

The Language Centre at SEEU: A role model in the Higher Education Area in the Balkans

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Abstract: The Language Centre (LC) was founded in 2001 and was the first independent unit to provide instruction within South East European University (SEEU). It provides language services to all SEEU students. Its 20 well-equipped classrooms, CELTA Centre and the Language Resource Centre (LaRC) are designed to meet the educational needs of the students, staff and the community as well as create an environment that is conducive to learning.

Language study is a central part of every SEEU student's academic career, both as required subjects and as optional elective courses. Part of the University's mission is to promote a multilingual approach to learning, stressing both the importance of local and international languages. The Language Centre has the crucial role in achieving this goal. The primary function of the Centre is to provide courses specified in the curricula of the five faculties. This includes courses such as Basic English Skills as well as ESP faculty-dependent courses. Due to these requirements and student interest, the LC is the largest teaching organization at the University.

The Language Centre as an integral part of the SEEU, implements a number of well-established, institution-wide quality procedures, which are intended to have a positive impact on the standards of learning and teaching. These include: Teaching Observation Procedure, an annual Student Evaluation Survey, a performance management process for staff linked to professional development and an LC cycle of strategic planning, linked both to internal and LC Specific external evaluation. In developing these procedures, the University and the Centre have drawn on international quality assurance guidelines, trends and good practice in order to develop effective approaches to quality within a specific educational and national context.

Key words: Language Centre, language courses, quality assurance, assessment

Abstrakt: Jazykové centrum (LC) bylo založeno v roce 2001 a bylo první samostatnou jednotkou poskytující výuku v rámci South-East European University (SEEU). Poskytuje jazykové služby všem studentům SEEU. Jeho 20 dobře vybavených učeben, centrum CELTA a Centrum jazykových zdrojů (LaRC) jsou navrženy tak, aby vytvářely prostředí napomáhající studiu.

Součástí poslání univerzity je podporovat mnohojazyčný přístup ke studiu s důrazem jak na místní, tak na mezinárodní jazyky. Jazykové centrum hraje v dosažení tohoto cíle klíčovou roli. Jako integrální součást SEEU zavádí po celé instituci velký počet osvědčených, kvalitních postupů, jejichž záměrem je pozitivně ovlivňovat úroveň studia a výuky. Tyto zahrnují: metodu pozorování výuky, každoroční průzkum evaluace studentů, proces řízení výkonu zaměstnanců spojený s profesionálním rozvojem a cyklus strategického plánování LC, spojený jak s interním, tak se specifickým externím hodnocením LC.

Při vývoji těchto postupů univerzita a centrum čerpaly z mezinárodních a kvalitou zaručujících směrnic, trendů a praxe za účelem vyvinutí efektivních přístupů ke kvalitě v rámci specifického vzdělávacího a národního kontextu.

Introduction

The Language Centre (LC) of SEEU was founded in 2001 as the first independent teaching unit. Its core activity is to provide obligatory language courses for the five faculties currently operating within the university, such as Business and Economics, Public Administration and Political Sciences, Law, Computer Sciences and Languages, Cultures and Communications. These language courses include Basic English Skills starting with the Elementary (A2) level up to Intermediate (B2) as well as English for Academic Purposes (i.e. Upper-intermediate (C1) and Advanced (C2)) and English for Specific Purposes for all faculties.

SEEU operates in three languages: English, Albanian and Macedonian and language skills development within a multi-lingual society is a central part of every SEEU student's academic career profile, both as required subjects and as optional elective courses. The LC plays a central role in achieving this goal. It offers its students, university staff and the community the opportunity to acquire foreign languages in a friendly and comfortable environment, using the latest learning theories, methods and other materials in combination with new technology. LC is the largest teaching organization at the University, with more than three quarters of the entire student population taking classes there at any given time. In figures, this is approximately 2500 students.

LC was evaluated externally in October 2014 under very specific terms of reference. The results of this evaluation showed a very well developed organizational structure and high quality teaching and learning opportunities for SEEU students, provided by qualified and committed staff. Nonetheless, its performance and viability is constantly under the scrutiny of the university authorities.

