
CONSIDERATIONS FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE OF E-LEARNING PROVISION

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**REPORT FROM THE ENQA WORKING GROUP VIII
ON QUALITY ASSURANCE AND E-LEARNING**

Occasional Papers 26

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I. INTRODUCTION

AIMS OF THE WORKING GROUP

In October 2009, when ENQA held a workshop on quality assurance in e-learning, it was obvious that e-learning had already become a key issue among quality assurance (QA) agencies and institutions in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Evidence was given during the workshop that the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) – if appropriately interpreted – could be used as a backbone for quality assurance processes, including those for e-learning (cf. 2009 ENQA workshop report.)

The ESG have since been revised, and there is no doubt that the ESG 2015 are equally applicable to all modes of teaching and learning, however, the necessity for an appropriate interpretation for using them persists. It remains a responsibility of QA agencies as well as higher education institutions to further improve their methodological development.

According to EUA's 2014 e-learning study, 91 percent of the institutions surveyed have integrated e-learning into their teaching: whether in the form of distance learning, blended learning, problem-based learning, lectures, work-based learning, or simulation. Eighty-two percent admit to offering online learning courses. In contrast, the quality assurance of such provision has been given far less consideration, namely in the realm of external quality assurance, where the authors suggest there is an apparent shortcoming, citing that only 23 percent of national QA agencies give special consideration to e-learning.

Launched in summer 2016, the ENQA working group on quality assurance and e-learning aims to address the challenges associated with the alternative learning and teaching methods that information and communication technology (ICT) creates by sharing ways in which QA agencies might consider conducting themselves in this area. In particular, the working group has reflected upon how these non-traditional forms of education can be evaluated using traditional methodologies, while also offering higher education institutions (HEIs) points to consider when designing courses that utilise e-learning.

Recognising that recommendations for quality assurance and e-learning have already been written, the working group decided to create a new focus: to systematically examine both the applicability and relevance of the standards as defined in the ESG 2015, while considering and utilising existing papers and publications. Although each standard proved to be fully applicable to e-learning, some standards seemed to require special guidance on how they can be applied. This document aims to provide such guidance. It results from an intensive discussion process both in the working group and with relevant e-learning stakeholders in Europe.

The working group comprises the following members from ENQA agencies:

- Ivan Biscan, ASHE, Croatia
- Ana Capilla, FMID, Spain
- Charlotte Ejsing, UKÄ, Sweden
- Esther Huertas, AQU Catalunya, Spain (chair)
- Liza Kozłowska, NVAO, Netherlands
- Liia Lauri, EKKA, Estonia
- Sandra Marcos Ortega, ACSUCYL, Spain
- Monica Risse, AAQ, Switzerland
- Kerstin Schörg, AQ Austria, Austria
- Georg Seppmann, Evalag, Germany

The working group has been coordinated by Lindsey Kerber from the ENQA Secretariat.

SCOPE OF THE DOCUMENT

The working group is fully aware of the fact that there is great diversity among institutions, programmes, and approaches to e-learning, as well as quality assurance procedures. Therefore, the considerations and indicators mentioned in the following text may not be fully applicable – nor equally important – to every institution, programme, approach, and procedure.

The findings of the document are applicable to all forms of e-learning, i.e. learning which is facilitated through the use of ICT, as described in section II. As stated before, the relevance of certain considerations and indicators will depend on the extent to which digital technologies are used and how well they are integrated into institutions and/or programmes.

Besides examining the applicability and relevance of the standards defined in the ESG 2015, this document is meant to initiate discussion and the thinking processes of stakeholders involved, e.g. HEIs, QA agencies, etc. It is not intended to be prescriptive.

METHODOLOGY

The basis of this work combines elements from the working group’s analyses of relevant international reports (see section VI “References”); the experience and knowhow of QA agencies; and the dialogue between participants during the EADTU-ENQA Peer Learning Activity on Quality Assurance in Blended and Online Education¹. Furthermore, outcomes from international projects, such as TeSLA² and SEQUENT³, have been taken into account.

