

NQA
Networking for Quality Assurance
PROJECT n° - 2012-1-IE1-LEO05-04714



NQA Interagency Guidelines and Resource Pack

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GUIDE FOR NETWORKING FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

INTERAGENCY WORKING



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction to the Net-working for Quality Assurance Interagency Model
2. Developing a culture of Quality Assurance
3. Working in an Interagency way: Good practice tips from the NQA project
4. Resources for Interagency working
 - a. Guidelines for facilitation, leadership, time requirement and administration
 - b. Choosing an NQA Workshop Trainer (to use alongside NQA Training Materials)
 - c. QALLL recommendations
 - d. Confidentiality Policy template
 - e. Interagency Protocol – terms of reference
 - i. Informal template
 - ii. Memorandum of Understanding
 - iii. Formal Protocol

NQA
Networking for Quality Assurance
PROJECT n° - 2012-1-IE1-LEO05-04714

Introduction to the Net-working for Quality Assurance Interagency Model

Networking for Quality Assurance (NQA) is a way of working at learner, local, regional and national levels which aims to develop and encourage a *quality culture*.

Quality Assurance can seem like a concept that is management driven; requiring the checking of standards, the ticking of boxes, and the regulation of practice and in many cases a heavily administrative task. However Quality in itself is a concept that most of us strive for in our daily lives, in the work we do and in the services we provide.

The Quality Assurance in Lifelong Learning (QALL) Thematic Network launched its recommendations for the realisation of Quality Assurance in vocational education and training in 2012. They argued for 10 key recommendations:

1. Joint Approaches in AE and VET
2. Quality Culture
3. The EQAVET Quality Cycle
4. Quality Management Models and Indicators
5. Methodologies
6. Work based learning
7. Guidance
8. Professionalisation and staff development
9. Dissemination and Valorisation
10. Innovation in QA

The NQA model focuses on developing quality culture, disseminating the EQAVET Quality cycle and innovation in QA through the use of an interagency approach.

NQA enables the development and nurturing of Interagency groups (particularly at local stakeholder level) and aims to facilitate bottom up responses to more formal top down Quality Assurance systems.

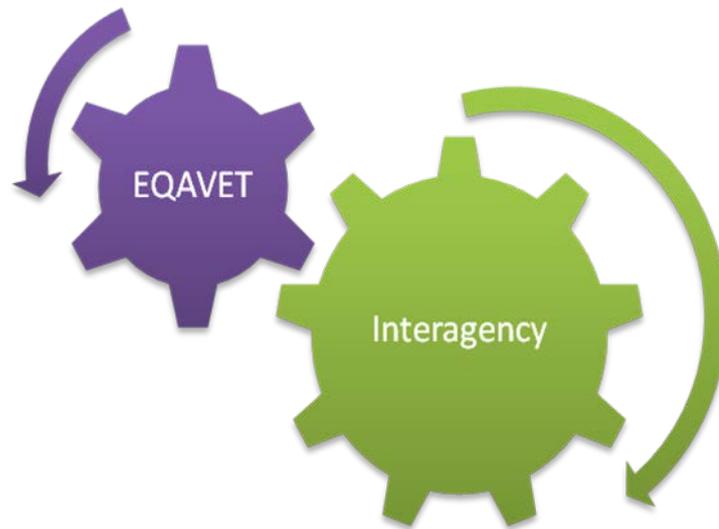
Based on an existing model of interagency working, the NQA partners sought to bring together the main stakeholders in Vocational Education and Training in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Spain, Finland and Italy.

This two year NQA project allowed the interagency groups to not only adapt and transfer the existing interagency model, but to innovate around issues of quality specific to each partner country.

Over the lifetime of the project stakeholders (including learners, VET providers, Career Guidance practitioners, Policy makers) across the partnership engaged in 65 Quality Assurance related meetings where issues relating to quality culture and its development were discussed and debated.

NQA
Networking for Quality Assurance
PROJECT n° - 2012-1-IE1-LEO05-04714

From these meetings a range of support materials were developed and piloted forming the NQA Model and Resource pack which can be used by practitioners and area based groups to implement a similar approach.



NQA Interagency model supporting the implementation of EQAVET

Developing a Culture of Quality

One of the key aims of the NQA project has been to develop a Culture of Quality in specific areas of Dublin, Belfast, Rome, Turku and Madrid.. We understand 'quality culture' as that defined by the QALL thematic Network as

'...an encompassing organisational culture that supports quality assurance and quality improvement at all levels.'

