Evaluation of Key Project Deliverables in Part Fulfilment of ESF Project 1.227 ‘Making Quality Visible’

Qualitative Report
2015
# Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms 3
Background 4
Findings 5
  About the ESF Project 1.227 “Making Quality Visible” 5
  CPD Award Course 7
  Seminar for Prospective Expert Evaluators of EQA 10
  Seminar for Prospective Student Evaluators of EQA 12
  Net-QAPE Meetings 14
  EQA 16
  Concluding Conference 18
Conclusion 19
Recommendations 22
Appendix I: Semi-structured guidelines 24
# List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CPD</td>
<td>Continuous Professional Development</td>
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<td>EQA</td>
<td>External Quality Audit</td>
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<td>ESF</td>
<td>European Social Fund</td>
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<td>IQA</td>
<td>Internal Quality Audit</td>
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<td>ITS</td>
<td>Institute of Tourism Studies</td>
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<td>MCAST'</td>
<td>Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology</td>
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<td>NCFHE</td>
<td>National Commission for Further and Higher Education</td>
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<td>QA</td>
<td>Quality Assurance</td>
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**Background**

Grant Thornton has been engaged by the National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE) to carry out an evaluation of the deliverables forming part of the ESF Project 1.227 “Making Quality Visible”. For the evaluation exercise, Grant Thornton utilised both quantitative and qualitative research tools. The aim of this report is to present the results of the data gathered through the qualitative research exercise.

Following the completion of the quantitative research exercise, experts from Grant Thornton randomly selected a number of interviewees for the face-to-face interviews to collect in-depth information on the implementation of the ESF Project 1.227 “Making Quality Visible” and its deliverables. The semi-structured questions guidelines were previously submitted to NCFHE for approval. When selecting the interviewees, Grant Thornton ensured that respondents are representative of the different roles that project participants held during the project implementation (administrators, tutors, and students) and heralded from the educational institutions that they represent. The interviewees were from the three main educational institutions in Malta, that is, the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS), the Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), and the University of Malta. The interviewees were selected from the list of participants that was forwarded to Grant Thornton by NCFHE. However, there were not enough students listed with whom Grant Thornton could carry out the requested number of interviews. Thus, a request was submitted to ITS and MCAST to identify a number of students who participated in the ESF Project 1.227 from which Grant Thornton selected the interviewees. The face-to-face interviews were mainly carried out during October 2015. However, due to other commitments of some of the interviewees, a number of interviews were also carried out in November.

The following sections present the main research findings that emerged from the qualitative research exercise. It is to be noted that all the information presented in this report has been provided by the interviewees and that the conclusions and recommendations put forward by Grant Thornton depend on what was observed during the qualitative research exercise and on the feedback provided by the participants. Furthermore, some of the activities organised as part of the ESF Project 1.227 “Making Quality Visible” took place months ago. Thus, there were instances during the face-to-face interviews where interviewees had some difficulty recalling in-depth details, which may have led to some minor inaccuracies.
Findings

About the ESF Project 1.227 “Making Quality Visible”

In the past, the main problem of local educational institutions was that these kept creating and offering new courses regularly and then at one point it would emerge that the courses were not accredited. A legal notice was issued in the year 2002 which provided a framework for the licensing and accreditation. In a way, this legal notice was implemented through the ESF Project 1.227 “Making Quality Visible”. This project sought to put in place a system to ensure that the courses being offered meet quality standards and that the institutions providing these courses are actually capable of providing these courses. Thus, such a project provides guarantees to students on the final product. The ESF Project 1.227 was deemed as the preparatory work to pave the ground for future audits and to extend the framework to the private educational sector. An authority cannot be a provider of the service and a regulator without having its own institutions that are providing the service up to the set standards.

In balance, the interviewees questioned were of the belief that the project achieved the intended objectives in setting up the systems and standards for the Internal Quality Audit (IQA) and External Quality Audit (EQA). The participants had their own expectations and reasons for participating in the project and if project met their expectations meant that it achieved the projected results. Indeed, the educational institutions are satisfied with the IQA reports that they produced and are planning to implement the recommendations that they received on the report.

