Quality Assurance in International Cooperation and Development Projects in Higher Education

Considerable funding is invested in international cooperation projects in higher education by national donors and the European Commission. This paper is addressed to practitioners and donor organizations interested in project quality assurance in international cooperation projects in higher education. Most principles and tools can, however, easily be used in other contexts as well. It gives an introduction to what constitutes quality assurance (QA) in such projects and explains why it is important to consciously include QA from the onset of the project. It aims to broaden a typically narrow understanding of QA by differentiating the four functions – planning support, advice, facilitation and control – that it should ideally serve. It describes which qualifications a quality assurance partner should ideally have in order to maximally contribute to effective and productive project management. Lastly, the paper provides an overview of QA instruments that can deliver a real added value to any international project and shows how each of them relates to the four functions of QA. This paper argues that having a competent QA partner can significantly improve the delivery of the desired results and their sustainability once a project has ended.

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The binding of this supplemental volume enables you to remove each article from the cover and file it according to your needs. Also, for your convenience, all articles have been organised by chapter and subchapter online at www.handbook-internationalisation.com. This article, D 4.13, has been assigned to:

Chapter D: Learning and teaching
Subchapter D 4: Partnerships
1. Importance of Quality Assurance in international cooperation projects in higher education

International cooperation projects in higher education funded by national development agencies or the European Commission\(^1\) are almost always complex undertakings as resources and time for project implementation are limited. Partners come from different countries, often with different working cultures and languages\(^2\). Depending on how the project came about, how it is funded and by whom it is implemented, partners may have diverging motivations to participate. The fact that money flows may create the wrong incentives to participate. Reasons for project failure are plentiful: The goals may not be realistic. The project may lack a powerful sponsor. The project manager may be inexperienced and may have difficulties dealing with the project’s complexity. Intercultural differences may interfere with effective communication. The project’s benefits may cease to be evident to the partners and stakeholders if the people involved have changed since the project was designed. Lastly, the political environment may change, requiring plans to be amended. For any international cooperation project to be successful, partners must be mindful of its inherent complexity.

All development and cooperation programmes have certain objectives that their funding agencies hope to accomplish and for which they invest a considerable amount of money. For LLP (Lifelong Learning Programme) alone, the budget was nearly €7 billion for the period

\(^1\) There are a great number of international cooperation projects in the higher education sector. Some are bilateral projects funded by international organizations such as the World Bank, others by development agencies such as DFID, GIZ or HELVETAS, and yet others by higher education cooperation agencies such as DAAD, the British Council, or OeAD. At the European level, the vast majority of cooperation projects are designed and funded by the European Commission and administered by its executive agency, the EACEA. For intra-European projects, the most notable of these was the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) and its sub-programmes e.g. for higher education (Erasmus), for vocational education and training (Leonardo da Vinci) and for adult education (Grundtvig). The TEMPUS programme funded many international cooperation projects with non-EU partner countries, as did the Erasmus Mundus Programme, Alfa, and Edulink Programme. Starting in 2014 all of the EU’s programmes in education will be subsumed under the roof of the Erasmus+ programme. URL: http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus

\(^2\) This is particularly the case for many projects funded by the European Commission which requires that partners from different European countries and (in the case of TEMPUS), a (much larger) number of partners from the beneficiary countries have to participate in the project for it to receive funding.
2007 to 2013 (EACEA 2013). The TEMPUS programme received €129.8 million in the same budgeting period (EACEA 2012). Ultimately, taxpayers are investing a significant amount of money in cooperation activities in higher education. The evaluations of these programmes are near unanimously positive. However, not only the author’s many personal communications with project coordinators indicate that these positive results should probably be taken with a grain of salt. Often, the evaluations do “not allow a focused evaluation of individual projects” and “findings are therefore strongly based on information provided by programme-internal sources” who are often “seemingly anxious to present their projects in a positive way” (EPRD, p. 10). As is common knowledge in the development community, projects may often not live up to their promises.