QALL also explain that the development of such a culture takes time, dedication and resources. It is the type of concept which underpins our daily work, it is something we *feel* rather than being able to define.

The NQA model describes this culture of quality as being 'essential for a clients VET journey' and should 'assure the client a quality experience at all stages'. It is not a one off experience but rather a continuum which underpins the clients journey from guidance services into VET and on into work and lifelong learning.

NQA
Networking for Quality Assurance
PROJECT n° - 2012-1-IE1-LEO05-04714

QALLL proposes that quality culture goes beyond the formal structures of quality assurance and actually affects or is visible in the everyday practice in organisations. Our model proposes the development of quality culture at all levels within the VET system but particularly from a bottom up perspective where quality indicators are more about feeling than quantitative measurements.

So, it would seem from our NQA experience that we know when we 'do' and 'do not' experience quality and how we feel as a result. We constantly make judgements about the services we receive.

We also know from our experiences within organisations that quality has a certain structured or managerial feel to its implementation and assessment.

The EUA (European University Association)¹ define quality culture as referring organisational cultures which intend to enhance quality permanently. They define two key elements:

- a cultural/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality
- a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts

The NQA model provides a way to enable groups of stakeholders to come together and develop both of these elements, while keeping QA on the table.

¹ European University Association: *Examining Quality Culture: Part 1 – Quality Assurance Processes in Higher Education Institutions*, Brussels 2010.

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PROJECT n° - 2012-1-IE1-LEO05-04714

Working in an Interagency way: Good practice tips from the NQA project.

- Rationale for the establishment of the interagency group – having a shared purpose, a common goal, and this should be specified from the outset (even if its still quite vague)
- Selection of interagency members – invite all stakeholders to participate and to become involved from the outset. This enables a sense of ownership and a belief that all stakeholder members are an important element of the interagency group
- Communication - enable good communication during meeting and between meetings. There may already a good communication network between organisations and this could be utilised. The interagency group should decide on a preferred communication system from the outset. Essential however to the interagency meetings is a well experienced facilitator, who can guide the meetings and ensure a participatory and collaborative approach is used.
- Trust – building trust within the interagency group is a cornerstone of the interagency process and requires careful nurturing, respectful communication and a supportive environment. Key to this is careful facilitation of the meetings and the strong impartial leadership within the interagency group.
- Developing a culture of interagency working – get the interagency group working together from the outset, defining their common goals, reflecting on current practice, identifying challenges and strengths. Identify case studies relevant to their shared challenges and enable a solution focused setting within which the group can work together to solve the issues raised in the study.
- Commitment – assist the members in their commitment through reflection, teamwork, keeping the common goal on the agenda. Ensure that each meeting is valuable to each member and enable the group to provide feedback so as to establish the importance of each member of the interagency group.
- Leadership – another cornerstone of the interagency process. It is a key role in ensuring that the interagency process is driven and that progress is enabled. It provides members with a sense of

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Networking for Quality Assurance
PROJECT n° - 2012-1-IE1-LEO05-04714

support, security and comfort, allowing them to utilise their skills and knowledge within a secure structure.

- Co-ordination – this role could be allocated to the facilitator or leader. It ensures that the members are brought together to form and continue the interagency approach. It adds to the support structure within which the interagency process sits. It involves the practical aspects that ensure an organised approach, such as arranging meeting rooms, ensuring agendas are available, enabling the communication, checking in with members to ensure their needs are met within the interagency process, ensuring appropriate systems are established.
- Administration – good administration allows for the work of the interagency group to be documented and recorded. Members then feel they can concentrate their efforts on utilising their key skills in meetings, thinking through problems/issues, communicating and engaging in meetings without worrying about taking notes etc.
- Common language – a key benefit of interagency working is that confusing language can be reduced and clarified. Terminology can vary across organisations and disciplines; however interagency approaches can assist in fine tuning language and ensuring that all are speaking about the same/similar situations.
- Resources – resources' are essential in interagency, particularly in terms of the provision of staff time, the establishment of key roles, the development of support materials (confidentiality agreements, protocols), the financial costs associated with the meetings.
- Time – interagency is not a quick fix and takes time to develop. Building trust, developing relationships, enabling transparency, facilitating progression towards common goals all take time.