A key characteristic of the ESF Project 1.227 is its coherence. The project brought together the different educational institutions and the different stakeholders, that is, administrators, tutors and students. This allowed the benchmarking of educational institutions with a set of standards through the IQA and feedback was provided from the Quality Assurance (QA) Officers from the other educational institutions audit report. Thus, this exercise allowed for the identification of shortcomings that the educational institutions could improve.

Despite the acknowledged benefits and positive impact of the project, the interviewees identified a number of issues and limitations to the project. One of the main limitation of the project is common to all ESF projects, that is, the timeframes for the project implementation. ESF-funded projects need to respect certain deadlines and thus, some of the interviewees were of the belief that some of the activities of this project were rushed.
The participants were expecting the amount of work they actually had to carry out, but the main issue was the timeframes and short notices to carry out certain activities. It is to be noted that the participants involved in the project had their routine work at the educational institution to carry out, including lecturing. Thus, some participants had to work overtime and had to report to the office during the summer holidays in order to meet the project deadlines. According to one particular interviewee, the project should have taken another year to be implemented. The short notices faced by some interviewees arose due to, to some extent, lack of planning and preparation. An example mentioned in this regard is the preparation of tags for the peer reviewers of the EQA of which a particular institution was informed about only the day before. Another example mentioned is a visit that had to be carried out on the premises of the educational institution in Gozo. In this regard, the institution asked for the visit to be carried out on a Monday to observe the full operations of the institution. Nonetheless, the visit was planned for another weekday and the educational institution had to coordinate to change the date of the visit.

Interviewees also commented on the timing of the project. The programme of the project was changed and a meeting that was originally scheduled to take place before the drafting of the EQA report, actually took place afterwards. This created issues to the participants which made them feel that they were not appropriately prepared for the EQA. Indeed, some participants commented that rather than the activities forming part of the ESF Project 1.227, it was thanks to their past experience in QA (either direct or indirect) which made them prepared to effectively contribute to the project.

When the project was being implemented, some of the participants who were interviewed for the qualitative research were newly employed as administrators at their educational institution. Apart from getting used to their work duties, these newcomers also had to learn what was being taught through the project. This was viewed both as an advantage and as a disadvantage. It was an advantage because it gave the opportunity to the newcomers to integrate what they were learning into their work practices, but it was also viewed as a disadvantage because of the amount of policies and procedures that they had to learn to implement at their place of work.

Whereas this section provided a general overview of the ESF Project 1.227 “Making Quality Visible” from the interviewees’ perspectives the following sections provide the interviewees’ insights on the specific activities forming part of the project.
Overall, the CPD Award Course was a very interesting experience to the participants as it assembled all the education service providers with a common goal. Through the course, the participants learnt the standards in the QA and how these could be achieved. The participants were then able to develop an IQA report in which they set out how the standards were and could be achieved by the educational institutions.

It is to be noted that the participants of the project had different roles and positions in their respective educational institutions. While some of them directly worked in the QA Department, others were not directly involved in QA. Despite this, all the participants stated that in a way or another they were putting into practice what they learnt as somehow standards could be related to their work, even if marginally. One participant stated that one could implement something that they learnt at any level, even when lecturing or drafting the course content. Furthermore, participants also had their own aspirations for their professional development and the CPD Award Course has helped them in this regard.

The course was described as being flexible to the needs and the work requirements of the participants. The CPD course first provided a general introduction, but the participants were then asked to identify some topics that they wanted to be tackled during the delivery of the sessions. During this exercise a number of topics were identified, which were not originally going to be discussed during the lectures because the organisers thought that the participants already had extensive knowledge of these topics. This made the course more relevant to the work that the participants carry out on a daily basis.

Almost all the interviewees stated that they would recommend the course to others. Indeed, an interviewee stated that he received an invitation on LinkedIn from a QA Officer based in the UK who was considering to come to Malta to work here. The British QA officer asked for more information on the local opportunities within her field of expertise. This particular interviewee mentioned to her the ESF Project 1.227 and she seemed very interested in it and expressed her interest should such a course be provided again in the future.

