

# External evaluation summary

## QUEST project

Matthias Stadler, University of Bergen

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In the following, I summarise the main aspects concerning the external evaluation of the QUEST-project. I list findings indicating the success of QUEST and factors that have contributed. At the end, I briefly describe what more can be done to help innovation projects in education to improve teaching to an even higher degree.

The project delivered a long-term teacher professional development model of high quality to the participating municipalities. It succeeded in establishing working structures including municipal consultants, school leaders, teachers, and the project staff from Aarhus University and VIA University College. Disturbances of these structures occurring during the project period (i.e. people moving to other positions, a labour dispute, and new national working regulations for teachers) were resolved through intensive dialogue between the management team and the involved partners. At the end of the year 2015, these structures were functional in all municipalities and plans for continuing activities in 2016 in place.

Most of the participating teachers evaluated the course days of the QUEST-modules positively. Especially the QUEST-rhythm became highly appreciated. Following that rhythm in the modules, the teachers acquired new knowledge, informed their colleagues at their schools, tried out new teaching approaches, and exchanged and discussed their experiences again with other course participants. Encouraged by QUEST, subject teacher groups were established in schools that did not have one. The agendas of these meetings were gradually shifted from organisational issues over to teaching related topics making the meetings more meaningful for the teachers.

Observations in classrooms and teacher reports during network meetings showed that the teachers used the approaches and tools introduced by the modules in a systematic way. Often starting with a simple adoption of teaching activities, they later adapted them to classroom conditions and began to reflect upon student learning and its relation to aspects of the teaching. The notion of redesigning teaching sequences and the positive reception of the lesson-study method indicate improvements in the participants focus on quality in teaching and student learning.

There are numerous accounts from teachers who tried out ideas and tools from QUEST in their classroom that students reacted positively and often became engaged in intensive learning processes. There are also accounts of improved learning outcomes from teacher reports. A comparison of student performance in QUEST and non-QUEST schools using the results from national exams including the years 2012-2014 found no differences. Given the short duration of QUEST, a significant difference on the school level could not be expected. There are, however, preliminary findings indicating that QUEST schools which are described as developing especially well by the indicators used in the project show improvements compared to QUEST schools scoring lower on these measures.

Concerning efforts to sustain the use of QUEST ideas beyond the project period, it was achieved that all participating municipalities took over the responsibility to secure the working structures (coordination, subject teacher groups, and teacher networks). They organised and conducted the work in the last project year largely independent from the project management and are committed to continue the work also in 2016 and beyond with the

QUEST schools and new ones. In some of the municipalities, QUEST inspired initiatives using some of the ideas on a broader basis in order to further develop all schools within the municipality. These initiatives can be regarded as steps towards an institutionalisation of the teacher professional development approach designed and implemented by QUEST. At the current point in time and with the available information about these initiatives, it is not possible to say how far this institutionalisation might reach in the future. Actually, there is one aspect that might hamper the functioning of these initiatives namely that they are linked to a formal requirement of teaching competence for teachers introduced by the government in 2014. Teachers working towards a formal qualification might possibly individualise the originally collaborative approach from QUEST.

One important reason for the success of QUEST, if not the most important one besides a research-based professional development model, is the combination of mainly formative evaluation research and a management that took the research results seriously. The observations at various levels (subject teacher group, teacher network, and classroom) yielded hints at problematic aspects that could interfere with the project goals. The project team became itself a professional learning community adapting and improving plans to municipal differences and unforeseen occurrences. The knowledge about the processes was communicated to the other project partners in order to make them aware of possible challenges and to find solutions securing or enhancing the impact of QUEST.

All this shows that QUEST succeeded in implementing a collaborative development model of science instruction in Denmark. The model is well accepted by teachers and recognised as an exemplary model of school development. Research conducted in QUEST has evidenced that teachers use ideas and tools introduced by the project on a broad and increasingly regular basis. There are indications of teachers becoming more and more aware of the importance of reflection on teaching quality if their students are supposed to improve. Last but not least, there are indications of a continuation of that model in the participating municipalities that hopefully will lead to a stable institutionalisation.

Despite all these positive and promising findings, there are many questions still open. This seems to be due to the current model of project funding where neither the long-term consequences of innovations nor an institutionalisation of beneficial practices are usually taken into account. This is mainly a political issue, but also funding organisations like the Lundbeck foundation can play a role. I see two possibilities for funding agencies to promote a change. First, they can provide funding for follow-up studies documenting whether the effects of a finished project persist, increase, or wither. This knowledge will help to clarify conditions of successful long-term school development especially with regard to the classroom and student level. A second and maybe even more beneficial approach can be to sustain school development initiatives like QUEST in a number of well-working schools in order to develop them to exemplary schools which are clearly distinguishable from other schools. This would reduce the danger of running one innovation project after the other without really achieving the possible outcomes because resources were used for new ideas.