

# On the organisation of Educational Development Centres

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 <p>The image contains three logos: the European Union flag (a circle of twelve gold stars on a blue background), the Education and Culture logo (a stylized blue bird with colorful dots above it), and the Socrates logo (the word 'Socrates' in a blue serif font).</p>	<p>Produced with the support of the European Community in the Framework of NETTLE, the Network of European Tertiary Level Educators SOCRATES Nr.114053-CP-1-204-1 –UK – ERASMUS – TN. The contents of this publication reflect the view of the authors only, and the European Commission can not be held responsible for any use of the information contained herein.</p>
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## Introduction

As has been described by Williams (1997)<sup>1</sup>, standards in higher education have, traditionally, been implicit. "Professors and others within academia knew what they were" (p. 69). This knowledge encompassed every bit of work a professor did, from research through teaching, the assessment of students, and administration. By observing the professor and his work, others gradually came to understand these standards. As universities have changed from being arenas of learning for the few to become arenas of learning for the many, there has been a growing demand for standards to be made explicit. Both the providers of money (the state and its taxpayers), the users (the students), and the recipients (the society as such, local communities, companies) ask for guarantees that standards are met, and that standards are being maintained. On the national level each European country has established an accreditation organisation that ensures the quality of higher education. For example, in Norway, NOKUT – the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education - was established by law in 2002. This is an independent public agency "whose purpose is to control and develop the quality of Norwegian higher education institutions through the evaluation, accreditation and recognition of quality assurance systems, institutions and education programmes" (<http://www.nokut.no/sw335.asp>). NOKUT performs its task through several mechanisms, e.g. evaluation of internal quality assurance in higher education institutions, and evaluation of specific types of educational provision or defined aspects of such. NOKUT has the power to withdraw its accreditation or recognition if conditions are not fulfilled, and states the following about its role: " The role of NOKUT is to check the quality of Norwegian higher education provision and to inform the general public

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<sup>1</sup> Williams, R. (1997). Factors impacting on academic standards. In: Radford, J., Raaheim, K., de vries, P. & Williams, R. *Quantity and quality in Higher Education*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

about this work, and also to bolster the institutions in their own efforts in quality development.”

Universities and other institutions of higher education quite typically describe their internal quality assurance systems in a “Handbook” for quality assurance of study programmes, as does the University of Bergen. Different stakeholders are involved in defining the quality of a study programme, for example students, alumni, teachers, university management and employers in the discipline in question. Here it is obvious that students play an important part, as they are asked to evaluate courses (and individual teachers). At the University of Bergen one third of the courses given at any point of time shall be subjected to evaluation. Student evaluation of teaching makes up a very important part of this evaluation. Each course has a course administrator and a course coordinator (a representative from the academic staff). Between them, these persons are responsible not only for making sure that course evaluations are carried out, but also to produce an evaluation report to the faculty. In cases where a particular course (or even an individual teacher) receives negative feedback from the students, the Educational Development Centre may be contacted and asked to assist by offering services related to course development, curriculum development and staff development. At the University of Bergen, the Educational Development Centre also runs work-shops for all new members of academic staff, as initial entry training is mandatory (see below).

Many institutions across Europe have an Educational Development Centre of some sort. These centres may be organised in many different ways. For example, about 70% of the universities represented in the European Nettle project have a kind of central centre or unit for educational and staff development. Another 13% of these universities run these activities from a centre in one of their faculties or departments. These decentred centres offer their services to all departments of the university. One university (3% of the total) has an informally organised group that offers these services. In about 13% of the universities these services are not organised in formal centres or informal groups.

As is evident from the above, Educational Development Centres may be organised in many different ways. In the following we will discuss possible positive and negative aspects related to different ways of organising such centres.

## **Models for organising Educational Development Centres**

When setting up an Educational Development Centre, several issues need to be taken into consideration. The first questions one needs to discuss are, probably, the following: what should the main function of such a centre be, and which tasks shall it have? Broadly speaking we may distinguish between two main functions such centres may have:

- to offer educational services. One main service is to train (new) members of academic staff, making sure that they become skilled university teachers. Another main service is to provide educational consultancy, for example for curriculum development, course development and quality assurance.
- to conduct educational research. Such a research centre contributes with knowledge related to the broad field of teaching and learning in higher education, and assists the institution towards becoming a “learning organisation”.