Having a quality assurance (QA) strategy is therefore a clear necessity. QA in international cooperation projects aims to make sure that the project reaches its intended outcomes and that it delivers optimal value-for-money. QA assesses where the project stands and whether it is moving towards its goals. QA includes monitoring progress, keeping the project’s focus on the satisfaction and motivation of all partners, documenting the lessons learned, and identifying potential risks before they become problems. Project QA is therefore particularly relevant for project donors, who often make it a requirement for any projects that are funded by them (such as in all TEMPUS projects). It is, however, in the best interest of all project stakeholders since it contributes to the project’s overall success.

Depending on the particular philosophy and tools that are used, QA in international cooperation projects can take on different forms. This article will differentiate four core functions of QA in international cooperation projects, describe the qualifications a designated QA partner should ideally have, and outline a number of tools used in project QA by CHE Consult.

The paper is addressed to practitioners and donor organizations interested in project quality assurance in international cooperation projects in higher education. Most principles and tools can, however, easily be used in other contexts as well.

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3 As of 1 January 2014, TEMPUS-like activities, namely capacity building activities, have become part of a new cooperation program called "Erasmus+".

4 For an overview of projects see www.che-consult.de.
2. Four functions of Quality Assurance in international cooperation projects

In order to understand the different aspects of quality assurance in international projects, it is useful to distinguish separate functions. The relative importance of these functions again changes depending on the extent to which the project has already been implemented. A project's life-cycle may be described in the four phases of initiation, planning, implementation and a final evaluation. Quality assurance is important in all project phases. Figure 1 illustrates the different contributions of project quality assurance within an overall project life cycle:

![Diagram of project life cycle with four functions: Planning support, Advisory function, Facilitating function, and Controlling function.]

**Figure 1** Functions of project quality assurance in a project life-cycle

2.1 Planning support: Review objectives, priorities, methodology, and planned activities

The planning support function concerns all supporting activities related to the project planning. This includes critically reviewing and assessing the logic of the project and its resource and financial planning. Quality targets and ways to verify them are established ("Quality Plan"). Lastly, potential risks to the project's successful implementation are identified.

The quality criterion at this stage is *fitness for purpose*: Is the planned project likely to achieve its goals (effectiveness)? Is it likely to achieve its goals making the best use of the human and financial resources available (efficiency)? Answering these questions involves an assessment of all dimensions of project planning:
Project eligibility

- Are the overall objectives of the project relevant to the funding organization (e.g. the TEMPUS programme)?

- Does the project meet the formal, technical and financial criteria of the funding organization?

Soundness of business case

- Are all project beneficiaries and all other stakeholders identified and are their needs and interests taken into consideration? Is the project consistent with donor policies as well as with partner government policies?

- Are the project objectives, goals and outcomes clearly described?

- Are the activities sufficiently described?

- Are the project results attractive and meaningful for its beneficiaries?

- Is the overall project narrative convincing?

- Will results be sustainable after the project ends?

Project feasibility

- Is the project timeline realistic? Are milestones and deliverables defined in sufficient detail?

- Are all activities connected to each other?

- Does the project consortium unite sufficient competences and human resources to achieve the project goals?

- Are the roles and responsibilities of all partners described in sufficient detail? Are their contributions meaningful?

- Are enough time and resources available for the project to have success?

Important assumptions and potential risks

- Are there conflicts of interest between stakeholders that could endanger the project?

- Are all important pre-conditions identified?
• What would need to happen for the project to fail? What does the project do in order to avoid this from happening? Is there a plan B in case it does happen?

If a logical framework approach or similar planning approach is used, supporting the development of indicators would also fall within the responsibility of project QA.

2.2 Advisory function: Advise project implementation and helps solve issues

The advisory function aims to support the project coordinator as well as the other project partners in implementing the project by giving continuous advice on project management. It aims to ensure that the outcomes are on time (through preparation and assessment of detailed work plans), technically sound and fit for purpose, that the deliverables are documented systematically, and that their usefulness for the attainment of the project objectives is ensured.

An experienced QA partner can draw upon many years of experience from similar projects and is therefore in a good position to anticipate potential problems or to share approaches which have been successful in past projects. In order to be able to provide this expertise for the benefit of the project, the QA partner should be present in all project meetings and be in a continuous exchange with the project coordinator.