The main reason for such treatment is the fact that in the present times of financial crisis and budget constraints, the most convenient and the least painful course of action for the university management may be to restrict language programmes, especially bearing in mind that the Language Centre does not offer degree programmes.

As in most cases at different universities, the SEEU LC does not have its own students. Therefore, its existence depends on the good will of other Faculties which devote some of their credits to languages. Fortunately, the present University management can see the value of learning languages and its benefits for raising student profile and competitiveness and provides ongoing support, especially with regard to the English programme, which contributes to the internationalization strategy as well as the employability of its graduates.

The departmental quality framework for the Language Centre at SEEU has well established processes. At enrolment at SEEU, all students are placed in appropriate levels based on their results on the institutional placement test with only

one exception: native speakers of Macedonian are all beginners in Albanian. The placement test does not have an eliminatory character; it only determines the level of students. This and the fact that there is no preparatory year result in very mixed abilities language groups especially in the English programme and in the more advanced levels. This issue is expected to be addressed by differentiated teaching and some movement between groups in semester.

The English programme is the broadest one since all students are required to take English courses in the first four semesters. They must complete level 4 before having the opportunity of entering a subject oriented English for Specific Purposes (ESP) class. Students who are tested out as having the required proficiency above Level 4 take Academic English in semester 1 and Advanced Academic English in semester 2 before starting ESP.

There are clearly defined and appropriately varied criteria according to which students can receive a passing grade from the language courses: attendance, participation, presentation or project, speaking and writing skills evaluation, quizzes, final exam; these are all grading components. For speaking and writings skills evaluation, the students are fully informed of and have the opportunity to practice with the published rubrics. What is more, the final exams are cross moderated in order to achieve greater objectivity.

Nevertheless, it does happen that some students achieve a passing grade and are promoted into the next level and eventually complete the language requirements, but actually have still lower proficiency especially in productive skills. Alternatively, more often, students finish with all other professional exams and cannot graduate because of the language exams and then there is a lot of pressure from the Deans' Offices to lower the criteria and enable such students to take their diplomas.

In both cases, there is a lot of responsibility for the LC teachers and their courses, not least because there is a view held by many Faculty staff and other stakeholders that students will be fluent in the languages that they have learnt at SEEU after completing four semesters of obligatory language skills study. Despite these pressures and limitations, a recent study conducted among former SEEU students, examining the influence of classroom communication on student commitment to university (Kareva, 2011), showed that all the interviewed students identified the English programme as the most positive experience and the biggest strength of the SEEU, which is another indication of the value of the LC for the University in general.

Excellence in Language Learning

The Language Centre (LC), as an integral part of the South East European University (SEEU) implements a number of well-established, institution-wide quality procedures, which are intended to have a positive impact on the standards of learning and teaching. In developing these procedures, the University and Centre have drawn on international quality assurance guidelines, trends and best practices in order to develop effective approaches to quality within a specific educational and national context. The Centre remains focused on the effectiveness of its language skills programmes, on developing its staff within the subject discipline and on maintaining a sustainable position and structure within the University. This is at a time of rapid change and expansion of higher education in the country and in a period of economic and social transition. It is a complex setting with benefits and challenges.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the relative value of being part of an integrated institutional structure and specifically, what changes the internal quality enhancement procedures have made, both at individual teacher and LC level. We analyse how far institutional-wide processes have been applicable and valuable to the LC and whether there has been an impact on LC staff in their awareness and/or commitment to quality enhancement. We hope that the results of these findings will contribute to a greater understanding of the value of quality assurance procedures for Language Centres as well as to identifying what makes such processes successful.

Speaking about quality in language education, Crabbe (2003) suggests taking into consideration three parallel domains of enquiry: theoretical – which is about the conditions that have to be met in order for language learning to occur; cultural – context oriented enquiry into current teaching practice in any context, and management enquiry – how to establish and ensure good practice. This author further refers to a TESOL standard framework in which a set of quality indicators are proposed.

“The indicators cover a number of dimensions of programme design and management: planning; Curriculum (in the sense of course specifications); instruction (learning activities); recruitment, intake, and orientation; retention and transition; assessment and learner gains; staffing, professional development, and staff evaluation; and support services.” (Crabbe 2003: 25).

