CONSIDERATIONS FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE OF E-LEARNING PROVISION

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Introduction

Today's learning landscape differs greatly from that of a few years ago (Bates, 2015; Daniel, 2016; Mathes, 2019; Ossiannilsson, Williams, Camilleri, & Brown, 2015). The main global challenges highlighted so far and affecting and influencing education are globalization, changing demographics and increasing digitization (Schwab, 2016). The United Nations' UNESCO sustainability goals aim to meet these challenges (2015a; 2015b). In the field of education, the SDG4 focuses on education for all through its core areas of access, equity, equality, equality, inclusion and lifelong learning. Mobile learning is the first choice for most people today. The way learners learn is changing dramatically, due to the fourth industrial revolution, not just the way we learn, but also the way we live, perform, communicate, and interact (Schwab, 2016). Today, learning is possible anywhere, anytime and through any type of device. In the context of globalization and the knowledge-based economy, the quality of higher education is increasingly seen as strategically important for national economic development and competitiveness. High quality and relevant higher education provide students with the knowledge, skills and transferable core competences they need to succeed after graduation, in a high-quality learning environment that recognizes and supports good learning and teaching. The combination of educational technologies is both natural and demanding, so quality aspects must be taken into account (Bates, 2017, Daniels, 2016, Heurtas et al., 2018).

This paper is based on the reflections of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) Working Group VIII on Quality Assurance and E-Learning on the quality assurance of e-learning services. The report is intended to provide guidance on how European Standards and Guidelines 2015 (ESG) can be applied in the context of e-learning. The recommendations of the ENQA Occasional Paper (Huertas et al., 2018) apply to all forms of e-learning, i.e. learning through the use of information and communication technologies (ICT). The indicators provided are intended to stimulate discussion between stakeholders, both internally and externally. In addition, the applicability and relevance of the standards defined in ESG 2015 are to be investigated. The ENQA report is intended to stimulate discussion and reflection between stakeholders, e.g. universities, quality assurance agencies, etc. In addition to the ESG report, it is based on the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) Quality in E-Learning E-xcellence Benchmarking Framework (Kear et al., 2016). Furthermore, this paper is based on the presentations during

the European Distance E-Learning Week (EDLW, 2018) organized by the European Distance and E-Learning Network (EDEN) Special Interest Group on Quality Enhancement (SIG TEL QE) on 8 November 2018 on reflections on quality assurance of e-learning based on the ENQA report (Huertas et al., 2018). The challenges of quality improvement in e-learning need to be addressed at all levels, i.e. at the macro, meso and micro levels and not least at the nano level. The nano level refers to people and individuals, the nano level, because ultimately quality is about people, about you and me, that is, not just about indicators or benchmarks, it is about how individuals interpret, follow and apply them.

Aims

The aim of this paper is to raise awareness and stimulate discussion and reflection between the actors involved in quality assurance and quality improvement of e-learning provision, including open online and flexible learning methods such as universities, quality assurance agencies, etc.

Method

This paper is based on the ENQA report on quality assurance considerations for the provision of e-learning by the Working ENQA Group VIII on Quality Assurance and e-learning and the ENQA ESG. It is also based on the framework of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) Quality in e-learning E-xcellence Benchmarking (Kear et al., 2016). In addition, this paper has its basis in the EADTU SEQUENT project. Furthermore, this paper is based on the presentations during the European Distance E-Learning Week (EDLW, 2018) organised by the European Distance and E-Learning Network (EDEN) Special Interest Group on Quality Enhancement (SIG TEL QE) on 8 November 2018 on reflections on quality assurance of e-learning based on this ENQA report (Huertas et al., 2018).

Results

Even when the ENQA ESG 2015 was introduced, there was no doubt that ESG 2015 would be equally applicable to all forms of teaching and learning, but the need for an appropriate interpretation of its application remains. At that time, it was noted by ENQA that it was still the task of quality assurance agencies and universities to further improve their methodological development. In 2016, the working group decided to set a new focus: the systematic review of both the applicability and the relevance of the standards defined in ESG 2015, taking into account and using existing papers and publications on quality in e-learning offerings. Although it turned out that each standard is fully applicable to e-learning, some standards seemed to require specific guidance on how to apply them. Accordingly, their occasional paper on quality assurance considerations for e-learning services by the Working ENQA Group VIII on Quality Assurance and E-learning aims to provide such guidelines. It is the result of an intensive discussion process both in the working group and with relevant stakeholders of e-learning in Europe (Huertas et al., 2018).

Its guidelines are to a large extent based on the internationally recognized EADTU Excellence Quality Framework (Kear et al., 2016; Ossiannilsson, Williams, Camilleri, & Brown, 2016),

and furthermore it has its basis in the project (Supporting SEQUENT quality in European e-learning networks, 2014-2015) coordinated ENQA by EADTU a partner (Bacsich, 2015; Ossiannilsson, 2015; Williams, 2015). The SEQUENT project aimed to promote excellence in the use of ICT higher education, with the clear objective of preparing European universities in line with the European modernization agenda and better adapting higher education in Europe to cross-border cooperation initiatives in implementing innovative and ICT reinforced partnerships for the purposes of the ENQA report:

“...e-learning is understood as any form, including blended learning (except MOOCs and OER), and that which is facilitated by the use of technology”
(Heurtas et al., 2018; p.5).

