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## **Covering Letter**

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Dear Madam/Sir

Please find below the paper, “**Shifting Institutional Culture, Promoting Teaching Excellence, Evaluating Progress**” for consideration for publication in the Higher Education Management Journal.

Please let me know if you require any further information.

Yours sincerely

Heather Henshaw

## **Shifting Institutional Culture, Promoting Teaching Excellence, Evaluating Progress**

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### **Abstract**

We describe and evaluate how far a discursive, reflective approach linked to research and the use of an observation procedure has contributed to a shift in teaching, classroom practice and quality culture. In doing this, we have taken into account current trends and developments in quality assurance and the promotion of effective learning and teaching in higher education. We also present an institutional research survey, conducted with a culturally specific setting. The survey analyses staff perceptions and beliefs with regard to their role as teachers, what staff identified as constituting excellence in teaching, how far institutional initiatives have supported quality teaching and whether other factors were perceived to have had a positive influence. This facilitates analysis and debate concerning how change may be fostered at institutional level,

### **Introduction**

High Education institutions have already realized that new trends, demands and developments in this sector require a shift in the quality culture and improvement in learning and teaching. Universities must respond to market requirements, globalization, increased student numbers, funding constraints and calls for greater accountability. These have necessitated increased harmonization and mobility at international level whilst aiming to safeguard standards, improve quality, support diversity and increase transferability and compatibility. At European level, since 1999, the response to these trends has been the establishment of the Bologna Process to facilitate these goals and promote quality assurance, including a focus on quality teaching. There is the expectation that “staff engaged in teaching should be qualified and competent to do so” ENQA Guidelines (2005).

The European Universities’ Association (EUA) Trends V data analysis indicates that “the focus on quality in the Bologna process has certainly raised awareness within higher education institution of the potential benefits and challenges of effective quality assurance and enhancement activities”. It also says that two-thirds of responding universities stated that they had obligatory procedures to evaluate individual teaching staff, with a further 17% having voluntary processes in place. This implies a shift to a more pro-active quality culture and emphasis on good teaching across Europe. However, the section in the Trends V Report on South East European indicates that “effective quality assurance is proving to be an extremely difficult challenge to address...with little activity in this area and with little or no change from Trends 111”.

## **Local and Institutional Context**

The Republic of Macedonia is such a country in political, social, economic and educational transition where some progress has been made with implementing the Bologna Guidelines (the introduction of the ECTS system, a law on study cycles, encouragement of mobility and some work on a common Qualifications Framework). However, there is little or no activity with regard to the quality of teaching and the development of a quality culture. Moreover, the new national law on higher education continues to focus on the value of qualifications in terms of career and reward rather than on a wider range of academic skills, including teaching competency. And there the debate has started: what has traditionally been considered to be quality teaching? What learning experience should a university offer to students? How can we change our academic culture and teaching strategies to provide the best possible learning experience for our students?

Traditionally, good teaching has meant teacher-centered instruction, a focus on knowledge memorization and student responsibility for their own learning. This is the widespread view that “a college is an institution that exists to provide instruction.” Barr and Tagg (1995) However, because of external and internal pressures and developments over time, “subtly but profoundly we are shifting to a new paradigm: a college is an institution that exists to produce learning. This shift changes everything. It is both needed and wanted.” Barr and Tagg (1995)

This shift from providing instruction to producing learning is part of an active process at South East European University (SEEU). Opened only eight years ago as the first private/public University in the country and in response to the need to provide higher education in the Albanian language within a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic environment, the University has sought to combine the best of local and international traditions and initiatives. However, given the educational background of the teaching staff and the fact that some also teach at other, more traditional institutions, many and particularly more experienced teachers have followed the ‘instruction paradigm’. Good teachers are defined as being disciplinary experts, who deliver knowledge by lecturing. This approach linked to a perception that any expert can teach and that being an expert in the field necessarily made you a good teacher. At its extreme, this meant that after earning a PhD, there was nothing more to learn, especially not from people who had lower academic qualifications. Students’ needs, interests and ways of understanding and learning were less important. It was their duty to attend lectures and study and if they could not understand, that was their problem and the result of their attitude or educational background.