The findings of the report on what constitutes quality in language learning in adult education from the European Commission (August, 2010), which aimed to identify and compare the views of both learners and teachers on this matter, revealed that in different countries, there were some common ideas of what high-quality teacher and a high-quality learning experience should be like. Therefore, the most important aspects for teachers were that they knew their subject well;

they were encouraging, supportive, approachable, able to explain things clearly and well prepared. In addition, both students and teachers agreed that the learning was best when students understood the aim of the lesson and how it was helping them to learn, knew well how they were progressing and had clear instructions.

This is all in line with the recommendations from other authors about good teaching practices in higher education (Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall, 2003; Kember, 2007; Ramsden, 2008). The principles of good teaching recommended by Kember (2007) in his book, *Enhancing University Teaching* can apply to quality language teaching as well. They refer to creating curricula that meet students' needs, using real life examples and relating theory to practice, students' active engagement in the teaching and learning process, motivating students through organizing interesting and enjoyable classes, consideration of their needs when planning programmes and courses, flexible lesson plans based on students' feedback and assessment which is consistent with the desired learning outcomes.

It can be concluded that quality language learning is not very dissimilar from quality learning in any other discipline. There are certain specificities that are exclusive to language learning such as those related to the biological processes of how people acquire languages and which are different from the way they learn spatial orientation, but the general framework of quality in education in terms of creating learning opportunities that lead to best learning practices are broadly comparable for all fields. This provides a basis on which the implementation and evaluation of shared quality processes are of relevance and value to language centres as well as other academic units within institutions.

National and institutional perspective

Considerations of what constitutes high-quality language learning are influenced by the context of the country and institution. The Republic of Macedonia (RM), a former republic of Yugoslavia, has been undergoing many reforms in all spheres of its existence since its independence in 1991. The country received the candidate status for membership in the European Union in 2005. This status generated a process which has required considerable change in order to be able to meet the requirements of integration into the European family. The new reality meant free exchange of goods and services, but also exchange of ideas and mobility of intellectual potential. It also meant much wider exposure to international standards and quality expectations.

The political, social, economic and educational transition combined with more general trends such as massification had a significant impact on higher education in the country with the introduction of new and often revised laws and reforms. Moreover, even earlier than its aspiration for membership status in 2003, Macedo-

nia became one of the countries that committed themselves to following and realizing the recommendations of the Bologna Process and the aim of creating a unified European Higher Education Area. As stated in the Strategy for Educational Development 2010–2015 of the Ministry of Education of RM, besides the regular efforts for raising the quality of the study programmes and their efficiency, these guidelines from Bologna required activities for educational restructuring which would be transparent, competitive, compatible and recognizable on the European market of academic services.

Thus, one of the aims of the Ministry of Education in cooperation with the Universities in the country, as stated in its Strategy, was to increase the number of highly educated people who would be able to carry on the reforms in other spheres and at the same time be competitive on the global educational market. In order to meet this aim, the government pursued a strategy of dispersion, that is, by opening one new state University and/or Faculties in almost every urban area. At the same time, the tuition fee at state universities was lowered, in order to make higher education more accessible.

Macedonia today has slightly more than 2 million inhabitants (2 052 722, as of 31. 12. 2009, State Statistical Office of RM), 19 higher education institutions with 99 faculties, both state and private. Nine years ago, there were only two state universities. The same daily newspaper cited data from the Open Society Institute and reported that in the last five years in Macedonia, the number of students has almost doubled from 48.252 to over 70.000 (Dnevnik, August 24, 2010).

As a private public, not-for-profit institution, the Southeast European University is faced with disloyal competition from the state universities. Moreover, student fees are a main source of income for the university and only a limited number of people can afford to pay these in the present situation of economic crisis. Studying at the state universities is very cheap. However, enrolment numbers have remained sustainable and quality and reputation are determining factors for the university's success. This is the national context in which the SEEU operates.

