

# Professional development and enhancement of the teaching quality: how to integrate individual and institutional actions ?

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## Abstract

The Swiss Higher Education quality system integrates the professional development of the professors as an essential component. As a consequence, the teachers' professional development strategy and activities of each institution are part of its quality management process. What does this integration mean? What could be the relationship between the teaching professional development and the HE teaching quality management system? How could teachers and institution take advantage of both processes? Each institution could develop its own answers. In our contribution, after a clarification of concepts of professional development and quality of teaching, we provide a short description of the University of Fribourg Professional development system and analyse the relations between individual and team professional development and the teaching quality management. Doing so we describe some of our "what works" results but also issues and challenges for the future.

**Keywords** : teaching, professional development, supporting and engaging teachers, quality teaching at the institutional level

## 1. Introduction

The Swiss HE quality system integrates the professional development of the professors as an essential component. A quality standard focused on professional development is part of the quality audit visits carried out by the Centre of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss Universities (OAQ)<sup>1</sup>. As a consequence, the professional development program of each HE institution is part of its quality management strategy. But, has this relationship between individual professional development and institutional quality management a sense?

These quotes show that this relationship is not at all easy either for quality experts or professors.

- A quality expert : « *The imposition of quality had more to do with managing mass higher education than with organizational and professional development* » (Morley, 2003. p. 49)

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.oaq.ch/pub/en/01\\_00\\_00\\_home.php](http://www.oaq.ch/pub/en/01_00_00_home.php)

- A professor : « *The most important challenge for the quality system in which teaching quality is included is to find practices that are meaningful for all the actors involved* » (adapted from Gorga, 2009).

Although the discourse focusing on enhancement, improvement and individual accountability is hard to contest, relationships between institutional evaluation and measures and individual practices and development remains difficult to reach.

In our contribution, after a clarification of concepts of professional development and quality of teaching, we provide a short description of the University of Fribourg Professional development system and analyse the relations between individual and team professional development and the teaching quality management. Doing so we raise some issues and challenges that need to be dealt with in order to foster the dialog between actors and to contribute to building a meaningful system acceptable to a majority.

## **2. Change and professional development: clarification of concepts**

According to (C. Day, 1999) teachers' professional development includes « .. *All natural learning experiences and those conscious planned activities which are intended to be of direct or indirect benefit to the individual, group or school and which contribute through these, to the quality of education in the classroom.* » and « *is the process by which, alone and with others, teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents* » (Christopher Day, 1999, p.4)

- **Professional development, professional learning and changing practices**

In this definition teachers' professional development is related with professional learning in natural settings. This vision largely accepted in research on professional development is rarely implemented in practice. Nowadays, most institutions are still offering traditional training programs focused on contents or techniques (Webster-Wright, 2009). Following Webster many possible reasons exist to explain this situation "*They range from the problematic nature of a bureaucratic contexts for many professionals through professional issues such as time pressure and stress at work to problems in introducing changes in such change-weary time*"(Webster-Wright, 2009, p. 704).

Furthermore, these reasons explain also why such professional development programs fail. Other related reasons are that they don't take enough into account what motivates teachers to engage in professional development.

Taking into account these issues, our professional development program is grounded on iterative needs analysis and offers different activities to support relations with practices (communities of practices, implementation or evaluation of new methods, curriculum designs, peers' coaching). The section 2 of this contribution will illustrate these options.

- **Professional development, professional learning and teaching quality**

At the end of her recent review on professional development Webster-Wright gives some reasons to understand the gap between professional development and the management of the quality of teaching at institutional level. *“Much of the researches reported here reveals most professionals as enthusiastic learners who want to improve their practice. Let us listen to their experience and work to support, not hinder their learning rather than deny, seek to control, or standardize the complexity and diversity of professional learning experiences, let us accept, celebrate and develop insights from these experiences to support professionals as they continue to learn”*.(Webster-Wright, 2009, p. 728)

Why on the contrary is management of teaching so often related to control and standardization imposed top down?

A first reason could be related to the shift between the layers at which teaching quality is considered. Professional development and professional learning are often envisaged at the individual level although teaching quality management is envisaged at the departmental or institutional levels. Is it possible at this level to manage quality following the advices of Webster-Wright *“listening to the professional experiences in order to support learning”* ?

A second reason is related to the definition of quality as such. In the literature, two conceptions of quality are opposed. The first one is essentialist and the other one is multidimensional or systemic (Gorga, 2009). In the essentialist conception, quality is related to the specific nature of something and is recognized by the individuals. The vision of Webster could be related to this vision. It's the teacher who recognizes and tries to enhance the quality of his/her teaching. On the opposite, the institutional management has often adopted a multidimensional approach trying to capture and measure different dimensions of the teaching quality giving an important place to the easiest source of data : the student point of view.

A third reason associated to this multidimensional vision of quality is that the definition of quality and the indicators chosen to evaluate these dimension is a question of power. *“The definition of quality is a question of power owned either by the academy, the economy or the politic”* (Gorga, 2009, p. 28)<sup>2</sup>

Finally a fourth reason that could be determined by the “Owner of quality” is the orientation of quality measurement: a process or a product oriented perspective (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 1995).

To summarize our arguments to understand the gap between professional development and teaching quality management, we could argue that in professional development the quality of teaching is often defined by the teachers themselves and is more focused on the teaching process and at the opposite on a institutional management perspective, quality is defined by the manager of the institution on a multidimensional and standardized perspective. Although this comparison seem rather a caricature, it could help us to understand better some resistances and misunderstanding between actors.