2.3 Facilitating function: Provide tools to foster engagement, commitment and accountability

Using traditional tools of Quality Assurance such as surveys or qualitative interviews is not only about assessing results or gaining information. Following the credo of psychologists that every social interaction is also an intervention, QA tools should be used in such a way that fosters engagement and builds commitment and accountability to the project and the project partners. Using QA tools to increase commitment requires finding the fine line between gathering sufficient data for monitoring project progress and being the source of additional work that is not perceived as adding any value to the project ("yet another survey?").

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2.4 Controlling function: Assess products/outcomes/sustainability/visibility

The controlling function of QA is what is most commonly associated with project QA. Most donors nowadays require that any project application include a "quality plan". This plan needs to describe the quality control processes and the monitoring measures that will be used to verify that the project is on the right track. In particular, the plan is used to verify that the project is making progress towards the goals that were stated regarding products, outcomes, sustainability and visibility of the project. In case there are deviations, strategies need to be developed to adapt in a way that ensures reaching the project's goals.

Another important component of the controlling function is risk management. All projects operate on a number of risks and assumptions. As these assumptions may or may not be correct, it is important to monitor them continuously and develop strategies to adapt to changing circumstances. If the logical framework approach is used, the LFM forms the basis for the controlling function.

There are a number of tools that can be used in the controlling function, a number of which will be presented below.

3. Qualification profile of a Quality Assurance partner

Quality Assurance can be conducted either by a designated project participant or by an outside consultant. Fulfilling all of the four core functions that have been described above is only possible if QA is conducted by a full project partner. Such a partner needs a range of specific qualifications. These include analytical skills required for systematic monitoring and evaluation, technical skills in using QA tools and writing reports as well as social, intercultural and language competencies. In total, a designated QA partner should ideally have the following detailed qualification profile. He/she should

- be experienced in the management of international cooperation projects
- have an excellent understanding of the methodology and techniques of monitoring and evaluation
- have extensive technical expertise in the application of QA tools (such as online surveys) and be able to draft concise and readable reports in a tight timeframe
- have a good understanding of the subject the project is dealing with
• have excellent teamwork and social skills
• be sensitive towards group dynamics and know how to shape them
• be interculturally sensitive and competent
• ideally be proficient in several of the partners’ languages

4. The CHE Consult Approach - Tools for Project Quality Assurance

The Quality Assurance approach used by CHE Consult consists in the combination of a number of QA tools. At the time of writing (2014) we are applying it in a number of projects with as diverse objectives as the development of quality assurance in higher education in Moldova (QUAEM)\(^6\), the development of new modules for international bachelor and master programmes in sustainable tourism management in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan (SUTOMA)\(^7\) or establishing “Entrepreneur Alumni Network” in Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia (EANET)\(^8\). In the following chapter, we will present a number of tools that have been successfully employed in project quality assurance by CHE Consult. Next to each tool, a graph will visualize the tool’s suitability for Planning Support (P), Advisory Function (A), Facilitating Function (F), and Controlling Function (C) respectively.

The Logical Framework Matrix (LFM)

The “Logical Framework Approach” (LFA) is an analytical process and set of tools used to support objective-oriented project planning and management (European Integration Office 2011, p. 10). It was originally developed by the US Agency of International Development (USAID) for overseas project activities in the early 1970s. Today, it is being used by donor organizations, multilateral or bilateral agencies, as well as international NGOs and governmental agencies around the world in order to effectively manage cooperation and development projects. The EU uses Project Cycle Management (PCM) as its primary set of project design and management tools (European Commission 2004, p. 1) and requires that the LFA be used in all development projects that it funds.

\(^6\) http://gesi.sozphil.uni-leipzig.de/quaem
\(^7\) http://sutoma.eu/
\(^8\) www.ace-amsterdam.org
The different planning steps included in the logical framework approach are summarized and distilled into a "logical framework matrix" (LFM or "logframe"). This matrix includes a hierarchy of objectives (from the overall objective down to the individual project activities), a plan for monitoring and controlling the project’s achievements as well as associated risks and assumptions for each level. Figure 2 shows the structure of an LFM and the relationships between each of its levels.