Institutionally, SEEU operates its academic activities from two teaching premises, the main campus in Tetovo and its satellite campus in the capital city, Skopje, which is 40 kilometres away. It is now in its fourteenth year of operation with more than 7500 students and 3300 graduates. Since the establishment of its campus in Tetovo in October 2001, it has established itself as a quality-focused, financially sustainable university regarded as a good model for multi-ethnic, multi-lingual higher education in South East Europe. This is important in a multi-ethnic country within a region with a history of conflict and community tension. There are five Faculties and two Centres within the University: Law, Business and Economy, Computer Science and Technology, Public Administration and Political Science, Languages, Cultures and Communication, as well as the Language and IT

Centres. The University has modelled its provision on the Bologna guidelines and standards, and sought to use international trends and good practice in shaping its offer. It has been evaluated twice as part of the EUA's Institutional Evaluation Programme and benefitted from positive and constructive reporting from these processes. The Language Centre (LC) was fully involved in this process. At the core of SEEU's mission are the aims of excellence, equity, transparency and efficiency. The University strives for the highest quality in every faculty and department; it sees quality improvement as both an individual and collective responsibility and a continuous process, which recognizes achievement as well as necessary areas for improvement.

Internal Quality Measures

Given the specific field of language learning, and international, national and institutional contexts, we decided to evaluate the benefits and challenges of a Language Centre being integrated with university-wide quality processes, and to analyse what changes these procedures have made, at both individual teacher and LC level. In addition to this, our aim was to examine how far institution-wide processes have been applicable and valuable to the LC and whether there has been an impact on LC staff in their awareness and/or commitment to quality enhancement. Our conclusions were drawn from an evaluation of these procedures, a comparison of LC data over a period of time and an investigation into Centre staff perceptions.

Our analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of being more rather than less integrated into the structure, decision making and quality assurance mechanisms of an institution indicates that on balance, there is more value than challenge in this position. Through a high level of integration, the LC has gained recognition and status at management level, and developed positive liaison with the Faculties whose students we teach. The Centre Director is a member of the Rector's Council and can initiate discussion on relevant issues directly with senior management and Faculty Deans. Regular liaison with the University Provost provides support for efficient scheduling of classes, especially embedded ESP provision and more importantly, matters of core funding and entrepreneurial initiatives.

The annual requirement for departmental strategic and operational Action Planning, including the LC, ensures that the Centre's strengths and areas for development within the institutional context are clearly identified and agreed on. There is still sufficient autonomy in operational decision making and in field specific issues such as curriculum, structure of classes and assessment.

The integrated structure provides an opportunity for the LC to be more fully represented at all levels of the institution and to have good working links. It also offers the opportunity not only to share good practice but also to lead on some

quality initiatives such as the improvement of teaching and learning and provision of training faculty in student centred learning approaches. In a EUA publication, Surcock, (2011:18), notes that, “professionally-staffed centres that support teaching and learning are still a rarity which will require attention in the years ahead”. The Language Centre at SEEU has taken a very helpful role in providing such support, with positive evaluation.

The present task is to ensure that inappropriate or barely relevant mechanisms, which are incompatible with language learning are not imposed on the Centre and that LC needs are not forgotten or ignored. Furthermore, it is a challenge to make certain that being more visible does not equate with being easier to re-structure or remove. So far, the active involvement and representation of the LC has allowed it to continue and develop with good success within general constraints.

Teaching observation

The teaching observation procedure has been implemented for four years and provides the opportunity for every member of staff to be observed by two colleagues during a class and to receive feedback and a report on their performance. Since at least one observer is a trained language specialist, the process has applicability to the Centre. The procedure draws on the concept of developing ‘pedagogical competence’ which is applicable for all academic and skills staff in higher education and includes a focus on student learning, clear development over time and a reflective (scientific) attitude (Olsson, Martensson, Roxa, 2010). The fact that the individual results are also used positively as part of the staff evaluation process and in targeted training gives added value.

The Language Centre has almost 100% compliance with the procedure over this period and summary data from these observation reports, which include judgments on learning, teaching, class management, resources and monitoring of learning, show steady improvement in the quality of the experience teachers provide in the classroom, with some fluctuation.