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<sup>2</sup> Author translation

In the following section we first present our Fribourg University Professional Development and teaching management quality system before suggesting some perspectives to fill the gap between the two.

### **3. A practical case: the University of Fribourg professional development and quality teaching management systems**

The Fribourg teachers' professional development system has been built and regulated through needs analysis realised in 2002, 2005 and the last one in 2008. These needs analysis have oriented training activities organised separately for teaching assistants and for professors.

All the activities are guided by main principles, they are :

- Related to practices and projects (personal projects, communities of practices, observations in the classrooms) ;
- Flexible (4 programs :introduction, certificate, diploma, « à la carte » modules)
- Opened to : experts, and inputs from other programs
- Bilingual
- Enhanced through the uses of ICT

As an illustration, this year (2008-2009), we initiated Communities of Practices (CoPs) for professors. To design these CoPs, decide the subjects to be discussed, the timing etc.. we realised 40 interviews of professors and organised group discussions on topics considered as very important for them i.e. the use of teaching evaluation results through students questionnaire, the plagiarism or the animation of academic teams.

Since 2002, we carried out evaluative researches to describe and analyse some effects on individuals and groups (Charlier, B., & Platteaux, H. (2005). Rossier Morel, A. et Charlier, B. (2006). Charlier, B. et Moura A. (2006) :

- Did@cTIC certificate and diploma are chosen by assistants and lecturers to :
  - ^ Acquire certification useful for their career
  - ^ Become more confident in their own teaching skills
  - ^ Be recognized as teachers
- Several individual and team projects useful for the programs and departments were produced
- A lot of data on « best practices » have been shared through the did@cTIC communities of practices and individually reused.

Although we counted more than a thousand of participations of teaching assistants, we observed very little participation of university professors in these professional development activities. After a short presentation of the University of Fribourg teaching quality management system, we'll try to understand this situation.

The University of Fribourg teaching quality management system has been grounded on an explicit and systemic conceptual model addressing dimensions considered to intervene in the teaching quality. This scientific framework is considered by its author as a necessary characteristic of such a system (Donzallaz, 2007). Thus the evaluation concept is integral.

That means that evaluation is not confined - as that is often the case in the universities – to the field of teaching (evaluation of the courses), but considers all the activities in the University (academic units, teaching and research). Furthermore, evaluations of teaching or academic units are not to be considered as a control exerted by higher authorities, but well rather like a participative process supporting continuous improvement of individuals and groups. Thus for example, beside the regular imposed evaluation (on a two years basis) professors can ask for a free course evaluation procedure allowing them to receive a good feedback on different dimensions of their teaching and discuss it with their students.<sup>3</sup>

However, although a survey realised in 2006 (Donzallaz, 2006) indicated that professors wanted to participate in activities related to professional development either individually or collectively why do we have such low participation of professors ?

Although both the professional development concept and the system of evaluation seem appropriate, strength and weaknesses of both systems could bring some interpretation.

Strenghts	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Based on needs analysis</li> <li>■ Related to practices</li> <li>■ Focused on clear aims</li> <li>■ Trying to coordonate efforts on quality and evaluation</li> <li>■ Well developed teaching evaluation system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ relations between professional development activities and the teaching quality evaluation</li> <li>■ internal incentives for teaching quality</li> </ul>

As the strengths are easy to describe, the weaknesses reside not in each system but in their structural or institutional relationships. Since their creation, each office is independent from one another. If this independence has advantages allowing respecting the anonymity and autonomy of each beneficiary (assistant and professors), a closer collaboration is needed for the higher education centre to get meta data analysis on the teaching evaluation results allowing to design better the professional development activities and to provide more incentive to the professors to use the results of the evaluation as a communication means with students and with their colleagues. This year a project will be proposed by the two teams to enable this collaboration

A second weakness is the valorisation of the teaching quality inside the institution. The internal incentives are more focused on research quality than on teaching quality. This is often the case in HE and is related with the traditional opposition between research and teaching and also with the external pressure of competitions between institutions governed by ranking focused mainly on research. Is it possible to build a strategy allowing going beyond this sterile opposition? This question is an important topic of this conference. In our conclusion, we suggest some trends to do so.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.unifr.ch/evaluation/fr/>

## **5. Conclusive discussion: how to fill the gap between professional development and quality management?**

This situation is a good illustration of the need to foster the dialog between actors involved in evaluation and teaching quality. Good concepts or systems are not enough there is a need for dialog between actors but also for the structural possibility for collaboration. It is the reason why, we need to consider a further actor. This actor is the institution which needs to intervene to recognise and valorise teaching quality and to put it into practice.

Coming to the end of this contribution we can highlight some issues, challenges and also opportunities we could use to integrate better professional development as a force to foster teaching quality inside the university.

- Develop a coherent structural approach that takes both actors and structures into account and translates into practice
- Reinforce a real process oriented approach, based on a systemic quality management concept with great emphasis on stakeholder needs
- Use teaching evaluation as a communication tool between students-professors and the institution
- Use teaching evaluation as a means to document a reflective process and to support professional development
- Integrate the concept of professional development in the management of the career of university teachers
- Integrate more informal learning processes through collaborations on concrete projects inside the departments (i.e. programs design and revisions)
- Seek meaning and needs rather than conformity
- Avoid heavy procedures and high workload: « more time to think! ».

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