![Logical Framework Matrix Diagram](image)

**Figure 2**  The structure of a logical Framework Matrix (LFM) explained

Using a LFM carries benefits even in cases in which the project donor does not make it a requirement. By forcing project planners to specify SMART objectives (objectives which are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound), the tool prevents the project plan from being too broad, too ambiguous or insufficiently thought through. Through the "temporal logic" linking objectives, outcomes, outputs and activities in the LFM’s vertical dimension, it is a helpful tool to find gaps in the project’s logic. Because of these features, using the LFM for project planning is an early reality-check for projects. In addition, the fact that the LFM links objectives to indicators means that it creates the basis for an outcome-oriented evaluation and monitoring of the project results once the project has started.

A downside of the LFM is that it requires a good understanding of the Matrix’s internal logic as well as of indicator-development for which some training is usually required. It also requires regular updating to

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9 For an overview, see European Integration Office (2011).

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Using the LFM for project planning is an early reality-check for projects

Using the LFM requires training
accommodate justified changes to the project plan. Overall, the LFM, however, can greatly enhance the quality of the project and be a very helpful tool for both project management and project quality assurance on which many other tools can be based.

**Quality policy document**

The aim of a quality policy document is to establish common principles with regard to the cooperation in the partnership, the quality of the deliverables produced, and the working spirit guiding the activities in the project. It represents a commitment that partners make towards each other. It is therefore a “psychological contract” that is intended to facilitate future cooperation in the project. Usually, the document contains commitments on punctuality, reliability, proactiveness, openness, rules for dealing with conflict, accepting constructive criticism, asking questions if points are not clear, and working together in good faith. To reach its maximum effectiveness, a quality policy document should be developed jointly during the project kick-off meeting.

**Evaluations of Events**

Conducting evaluations of all meetings, workshops, and other events conducted within the framework of the project should be the basic stock of any QA approach. Evaluations take place at the end or after a meeting and can be conducted by pen and paper or via an online survey. Evaluations of events serve a number of purposes.

On the one hand, evaluations of events can help to gather information about organizational aspects (e.g. the quality of accommodation, information that was sent prior to the meetings, the quality of meals), content aspects (feedback on different activities during the meeting) and leisure aspects (such as the social programme). Gathering this information from the participants will help to improve and ensure the quality of future meetings. A second and perhaps even more important benefit is that evaluating events permits gathering feedback on the intended outcomes of the meeting. Whether the purpose of the meeting was project coordination or capacity building, evaluations of events allow to gather feedback from participants to what degree these objectives have been attained. Lastly, conducting evaluations of events shows the participants that their opinion is important and valued. For this to be effective, it is imperative that the results of the evaluation are shared with the participants and that it is made clear which consequences are drawn from these results. To be consistent, every meeting should be evaluated and every evaluation is summarized for all partners, along with findings and recommendations.
Regular Project Planning and Monitoring Meetings with the Project Coordinator

If the project coordinator’s role is the overall responsibility for the good implementation of the project and the QA partner’s role is to advise, facilitate and control, then regular communication between the two is essential.

With the wide availability of free video-conferencing tools such as Skype or Google Hangouts, screen-sharing applications such as Teamviewer or Skype, and online collaboration tools such as Etherpad or Google documents there are few technological barriers to effective online meetings. In a typical 3-year project, a meeting frequency of around once per month has proven to be effective. To make the most use of planning and monitoring meetings, all partners who are currently coordinating activities should be invited.

As with any goal-oriented meeting, an agenda should be drafted beforehand. Minutes should be taken during the meeting and circulated among all partners afterwards. The role of the QA partner during these meetings is primarily to advise and to assure that activities are planned in such a way that the project’s goals are realized.

Monitoring visits to project beneficiaries

In international cooperation projects, project partners are usually geographically dispersed and project meetings are organized in locations which can be reached easily by the majority of partners. The project’s objectives, however, are implemented in the beneficiary countries. In order to develop an in-depth understanding of the situation on-ground, it is highly advisable that the project coordinator and QA partner familiarize themselves on-ground with the state of implementation. During the monitoring visit, the QA partner should verify the correct use of purchased equipment, the use of dissemination materials, and other practical aspects of the project.

