

**AN EFQM MODEL SELF-ASSESSMENT PROJECT COVERING 50 PORTUGUESE SCHOOLS**

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**Abstract**

Under the name of “Improving Quality!” a project is currently being implemented in Portugal, within the scope of its Association of Private Schools (AEEP). A research and consulting team was thus put together in order to conceive, prepare, implement and support continual improvement within a group of about 50 schools, ranging from primary to secondary levels of education, and covering sizes from the dozens to a couple of thousand students, spread all over the country.

Based upon a set of documents that provide a detailed adaptation of the EFQM Model of Excellence to the reality of Portuguese schools (tailored and created along the current project), and after receiving appropriate training, each school has conducted its own self-assessment, ending up in the definition of a short term (6 months) improvement action plan, with the help of consultants with specific assessor training in the use and application of the above model, assigned to the different schools involved. The evaluation tools that the schools are using result from a combination of both the pro-forma and questionnaire techniques proposed by EFQM. Six months after having completed the self-assessment exercise and the definition of improvement plans, each school will be examined once again, in order to evaluate the practical results and implementations achieved as a consequence of the project.

In this article we describe the project methodologies adopted, present the profiles of excellence obtained for 14 of the participating schools, which are already available, and discuss some of the barriers and challenges related with a project of this size, which represents what we believe to be one of the largest scale experiences for the simultaneous application of the EFQM Model of Excellence.

**Introduction**

Besides other factors, the growth of schools' autonomy, existence of alternatives and higher levels of requests demanded from students, their parents and the society as a whole, contributed to the emergence of education as a critical sector where one needs more and more to understand quality concepts and apply its principles and tools. This almost universal trend is also becoming a reality in Portugal, especially since the beginning of the nineties. Quality is surely a multidimensional concept, difficult and complex to define or measure. These difficulties become even larger when we speak about quality in educational settings, where it is related with a big number of relevant issues and perspectives. Also, it is well known that there are no magic or unique recipes for achieving successful quality imple-

mentation. Therefore, the construction of quality in education must be defined at the level of each particular school, in a decentralised way and with a self-assessment perspective, tailored to it. A quality management approach should thus focus on the establishment of a systemic view of the school, including its vision and mission as an organisation, the definition of its development plans and culture. It also implies teamwork, empowerment and the commitment of all the relevant actors (staff, teachers and students), under a leadership committed and capable of involving everyone in the quality improvement effort (Saraiva et al, 1998).

Any organisation that wishes to think seriously about its future, defining goals and developing strategies to achieve them, and that wants to involve all of its members in the process, needs to know itself very well and understand which are its strong points as well as areas where improvement is needed. In order to build such a picture, self-assessment according to predefined models provides a sound basis for monitoring and improving, in a regular basis, activities and their outcomes.

To carry out this particular project, an adaptation of the EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) Excellence Model was chosen, since it is one of the most well known frameworks, and the one adopted by many leading organisations in Portugal for approaching excellence (as well as by government agencies and our national quality awards). It provides a set of evaluation criteria that are applicable to any kind of organisation, and has been successfully applied in several countries, including in educational contexts, thus reinforcing our trust in the development of an adaptation of it as providing the most appropriate conceptual basis for guidance within the scope of the “Improving Quality!” project.

### **Project Scope**

AEEP (national association of private schools), which has as members several hundreds of schools, ranging from kindergarten to secondary education levels, considered that there was a need to offer to its associates the possibility of participating in a self-assessment process, with the ultimate goal of continuously improving performance. To achieve that purpose, partnerships were established with technical experts and a consulting company (QUAL), responsible for designing, preparing, helping in the implementation stage and supporting the self-assessment project in all of the participating schools. After promoting this initiative, a total of 47 schools decided to participate in its first edition, taking place during the present academic year of 2000/2001.

Based on a set of documents and training prepared for the project, each one of the schools involved conducted its own self-assessment process, in accordance with an adaptation of the EFQM model of excellence for educational institutions and counting with the support of consultants, with specific training as EFQM model assessors, who were assigned to the different participating schools.

