

## ACT-NET QUALITY CRITERIA CATALOGUE

### Introduction:

The ACT-project created a first Impact Assessment System in order to assess and validate competence development of people in informal learning settings of all kinds. Along its creation process the system was applied and tested on a number of 'micro projects' in the different project partner countries. The follow-up project ACT-NET has been refining and further developed the approach, tools and procedures.

A first step in this process is the creation of quality criteria that should be applied when using the evaluation approach.

The following catalogue is based on central issues and questions ("FAQs") that necessarily come up during the evaluation process:

- **Objectivity/inter-subjectivity, representation:** *How can we assure the objectivity of the results when applying the approach?*
- **Validity:** *How can we assure the validity of the results when applying the approach?*
- **Reliability:** *How can we assure the reliability of the measurements?*
- **Efficiency:** *What is the cost benefit balance of the assessment?*
- **Effectiveness in view of the goals of the evaluation:** *Will the assessment lead to improvement?*
- **Efficiency and Effectiveness as a learning process:** *How can we assure efficiency and effectiveness?*
- **Transparency:** *How can we assure transparency?*
- **Consistency of the categories:** *How can we create consistent categories?*

### Objectivity/inter-subjectivity, representation

*How can we assure the objectivity of the results when applying the approach?*

Competence development assessment can hardly be a process that delivers objective proof of what has been acquired. The methodology available usually is not sufficient to deal with the complexity of the situation, created by the uncountable number of variables and in regard to the external factors influencing the objectives of the assessment. The relatively small number of respondents or cases often makes it impossible to provide full proof evidence.

The assessment is done to gain as much understanding as possible of the impact of informal learning and the level of the acquired (citizenship) competences. It should be achieved that the obtained proof is plausible, to a certain extent transferable and follows scientific criteria.

This implies that one has to be very much aware of which data one may collect in an objective way and how these data can be processed in a reliable way.

When objectivity is at stake, there is always the solution of inter-subjectivity. One could conduct the measurement as well as the evaluation and the evidencing of the results in the cube by two or more different persons and compare the results. A high similarity would be an indicator for a high objectivity. There is not one single way of doing this. It will however be clear that it has to be a deliberate and conscious decision, taking into account for whom the evaluation is meant, and what the goal of the evaluation is.

## **Validity**

*How can we assure the validity of the results when applying the ACT approach?*

The term “validity” indicates the extent to which a measure accurately reflects the concept that it is intended to measure. Sometimes different actors have a different understanding of the issues and the concepts that are going to be assessed. Validity is about that. Basically it comes down to two questions:

- Are we all clear about what we want to know?
- Is what we are measuring indeed what we want/need to know to get the right answers?

In order to get good and shared definitions of concepts it is important to set up a discussion with all actors involved, asking the right questions: what is important and why. Concepts and interpretations should however also be linked to a broader theoretical frame, otherwise it will be impossible to compare results and transfer of experience to other sectors.

Instruments made or chosen and the debates held about the data, will always have to be looked at critically, asking the central question over and over again: Is this what we think the assessment is about? Is this showing us what we want to know?

All the elements in the assessment plan should also show a great coherence and internal consistency. Basically the questions to which one has to pay attention are:

- Is what we are doing still according to the goals of the evaluation?
- Is the involvement of everybody still doing justice to our intention to involve various parties?
- Is our process serving the right target groups?

Not only the assessment method should consider the criteria “validity”, but also the reference system should be a valid system. Are the concepts used as stages clear for all actors involved? Do they relate to a broadly recognized reference system? A possible way to assure validity of the reference system could be to compare the defined stages with statements of experts in the respective field. The stages could also be built on existing level models (e.g. for cultural competence).

When it comes to evidencing it is also important that the indicators, giving proof that a certain level has been reached, are commonly understood and shared.

## **Reliability**

*How can we assure the reliability of the measurements?*

Reliability describes the degree to which scores and results are consistent and repeatable. A possible way to assure reliability of the reference system could be to carry out the measurement twice (either at two different points of time or with two different assessment methods) and to assign the results to the same reference system. Similar assignments would indicate a high reliability of the reference system.

## **Efficiency**

*What is the cost benefit balance of the assessment?*

Are we doing what we can, to reduce the investment of time in executing the evaluation, and yet to provide worthwhile outcomes?

- Is it necessary to involve as many respondents as we do or can we work with samples?
- Is the method chosen for data gathering (Interview, questionnaire, observation etc.) efficient?
- Have we chosen a sensible level of detail in our instruments or in our analyses and our reports?

Realise that efficient evaluation gives quicker answers. By doing so the evaluators better serve the learning process of the people involved. Efficiency definitely is a quality!

## **Effectiveness in view of the goals of the evaluation**

*Will the assessment lead to improvement?*

If learning and change are desired effects of the assessment process these effects should be defined and included in the evaluation of the assessment. That is why it is so important to identify some intermediate results to be accomplished during the evaluation process in order to raise the question of effectiveness at an early stage.

- How much of what we want to find out have we revealed so far?
- How does that compare with what we intended?
- What can we do to raise the effectiveness of our next step?

## **Efficiency and Effectiveness as a learning process**

*How can we assure efficiency and effectiveness?*

A special focus in the approach chosen is learning as the ultimate process to which evaluation should contribute and by which it should be supported at the same time.

Because of the importance of this element in this approach we once more focus on this aspect. The quality of evaluation from this perspective consists of the following:

1. Good self evaluations are motivating events.
  - They include a variety of activities.
  - They have clear goals and purposes known and supported by the people involved and concerned.

2. They provide the people involved with a richness of information or experiences they can benefit from
  - Lots of sources
  - Clearly structured information
  - Involving all senses
3. They provide opportunities for exploration, articulating ideas, experimentation and feedback on these experiences.
  - Opportunities for brainstorming
  - Opportunities for thinking
  - Opportunities for discussing and sharing ideas
  - Safe and secure feedback on initial "theories and actions", meaning feedback on how the facts found related to what people originally did or thought, or both.

## **Transparency**

*How can we assure transparency?*

Two basic assumptions serve as the basis for our evaluation approach. The first is that evaluation is an element in processes of individual and organisational professional learning. The second is that it will clarify interest positions and serve as a basis for negotiation among all parties involved.

It serves both learning and democracy. For both these purposes the process of self evaluation should be as transparent as possible.

## **Consistency of the Categories**

*How can we create consistent categories?*

The construction of the reference system could be based on approaches for category construction like in a qualitative content analysis or in a structured observation (using a fixed set of categories).

This means that categories of a variable should not overlap, all possible results should be clearly assigned to a category and the assignment to categories should be precisely regulated.

The following checklist might be used for checking the quality of your categories:

- Are your levels exclusive? – They should not overlap!
- Are your descriptions comprehensive, precise and concrete? – Be aware that a clear assignment should be possible!
- Are your levels complete? Any possible learning development should be representable in the levels!

*Do the intervals between the levels have to be exactly the same? How can we make sure?*

The intervals between the levels do not have to be exactly the same, (this is nearly impossible. But the levels should indicate a clear ranking (e.g. level 2 should indicate a clear progress compared to level 1).

*Why are there numbers for the stages in the cube? Does that indicate any quantities?*

Although there are stages in the cube it is still clearly a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach. For naming the levels in ordinal scales numbers can but must not be used. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ordinal\\_scale](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ordinal_scale)) In the case of the ACT cube the levels could also be named ABCD instead of 1234.