

## Teaching Observation: Does it Develop Teaching? A Case Study from South East European University (SEEU)

Heather Henshaw, Quality Assurance Advisor, ([h.henshaw@seeu.edu.mk](mailto:h.henshaw@seeu.edu.mk)); (Presenter)

Zamir Dika, Pro-Rector for Academic Issues, ([z.dika@seeu.edu.mk](mailto:z.dika@seeu.edu.mk))

Rufat Osmani, Quality Assurance and Management Officer, ([r.osmani@seeu.edu.mk](mailto:r.osmani@seeu.edu.mk))

Alajdin Abazi, Rector, ([a.abazi@seeu.edu.mk](mailto:a.abazi@seeu.edu.mk))

### **Abstract**

*Governments, regional bodies and individual institutions, employers and students are now demanding a high quality student learning experience and in particular, an improvement in the quality of learning and teaching, within the particular environment of higher education. This case study provides an active example of how a higher educational institution has created and implemented a teaching observation procedure based on critical reflection, individual support, institutional quality assurance and staff training and development, within a challenging, social, economic and political context. It has drawn on European and Bologna policies and guidelines as well as other national schemes in order to shape an effective system. It is intended to offer an individual model for discussion and generate wider debate about the correlation between layers of quality assurance, and about what methods actually create the conditions and environment for improvement.*

### **Institutional and National Context**

South East European University (SEEU) was established in 2001 as a non-profit making institution, with OSCE, USAID, European Commission and Government co-operation. It was an experimental model to provide third level study for the first time in the Albanian language, whilst at the same time providing a multicultural, multilingual environment which did not exist elsewhere in the region. The Republic of Macedonia itself was and remains in a transitional phase, with many political, social and economic challenges, and the university faced the same issues in creating a high quality learning and teaching environment. As a new institution, SEEU developed alongside the Bologna process and used it as “a guiding light” (*SEEU Quality Handbook, 2007*) and in order to “explore what international trends and models to follow” (*EUA Report, 2005*).

The university has five Faculties which offer curricula validated by a National Assessment Board. Programs are reviewed periodically within Faculties. It operates a 3 + 2 curriculum model, using the ECTS system. There is very limited mobility. With a new Higher Education law and a recent, limited change of status, it is hoped that there will be closer co-operation nationally and that the National Evaluation Committee will begin its work of monitoring and supporting higher educational institutions in the country, and initiate a centralised quality assurance system.

The University itself has placed the creation of a quality culture at the heart of its strategy. It has a Policy linked to its strategic plan, a quality structure for both academic and administrative staff and a Quality Office. An external Quality Champion provides

reports and advice, and its procedures are validated through ISO 9001:2000. It has revised and improved its Student Evaluation Survey and has started to link the results of the survey with achievement data for its Staff Evaluation procedure. It has created a department to offer targeted in-service training, including on teaching methodology. A main focus, however, has been on the quality of learning and teaching which has been spearheaded by the introduction of a customised procedure for Teaching Observation. The establishment, operation and evaluation of this scheme are described below.

It is useful to note here that the University offers programs in two local languages, Albanian and Macedonian, with some programs in English and with compulsory English classes for all students. This multilingual, multicultural model is intended to promote social cohesion and European integration. Teaching is allocated according to Qualification, with PhD holders delivering theory and knowledge, often in large groups, supported by Assistants with Masters who complement the Professor's input with smaller, practical classes. English teaching, on the other hand, is skills and level based and may be taught by staff from any ethnic/language community with minimum Bachelor qualification.

There is a great deal of keen interest in developing new approaches from many staff but there are also challenges due to the social, economic and academic culture and experience of staff. Schooling was based on teacher-led learning, qualifications were believed to confer both academic status and all round competency, there was a focus on the theoretical rather than on practical application, a tendency to 'play the game' on paper only, a confusion of 'critical thinking' with 'criticism', professional with personal, a perception that political and personal patronage influenced employment and promotion, and a lack of ability to travel easily and so gain experience of different cultures and ideas because of visa restrictions. University staff received no professional training with respect to their teaching, either at induction or in-service. Along with the tensions and difficulties experienced in the recent history in the area, this is put forward as a common, regional experience.