The working group organised relevant information, translating it into: i) elements to consider and ii) indicators from an e-learning perspective.

1 EADTU-ENQA Peer Learning Activity on QA of blended and online education event webpage. Available at: <http://eadtu.eu/home/policy-areas/quality-assurance/news/411-eadtu-enqa-peer-learning-activity-on-qa-of-blended-and-online-education>.

2 TeSLA project webpage. Available at: <http://tesla-project.eu/>.

3 SEQUENT project webpage. Available at: <https://www.sequent-network.eu/>.

A consultation on the first draft of the document was held in order to gain validation from stakeholders in the sector. Representatives from the following organisations participated in the consultation:

- Bavarian Virtual University
- ETH Zürich
- European Association of Distance Teaching Universities
- European Students' Union
- European University Association
- FernUniversität in Hagen
- Open University of the Netherlands
- Open University UK
- Ossiannilsson Quality in Open Online Learning Consultancy
- The Danish Accreditation Institution
- UniDistance / FernUni Schweiz
- Universidade Aberta
- Universidade do Porto
- Universidad Isabel I
- Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia
- Universitat Oberta de Catalunya
- Universitat Politècnica de València
- Université de Lausanne
- University College London Institute of Education
- University of Geneva

The working group would like to thank all the participants for their comments and for the input that has contributed to improving the quality of this document.

This document was presented to the ENQA Board in June 2018.

STRUCTURE OF THE DOCUMENT

This document is divided into six sections, the first of which is the Introduction. The second section, called "E-learning terminology", identifies the scope and context in which this document may prove useful. It is followed by a third section, "Considerations for higher education institutions", which analyses ESG Part I ("Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance") in terms of applicability of the standards to e-learning programmes as well as the HEIs offering those programmes. For each standard, specific elements of e-learning that may be considered have been identified, while indicators for fulfilling the standard in question are also mentioned. The fourth section of the document, "Considerations for QA agencies" concerns ESG Part II ("Standards and guidelines for external quality assurance"). This section also describes elements to take into consideration for e-learning and includes indicators of fulfilment, but with respect to external quality assurance. Finally, the report includes main conclusions (section V) of the working group and references (section VI).

II. E-LEARNING TERMINOLOGY

The definition of e-learning and its characteristics may differ from country to country. In order to share a common understanding, it is necessary to clarify the e-learning terms and educational methods relevant for reading the document. The working group considers the definitions formulated by Tony Bates (seen below) valid for the context of their work.

Distance education courses. Distance education courses are those where no classes are held on campus – all instruction is conducted at a distance. Distance education courses may use a variety of delivery methods, such as video/audio conferencing and those which are internet- or print-based.

Online courses. A form of distance education where the primary delivery mechanism is the internet. These could be delivered synchronously or asynchronously. All instruction is conducted at a distance.

- **Synchronous online courses.** Courses where students and an instructor participate at the same time, but at separate locations other than an institutional campus. These courses may be delivered by video conferencing, web conferencing, audio conferencing, etc.
- **Asynchronous courses.** Courses where students are not required to participate in sessions at the same time as the instructor. These may be print-based courses or online courses using a learning management system, for instance.

Online programmes. A fully creditable programme that can be completed entirely by taking online courses, without the need for any on-campus classes. These could be delivered synchronously or asynchronously.

Blended/hybrid courses. These are courses designed to combine both online and face-to-face teaching in any combination.

Other forms of distance and online education include:

OER (open educational resources). Materials that are offered freely for use by teachers and learners, i.e. without charge and with few or no restrictions on the way in which the material may be adapted and reused.

MOOCS (massive open online courses). Online courses that are designed for large numbers of participants, often offered for free and without any entry qualifications. They are distinguished from OERs in that they offer a full course experience and content that is not usually free to reuse.

For the purpose of this document, considering the definitions stated above, e-learning is understood as encompassing every form, including blended learning (but excluding MOOCs and OERs⁴), and that which is facilitated through the use of ICT.