The two functions are not necessarily contradictions, as a proficient centre will do both. What seems certain, however, is that the image those involved carry of themselves, as researchers, or as “teachers teachers” (consultants), will have a direct, and profound, influence on both focus, tasks, and the way the outside world perceives the status of the centre. It may also have significance for the way an Educational Development Centre is organised. As we see it, there are (at least) five different models to choose between in order to handle one or both functions mentioned above:

- a unit within a particular department or faculty
- a separate, overarching and independent unit or centre reporting to the rector, the board of deans and/or a director
- an “inter-institutional” unit or centre
- decentralised individuals
- an administrative resource, buying services from external experts on demand.

### Part of a department/faculty vs independent centre

Of the five models listed, the first two are, probably, the most conventional ones. Regardless of which of these two models one chooses, we may distinguish between different variants, such as;

- a large (research) unit that spreads its resources/offers to departments and faculties
- a small(er) (research) unit with “satellites” within faculties (departments)

On the one hand, a large unit is staffed with educational (research) specialists. Such a unit may have its strengths in research and in competing for funds and resources. On the other hand, a large and forceful unit may have its disadvantages. As institutions of higher education are competitive organisations, other units within the institution may come to view a strong Educational Development Centre as a competitor and a threat and not as a place to seek guidance. There is also the danger that a unit like this may be perceived as somewhat “departed” and out of touch with what is going on in different parts of the organisation.

One alternative to a large unit with staff of its own is, therefore, to have a smaller unit, which cooperates with dedicated individuals within different faculties or departments across the institution. These individuals are regular members of academic staff, with, say, 20% commitment to that smaller unit as educational developers. This way the Educational Development Centre may stay updated and be able to respond to particular needs and demands of the different faculties. Working together with individuals who are highly respected within their faculties, may also serve to increase the status of the kind of work Educational Development Centres are involved in.

At the University of Bergen, the Educational Development Centre is located in the Faculty of psychology. The staff occupy regular research positions within this faculty, and the centre receives its budget (working capital) partly from the Faculty of psychology and partly from central (University of Bergen) reserves. Such a way of organising an Educational Development Centre has its plusses and minuses. Being part of a larger work environment may prove advantageous socially as well as professionally. It may provide better opportunities to do research and to engage in research projects together with others. Another obvious advantage is related to infrastructure. As part of a department or faculty one may draw upon well established administrative routines and resources. On the negative side, an Educational Development Centre which is organised as a unit within a particular department/faculty, may prove to have less autonomy, especially if it does not have control over its own budget. There is also the danger that the Centre may be less visible and more anonymous to units outside the department or faculty within which it is organised. This may even be true within the actual department/faculty. It is a centre within a department/faculty, but at the same time an organisational hybrid as its role is to serve the institution as a whole. It will, consequently, seldom be seen as a full member of that department/faculty (unless it is involved in the teaching programmes of the particular department/faculty). As part of a particular department/faculty, the Educational Development Centre will have to compete with other units with regards to resources (money to do research, new academic and administrative positions, equipment, and the like). In good times, this will seldom constitute any big problem. However,

when resources get scarce, other units with obligations closer to the core of the department's teaching programmes will most likely be prioritised. This may lead to internal rivalry and conflicts. As an Educational Development Centre serves the institution as a whole, and therefore needs to be impartial, an affiliation with one particular department or faculty may prove problematic.

An alternative way of organising an Educational Development Centre is as an independent centre, with its own director and board that reports directly to the university rector or director general (vice chancellor). This seems to be a more natural organisational model, as the centre provides services to the institution as a whole, and needs to be perceived as a separate, impartial, and autonomous unit. Being a separate, autonomous unit also provides the centre with greater flexibility, and with a shorter, direct route for communication with the top leaders of the institution. Different from what otherwise might be the case, such a centre may, furthermore, be more visible both to the outside world and to the rest of the institution.<sup>2</sup> Last, but not least, being a separate unit may secure the Educational Development Centre a higher status. There is, however, one great challenge; rectors and top leaders come and go, and different regimes may have different attitudes, plans, and strategies when it comes to Educational Development Centres and the kind of work such centres do.

The University of Rotterdam has organised its educational centre as a firm, called Risbo, fully owned by the university itself. Risbo is affiliated with the faculty of Social Sciences, which uses this firm to offer training, consultancy and research in different areas within social sciences, to external organisations, mainly non-profit organisations such as ministries, city governments or non-government organisations. The main area is educational sciences, in which employees of Risbo perform training, consultancy and research activities. These three types of activities benefit

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<sup>2</sup> If the centre is part of a particular department/faculty it might simply be more difficult to find its web-pages.



from each other. It is the opinion of Risbo that the combination of these activities leads to better performance.