NQA
Networking for Quality Assurance
PROJECT n° - 2012-1-IE1-LEO05-04714

NQA Resources for Interagency working

The following resources alongside sample meeting agendas can assist in the set up, training and development of Interagency networks focused on QA in VET

1. Guidelines for facilitation, leadership, time requirement and administration
2. Choosing an NQA Workshop Trainer (to use alongside NQA Training Materials)
3. QALLL recommendations
4. Confidentiality Policy template
5. Interagency Protocol – terms of reference
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NQA
Networking for Quality Assurance
PROJECT n° - 2012-1-IE1-LEO05-04714

Interagency Tools 1

NQA Guidelines to Assist with Facilitation, Administration, Time and Leadership

The information below forms the basis of NQA Guidelines to assist in enhancing quality-based interagency partnership and collaboration.

Facilitation

Facilitating group interaction requires a range of professional competencies in order to skilfully deliver the task. Professionally delivered facilitation skills make the act of facilitation almost invisible to the group. Hence, most managers believe they are good facilitators because they perceive that there is nothing to it!

Cognisance of the dynamics of the group is a key requirement to good facilitation. Balancing the participation by all group participants is also a fundamental facilitation skill. Good facilitators simultaneously observe and participate in the group. They can clearly contribute to the group discussion while also influencing its levels of collegiality and envisioning the group's potential outcomes.

Other characteristics and competencies required to enable a good facilitator are:

- Being able to pace the group's workload within an agreed time frame
- Being able to initiate interesting discussion and questioning
- Being able to manage group conflict or disagreements
- Being able to suggest relevant group processes and practices that assist the group to achieve its tasks
- Being able to summarise, in verbal or report format, the outcome/s of group discussion
- Being able to recognise what the group is recommending for further action
- To be somewhat light-hearted. Therefore being an instrument of placing the group participants at their ease - even if the participants are operating outside of their usual professional or personal comfort zone.

Administration

Considering in turn objectives, implementation and resources the primary purpose and activity of an interagency initiative is to set the direction of a concerted strategic development for the foreseeable

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Networking for Quality Assurance
PROJECT n° - 2012-1-IE1-LEO05-04714

future. This is usually achieved using innovation functions that need to include strong administration processes. Such processes place, in their correct priority, productive responses to interagency challenges that may emerge.

Clear and agreed administration procedures help to facilitate and enable solutions to periodic policy and practice tests that working within an interagency framework can, from time-to-time, highlight.

As interagency groups move through good and clear administration processes in order to achieve their shared objectives, they usually enjoy a high level of performance-related outcomes. This occurs collectively as the group learns to do the right things faster, better, and much more productively than if they singularly tried to achieve similar aims.

A strong commitment is therefore needed by each participant of an interagency group. This helps in the collective understanding and appreciation of the potential of organizational shared learning. This outcome can be achieved by the use of an agreed fit-for-purpose administration process that will assist the interagency group activate its quality-based objectives within its given time frames.

Time

Time is an essential and practical aspect of interagency working. Bringing together networks of providers, learners and policy makers on a number of occasions over time requires careful planning, resources and a recognition that developing relationships, building trust and enabling a collaborative approach takes time. Networks should allow time for initial engagement, time for agreeing terms of reference, time to start the collaborative working.

The NQA project piloted a model which required local interagency groups to meet on a quarterly basis (approximately every three to four months), learners to meet approximately three times per year and national organisations to meet either bi-annually or on a one to one basis as required.

Interagency working needs time to develop – it is an investment for longer term efficiency and effectiveness.

Leadership

Research and practical evidence suggests that when professionally activated the four cornerstone goals of leadership enable cross-fertilisation of individual competencies and interagency collaborative capabilities.

The group leader should therefore strive to encourage exchange, debate and interaction that nurtures and results in:

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Networking for Quality Assurance
PROJECT n° - 2012-1-IE1-LEO05-04714

- 1)** Releasing of the professional and human potential of each of the group members.
- 2)** Balancing the needs and agenda of the individual and the agenda of the group itself.
- 3)** Focus the participants on advocating and defending the fundamental quality values of the group
- 4)** Instil in the group, as well as in each group participant, a working knowledge of a sense of initiative and responsibility.

On the other hand, shared leadership fosters a quality environment that responds in sprightly ways to newness of thought. It promotes a greater degree of creative and rational levels of ideas for exchange when required. Shared leadership also allows for all the individual participants to test their own assumptions against those of the interagency group.