The interviewees also praised the study visit to Berlin which was a very good experience to the participants. The study visit was a good opportunity for the participants to be exposed to what is taking place within educational institutions abroad. Indeed, participants were able to compare different scenarios, and learnt that other educational institutions abroad have their own (similar an even larger) problems. One of the interviewees commented that he was still referring to the notes taken during the study visit in the conduct of his work duties. Interviewees also praised the timing of the study visit as it

**CPD Award Course**
took place during the delivery of the training programme. Hence, post-study visit training could be better connected to practical examples.

A number of limitations on the course were mentioned during the qualitative exercise which were mainly related to the workload, preparation, logistics, selection of the participants, and the trainers. The CPD Award Course was a Level 5 Course with 6 credits, but considering all the work that it involved over and above the direct lecturing hours, the course should have been allocated more credits. This could have resulted either because of wrong planning or because the organiser did not take into consideration all the work that had to be carried out as part of the course requirements. Thus, to some participants, the course involved much more work than was expected because of the allocation of the number of credits. The CPD Award Course involved a lot of paper work which obviously required a lot of time to prepare. While participating in the course, the participants still had to carry out their work duties at their respective educational institutions. An interviewee stated that he would have preferred to have a detailed programme and schedule of the course sessions in order to better plan his commitments beforehand. Indeed, training was scheduled monthly, but the actual dates were not set which made it difficult for participants to plan ahead other commitments.

An issue that emerged during the interviews relates to preparation. Participants were not aware of what was required from them and necessitated more information prior to the commencement of the course. In addition, reading material, should have been provided with ample time for reading before every session. Interviewees commented that they were given material to read before each training session, but they were not given enough time to read through all the material. Furthermore, presentations were not always forwarded to the participants on time. Despite these issues, the participants did not find the topics difficult to understand, partly due to the repetition that took place across different sessions and across different lecturers.

Some interviewees also had a number of issues with the logistics of the training sessions (timing, duration and venue). The workshops that took place during the day were too tiring and some people left before the end of the sessions. Furthermore, other sessions were held after working hours at around 16:00 and participants found it very difficult to concentrate after a full day’s work. Training sessions were also held during the summer months which did not make sense to some participants because they do not work during the summer. In this regard, one of the participants stated that due to the deadlines of the project, he had to report to the office during the summer holidays to work on the paper work and deliver the outputs within the specified deadlines. The sessions were not held in a central location which caused a problem to some participants, especially to those who did not have private transport.
Questions on the selection process of the participants for the CPD Course Award also arose during the qualitative research. Upon completion of the course, an interviewee who participated in the CPD Award Course was not involved by the education institution in the work pertaining to the implementation of the recommendations deriving from the EQA. The same interviewee stated that he is 60 years and that he would contribute to his educational institution for only another few years. Due to this, he stated that he would have not participated in the CPD Award Course as he was of the belief that younger participants should have been chosen to participate in the project so that they could contribute to the quality of the institution and during future audits. Thus, he recommended that a team from the institution is put together composed of two mature members and two younger ones. In this way, the mature members would contribute to the exercise through their work experience and would provide guidance to the younger ones who would implement what they learned.

Whereas the participants praised the overall organisation of the training, they described the delivery of the trainers as being somewhat unprofessional. One of the interviewees also mentioned an episode where a trainer forgot his laptop and was unable to use visual aids during the delivery of the session. This session was related to the EU vis-à-vis QA. This interviewee stated that this topic required further explanation, as the trainer did not manage to effectively explain the involvement of the EU in this field to those who do not have background of the subject. The lecturer did not provide enough information on how the EU takes decisions in the educational field and how Malta has to adapt these decisions to be in line with the rest of Europe.

Another activity that formed part of the ESF Project 1.227 “Making Quality Visible” related to the Seminar for Prospective Expert Evaluators of EQA. The following section specifically focuses on the feedback provided on this seminar.
Seminar for Prospective Expert Evaluators of EQA

In order to participate in the seminar, participants had to meet a number of strict criteria. This was deemed as a positive thing by the participants, because in this way it gathered specific persons with precise qualifications and with particular experience in the field. Participants expected the seminar to be hands on and indeed, they found it that way. The practical side of the seminar was implemented through a simulation exercise of an audit where participants were split into groups and they had the role of experts in charge of drafting a report on Quality Audit. Participants found the practical exercise to be very useful as there was more involvement. The simulation exercise was very useful to the participants as the observers went into a lot of detail on what the participants had to do. Feedback was provided on the participants’ work and suggestions were put forward on what can be improved. However, an interviewee stated that such exercise should have been carried out using one of the educational institutions as a “dummy”. Such an exercise should be carried out by a team composed of, for example, a representative from MCAST and a representative from the University of Malta who carry out a “dummy audit” on ITS. Such a team would have expertise from both the academic and the vocational sectors and contributes towards the sharing of good practices.