The University of Rotterdam and its faculties are the main clients for Risbo in the area of the educational discipline. The activities that Risbo undertakes for the university and its faculties cover a broad spectrum, ranging from initial entry training for teacher, curriculum development for faculties, developing quality assurance procedures and instruments and educational research (e.g. evaluation of projects, study progress analysis and analysis of the impact of educational or organisational reform). Although the activities of Risbo are comparable to that of any other academic educational centre, the fact that it is a firm has certain advantages. The main advantage is that all activities that Risbo performs are clearly visible and controllable, because each activity is based upon a short-term project contract. The economic risks of the activities of Risbo are placed outside the university organisation itself. Another advantage is that the activities for the different clients build up to a broader available expertise.

#### “Inter-institutional” unit

Depending on size and geographical conditions, a model in which two or three different institutions cooperate, financially and otherwise, may prove to be a workable solution. Smaller institutions, with relatively few members of staff and limited resources, may not be able to keep their own Educational Development Centre. Nor may it prove to be necessary. This is in fact a model that the University Colleges of Lillehammer, Hamar, and Gjøvik, all situated relatively close to each other on the east coast of Norway, have chosen. Each of these institutions has one or more members of staff who are involved in staff development as part of their regular academic position, and they run work-shops on a cooperative basis. There are, of course, several challenges involved here. One has to do with administration. Another is related to the professional development of those who are involved in running these work shops. Yet another has to do with money and securing enough resources. It might be difficult to find a solution that all institutions might accept, especially if one institution takes up more resources than the others (e.g. sending more participants to the

work shops). In that case one might think of a solution in which work shops and other services are rendered on a “pay as you use” basis. This is a model that the Norwegian University of Life Sciences has adopted. Each participant (his or her department) pays a set sum per work shop.

### Decentralised individuals

This model has some similarity with the above. In this case there really is no Educational Development Centre, but rather different individuals working (full time, 50% or some other solution) as staff developers within their own faculties. The work of such individuals may or may not be coordinated by an overall plan or strategy (most likely it will not). The main advantage of this type of organisation is the involvement of the educational experts with the faculty. They really belong to the group of employees of the faculty. This type of organisation also suffers some disadvantages in comparison to a larger educational centre.. One disadvantage is that it is difficult to build a variety of detailed educational expertise, which is needed to tackle the variety of educational issues that play a role in one department. Another, related, disadvantage is that the individual staff developers are isolated, since they lack a group of colleagues in the same discipline.

### Buying services on demand

This is a model well known to a number of institutions in Norway. Initial entry training and staff development has been an integrated part in the “old” universities, like the University of Oslo, the University of Bergen, and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. In new universities (like the University of Stavanger), and in several university colleges, initial entry training may be mandatory, but the institutions have not had, and in many cases still do not have, the kind of expertise needed to provide such training. In order to solve this problem, external experts (from the old universities) have been paid to run work shops, and to provide other services needed. In many cases such work shops (and other services) may get a very good reception. Nevertheless, this is not a good solution in the long run. In order to secure a permanent interest in, and pressure on, staff

development, an institution (like a university) ought to have this expertise as part of its own portfolio.

## **The Educational Development Centre at the University of Bergen**

Ever since it was established, the Educational Development Centre at the University of Bergen has been part of the Faculty of psychology. The centre has 4 full time researchers and one adjunct professor in a 20% position, and draws on administrative resources from the faculty administration. The centre reports to a board and to the dean at the Faculty of psychology. The board is made up of representatives from different faculties (5) and one representative from the Division of Academic Affairs at the university. The board appoints an external examiner whose task it is to control the quality of the educational programme offered by the centre. The centre pursues a model for the future in which its staff are supplemented by staff developers from each of the 5 other faculties as described above. These (20%) position will be financed by their respective faculty.

All new members of academic staff at the University of Bergen have to document what is called “basic pedagogical competence”, and the Educational Development Centre offers training towards such competence. This was made mandatory in 1990. The programme is quite comprehensive (equivalent to 20 ECTS credits), and has to be undertaken within one year of employment. The programme is made up of several units. One of these units – the basic unit – is mandatory. This runs twice every year and is equivalent to 10 ECTS credits. In addition, several smaller, optional units are offered once or twice every year. These optional units cover a range of different topics, and are of two different kinds; (a) 5 ECTS credits and (b) 2.5 ECTS credits. All successful participants receive a certificate by the Educational Development Centre. The staff at this centre also serve as consultants to faculties and departments in their planning of new study programmes or in other cases when there is need for pedagogical assistance (e.g. open lectures/seminars, or individual counselling/coaching).

