

by Thomas Rau

For the more than one million learning service providers (LSP) worldwide, ensuring consistently high quality will remain an issue. A year ago, ISO technical committee ISO/TC 232, *Learning services for non-formal education and training*, started to address this with the publication of ISO 29990, an International Standard that is gaining much awareness and interest, particularly among LSPs.

ISO/TC 232 is intended to create a suitable framework for preparing standards in education and training. The term “learning services” is used instead of “educational services” to encourage a focus on the learner and the results of the process, and to emphasize the full range of options available for delivering learning services. This includes the learning service provider (LSP) enabling and facilitating learning beyond teaching.

ISO/TC 232 is open to standards proposals from other areas of learning that share the concern of encouraging cooperation in quality assurance. Here, there is emphasis on exchanging models and methods and establishing common criteria and principles.

The core elements are: ensuring the quality and effectiveness of the education or training; improving knowledge transfer; and increasing the transparency and comparability of the range of learning services provided.

Standards are designed to help LSPs improve their ability to consistently provide quality services, improve organizational effectiveness and reduce costs. For stakeholders, the benefits are worldwide comparability, enhanced transparency of learning services offered and higher quality. The standards will help to overcome the huge variety of national service and management standards in learning services.

ISO/TC 232 is focused on the following main objectives and priorities:

- Enhancing service quality in the field of learning
- Enhancing the comparability and transparency of learning services
- Optimizing LSPs’ business processes
- Maximizing LSPs’ organizational effectiveness
- Protecting learners’ rights
- Reducing the possibility of discrimination and technical trade barriers in transnational learning services caused by using national standards.

Introducing ISO 29990

ISO/TC 232’s main achievement is ISO 29990:2010, *Learning services for non-formal education and training – Basic requirements for service providers*, published in September 2010. ISO 29990 specifies basic requirements for education and training, including learning, learning results and improvement, the learning service and the competence of the LSP.

This International Standard aims to create a general quality model for learning services. It also acts as a common reference for LSPs and their customers for planning, developing and implementing education and further education, as well as promoting development.

The standard follows a linear structure to ensure its implementation leads to continual improvement.

The standard's ultimate aim is assuring the implementation of high-quality tutorial programmes and processes. The starting point for the development of educational offers is determining individual and company-specific learning needs.

When designing learning services, suitable methods and instruments have to be found and the specific responsibilities of the learner and teacher must be defined. It is also important to identify instruments for the support and supervision of the learning transfer. The curriculum must take into account modern learning ideas, methods for the promotion of individual learning processes and flexible learning forms.

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When rendering learning services, the inclusion of learners, their information and orientation is important for learning success. Learning resources and the learning environment must be adequate to meet learning objectives.

Monitoring is used to compare clearly defined success factors, learning results and the feedback of the learner and other interested parties. It is the basis for the evaluation and improvement of the learning service.

Language learning

ISO/TC 232 has started to develop a series of standards with special requirements related to ISO 29990. The first standard in this series will be ISO 29991-1, *Language learning services for non-formal education and training – Specific requirements for service providers*.

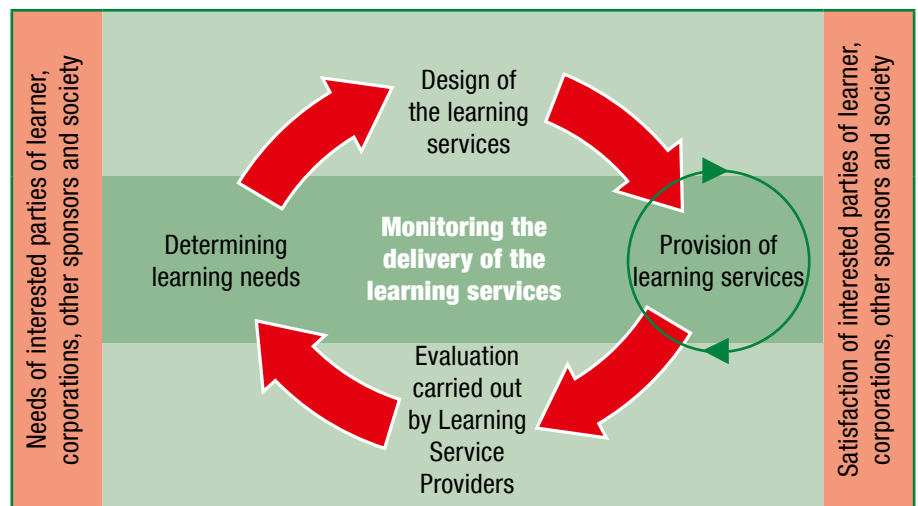


Figure 1: Process-oriented cycle of learning services in accordance with ISO 29990.

CNIS, the China National Institute of Standardization, proposed this standard. Its objective is to specify in each paragraph of ISO 29990 the particular requirements for providers of language learning services.

ISO 29990 characteristics

ISO 29990's core processes are oriented towards learning services.

The standard considers the quality of the services that are provided by the LSP by focusing on the inter-dependent processes of recognizing, understanding, leading and steering, and contributes to LSP effectiveness in achieving goals.