## **Wider Context**

Clearly, these are individual and culturally specific responses but they may also more generally reflect why such quality initiatives have recently and rapidly been given greater prominence at individual, national and European level. For example, in 1999 Barbara Kehm described how gradually, within the German higher education, evaluation and ranking exercises and growing public and political dissatisfaction led to demands for more accountability and stronger "client orientation" (*Kehm, B. 1999*). The country report from the 2<sup>nd</sup> European Quality Assurance Forum describes how far they have moved in just a few years (*Witte, J. 2008*). In the United Kingdom, there has been debate about the relative value of teaching and research and the link between research and teaching. Its Higher Education Academy offers an extensive programme of professional development and recognition for teachers both new and experienced whilst the creation of a Professional Standards Framework is designed so that institutions can offer professional support, ensure consistency and quality for learners, offer accountability to students and stakeholders and "demonstrate that professional standards for teaching and supporting learning are being met". (*Higher Education Agency, 2006*). In another approach, the Docentia programme from Spain shares responsibility for teaching quality

between the universities, central and regional government and quality assurance agencies. Qualifications and competency are assessed for recruitment, training and promotion purposes. Universities themselves are responsible for evaluating teacher competence through a range of tools such as student surveys. The outcome is seen as moving “the teaching duty of the teacher to the centre of the quality assessment of their activity” and reinforcing the quality culture (Codina, E.A., Jimenez, E.G., 2008).

Within the Republic of Macedonia, such national initiatives are not yet created, but SEEU has considered their value at institutional level. We also refer to two key Bologna imperatives. Section 1.4 of the “Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area” states that “Institutions should have ways of satisfying themselves that staff involved with the teaching of students are qualified and competent to do so. They should be available to those undertaking external reviews, and commented on in reports” (ENQA, 2007). The other key reminder for a small, relatively new institution which has little external monitoring was from the Background of the Standards and Guidelines. This makes it clear that, “The standards and guidelines are designed to be applicable to all higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies in Europe, irrespective of their structure, function and size and the national system in which they are located” (ENQA, 2005). The University decided to be one of the two thirds of responding higher education institutions which had obligatory procedures (EUA, Trends V, 2007).

### **An Example Observation Scheme**

So, what are the features of SEEU’s Observation of Learning and Teaching Procedure which make it an effective model for consideration?

Firstly, it was created as a strategic priority identified both by the university itself and from the recommendations of its Quality Champion, (Bourse, M. 2007). This meant that it had the active support of senior managers and that those who implemented it had an external rationale and a body of evidence with which to promote the initiative.

Secondly, its rationale was thoroughly debated by senior managers, Deans of Faculties and teaching staff. In line with the EUA’s Policy Position on Quality, the agreed approach was to “promote shared values and attitudes about quality rather than simply managerial processes” (EUA, 2001). The scheme was to foster creativity and innovation, be fit for purpose, consultative and culturally appropriate. It was designed to be improvement orientated with an emphasis on transparency, reflection, self-evaluation and support. Very importantly, it took into account the experience and situation of staff, addressed their concerns and focused on the teaching and learning strategies that they could employ themselves. It aimed to celebrate good practice and to develop teaching that was inclusive and promoted the university’s commitment to its multilingual, multicultural mission.

Thirdly, it was based on a review of the advantages and disadvantages of different types of scheme and observer. The findings of the research paper, ‘Teaching Observations: A Meeting of Minds?’ (Hapzipanagos, S, Lygo-Baker, S. 2006) proved useful. This outlined the negative and positive aspects and outcomes of peer/teaching observation schemes and their impact on staff thinking and performance. Particularly relevant was their

positive conclusion that 'observations within an educational developer observation framework do provide a time to consider knowledge and deepen understanding'. The benefits and drawbacks of a range of other Peer Observation schemes were also considered, with the conclusion that fairness, objectivity and consistent, rigorous implementation were important issues if the scheme was to be effective.