## **Institutional Initiatives**

As well as these attitudes, the institution faced similar challenges with regard to issues such as competition, student numbers and developing international standards, guidelines and quality enhancement. These common pressures “form an inescapable background for any discussion of better university teaching.” Ramsden (2008) However, Ramsden is clear that, “external pressures form an inadequate basis for enhancing the quality of teaching. Something else is needed to make teaching better. . . . you must understand what this something is and recognize that every teacher can learn how to do better.” Therefore, the University has engaged in a

number of quality initiatives and approaches with the aim of fostering quality teaching and a culture of reflective debate. We focus here on one institutional approach, one key process and an evaluation survey designed to measure our situation and progress.

Firstly, opportunities for *constructive dialogues* have been created in order to develop a greater awareness, understanding and self-analysis *around the concept of 'excellence in teaching'*. Given that "there cannot be one best way of teaching" Ramsden (2008) or one strategy that is right for all subjects and individuals, many authors have nevertheless suggested definitions and key characteristics of what good teaching might look like. In "Learning to Teach in Higher Education", (2008) Ramsden lists thirteen essential properties which good teachers have been practicing "since time immemorial". Another example from Hartley *et al.* (2005) describes successful teaching and learning as opening the Learning Combination Lock (LCL), combining the learning environment, learning activities, communicating through the senses, using emotions for learning, stimulating intelligence and understanding ways of learning.

In "Enhancing University Teaching" Kember and McNaught (2007), the writers draw on the narratives and experiences of eighteen award winning teachers in order to define ten principles concerning teaching and curriculum design to meet student need and develop generic capabilities, ensuring understanding of fundamental concepts rather than covering excessive content, establishing relevance using real, current, local and applied examples, challenging beliefs, engaging students actively, empathetic relationships, accepting responsibility for motivating students, considering students' future needs, thorough lesson planning delivered with flexibility and consistent, appropriate and authentic assessment.

Based on such research and published exemplars, the University promoted their consideration in a number of ways. Guidelines were provided which form part of the University's Teaching Observation Scheme. Staff have been briefed about how these should be considered when planning lessons. Appropriate reference has been included in individual feedback discussions. Regular, Faculty based workshops have been organized in which such ideas are presented for discussion. Faculties have been provided with subject specific analyses of what works well in a specific discipline and within the University's context. These opportunities are intended to support awareness raising and reflection amongst teaching staff as well as to generate active discussion, including disagreement and individual innovation.

Secondly, the University has developed *an Observation of Learning and Teaching Scheme* with the purpose of assuring quality, recognizing a 'what works' approach and supporting improvement targeted at both professors and assistants. Piloted two and a half years ago, it has been fully implemented for two academic cycles. All staff of whatever status are observed annually, by trained evaluators from the Rectorate and Deans' Offices, supported by a central team of 'educational developers' selected from the Faculties using agreed criteria of authority, experience and a record of good teaching. Schedules are devised which take into account rank, subject and language of instruction (Albanian, Macedonian, English) and include two observers to combine these elements. Each observee has the opportunity of a pre-evaluation meeting to discuss the lesson plan and related issues, an observation, and confidential feedback, both oral and written. Teachers are encouraged to comment on the report. Summary

data is analyzed centrally and provided to both University bodies and Faculties. The scheme is linked to training opportunities. This year, the University plans to extend professional development opportunities and to encourage each Faculty to engage in one additional teaching and learning activity such as subject based research on an aspect of learning/teaching, workshops, reading groups or additional peer observation. Every year, both staff and reviewers are encouraged to evaluate confidentially both the process and its effects on quality teaching. A twice yearly report is distributed to all staff and students for discussion in Faculty Councils, the Quality Assurance and Management Commission and at the governing University Board level. Utilizing one key procedure in this way has provided an opportunity for both individual and institutional evaluation.

### **Survey of what worked**

In order to see if these initiatives have resulted in achieving an institutional shift in approaches to quality culture and improvement related to learning and teaching, the University conducted internal research. The aim was to examine staff perceptions and beliefs with regard to their role as teachers, to analyze what staff believed constituted excellence in teaching and to find out what other factors they thought influenced teaching quality. Additionally, the survey was used as an opportunity for awareness-raising. It consisted of two sections: a request to describe what they considered to be 'excellence' in teaching and a Likert scale questionnaire. Ninety two members of staff completed the survey in confidence during departmental discussion workshops. This constitutes 40% of all teaching staff from the five Faculties and the Language Centre. The response was mixed in terms of gender, age and ethnicity, but with a majority of responses from assistants (approximately 70% assistant, 20% professor, 10% no response). This reflected meeting attendance. In addition to this survey, we also analyzed the internal evaluation reports about the Observation process.