As a general remark, Heurtega et al., (2018) stressed that e-learning components enable pupils to use personalized and flexible (time and place) pathways while ensuring the achievement of learning outcomes. Content presentation can be more flexible than traditional face-to-face events using online information sources, video and audio channels. However, sometimes personalized and flexible (or innovative) elements of e-learning are not easily understood in a rigid and over-regulated context. It was also stressed that e-learning is a very dynamic and innovative field of learning. The definitions are regularly reviewed and adapted to the new reality.

The guidelines aim to: (i) be generic, non-specific and provide the framework and common basis for national and institutional activities; (ii) apply standards and guidelines for quality assurance, but not for quality as such; (iii) apply e-learning, short courses, to all higher education institutions (EHEA) offered in the European higher education landscape, regardless of the type of study or location (traditional courses); (iv), therefore all types of e-learning and all phases of a learning process (e-assessment) should be considered; and finally, (v) it should apply to all types of quality assurance activities and agencies (quality audits, programme accreditation, institutional assessment). The guidelines consist of three parts, Part 1 Internal quality assurance, Part 2 External quality assurance and Part 3 Quality assurance agencies, as shown in Figure 1. What is new is that the guidelines are aimed both at universities and at quality assurance agencies.

Figure 1. Outline of the Occasional paper on quality assurance considerations for the provision of e-learning (Heurtas, 2018)

In the following the three parts are illustrated, Part I Internal Quality Assurance, Part 2 External Quality Assurance and Part 3 Quality Assurance Agencies.

Considerations for higher education institutions. Part 1. Internal quality assurance

- Standard 1.1* – Policy for quality assurance
- Standard 1.2 – Design and approval of programme
- Standard 1.3* – Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment
- Standard 1.4* – Student admission, progression, recognition and certification
- Standard 1.5* – Teaching staff
- Standard 1.6* – Learning resources and student support
- Standard 1.7* – Information management
- Standard 1.8 – Public information
- Standard 1.9 – On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes
- Standard 1.10 – Cyclical external quality assurance

The ones marked with a star requires particularly special considerations due to e-learning provisions. Below in Figure 2, 3, and 4 Standard 1.1, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, and 1.7 are showed as examples.

Figure 2. Standard 1.1 and Standard 1.3 (Heuertas, 2018)

In addition, for Standard 1.1 – Quality Assurance Directive, it can be emphasised that the directives are as follows:

The institutional policy for e-learning may also include the constituent quality elements, to which belong:

- institutional support;
- course development;
- teaching and learning;
- course structure;
- student support;
- faculty support with compulsory e-learning training for new members of staff;
- technological infrastructures;
- student assessment (learner authentication, work authorship and examination security) and certification; and
- electronic security measures.

The institution may also define policies to grant proper access and ensure participation for those students affected by disability, illness, and other mitigating circumstances.

Figure 3. Standard 1.4 and Standard 1.5 (Heuertas, 2018)

Figure 4. Standard 1.6 and Standard 1.7 (Heuertas, 2018)

Considerations for quality assurance agencies. Part II. External quality assurance

Below considerations for quality assurance agencies are described:

- Standard 2.1 – Consideration of internal quality assurance
- Standard 2.2* – Designing methodologies fit for purpose
- Standard 2.3* – Implementing processes
- Standard 2.4* – Peer-review experts
- Standard 2.5 – Criteria for outcomes
- Standard 2.6 – Reporting
- Standard 2.7 – Complaints and appeals

The ones marked with a star requires particularly special considerations due to e-learning provisions. Some examples are given below. Then Standard 2.2 and Standard 2.3 are shown as examples below in Figure 5. Standard 2.1 is defined, following:

2.1. Consideration of internal quality assurance

Standard: External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

Elements to consider

European, national, and local policies apply also to e-learning, providing institutions with ethical and legal requirements (for example, data privacy or local legal considerations for students with special education needs).

Figure 5. Standard 2.2 and Standard 2.3 (Heurtas, 2018)

The ENQA considerations gives comprehensive guidelines for both internal and external quality assurance and reflect and indicate explicit what has to be taken into considerations by stakeholders involved.

Conclusion

This work by ENQA shows that e-learning is not only ESG applicable, but also illustrates how quality assurance methods can be developed with new indicators.

The current challenge remains with universities and Quality Assurance agencies. On the one hand, Quality Assurance agencies should develop external verification methods that take into account the specificities of e-learning, while on the other hand traditional e-learning or mixed programmes providers should adapt their internal quality assurance systems to ensure the quality of their teaching and learning processes.

This report can be used as a reference for universities and Quality Assurance agencies and could contribute to a common understanding of the concept itself and the relevant terminology. The document can also be useful for training external evaluators and can help to improve the expert profile of the panels.

Two research studies by the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) on the quality of open online learning emphasized that important approaches showed that quality assurance models are central and valuable. Areas that do not

provide good guidance, guidelines or exchange of good practice face more challenges than others as they have to spend time demonstrating the value of this range of educational modes (Mathes, 2019; Ossiannilsson et al., 2015).

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Acknowledgement

The author would like to express acknowledgements and thanks to the ENQA Working group VIII on Quality Assurance and E-learning. In addition, acknowledgements will be expressed to EADTU and especially the E-xcellence and the SEQUENT team.