Fourthly, a detailed Procedure and management structure, ISO validated, was agreed and implemented for *all* full and part time staff. It was tailored to suit the institution and provided for annual, supported observation, with an optional unannounced observation. It linked to training opportunities and contracts and dealt with problematic issues such as unsatisfactory observation. Deans coordinated the scheme within their Faculty, in liaison with the Quality Assurance and Management Office which provided central organization and overall monitoring. The Pro-Rector for Academic Issues reported findings to the Faculty Council, Quality Assurance and Management Commission and the university's external Quality Champion.

Fifthly, observation was carried out by two observers. The lead person was usually from the Faculty and had a position of responsibility and subject expertise. The co-observer was drawn either from the Faculty management team or from a small 'central' team linked to the Quality Assurance and Management Office. This 'central' group had teaching methodological training and observation experience and worked across all Faculties and ranks of staff, both full and part time, and with all Faculty observers. They also provided support for re-observations. The complex scheduling combined subject knowledge, teaching methodological expertise, relevant language competence and took account of perceived issues of status and bias.

Sixth, each part of the process was designed to maximize the benefits. At a pre-arranged meeting one or two days before the agreed lesson, teacher and evaluator discussed the planned lesson, resources and context. The observation itself lasted about one hour. Observers remained unobtrusive and their presence was explained to students. The follow-up session was seen as the most vital part of the whole process, an opportunity for active feedback, reflection, discussion and shared training.

Seventh, standardised templates were used which supported the purpose and success of the scheme. The Teaching Observation Confirmation Request Form gave the date of the observation and outlined what preparation and records were required. The Lesson Plan guided staff to consider aims, specific objectives, the prior knowledge and levels of the students, references and bibliography, teacher and student activity and approximate timing. The Teaching Observation Feedback Form provided judgements, description and positive advice concerning learning, teaching, classroom management, resources and monitoring of student progress. It highlighted best practice, advised on issues or training and included space for staff to comment. A Co-observation Form corroborated the feedback and provided evidence of objectivity.

Eighth, staff were provided with guidance on the characteristics of excellence, designed to provide criteria and trigger ideas for successful learning strategies. It was made clear that these were not exhaustive or prescriptive and that the teacher should choose and deliver the methods which best achieved the end of active, inspiring learning. These ideas were drawn from observer experience and based on some of the numerous,

helpful definitions and lists of what is considered to be high quality teaching practice, for example, Paul Ramsden's 13 characteristics (*Ramsden, P. 1992*), and David Kember and Carmel McNaught's 'Enhancing University Teaching' (*Kember, D, McNaught, C.2007*).

Ninth, the process was carefully piloted in all its phases, with a thorough evaluation by all participants and senior management. Changes were made before full implementation in 2007-8. This had the additional benefit of generating wide debate and raising awareness amongst staff about quality assurance issues and the importance of the quality of teaching in particular.

Tenth, there was targeted dissemination and training. Every observer attended training on the process and on observation and feedback skills, including guidance on the use of language for oral and written feedback. Faculties briefed staff and after the first semester, they offered discussion workshops which highlighted excellent practice and methods for improvement. A model, large lecture was also delivered with collective observation and analysis. In September, each Faculty will hold another workshop to consider the full year report and to discuss the detailed feedback for their Faculty. This is intended to build and share expertise. Further training and support for evaluators, especially on feedback, is planned.

Finally, data was collected and analyzed centrally for quality assurance purposes and the scheme was thoroughly evaluated via separate questionnaires for teachers and reviewers. Winter Semester and Full Year Reports were made available to the Rectorate, Faculty Quality Teams, and all staff and students to be used as a tool for institutional improvement. Individual reports were also considered as part of the annual Staff Evaluation process.

