was and still is a great success. Some students have even co-authored in articles in renowned scientific journals and they love it. And the lesson of this story is: drafting of programmes is an essential element in creating the kind of education that you want.

### ***b. Carrying out Programmes***

Even at the micro-level you can do a lot to help achieve aims that you would wish you're your students to reach. You have perhaps noticed that I love - what is called - energizing classes by asking questions, by letting students discuss things, by giving short assignments, puzzles, tests, and so on. I am sure there is a lot to be improved on these aspects in higher education all over Europe, and Romania is no exception.

### ***c. Assessment of Students***

On the whole I am quite pleased with the section on Student Assessment in the Code of Good Practice, and again from a European perspective improvement in the quality of student assessment is

crucial for generating public trust in the degrees and diplomas in higher education. This however is not the only important aspect of student assessment. Student assessment is in my view also an important aspect of evaluating the quality of a module, a course or a programme. Is the quality of the work shown by students during assessments the type of quality that you really want to see? Or does it show that there are serious shortcomings in the course? I would love again to see examples of how teachers use the way students have handled assessment-questions in conducting the next course.

#### ***d. Evaluation of Programmes***

Drafting programmes, energizing classes and improving the quality of assessment are important for improving the quality of higher education and it will take quite some effort to achieve this improvement. Also evaluation of programmes can help improve the quality of education. But then it is essential that you go full-circle: from aims to carrying out the programmes, to evaluate the relevant aspects of the educational programme and - last but not but least - to improve the programme accordingly. This MAY give rise to an enormous evaluation-burden, but in my view this burden can be avoided by focussing on essentials.

During our training-seminar we set up evaluations on the basis of 4 major questions only, to be answered without complicated evaluation forms:

- was the course effective (were aims reached? see also the paragraph on assessment)
- was the course valuable to students (did students feel that time and energy were well spent?)
- was the course enjoyable (e.g. did the course invite students to further learning?)
- was the course efficient (was the course to the point without unnecessary deviations?)

Well, these four main questions may seem a bit too simplistic, but on the whole I would urge you to limit your evaluation-efforts to essentials, so as to spend more time on drafting programmes, energizing classes and the quality of assessment.

### **What to Do Next?**

We produced a first draft of the Code of Good Practice, to be finished soon from now by adding your comments and remarks. And maybe even more important: we met and created a network.

We also know that there will be a substantial follow-up by way of a huge EU-project. But - also in line with my earlier remarks on how things change- it is surely important now that you yourself also express your feelings as how things should develop further.

For that matter I would have loved to give you an assignment: list for yourself some activities that you would consider essential in the coming years as regards quality assurance in universities. Discuss these with your neighbour and select the 3 best you agree upon. And then we would have a plenary discussion.

However we have almost reached the end of this conference and some of you will still have to travel hundreds of kilometres. So I will not start a discussion now, but I'll give you something to do for on your way. And this assignment is: on your journey back home, think of Eminescu's lines: "Descend o Sweet Hyperion and Brighten up my Way" and list three activities that would brighten up your way in the coming years of quality assurance. And let these three activities be known to others in the network. For myself I would think that the following three activities would be very helpful:

- ARACIS and higher education institutions: work closely together, maintain openness, exchange views;
- Keep an eye on the international environment, stimulate international networks;
- Take good care of the structural elements, in particular the quality assurance departments; they are the catalysts for quality development with Romanian higher education.

Well this is it. Thanks a lot. I loved it to be with you. Wish you all the best.