Additionally, although having in consideration confidentiality issues raised by participating schools, the fact that a significant number of them is going simultaneously through the same experience, sharing the very same methodology, allows for a quite rich exchange of knowledge and practices, as well as for the establishment of a global aggregate picture of the intervening schools' profiles of excellence.

### The EFQM Excellence Model

The EFQM Excellence Model is not prescriptive, but rather recognises that there are different ways to achieve excellence in an organisation. However, it provides a sound framework for the diagnosis and evaluation of the excellence levels attained, leading to its continual improvement, based upon 9 criteria that cover about 30 sub-criteria (fig. 1).

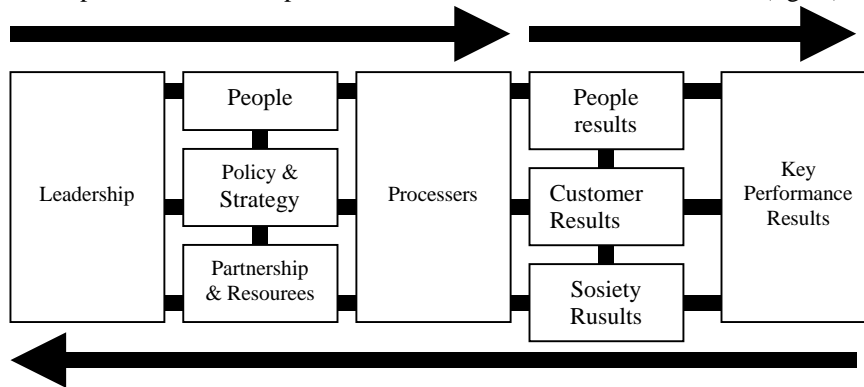


Figure 1 – The EFQM Excellence Model®  
(The EFQM Excellence Model 1999, EFQM, 1999).

The 9 criteria belong to one out of two possible categories: Enablers and Results. Enablers are directly concerned with what is done and the way it is done, while results have to do with what the organisation achieves as performance deriving from enablers management. For each criterion, self-assessment teams identify strong points, areas for improvement and give a final score to different criteria and/or subcriteria. Then, from these partial scores one may obtain an overall aggregate excellence quantitative level achieved (which may range from 0 to a theoretical maximum of 1000 points).

The essence of this model, when adapted to an educational context, can be synthesised as follows: “Excellent results in the school’s, students’, teachers’, non teaching staff and society’s performance are achieved through a leadership that catalyses the institution policy and strategy and the peoples’, partnerships’, resources’, educational and support processes’ management”.

### The “Quality Improvement!” Project Methodology

The first phase of this project consisted in the design and development of a set of supporting documents (in a pack of 6 pieces), whose contents are briefly mentioned in the next paragraphs:

- Self-Assessment Guidelines

This is the core document, where the model that consists of an adaptation of the EFQM Excellence Model to educational contexts is presented. We have chosen to deviate from the EFQM model as little as felt really to be needed, so that in the end one can refer and compare results with those obtained using the EFQM model in other fields of activity.

The model structure is succinctly explained, covering all criteria, sub-criteria and areas to address (Figure 2), together with some examples, intended to be illustrative of concrete situations about what can be done, although stressing that each school must identify its own ways and practices.