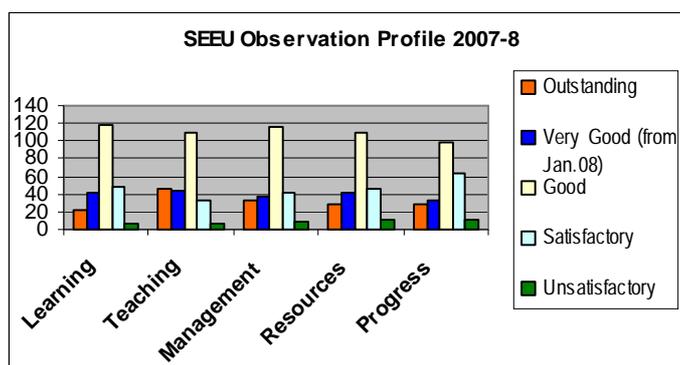
### **Successes to Date**

Published observation schemes describe broadly common aims and approaches and highlight similar expected outcomes and benefits. They form part of the debate about the quality of teaching in higher education and must address staff attitudes and responses in order to succeed. SEEU's scheme shared these goals and issues but with some differences. Gosling outlined three models – evaluation, development and peer review (*Gosling, D. 2002*). Most schemes favour the last, equal-mutual model of colleagues observing each other and sharing feedback. These have been shaped by staff attitudes, union consultation and national quality initiatives. SEEU's scheme has been developed using European guidance and is as yet unique nationally. It combined successfully an evaluation and development model, using observation by senior staff and educational developers. The university had to consider the psychology/balance of power relationship in order to address the highly politicised and personalised climate and the particular educational experience of staff and students. This cultural sensitivity proved important. For example, the high completion rate (97% from 232 members of staff) was seen as a crucial measure of objectivity and commitment which helped the scheme gain acceptance. The use of two complimentary reviewers, present at almost all observations, addressed concerns about appropriate language/subject expertise and teacher status. 'Central' co-observers were present at 45.2% of observations, resulting in a good level of expert support and reasonable trust in the scheme's transparency. It

enabled the introduction of teaching styles and methodologies which many staff had little experience of and provided the opportunity for shared discussion and reflection focused on self and institutional improvement.

The university's full year report on the process profiled the judgments, concluded that "there is much good practice" and summarized key elements (Table 1 below). Four re-observations resulted in improvement as observed. Faculty reports highlighted a range of effective strategies, methods and resources and also identified successful, individual approaches.

**Table 1**



The feedback meeting, identified everywhere as the most important component, was positive for many staff (See Table 2 below). Staff had the opportunity for reflective discussion and received helpful, detailed written reports; a reasonable number wrote comments on their evaluation reports. Many indicated how useful the process had been and how they would apply what they had learned. Observers who responded felt the scheme had been well implemented and had raised staff awareness. They felt they had learned a great deal from observing. Evaluations from the training showed that staff appreciated the briefings and valued the opportunity for faculty teams to share ideas, consider new teaching strategies and comment on the procedure. Overall, the scheme was described as mobilising staff, increasing awareness, encouraging rigorous debate and improving teaching. The benefits of one-to-one evaluation were combined with the promotion of a shared and 'scholarly approach to discussion' (Gosling, D. 2002).