Interviewees who have a direct role in the QA of their institution stated that the seminar was relevant to their professional development. Indeed, for these interviewees, Quality Assurance was an on-going workplace activity and they were practicing the topics that were discussed during the seminar. The discussed topics were being practiced in the following areas: teaching and learning programmes, change in curriculum, development of specific policies, and quality audits.

Despite the usefulness of the seminar and the putting into practice of the topics discussed, some participants still felt that they were not prepared enough. They expressed the need for more CPD where participants are given the opportunity to be exposed to foreign good practices and to see what is taking place abroad. This can be done either through an organised visit abroad or by bringing foreign experts to Malta. Interviewees recommend such CPD needs to be organised solely for officers who directly work in QA.

One interviewee also pointed out that more time should have been provided between the seminar and the EQA. While executing the role of expert evaluators, participants still have to carry out duties related to their normal work activities. Thus, they felt that they did not have enough time to prepare for the collection of particular data.
Other issues were identified related to the Seminar, which were mainly related to the organisation of the seminar and the logistics. Indeed, a relevant issue is that it was a one-off event and it was held months back. Such seminar should continue to be organised regularly, to act as a refresher for those who already participated and also for new peer reviewers to gain knowledge. Participants stated that there would be no need to go into all the topics that were tackled, but that focus should be given to the standards and on their practices.

Interviewees stated that the seminar was only three hours long, but an actual audit would take much longer. More importance should have been placed on the simulation exercise rather than in the provision of less relevant information. Some participants commented that they were not informed early that the seminars involved holding meetings in the evening and after working hours. Furthermore, some interviewees were of the belief that the seminar was rushed and that more time should have been allocated to it. Furthermore, one interviewees stated that there should be seminars for prospective expert evaluators. One seminar is to be organised prior to the EQA as a preparation and another one after to take stock of the lessons learned from the EQA.

Another seminar was organised with prospective student evaluators of EQA. The following section provides information relative to this seminar obtained from respondents involved as student evaluators in the EQA.
Students were involved as evaluators and had to carry out audits on the institutions. One of the interviewees was a tutor who during the project implementation was a student at one of the educational institutions. This interviewee was already aware of the topic because of previous work experience in the field of QA. She stated that her past experience was more useful than the two-day seminar that was organised for student evaluators. The interviewee expected more awareness and assistance in what they were taught and stated that a two day seminar was not enough. The seminar just gave an overview, during which a set of guidelines were provided to the participants on how to check on specific standards. However, the interviewee commented that more information should have been provided on the procedures to be followed for the conduct of the audits. Emphasis should have been given to practice and simulation. Furthermore, there was the need for a follow up session after the conduct of the audits. When asked about the achievement of the projected results, the same interviewee stated that she was not aware of the progress made on the project implementation, as upon completion of the audits she was not contacted again. Despite these issues, the interviewee stated that such a project helps in understanding and appreciating the point of view of students, and helps to identify the main issues and to make the necessary improvements.

Those students who did not have past experience in QA found the seminar to be informative enough with regards to what was required from them. The seminar tackled a number of topics, including the evaluation criteria, and the forms that the students needed to fill in. The interviewees stated that they had a lot of information to handle, but that they found the experience to be a good learning curve as they put into practise what they learnt. Through this experience, the student interviewees gained knowledge on how the educational institutions operate, their standards, quality audits, and how to draft reports. They learnt that there is a whole mechanism that ensures the quality of the courses and made them aware of some issues that need correction. Some of the interviewed students are involved in student organisations and given their role, they found the project experience to be useful for their personal development. One interviewee stated that she used insights and terminology learnt during the project implementation in the drafting of the student organisation’s reports. Student interviewees believed that since they are part of student organisations, this helped them to effectively contribute in the conduct of the EQA. One interviewee considered the work that they had to carry out as normal, in the sense that she had experience in attending meetings and already had basic knowledge of the different frameworks available and knowledge of the Education Act.