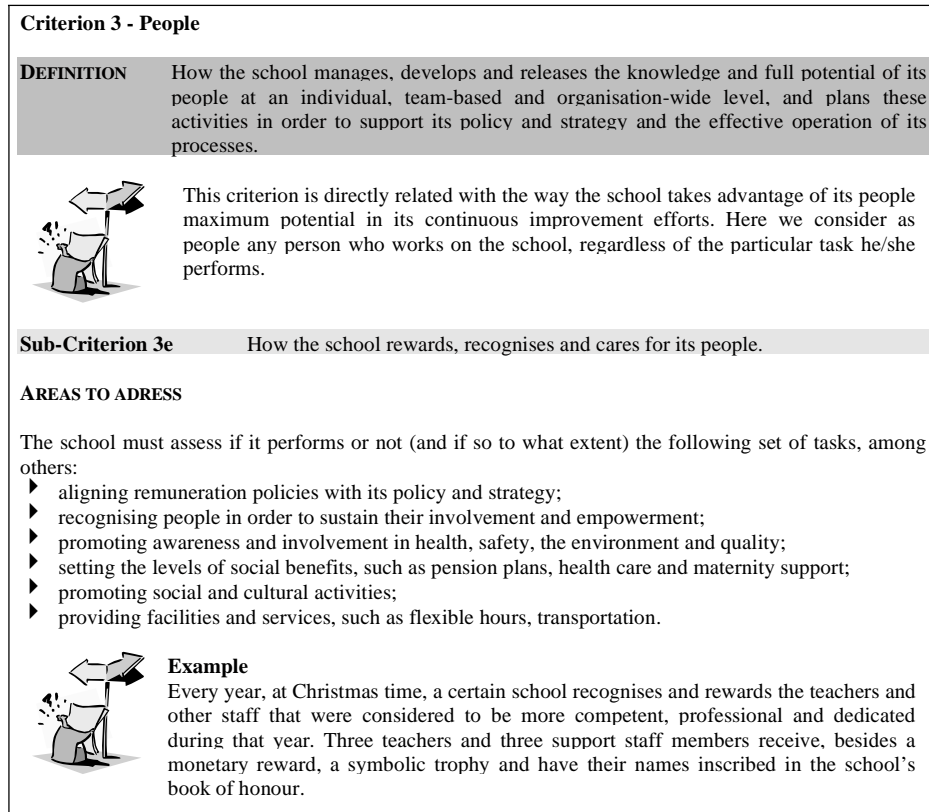


Figure 2 – Generic scheme for presenting the model structure.

· Self-Assessment Document

This document presents the methodology and the tools to be used in each school for conducting the self-assessment project. Two of the EFQM evaluation approaches are described (questionnaire and pro-forma), since in this project schools use a combination of both, as follows:

1. for each sub-criterion, a self-assessment team fulfils a pro-forma, identifying the school's strong points, areas for improvement and identifying possible improvement actions (pro-forma approach);
2. for each criterion, the self-assessment team provides an A to D reply to a number of questions raised regarding this particular item (questionnaire approach).

The main reasons for combining both evaluation schemes derive from the fact that we want at this initial stage of application of the methodology to de-emphasise the relevance

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associated with quantitative evaluations, and rather stress the importance of self-assessment as an improvement driving force through the identification of improvement areas and actions. Nevertheless, the questionnaires' answers allow us to aggregate and compare, at a more global level, the profiles of excellence associated with the several participating schools.

- A School's Self-Assessment – case study

This third document was conceived to be used as a training tool for the schools' self-assessment teams. As the proposed self-assessment model was new for all of the participants in the project, and to get more practical feeling about how it may be applied to a particular school, a case study, designed around an hypothetical secondary level school was created, describing its practices and results.

- A School's Self-Assessment – case study scoring

In accordance with the methodology proposed in the "Self-Assessment Document", a possible solution regarding the identification of strong points, areas for improvement, actions to take and responses to the questionnaire is given here.

- Improvement Facilitator Handbook

This manual serves as a supporting document to the person that in each school is designated as responsible for leading its self-assessment project – Improvement Facilitator. It explains and summarises what must happen, when, and with whom, serving at the same time as a pocket memory assistant, enumerating the things that should not be forgotten at each different stage of the process (Figure 3).