## Educational Development Centres – some challenges

An informal inquiry into “the state of the art” of Educational Development Centres in Norwegian universities and university colleges shows that these centres have quite a few challenges in common. Having the institution accept the need for such centres and the work they do, and providing them with necessary funding, constitutes one very big challenge. In many cases initial entry training has been made mandatory, but resources are scarce and the picture is characterised by little professionalism. A challenge that is related to this has to do with the lack of administrative resources and backup. Centres that have an administrative post as part of their staff (full time or other) are the exceptions rather than the rule. A third challenge is related to recruitment and professional development. In Norway, most Educational Development Centres are staffed by seniors, and too little effort has been put into recruiting younger staff members. Again, centres that have a PhD-student in their midst are exceptions and not the rule. This situation may have consequences for the quality of the work an Educational Development Centre does as well as for its reputation. This is one reason why a national initiative has been taken which seeks to join forces, both as far as the running of work shops is concerned, and with concern to professional development and research.

Another example of large differences in organising academic educational centres is the situation in The Netherlands. The 13 Dutch research universities have very different ways of organising and financing their educational centres. Two Dutch universities each have one educational centre positioned within one of the faculties, offering services to all faculties. Two universities each have an inter-facular centre, also offering services to all faculties within their own university. Seven universities each own a central educational centre. One university has a couple of small educational centres within faculties, serving only their own faculty. And one university does not have any educational centre (its initial entry training is delivered by an external organisation). Also the financing of these centres show large difference. Some of these centres do not receive any financing from the university itself, the others are at least partly financed from their

universities. Most commonly, this financing is based upon a contract for certain activities, such as delivering initial entry training to new teachers, assisting faculties in developing and organising quality assurance procedures or supporting teachers in using computers in their education. Despite their differences, these centres are able to perform some joint activities initiated by a national association of these centres called CRWO. CRWO organises an annual conference (in Dutch) and is the initiator of the agreement on a common level of initial entry training for teaching staff, signed in January 2008 by the rectors of all Dutch universities.

## Conclusion

The above is a snapshot of the situation as it looks like in two countries, Norway and The Netherlands. There is, however, a European dimension in this. The NETTLE project has shown that there are big differences between countries in Europe when it comes to the existence of Educational Development Centres and with relevance to the importance institutions put on initial entry training.

It is remarkable that the academic educational centres within Europe and within European countries suffer some common problems. The first common problem has to do with the position of the centre within the universities organisation. On the one hand, the centres have a narrow relation with the board of their university. In fact, each centre is an instrument of the university's board in fulfilling its policy in educational matters. For example, the board might ask the educational centre to develop an internal quality assurance procedure to be imposed upon the faculties. On the other hand, the educational centres have a narrow relation with the faculties. The activities of the centres aim at improving the quality of the education within the faculties. So, in fact, the faculties are their most direct clients. An academic educational centre might get stuck between the different policies of the board of the university and of the faculties within the university. The second problem is the relation between educational services and educational research. The centres that perform both activities, experiences a 'wall of glass' between educational services and educational

research. Researchers are focussed upon doing research and are not interested in the activities of the educational consultants and teacher trainers. These consultants and trainers, in their turn, lack enough time to do research and to earn a PhD. Doing research and having a PhD might give these employees an advantage in co-operating with teachers and researchers within the faculties. All in all, the level of cross-pollination between educational services and educational research is often too low.

Since all countries are suffering these problems, it might be a good idea to join forces in solving these problems. A natural follow-up of the NETTLE project would be to establish a network of staff developers within Europe, who cooperate in developing different kinds of work shops; one which aims at developing the competence of those individuals who are seeking to establish and run an Educational Development Centre within their respective countries, another aimed at new university teachers. The latter may be held on different locations according to some specified cycle with participants from different institutions and countries. Most probably a network like this would have spinoff effects in terms of cooperative research projects and as far as recruitment to Educational Development Centres in different settings is concerned.

NETTLE has 38 partners from 29 countries within Europe. Mainly from higher education institutions the partners are a mix of educational development professionals, subject specialist and professional trainers.

NETTLE has been researching what it means to be a teacher in Higher / Tertiary education, across the diversity and richness of cultures and institutions which its partners represent. This information is being used to inform guidelines for the development of a teacher's skills, in context examples of how this might be done, and associated support documents providing information on topics of interest to the NETTLE community.

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