Through the interviews a number of areas where identified which require further explanation. Participants had some difficulty in understanding the different structures of the educational institutions.
For example, The University of Malta has a rector and different boards, but the other institutions work differently and it took them some time for the students to understand the different structures and the lines of communication. Another identified area which required more training is the PASCAL which is found in student-centred learning. This is still a new topic and more information is needed to better grasp this topic.

Apart from the above mentioned topics it emerged that they require further explanation on other issues related to the seminar. Comments received relate to the preparation for the audit and the timeframes provided. Indeed, participants were given a lot of material to review before the conduct of the audit and they were not given enough time to review the material given to them. One interviewee was involved in the preparation of the standards which were then used by the reviewing panel. This interviewee was of the view that this exercise rather than the seminar effectively prepared her for the audit. Thus, she recommended that more training is provided on the standards and in the way these are interpreted in order to ensure consistency in the interpretation.

Another comment that was provided was that the students had to interview many people in a short period of time while ensuring the collection of the required information to get a true picture of how the institution operates.

Another activity forming part of the ESF Project 1.227 “Making Quality Visible” is the Net-CAPE Meetings. The evaluation on these meetings is provided in the next section.
Net-QAPE Meetings

The Net-QAPE Meetings gave the opportunity to officers working in the field of QA to network with other officers from the different educational institutions. These meetings served their purpose in providing on-going support and in creating awareness on the different issues related to QA. Interviewees commented that these meetings were better regarded than the other activities organised as these were shorter and allowed the participants to concentrate more.

The participants mainly mentioned the main limitations and issues of the Net-QAPE Meetings which primarily relate to the content and organisation of these meetings. During the Net-QAPE Meetings, participants were provided with templates which the same participants found them to be good, but they were not clear enough. A particular interviewee referred to point number 2 on probity. The interviewee explained that public institutions do not have full control over the finances as these are allocated by Government. Thus, if an institution is allocated €5 million for 5 years, every year the institution has to prove that it needs €1 million. Furthermore, education is free of charge. However, private providers have a source of income as these charge for their services. The interviewee emphasised that public institutions meet the standards set by Government with regards to the financing.

One of the interviewees commented that there cannot be a one size fits all situation, even if in this case the focus was on Government entities because of the difference among the educational institutions involved. The University is mainly academic, MCAST is made up of colleges, while ITS focuses on a specific area, that is, Tourism and Hospitality. Furthermore, the requirements of the sector in which the latter institute operates is different from that of MCAST.

Other issues identified refer to the repetition in the topics discussed during the meetings and the location of the meetings. Indeed, different interviewees pointed out that there was a lot of repetition across the different meetings. Also, the meetings were held at the Waterfront Hotel where there was a parking problem and since these meetings were not held first thing in the morning, the problem was even worse.

Despite the issues identified, all the participants found these meetings helpful and they believe that these should continue in the future. While acknowledging that the project was funded by the European Union, an interviewee was disappointed that these meetings will not continue. The project gained momentum through the different activities and the different meetings and then after almost two years it ended abruptly. The scope of these meetings was to have professionals in the area to network among them, but this stopped once the project was completed. Another interviewee stated that such meetings should take the form of workshops that are specifically organised for those who are directly involved in QA.
However, if QA is deemed to be a shared responsibility, then everyone should be involved, from the administrators to the tutors, as they all have a role to play. Some interviewees also recommended that during such meetings the administrators from a specific educational institution should remain together during the meetings. This allows the administrators to contribute more if they are all aware of their work issues and procedures.

The Seminar for Prospective Expert Evaluators of EQA and the Seminar for Prospective Student Evaluators of EQA served as preparation for the EQA. It is tackled in the next section of this report.
The EQA is deemed as a relevant activity as there is someone external to the institution who can provide his insights. This is especially so if this external expert is a foreigner as he can put forward an unbiased opinion on what he is observing. Foreigners tend to be more objective because they have a different culture and mentality, and are not exposed to the Maltese system.