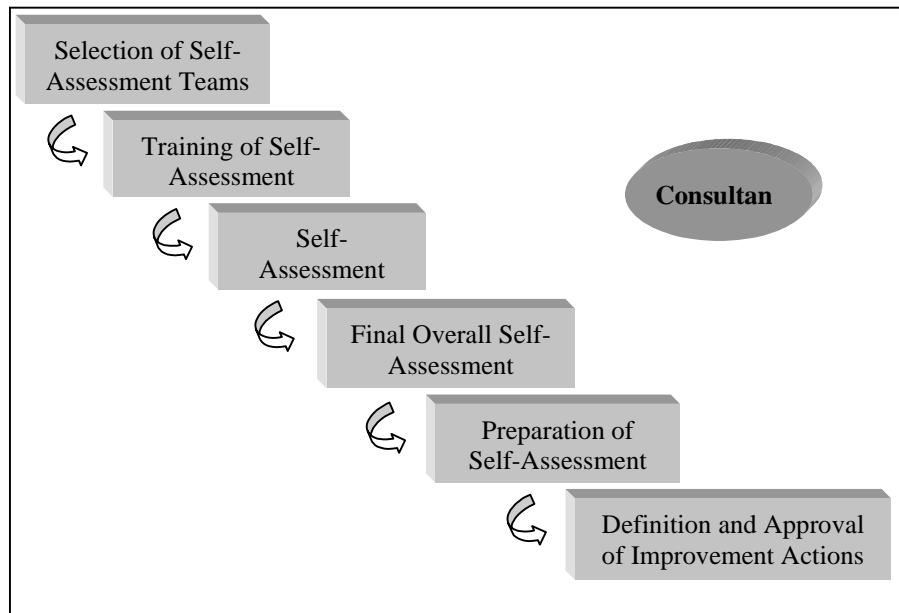


Figure 3 – Stages to be implemented in the school's self-assessment project.

- Guidelines for preparing Self-Assessment and Improvement Action Plan Reports

Some suggestions and guidance for preparing and presenting these two final reports are provided here, including some good practice project management hints.

As was briefly outlined before (Figure 3), the current project thus comprises a number of different tasks, according to the timings shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – Project tasks and scheduling.

Task 1	Jun./Sept. 2000	Project announcement and promotion
Task 2	Oct./Nov. 2000	Improvement Facilitators' training
Task 3	Oct./Dec.2000	Self-assessment teams' definition and training
Task 4	Jan./May 2001	Self-assessment meetings
Task 5	Mar./Jul. 2001	Preparation of self-assessment and action plan reports
Task 6	Sept. 2001	Overall project synthesis and analysis report
Task 7	Jan./Dec. 2001	Implementation of action plan
Task 8	Nov./Dec. 2001	Evaluation of practical results and changes in schools
Task 9	Jan. 2002	Final project closing seminar

Depending on the particular schools, and their size, the total number of self-assessment teams varied in general from just one (evaluating all criteria) to nine (a different team for each criterion), including in their composition a mixture of school directors, teachers, administrative staff, parents and students, according to the school and the criteria being evaluated.

### Some Key Results

As shown (Table 1), at the moment we write this article the project is still running, with most schools having by now completed self-assessment meetings (task 4), and thus we are already able to provide some preliminary but significant results obtained. Table 2 characterises the profiles for the 47 schools that are participating in the project, namely in what concerns different education levels and number of students. Overall, they employ a total of 2116 teachers and 1228 other employees (corresponding to an average of respectively 45 and 26 per school).

Table 2 – Participating schools overall characteristics.

Education Levels	Number of Schools	Total Number of Students	Average Number of Students
Kindergarten	27	2634	98
Grades 1 to 4	29	5188	179
Grades 5 and 6	25	4721	189
Grades 7 to 9	27	7631	283
Grades 10 to 12	21	6466	308
Others	8	1754	219

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Figure 4 illustrates the excellence profiles associated with the model's 9 criteria for a sample of 14 schools, for which the questionnaires' final results are already available.