From the analysis of individual observation reports and the Full Year Teaching Observation Reports issued twice yearly to all academic staff and students from the Quality Office, it is clear that this internal quality assurance procedure has obviously added value to the effectiveness of the LC, contributing to ensuring that staff are ‘qualified and competent’ to teach (EUA, 2005). The summary results are debated actively, both within the Language Centre and at the Rector’s Council and this strengthens the focus on total quality culture. Language Centre staff also make active suggestions about improving the procedure, particularly in the area of standardization of judgments, which has resulted in revising some aspects of the procedure.

Student involvement in and evaluation of QA

Another internal quality enhancement process that encompasses the Language Centre as an independent academic unit within University is the annual Student Evaluation Survey in which students are asked to evaluate anonymously their courses, teachers, their own study commitment as well as the administration, resources and environment of the University. For the academic departments, the results are provided from the Quality Office to every teacher and confidentially to the Deans/Director. Summary data is also provided at departmental and University level, with annual data and trends over time. The questions are generally applicable, although LC staff argue that additional or different questions could make the survey more useful to the Centre.

There is a satisfactory completion rate by students for LC provision (62%) although there is a recognized need to develop different mechanisms in order to involve students more effectively in the evaluation of learning and teaching which could include a more LC specific focus.

The results are very useful for considering strengths and weaknesses. The comparative data for the LC through years demonstrate a noticeable positive upward trend in student satisfaction. The results also show variation in levels of satisfaction for different aspects which are the subject of team comment and action as applicable. Staff may compare their departmental data with other Faculties, which adds to the status of the Centre, especially with the positive scores. Individual results are also added to the evidence for the staff evaluation procedure, providing for individual reflection and stronger performance management.

Staff assessment

Finally, both the individual observation reports and Student Evaluation results are included as relevant evidence in the annual Staff Evaluation Process in which each member of staff writes their own evaluation of their achievements and needed areas of development and receives a report from their manager, in this case, the LC Director. This is followed by a reflective, individual discussion with the mutual identification of specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely (SMART) targets for the following academic year, including professional development and work-related new initiatives.

The Quality Office's monitoring of the evaluation reports indicate 100% compliance with formal, written aspects, and more importantly, that the appraisal meetings have been used well in order to enhance the quality of the LC and its staff. There has been a focus on recognizing achievement and on continuous improvement. The Centre provided evidence that targeted training had resulted from this process, both on an individual and team level, with good follow-up. This process

is applicable to all staff without the need for any adaption. The feedback from staff meetings with the Director and/or Quality Advisor has been broadly positive of the process. Evidence is also used in applications for academic promotion, as applicable.

Teachers' survey

In order to see what the Language Centre teachers think of the quality procedures, whether they have an impact on their own perceptions and quality culture and if yes what it is, a questionnaire was given to them. It comprised of 15 Likert scale questions on the influence of the different quality procedures mentioned under the three previous subheadings at University, Language Centre and individual level, as well as the influence of both external guidelines (Bologna processes, External evaluation) and national framework (the Law on Higher Education of RM).

SEEU Language Centre has 24 full-time teachers out of whom 21 are English teachers and 3 are Macedonian. It has a few teachers of other languages, including Albanian, the other local language, but they do not have a full-time status at the LC. 20 teachers (83%) responded to the questionnaire: 19 English and 1 Macedonian, all employed by the Centre, ethnic Albanian and Macedonian, no international staff members. All of them have significant teaching experience at the University and are familiarized with the quality procedures. According to the Law on higher education in the country, their minimum educational level is an MA degree. The majority of the examined teachers are doctoral candidates.