With specific reference to this project, the interviewees commented that participants should have been informed on when the EQA was going to take place. Furthermore, they stated that the EQA should have taken place after the completion of the project rather than concurrently.

During the face-to-face interviews, one of the interviewees stated that prior to the EQA, the evaluation panel reviewed the educational institution’s website and that a number of officials working at the same institution were interviewed. However, this interviewee stated that other very relevant stakeholders were not consulted during the conduct of the EQA. Thus, the obtained results might have been different from those presented in the EQA report. Furthermore, it was noted that more meetings were required with the department in charge of the QA before presenting the EQA results to the higher ranking officials at the educational institution.

The participants experienced a number of issues during the execution of the EQA. Some interviewees pointed out that the framework document for the internal quality audit (guidelines) were not ready upon commencement of the first audit. Furthermore, interviewees from the University of Malta stated that whereas they felt adequately prepared for the EQA through the information sessions and meetings, they felt that the guidelines were not clear enough. They attributed it to the fact that the participants from the University of Malta were the first group to carry out the EQA.

One of the interviewees commented that no pre-conceived judgements were to be formulated before the conduct of the audit. When an audit is to be carried out for the first time, only recommendations should be put forward based on the observations of the audits. From the second audit onwards, judgements can be made on the progress made vis-à-vis the implementation of the recommendations put forward in the first audit. In the case of the institution of this interviewee, judgements were put forward which conflicted with the institution’s existing policies.

Despite being a stressful experience, it was also a very satisfactory one. Indeed, some of the participants stated that they are implementing an action plan with the recommendations put forward from the developed report.
During the interviews one interviewee put forward two relevant recommendations for the conduct of an EQA. The first recommendation relates to the provision of the CVs of the experts who will be carrying out the audits to the educational institutions. Information relative to the experience of such experts in the area of audits is also to be provided. In the case of the EQA that was carried out, the judgement was written by two foreign EQA experts and two local representatives. However, the local representatives did not agree with the judgement put forward by the foreign EQA experts. This could be attributed to the different cultures and mentality, but there should be consistency and agreement in the judgement. Despite the disagreement on the EQA results, the opinion of the local representatives was not included in the report. A mix of EQA experts (foreign and local) should be involved and the local experts should also have a say in the judgement drafted by the foreign EQA experts.

The following section provides information relative to the last activity of the ESF Project 1.227 “Making Quality Visible” which is the Concluding Conference.
Concluding Conference

With regards to the organisation of the conference, some of the interviewees commented that they were informed late about it and that they had some difficulty in attending. Those interviewees who attended the conference stated that they were very satisfied with the content of the conference as it was well presented and well attended. All the relevant topics were covered during the conference, but one interviewee commented that there should have been feedback on the experience of the different institutions on the project. Some of the interviewed administrators stated that they found the conference to be repetitive and that it would have been interesting to those who were not involved in any of the other activities. Furthermore, for the participants, the conference was a good networking opportunity.
Conclusion

For a long time it was felt the need for educational institutions in Malta to become subject to quality standards and accountable for the quality of their courses. This project was the first step in establishing a system to ensure that courses being offered locally meet quality standards to provide guarantees to the students following the courses they apply for. The educational institutions participating in the ESF Project 1.227 “Making Quality Visible” sought this project as an opportunity to review their operations through the IQA. Following the completion of the EQA, the educational institutions are working on the results of the EQA by developing an action plan for the implementation of the recommendations put forward by the EQA experts.

The activities that were organised as part of the ESF Project, provided an opportunity to participants to network with other officers with similar background from other educational institutions in Malta. At the beginning of the project, there was some degree of hesitation about the project vis-à-vis the review of practices within other educational institutions. However, this also acted an encouragement for the educational institutions to address existing issues. Indeed, the network that was created allowed the participants to compare the situation within their respective educational institution with those of other educational institutions and see how these are dealing with particular issues. Continued coordination and consultation among the educational institutions is an important element which could have an impact on the further and higher educational sector in Malta. For about two years, the different educational institutions were assembled through the regular seminars and meetings organised as part of this Project. However, after gaining momentum, these activities ended abruptly upon completion of the Project. The bringing together of the different educational institutions was one of the initial aims of the project which should be pursued in the future to continue improving the quality of the educational sector. Indeed, quality audits should be held at regular intervals in order to monitor and assess the implementation of the recommendations set forth in the previous EQA.