Participation is an essential, integrating component. It applies firstly to staff and associates, as well as to other LSP personnel. It includes active participation by learners and other interested parties.

Monitoring is extended with evaluations of the learning, learning services and LSP competencies (through the use of feedback mechanisms).

The transmission, retention, development and evaluation of staff and associates' competencies, as well as other LSP personnel competencies, are a central requirement.

The standard offers sufficient flexibility for adjustments based on the LSP's concrete needs and additional quality measures or benchmarks.

ISO 29990 provides a good foundation for language specification. Developing and implementing such a language-related standard will help to improve the quality of language training, promote the rapid, healthy and orderly development of the international language training industry, and protect learners' interests.

The users

ISO 29990 is useful for instructors, learners and other customers as well as other parties interested in successful learning results.

Organizations and individuals will be supported in choosing a suitable LSP which meets needs and expectations in developing competences and abilities.

The standard has many different users. Among ISO 29990-certified LSPs so far are:

- Providers of further education, including those of chambers of trade
- A vocational education and training provider
- In-house training departments
- A distance learning provider
- A self-employed trainer and consultants
- Management and health academies
- Universities of applied science.

Among the first users are organizations and their members which took actively part in the development of ISO 29990.

EAQUALS (Evaluation and Accreditation of Quality in Language Services – see www.eaquals.org) is an international association of more than 130 providers of language learning services in 26 countries.

EAQUALS has developed a unique international system for quality assurance. This is used to accredit language course providers that meet the organization's standards in audits. These audits take place every four years.

Since the establishment of ISO/TC 232, EAQUALS has enjoyed category A liaison status. Its members took a lively interest in the development of ISO 29990 and supported the Chinese proposal to create a standard for language LSPs, ISO 29991-1.

It is expected that, when it is published, some EAQUALS members will opt for certification against ISO 29991-1, in addition to accreditation by EAQUALS.

From the start, EADL (European Association of Distance Learning – www.eadl.org), with members from over 20 European countries, and the German FDL (Forum Distance Learning – www.forum-distance-learning.de), with 77 members, have been involved in the committee's work. To support the implementation of ISO 29990, EADL has developed a conversion and application manual for its members.

In Germany five large FDL members and providers of distance learning were among the first ISO 29990-certified enterprises. Between 15 and 20 intend to follow in 2012.

IFCES (International Forum for the Certification of Educational Services – www.ifces.org) is an international alliance of associations and other entities involved in quality assurance, research and professional development in education and training. It was founded by nine organizations of different kinds in Asia, Europe and the Americas, which all participated actively in the work of ISO/TC 232.

IFCES plans to develop the expertise and tools to support high-quality advisory and audit services for LSPs seeking certification against education-related standards such as ISO 29990.

Substantial support

A number of national and international governmental institutions and organizations provide significant support.

The European Union supports ISO/TC 232's work and the application of its results in a couple of projects. Within the Lifelong Learning Programme, the Transnational quality project and QuaG – Quality guidelines were funded for participating entities from nine European countries (www.adam-europe.eu). Through these projects, ISO/TC 232 experiences complement



the work of QALLL (Quality Assurance in Lifelong Learning – www.qalll.eu). This aims to highlight good practice in quality assurance in vocational education and training and adult education, and to take forward recommendations in support of Europe-wide cooperation.

The EU-funded multilingual Web-based service supporting tool PROMIS will provide an application to support the implementation and administration of ISO 29990. This will be carried out in cooperation with DIN (German institute for standardization) publishing house Beuth and RKW, the German centre for productivity and innovation.

Beuth has already published a DIN comment with guidelines for the implementation of ISO 29990. It has also organized a DIN-Academy conference with RKW. Participants from eight countries exchanged their experiences applying ISO 29990 in the year since its publication.

In Germany, the federal governments of Berlin and Brandenburg have supported ISO/TC 232's work from the start. This has been done on a national and international level with the funding of several projects, organization of conferences and provision of advice.

The inQuaVET (International Quality in Vocational Education and Training) project is supported by the Berlin senate and the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Women and Family of Brandenburg. The objective is to assist LSPs with ISO 29990 implementation through consultancy, training and developing suitable instruments to apply this standard.

In Japan, JAMOTE (Japan Association for Management of Training and Education), an association of learning service providers/associations, manages the ISO/TC 232 Japanese mirror committee, and it has been actively involved in the development and promotion of ISO 29990. One example of JAMOTE's activities is the development

of the Japanese certification scheme for ISO 29990 with the collaboration of learning service provider associations, relevant government ministries, and business groups in Japan. The scheme has already been used for ISO 29990 certification in Japan, and it has been affecting relevant government ministries' measures and policies in the field of education and training.

In India, NABET (National Accreditation Board for Education and Training), a board of the Quality Council of India, accredits auditors in conformity assessment, quality schools governance, vocational training and skills certification.

NABET has aligned its accreditation mechanism to cover ISO/IEC 17024 and ISO 29990. NABET Chairman Vijay K. Thadani has said: "We believe in leveraging these existing internationally accepted standards and customizing them for our local needs, versus re-inventing the wheel." (Quality India, a QCI Publication, Newline Publications Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, Vol V numbers 3 and 4, August-September 2011, p17). ■

About the author



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