As a general comment, it can be underlined that e-learning components present opportunities for students to use personalised and flexible (in time and place) paths, while ensuring the achievement of learning outcomes. The presentation of content can be more flexible than in traditional classroom-based environments, exploiting online information sources as well as video and audio channels. Nonetheless, sometimes personalised and flexible (or innovative) elements in e-learning are not easily understandable in a rigid and overly regulated context.

It is important to note that e-learning is a very dynamic and innovative field of learning. Definitions are regularly revised and adapted to reflect the new reality.

4 This decision was made by the working group, because these courses/resources are rarely within the scope of accreditation and evaluation procedures.

III. CONSIDERATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

PART I. INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

1.1. POLICY FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard: Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.

Elements to consider

When the e-learning strategy forms part of the overall institutional strategy, attention to quality by means of innovation and earmarked resources – particularly when e-learning is new or supplementing traditional provision – may be more greatly encouraged and prioritised.

With the institution's e-learning strategy embedded into the overall strategy of the institution, institutions' quality assurance strategies can also be more easily adapted to reflect educational objectives, rapid technological changes, and shifts in pedagogical models. Such quality assurance policies and strategies for e-learning, which may cover quality, pedagogical models, and innovation, can then be well defined, implemented, and communicated to the public.

Stakeholders may be particularly interested if the e-learning strategy includes an explanation as to why e-learning has been selected as an appropriate learning strategy for the students being served.

Educational objectives and pedagogical models are often included in institutional strategies. In the e-learning context, it is well to consider innovation strategies, rapid iterative review, and connections between research and pedagogy and/or learning design (which requires knowledge of the latest innovations in order to select the most appropriate means for achieving learning objectives).

Institutional policies for e-learning may further include the constituting elements of quality, which include:

- 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.

With the development of e-learning, national and international policies have emerged, including those that address ethical issues, such as those concerning the protection of data privacy or intellectual property rights. Institutions are well to define a policy/code of practice related to electronic security measures for the use of student data (privacy, security, consent, etc.), which also addresses fraud and consequences for students and staff members caught engaging in fraudulent conduct.

Part of the institution's cycle of continuous improvement includes ensuring a constant analysis and updating of the structure that provides service and support for e-learning activities, which typically includes subcontracting (or delegation) for network services or management of the institution's virtual learning environment (VLE)⁵. Quality assurance processes embrace those activities.

Involving stakeholders (e.g. students, teaching staff, authors, technical staff, student support staff, administration, etc.) in the internal quality assurance of e-learning can be a challenge due to the lack of an on-campus presence, so institutions may need to take steps to actively engage all stakeholders in internal quality procedures.

Indicators

- E-learning is part of the overall strategy for the institution's development as well as the policy for quality assurance.
- The institution uses a clearly articulated policy framework and governance structure when deciding on the adoption of new technologies to ensure the expected quality of e-learning provision.
- Institutional policies, structures, processes, and resources are in place to guarantee the successful teaching and learning process of students, including those with special educational needs.
- The institution has a policy and code of practice to ensure academic integrity and freedom and ethical behaviour.
- Electronic security measures are considered by the institution's policy/code of practice.
- If external services or expertise are utilised, written agreements/contracts that define the roles and responsibilities exist.

5 The term Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is used to describe the collection of software systems that provide materials and facilities for online learning. These systems allow for the management of all processes from course authoring, to delivery of the course materials to students, and recording their performance (EADTU, 2016). The term Learning Management System (LMS) is often used synonymously with VLE, but indicates a greater focus on administration than on course authoring and production (EADTU, 2016).

- Stakeholders (especially students) are involved in the internal quality assurance system, even if they are not on campus.

1.2. DESIGN AND APPROVAL OF PROGRAMMES

Standard: Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated, and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

Elements to consider

Although instructional design is also included in standard 1.3 on “Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment”, it is important to pay attention to the process by which the teaching staff determine the best teaching methods for students in a specific context, taking into account pedagogical practice, innovation, and the specific goal of the programme.