Quality-based leadership, whether individually lead or shared, enables an interagency group that is in principal committed to collaborating, to develop and act within the following parameters:

- Participants' trust is nurtured and their professional confidence in each other and in the group activities is noticeable.
- There is enabled a keen respect by the participants for the unique and/or specialist expertise available within the group.
- Belief in the benefit of operating joint working strategies is fostered.
- A renewed commitment to the processes of professional teamwork becomes a focus.
- A willingness to remove possibilities of blurring of professional boundaries is activated.
- A sharing in the same vested interests and common goals is achieved.
- Acceptance of agreed and appropriate interagency governance structures become a reality.
- Operating within transparent lines of communication between partner agencies is advocated.
- Agreement about objectives based on a shared empathy is achievable.

NQA
Networking for Quality Assurance
PROJECT n° - 2012-1-IE1-LEO05-04714

Interagency Tools 2

Choosing an NQA Workshop Trainer

Introduction:

The following information is intended to assist the first time user of the NQA methodology. The information here is part of a suite of NQA data within this Resource Pack. Collectively the range of information will enable the maximum benefits to be achieved by those activating the NQA range of interagency and quality assurance-based training products.

Choosing an NQA Workshop Trainer:

Below is an outline of the core skills that an ideal NQA Workshop Trainer should have within their professional experience.

If you are recruiting a Trainer to assist you deliver the NQA Training Module:

The concept of Quality Assurance (QA) within management and practitioner teams can range from enthusiastic involvement to professional boredom. Therefore a professional history of evidence-based leadership and facilitation skills is a necessary requirement should you be hiring a Trainer to assist in the delivery of NQA interagency and/or QA topics.

Ideally the person delivering any aspect of NQA training or development opportunities should present with a practical background in, and an experiential knowledge of training delivery. Empathy for, and a clear understanding of the concept of interagency development within a partnership model is needed. As is awareness of and appreciation for the benefits of working within a *Culture of Quality*.

Facilitation skills required by the NQA Trainer can span from collaborative to directional, use of any of these professional abilities depend very much on the knowledge base and interest levels of the participating NQA trainees.

NQA
Networking for Quality Assurance
PROJECT n° - 2012-1-IE1-LEO05-04714

Competency or a working knowledge in adult guidance methods and practice skills would also be an advantage for the NQA Trainer tasked with delivering the facilitated workshop.

Interagency & QA Training – *Allow Time for Change:*

NQA encourages the development and understand of the benefits of interagency work and the use of quality-based tools to assist and enhance organizations, management structures and practitioners' professional knowledge.

Applying NQA methodologies therefore requires, in the majority, a change in operational and/or professional attitudes. And this may not occur immediately for some. Therefore an NQA trainer needs to nurture workshop practitioners to understand that they should take quality time to consider the many elements of operating from within an interagency and/or a QA perspective.

NQA
Networking for Quality Assurance
PROJECT n° - 2012-1-IE1-LEO05-04714

Interagency Tools 3

QALLL recommendations:

Impact on aims and activities of the NQA project

Informal review of the correlation between the QALLL 11 Bullet Points on ensuring the development of a **quality culture** and how this is impacting on NQA to date:

1. At transnational, national, local and learners level the promotion of the concept of developing a *culture of quality* (as envisaged by QALLL) has been paramount.
2. Trying to overcome prejudices related to persistent negative QA-related personal or professional experiences is proving to challenge some of the NQA aims and activities.
3. Since the project commenced all NQA stakeholders have been actively involved in exploring how best to develop, at their level, a *culture of quality*.
4. Boards of Management of the organisations associated with NQA are being encouraged to view the benefits of developing and applying a *culture of quality* within their individual groups.
5. Creating within NQA stakeholders an understanding and practical application between standardization and innovation has yet to be fully fostered.
6. By developing, at local level, an NQA-related *Self-evaluation Tool* provides evidence that the QALLL *culture of quality* aspirations could be realized.
7. NQA discussions at transnational and local level have highlighted that the two essential requirements of building a *culture of quality* -as advocated by QALLL- is the nurturing and sustainability of: 1) good and 2) trusting relationships throughout the NQA network and individual affiliated organisations.
8. Further NQA work needs to take place if the project's potential results and outcomes are to positively impact and influence EU and/or national policies connected to the delivery of VET.
9. All transnational, national, local and learners NQA meetings focus on the promotion of the core elements associated with developing a *culture of quality* - as envisaged within the QALLL recommendations.

NQA
Networking for Quality Assurance
PROJECT n° - 2012-1-IE1-LEO05-04714

10. The NQA training tool encapsulates the provision of user-friendly self-evaluation processes of the type proposed by QALLL.
11. The NQA project promotes a continuum of assessment processes that will ensure into the future that the dynamic nature of creating a *culture of quality* maintains its momentum.