The main best features of the organised activities relate to the practicality and relevance. The simulation and role play exercises allowed participants to be more involved in the whole process by practicing what they were being taught. The qualifications and expertise of the experts who delivered the different sessions and meetings made the activities even more relevant to the participants. Indeed, the participants were able to relate to the experts via the practical examples that the experts were providing. Furthermore, the content of the activities was flexible to the needs of the participants which allowed them to implement certain topics in their routine work.
Despite the satisfaction of the participants with the activities, Grant Thornton observed a number of limitations and shortcomings at the project level and at the level of each activity that was organised. At the project level, it was observed that there were no clear criteria on how the participants were selected by the educational institutions to participate in the different activities. Indeed, there were young participants with no experience and other who are close to retirement backed up by years of experience. Furthermore, there were participants whose work is directly related to QA while others whose work is only marginally related to QA. Despite the divergence in the background of the participants, no distinctive activities were organised to take into consideration such differences, but they attended the same common activities.

Participants need to be provided with detailed information about what the different activities entail. Indeed, more information needs to be provided prior to the launch of each activity relative to the work that the participants would be required to perform and what it would entail in terms of actual hours dedicated to meetings and other input. In this regard, a detailed schedule with at least tentative dates and times for the taking place of the sessions for the CPD Award Course, Seminars, and Meetings are to be provided well in advance. This would allow participants to better plan their commitments deriving from their routine work at the educational institutions.

When drafting the detailed schedule, such schedule should be drafted in such a way that it gives the participants enough time to prepare for the different activities. Indeed, any reading material should be given well in advance to allow participants to review the material to be effectively prepared to contribute to the different activities. Furthermore, since the activities that were organised were a preparation for the EQA, the EQA should take place once all the other activities are completed. This would allow the participants to focus their efforts solely on the EQA.

The educational institutions that participated in the project have their own characteristics, that is, whether they are academic or vocational and whether they sector specific or general. Thus, the guidelines and manuals provided as part of the project, might not fully apply to the educational institutions. In such a situation a degree of flexibility (while ensuring consistency) needs to be applied when carrying out the EQA in order for the resulting recommendations to be relevant to the educational institutions. Furthermore, while acknowledging the expertise and professionalism of the foreign experts who provided unbiased recommendations during the EQA, it might be useful to have representation from the local educational sector on the evaluation panel. This would ensure that the recommendations put forward are applicable to the local educational sector.

From the qualitative research it emerged that for the EQA, not all the relevant stakeholders within the educational institutions might have been consulted. It would be helpful if a mapping exercise is
conducted prior to the EQA to identify the key officials within the different educational institutions who can provide relevant information for the EQA. In this way, the results of the EQA would be based on information that describe the full operations and scenarios of the educational institution.

Currently there is confusion as to what is going to take place in the future vis-à-vis the ESF Project 1.227 “Making Quality Visible”. In this regard, the participants need to be informed about the progress of the ESF Project and any future plans that there might be in the pipeline as continuation of this same project. This might ensure the participation of those who participated in the project, especially the student and expert evaluators, for future audits. Furthermore, answers need to be provided to particular queries that might exist. One such query relates to whether the trained peer reviewers who attended the expert evaluators of EQA can carry out audits on other educational institutions.

The logistics of the different activities was an issue to most of the respondents. Ideally, a centrally located venue is to be selected to reduce the travelling time of the participants. This might also reduce the number of participants who arrive late at the session, thus either disrupting the session or delaying the start time of the session.

Whereas this section provides that conclusions based on the observations made by Grant Thornton’s experts and the information received by the participants, the following section provides a number of recommendations for future activities in the field of quality audits.
Recommendations

Based on the findings of the qualitative research exercise and on the observations made by Grant Thornton’s experts, the following list provides the main recommendations that Grant Thornton deems relevant for future audits.