Results of the Teacher's survey

With regard to the external and national quality guidelines/initiatives, 85% (slightly higher for external) agree that there is a positive impact on the Centre and its staff. Over 60% believe that University wide procedures add value when applied to the LC. Sixty five % of the LC teachers are more aware about the quality than 2 years ago. There is 50% positive support from the teachers for the External Review for improving quality. Very high, 85% of them value constructively the positive effect of the Teaching Observation Process. Regarding the Student Evaluation Survey, 55% believe that it has a positive influence on individual level and more (63%) on the Centre level. Annual Staff Evaluation is believed to have a very high positive impact on the individual level (90%) although 35% of the teachers are sceptical about its influence at Centre's level. Finally, a very high number of teachers (90% for individual and 87.5% for the Centre) are certain about the positive contribution of the institution-wide staff professional development and training. The same applies to the action planning – 77.5% of the LC teachers think that it is useful for improving quality.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that a variety of quality enhancement strategies, both external and institutional, support quality enhancement. The integration of the Centre in utilizing University wide processes is positive, applicable, although should be capable of adaptation, and contributes towards status improvement. Having both Centre specific and general procedures adds value in the eyes of the staff and adds weight to the information gathered.

Data collected from these instruments show steady positive impact. Another contribution is the fact that this information can be further used for reflective discussions and targeted improvement. Teachers should be reflective about what and how they teach and very often their educational experiences provide little room for thinking, creativity, questioning, exploration, or risk-taking that seem so vital in developing intellectual habits and practices of learning and inquiry. In this respect, the use of evaluative information from different integrated procedures supports individual staff and their development. Quality is a continuous process, requiring sustained reflection and awareness: all parties involved in it should be innovative, adaptable, active, engaged and efficient. In this respect, some of the principles of the quality framework recommended by Munn (2009: 33) developed for the University of Manchester, can be applied universally: "Processes should be collective, reflective and respectful, not confrontational; they are based on dialogue, listening and support, not paperwork, policing and punishment."

Individual comments from the survey also demonstrate a progressive effect of the quality processes, but they point out that these processes should be continuously revised and adapted in order to be applicable to different situations and settings. As Lim (2001) points out, even though teachers know their performance has to be assessed, they will still be uncomfortable about it, unless they are able to participate in it, and influence the outcomes. Nonetheless, steady regular procedures have benefits for all.

As a result of the different quality initiatives, the awareness about quality culture among staff has arisen. This especially because of the fact that, as pointed out by Morley, (2003, cited by Vetorri, 2012), "Academics in particular have been very reluctant to engage with management schemes and procedures which they found overly bureaucratic and demotivating." And indeed, discussions and feedback do prove this attitude; teachers very often complain that the quality procedures are very formal and inflexible and do not correspond to the dynamism of active, practical ethos of a language centre. In spite of the reluctance, teachers still claim that they have become more aware of the quality than they used to be and gradually accept the different procedures as a part of their everyday working engagements. It further means promotion of the existing best practices and values at the Centre and the University in general.

Discussion

From the analysis and results provided at the SEEU Language Centre, some key questions may be considered as relevant:

1. How does a Language Centre function within the framework of the institution it is part of and what level of integration best ensures the quality and sustainability of their provision?
2. How do Language Centres develop and sustain effective strategies which are significant?
3. How do institutions and all their departments make sure they have noteworthy tools and practices used to implement these strategies?
4. Do all stakeholders (teachers, students, parents, administration, University management, the community) benefit from these tools and in what way? It must not be the case that quality instruments are used only because this is forced by the Law.
5. Are data gathered in this way carefully monitored and compared in order to be used for further planning and action?

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire on the impact of quality procedures on learning and teaching in the Language Centre

5 = strongly agree; 4 = agree; 3 = neutral; 2 = disagree; 1 = strongly disagree

1. The Observation procedure has had a positive impact on my teaching.
2. The Observation procedure has had a positive impact on LC quality.
3. The Student Evaluation Survey has had no impact on improving my teaching.
4. The Student Evaluation Survey has had no impact on improving LC quality.
5. Annual Staff Evaluation supports my improvement and development.
6. Annual Staff Evaluation supports LC improvement and development.
7. The Annual LC Action Plan is a useful tool for quality enhancement.
8. The LC Professional development program improves QLT.
9. The LC Professional development program improves my teaching.
10. The external review program enhanced QLT in the LC.
11. These university wide procedures are not applicable to the LC.
12. University wide procedures add value when applied in the LC.
13. External quality guidelines/ trends/ good practice enhance QLT in the LC.
14. National quality initiatives are useful in enhancing QLT in the LC.
15. I am more aware about quality enhancement than I was 1 year ago.
Explain:

Bionote

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