**Table 2**

<b>Observee Responses to Review 2008-7</b> 46 out of 232 members of staff observed (19.8%), 6 after the Winter Semester and 40 after the Summer Semester. Replies were received in three languages as follows: 25 in Albanian, 7 in Macedonian and 14 in English. This is a 20% response rate.					
Question	Comments	Positive	Negative	Mixed	% Positive
View of the process? Q1	35	31	3	1	88.5%
Improving own practice? Q3	34	28	4	2	82.3%
A supportive process? Q4	34	28	5	1	82.3%
Recommend to colleague? Q6	35	33	2	0	94.2%

For the university and its aim of strengthening quality, the balance of responsibility between management, faculties and individual staff has proved beneficial and has also provided a 'model' for the creation and implementation of other quality initiatives. Some published schemes report only in faculties but SEEU's central data collection has allowed for analysis at both departmental and institutional level. This was seen by staff as validating the scheme and therefore positive. This contrasts with concerns documented elsewhere that observation is merely a management tool. There is now a link with the student survey and staff evaluation which can be developed. Some schemes and researchers suggest that other aspects of teaching and evaluation should be included in peer review and this needs further consideration. It is hoped that this initiative can contribute to the development of quality assurance nationally.

### **Barriers, Problems and Solutions**

A number of issues relating to evaluation and feedback emerged. Despite training, observers confirmed that it was harder to observe than to be observed. There were inconsistencies in some judgements, between reviewers and faculties, with an over-emphasis on positive aspects to encourage staff. It was more difficult to raise critical matters, as was honest comment to colleagues and 'experienced' professors. This meant that individual reports sometimes lacked consistency and that comparative data were not reliable. Some forms were not completed well or fully. A focus on developing the highest level of evaluation skills was seen as crucial. Further and ongoing training and individual support for observers is planned to help with standardisation as is the use of criteria for selecting and training new reviewers. Refinement and differentiation of the procedure will respond to some ongoing concerns such as subject specialism and language.

The university intends to engage in further research, discussion and training in order to refine the scheme, improve observation skills and develop the effectiveness of giving and receiving feedback. This will include using last year's reports, staff surveys, briefings and interactive sessions, faculty specific model lesson plans and additional 'model' lectures. Faculties will also run workshops about the quality of post-observation meetings and will encourage more lecturers to give reflective input without simply justifying their performance. Hapzipanagos and Lygo-Baker's review of schemes in the UK (*Hapzipanagos, S, Lygo-Baker, S. 2006*) indicated that some respondents were highly critical. Likewise, SEEU had a small number of staff who were very dissatisfied with the objectivity or quality of the process and with the 'imposition' of external systems unsuited to the region. There was a more generally expressed view that teaching large groups meant limited student involvement. Staff thought that maybe the process would not be repeated and so claimed not to take it seriously; or that this was a 'paper' only exercise. The complexity and changes to scheduling created operational difficulties and the additional workload meant that the process was sometimes rushed. Finally, there was a body of satisfactory teaching to be improved. Analysis of the risks identified in other models indicate similar concerns. However, because institutional or faculty reports tend to be internal documents, it is difficult to judge how far these areas for improvement are the same or to know how improvements have been effected. SEEU has used its report to analyse issues publicly and to implement recommendations for addressing them.

## **Wider Issues and questions**

This case study raises a number of wider issues.

SEEU's scheme proved a useful tool for challenging traditional concepts of teaching and for strengthening institutional quality assurance within a specific context. Two thirds of European universities now have obligatory procedures for evaluating individual teaching staff (*EUA, 2007*). This suggests that peer review/observation schemes might usefully become a standard part of quality assurance systems across Europe.

If this is the case, it is pertinent to consider whether it is desirable and feasible to develop a common professional framework which allows for diversity of purpose, different national, institutional or area approaches, cultural and experiential sensitivity and how far concepts of 'excellence' transfer across countries and regions.

Since the model of relationship between observer and teacher is vital, it is also important to reflect on how far lecturers themselves can improve their practice by mutual, scholarly debate or whether this approach is strengthened when educational developers and/or staff with institutional authority are involved. Is a process better when other aspects of the teacher's role are included in the evaluation process and what is possible within operational constraints?

Finally, it is imperative to focus on developing observation and feedback skills within a confidential setting which maximise the potential to encourage reflection, minimize subjectivity and bias, motivate staff, support the sharing of good practice and contribute to sustained improvement in the quality of teaching and learning.

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