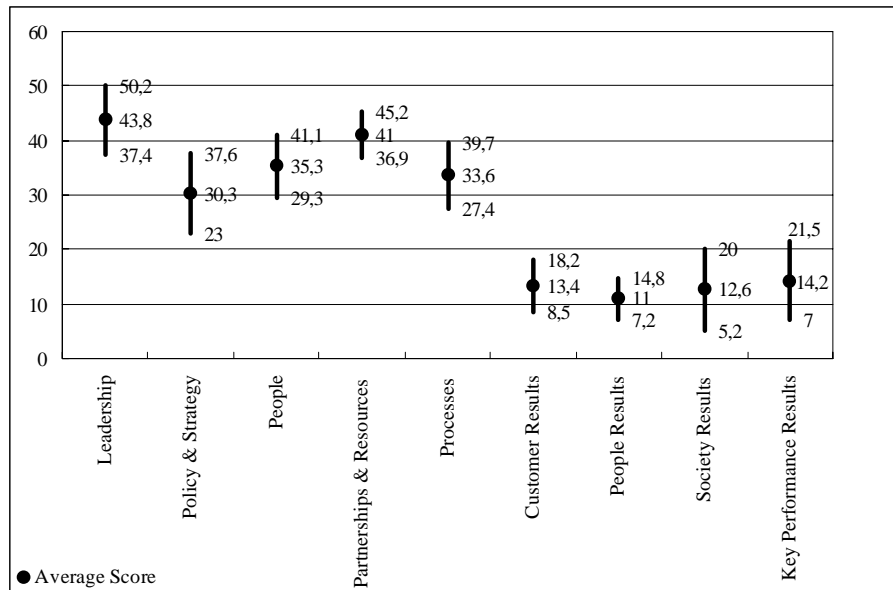


Figure 4 – Confidence intervals for criteria scoring averages (at a 0,05 significance level) of the model criteria (%).

These values show that there is quite a difference between the scores that correspond to results in general (overall average of 12,9%) and the ones associated with enablers (overall average of 36,6%). This does not derive in general from a perception of poor results associated with school performance, but rather from the fact that the majority of the schools is still in a very early stage of results measurement, with few indicators being monitored, compared or evaluated in a systematic way or with a broader view of categories and trends. From the combination of these two partial components derives an aggregate average score of 254 points, with most schools in the 200 to 300 points' range of overall excellence score. Within the enablers' criteria, Leadership and Partnerships & Resources did receive in general the highest values.

At the present moment, schools are preparing their final self-assessment and improvement action plan reports, including details about which initiatives are going to be implemented in the short and medium terms.

### Conclusions

From all the efforts and steps already taken within the scope of this project, one may already establish some concluding remarks:

- § There is a generalised lack of broad, objective and relevant indicators, collected and treated in a systematic way as a performance improvement driving force for most of

the schools participating in the project;

- § Benchmarking practices and comparisons of results/approaches are very scarce, since most schools tend to live within their own frontiers, even if they may already have quite interesting features;
- § We, as research team, were quite surprised with some very rich realities that were uncovered and found where that was sometimes least expected, even when we compare these schools with other types of organisations, providing evidence to support that there is indeed a number of excellent schools operating in Portugal;
- § The methodologies and paradigms followed were well received and accepted by most of the participating schools, although some minor refinements and improvement suggestions were collected;
- § Although it is yet too early to make a final proper balance and evaluation of the project, which is still ongoing, the good acceptance and enthusiasm provided by participating schools make us believe that new improvement cycles based upon self-assessment are likely to occur in forthcoming years;
- § All the success and achievements obtained so far indicate that the EFQM Excellence Model can indeed be easily applied and adapted to schools, and used by them as a powerful performance improvement driving force;
- § To have a large number of schools following simultaneously the same methodological steps and sharing experiences proved to be quite powerful, even if in some occasions information exchanges were somewhat constrained because of confidentiality issues that were raised here and then by some of them.

### **Acknowledgement**

We would like to acknowledge all the support and enthusiasm placed in this project by AEEP and its schools, as well as the efforts of all the consultants that are participating in it.

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