While a monitoring visit is primarily related to project controlling, a second purpose is building commitment for the project. To maximize a visit’s effect, the coordinator and QA partner should try to meet with as many partners as possible, preferably on the premises where the project is being implemented. Usually, only some of the staff working on the project can travel to consortium meetings. Therefore, a lot of people are engaged in the project but never have a clear image of whom they are working with. Visiting the project partners – also those located outside of capital cities – can help to convey appreciation, engage the operational staff in a dialogue about a project and their working conditions, as well as build mutual understanding, trust and commitment.
Project progress survey

There are a number of ways for a QA partner to monitor project progress. All "objective" measures, however, (such as activities that have been implemented or milestones that have been reached) suffer from one characteristic: They can only assess what has already taken place, and therefore do not provide any information about the likelihood of future success. Since there is no objective data on the future, the project progress survey asks the project participants about how confident they feel that the project will reach its objectives. These project objectives should be derived from the Logical Framework Matrix. Conducting a project progress survey at regular intervals (e.g. every six months) also allows to monitor changes in confidence in the project over time. This helps to identify problematic areas early on. The survey should be conducted anonymously. It should include open questions about potential problematic areas. As with any evaluation, the results of the survey should be analysed and then shared among all project partners. The collected information should be included in the Project Progress Report.

Average expectation towards completion of the selected categories (2014 vs. 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students will be competently and actively involved in the quality assurance (accreditation) system of Moldova.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students will be actively involved in the quality management of my university.</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic staff will be involved in the quality management at my university.</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QA staff at my university will be qualified to conduct self-evaluation processes and prepare accreditation processes.</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QA staff at my university will be qualified and be in a position to help improve the quality at my university.</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality management at my university will be functional and well-integrated in university processes.</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3 Example of project progress survey results on confidence in goal attainment for a TEMPUS project
Project Progress Report

Giving a regular update on project progress is a core responsibility of the QA partner in international cooperation projects. A Project Progress Report should contain information on all aspects which are relevant to project success. It should provide answers to the following questions:

- What is the progress of the implementation of activities within the project?
- To what degree has the project reached its objectives?
- Which problems could hinder the project from reaching its objectives?
- What would need to be done, in order to overcome these problems?

A Project Progress Report summarize all information available to the QA partner. It should therefore include the results of the evaluations of workshops, the project progress surveys, the monitoring meetings, any informal conversations and the professional judgment of the QA partner. For a typical three-year project it is recommended to compile a project progress report every 6 months.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Project Objective/s</th>
<th>Indicators of progress (based on LFM)</th>
<th>Information from formative assessment and reports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the specific objectives, against project plans achieved?</td>
<td>What are the quantitative and qualitative measures showing whether and to what extent the project’s specific objectives were achieved?</td>
<td>Current, in addition to being focused on the self-evaluation and the accreditation process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Make the internal QA Offices of the Moldovan HEIs functional</td>
<td>Nominated and recruited QA Office staff members; existing infrastructures and buildings exist; equality management and improvement processes to be implemented; accreditation self-evaluation conducted; initial framework in development;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4 part of a Project Progress Report based on the LFM, including data from project progress survey (under “partner assessment”)
5. Conclusion

As this compact overview has shown, quality assurance in international projects should be more than mere box-ticking of fulfilled deliverables. Having a designated quality assurance partner who keeps her eyes set on the project’s objectives can make a significant contribution to the project’s overall quality. In order to realize its full potential all four functions of QA – Planning Support, Advising, facilitating, and controlling – should be kept in mind. Project coordinators, QA partners, and external consultants can profit from the QA tools that were presented in this paper. Each of these tools serves one or several functions and should be used to support the project in reaching its intended objectives.

The paper, however, has also shown that the task should not be taken lightly. QA partners need to be adequately qualified to fulfil their role to its full benefit. Experience, analytical thinking and excellent social and intercultural skills cannot be replaced by any survey or evaluation report. Lastly, it should be said that every project is a team effort. Dedicated QA can help to keep focus on project outcomes, identify problems, and help to find solutions, but in the end it is the focus of the project coordinator and the good communication and collaboration among all partners that use this feedback to improve the quality of their project. This short overview is intended to help projects by providing a framework and ideas of how a competent QA partner can contribute to reach useful results and work towards their sustainability once the project has ended.

References


Biographies:

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