### **Interpretation of results**

Concerning their role, staff overwhelmingly saw innovative teaching as a main part of their job (93.48%), although a majority felt that this might be valued more. A substantial majority (70.65%) felt that academic qualifications conferred ability to teach well in higher education and 82.6% felt that years of experience made you a better teacher per se. With regard to the role of students in their own learning 32.61% felt that they were responsible for their own success whilst 83.7% acknowledged that their own teaching had a great influence on their students' learning.

Staff had very mixed feelings about whether institutional leaders and performance management processes had a positive effect on the quality of teaching (45% Faculty leaders, 31% senior managers, 42% annual evaluation process, 46% attendance monitoring 38% disciplinary measures). However, 77% stated that discussions about teaching with colleagues and peers were useful. In conclusion, whilst staff valued their role as teachers and identified their colleagues as a positive support, they were less influenced by management and processes and still largely believed that qualifications and experience equaled competence. This provides a strong basis for change but makes individual and group training and improvement more challenging.

With regard to fostering dialogue and regular discussion about what constitutes excellence in teaching, it was pleasing to note that 85.87% staff said they tried to follow good practice and 66% said the University's review process had enabled shared discussion. In addition, over 80% of staff surveyed said that they tried to provide a model of good practice and to evaluate their teaching against learning objectives. In meetings, they welcomed the opportunity to articulate and share ideas about what they defined as excellence in teaching in higher education. Their individual definitions corresponded to a large extent to the characteristics identified in research. It is interesting to note that there were no significant inter-disciplinary differences in the written statements, although the survey results indicate more varied views where 49% felt that excellence spanned subject fields, 26% believed that separate subject areas could not be taught in the same way and 17.39% were not sure. There was a similar mixed response about whether the country/region has a significantly different approach to teaching from other European countries (26.09% agree, 35.87% disagree with 34.78% neutral. 2.36% didn't answer)

There were two recurring points which appear to reflect what might be interpreted as 'culturally' different. In defining the characteristics of good teaching, there was a strong emphasis on professional conduct such as attendance, punctuality, seriousness, integrity and lack of prejudice. Even more pronounced was the belief, from 58.6% of staff surveyed, that one of the most important elements of excellence was deep subject expertise and excellent qualifications. This links to the survey results on the value of qualifications and years of experience as conferring automatic competence.

We conclude that staff are actively trying to use strategies that they consider to be excellent, to evaluate their practice and consider wider issues related to approaches in other subjects and countries. They appreciate discussion with peers as a positive opportunity for reflection. However, staff are still very focused on professional standards and knowledge of subject as specific features and the University needs to note this whilst operating procedures and developing initiatives.

Finally, it is clear from the survey results that the Teaching Observation procedure has been broadly accepted and has had some positive effect in supporting improvement and shifting perceptions. Over 77% believed it helped with reflection and 61% said it had impacted on their teaching. Almost 60% believed that the scheme was relevant for someone with their experience. The majority of staff (76%) felt it was generally supportive. Not so many respondents felt that it had improved self-confidence - 54% said it had but 28% remained unsure and 13% disagreed. This might be explained by previously very self-confident staff who have for the first time discussed the actual value of the strategies they used. It is important to note that nearly 73% said they had tried something new or different as the result of the observation and 68% felt it had made them more aware of teaching methodologies and strategies. This suggests a shift in their approach and an increased awareness of the impact of their delivery on the learning process.

In conclusion, we offer the following observations and questions:

- SEEU has staff with different views of what constitutes good teaching and what affects their practice. This is culturally sensitive as well as being linked

to wider standards and definitions. How does an institution take account of this diversity and utilize it to improve the quality of learning?

- One quality initiative such as an Observation Scheme can have a significant impact on the attitudes, awareness and practice of teachers. How does an institution develop, sustain and maximize the impact of such a procedure and ensure that it continues to support innovative teaching without becoming routine or bureaucratic?
- This survey suggests that a focus on individual teachers and differentiated opportunities for reflection, discussion and training as well as on university wide approaches; on dialogue and reflective discussion and on regular opportunities for awareness raising contributes to a positive shift in attitudes and practice. This links to the concept of promoting a total quality culture. How can an institution devise and push forward strategies which focus on these positive methods for improvement?

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