- A set of criteria need to be developed for the selection of participants who are to participate in the organised activities. This ensures that the participants have a certain degree of knowledge of the subject and that they can actively contribute to the deliverables of the project.

- CPD events should be organised to continue the work that commenced with the ESF Project 1.227 “Making Quality Visible”. Such CPD events should target participants with common background and similar work duties. This ensures continuation in the area of QA with the participants being exposed to good practices that are taking place both locally and abroad. These events become even more important in the cases of participants who decide to change jobs in order to train the new recruits.

- During the delivery of the training sessions, seminars, and meetings, it is recommended that the organiser put someone in charge of ensuring that the venue is appropriately set up for the delivery of the session. This entails ensuring the setting up of the venue with the audio system, laptop with the PowerPoint presentations, and projector, prior to the commencement of the session. Ideally, the person in charge should be present throughout the whole session such that immediate action can be taken in case of issues that emerge during the delivery of the sessions.

- It is recommended that a mapping exercise is carried out to identify the individuals within the educational institutions who shall provide information for the EQA. This ensures that relevant officials are not excluded from the EQA and that the results and recommendations put forward are based on information that shed light on the full picture of the educational institutions’ operations.

- A detailed schedule should be provided to the participants with tentative dates on when the activities are taking place to given them enough time to plan their work commitments and fully participate in the activities.

- Ideally, the evaluation panel of the EQA is composed of foreign and local experts who allow for flexibility in the conduct of the EQA. This allows for unbiased insights and
recommendations while ensuring that these are relevant to both the local educational sector as well as the educational institution per se.

- Ideally, educational institutions are informed about any plans for future audits. This might put more pressure on the educational institutions to continue their work in the field of QA.

- Ideally, a centrally local venue is selected for the delivery of the sessions and project activities to minimise the travelling time of the participants to arrive at the venue.
Appendix I: Semi-structured guidelines
Semi-structured interview questions

General questions on the Project (to be asked to all participants)

1. Can you briefly explain what were the intended objectives of the deliverables of the ESF Project “Making Quality Visible”?

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2. What was your involvement in this project?

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3. The amount of contribution required from you was what you originally expected? In what way?

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4. Do you think that you were appropriately prepared in order to effectively contribute to the project? If yes, in what way? If no, what additional information did you require?

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5. Do you think that the project has achieved the projected results?

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6. In your opinion, what do you consider to be the best feature of the Project?

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7. Overall, do you believe that such Project will have a significant impact on the Maltese Further and Higher (F&H) Education?

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Seminar / CPD Award Course (to be asked to all respondents)

8. What were your initial expectations from the course/seminar? Were these actually realised?
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9. In what way was the course/seminar relevant to your professional development?
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10. Did you have the opportunity to put into practice any of the topics covered during the course/seminar? If yes which ones and how did you put them into practice?
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11. Do you think you are adequately prepared for your future role in implementing the F&H EQA Framework?
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12. In your opinion, what do you consider to be the best feature with regards to the CPD Award Course/Seminar?
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13. Was there any topic/issue that you could have been addressed better / required more time / a different approach?
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14. If you had known at the beginning what the CPD Award Course/Seminar was like, would you have still taken it?
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15. If the CPD Award were to be available again, would you recommend it to your colleagues?
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Net-QAPE Meetings (to be asked to administrators)

16. The aim of the Net-QAPE meetings was to provide on-going support, upskilling and continuous professional development. Do you think that this aim has been reached? If yes, in what way? If no, what was missing?

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17. Were the Net-QAPE Meetings helpful to you? In which areas did you find the meetings to be beneficial? What could be improved?

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18. Do you believe that meetings of this nature should be continued? Please state your reason. What in your opinion should be their main focus?

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EQA (to be asked to all respondents)

19. What do you think of your contribution in the EQA?
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20. Were you adequately prepared for the EQA? If yes, how? If no, what would you have
required?
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21. Would you describe the EQA as a satisfactory experience and/or as a stressful
experience? Why?
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22. Did the EQA provide you with useful insights on how to improve your entity?
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_____________________________________________________________________________
23. Do you have any suggestions to improve the EQA experience?