Major challenges that institutions face are those of designing online programmes that guarantee skills development or the sense of academic community that has traditionally been associated with on-campus provision. Key challenges and opportunities include: programme modularity, online assessment methods, building online academic communities, integrating knowledge and skills development, and offering personalised instruction to meet different learning needs and aspirations.

Institutions may also focus on demonstrating the need for e-learning provision in relation to the mission and goals of both the programme and the institution.

Indicators

- The institution has a clear strategy for digital innovation, e-learning being a part of it. This strategy is known within the institution at all levels and is adopted by teachers in charge of designing the curriculum.
- E-learning programmes are aligned with the institutional mission.
- Curricula design reflects pedagogical practices and innovation, if applicable.
- People involved in designing/developing/evaluating e-learning programmes have expertise in academic and technical aspects.
- Teaching staff involved in designing/developing/evaluating programmes are familiar with the advantages/disadvantages of using e-learning in particular course contexts.
- Student needs are considered when developing the learning model and the curricula design.

1.3. STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT

Standard: Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.

Elements to consider

This standard encourages the use of flexible learning paths, different modes of delivery, a variety of pedagogical methods, and giving a sense of autonomy to each student. Since digitising content alone does not lead automatically to a successful educational setting, institutions may wish to design their curriculum in such a way so as to stimulate and engage students in the learning process (a step which may help prevent undesired dropouts), and to reflect best practices and research in teaching and learning.

In order to overcome the lack of direct face-to-face interaction, students may need encouragement to engage online with each other. Institutions can help by supporting the formation of online discussion groups for student-to-student contact; where peer interactions are essential for the successful completion of a programme, however, it is essential that institutions make sure to monitor, assess, and inform students of that. Online spaces for communication between teachers and students and among teaching staff can exist, too – the latter serving as a platform for sharing experiences and good practices.

A well-defined educational model can help guarantee that students will achieve the learning outcomes. It is important that the selection of the e-learning methodology used to assemble the learning model is appropriate to the level and subject domain of the course.

Institutions engaged in e-learning will find it necessary to pay attention to the development of learning materials and to incorporate any appropriate updates. Similarly, staff may need support in updating their knowledge in relation to teaching and assessment methodologies that are adapted to the e-learning environment. Input from several professions is desirable for the development of high-quality e-learning materials; hence, clear processes of coordination between various contributors are also needed.

Utilising technologies that match the course content will enhance and expand learning for all types of students' needs. VLEs offer increased flexibility for teaching, learning, and assessment and can be used to encourage the development of creativity, critical thinking, and in-depth subject knowledge. VLEs, which can be developed based on the pedagogical needs of the course and its learners, may contain a wide range of tools, including: blogs, forums, online video conferencing platforms, internet voice communication, virtual practical training, etc. Regular revision on the basis of learning analytics and learner feedback will help lead to constant improvement.

During the learning design process, it is important to consider how the e-assessment methods, which should be explained to any affected students, are aligned with the learning outcomes. It is important to also consider that when online assessment is carried out, there are established procedures for validating non-classroom-based assessments. The development and implementation of e-assessment includes protective measures that guarantee learner authentication and work authorship. In addition, the e-assessment system should be secure and fit for purpose. It is important, too, that guidelines are generated, as well as codes of conduct, to encourage appropriate online behaviour for students and that they are also supported in understanding issues of plagiarism.

Having a complaint procedure in place helps in case any matters arise that might be a hindrance or cause dissatisfaction among students.

Indicators

- Teaching methodologies and learning activities are chosen with the aim of achieving learning outcomes.
- Learning materials fit the pedagogical model and facilitate student learning.
- Authors of learning materials are relevant for the subject. Learning materials are reviewed and updated periodically.
- The technical infrastructure is aligned with the teaching methodology, learning activities, and e-assessment methods, and it eases the teaching and learning process.
- E-assessment methods are fit for purpose, allowing students to demonstrate the extent to which the intended learning outcomes have been achieved.
- Students are clearly informed about the e-assessment.
- Students are aware of plagiarism rules.
- Students are trained in how to appropriately paraphrase, cite, and reference, regarding both online and print sources.
- The institution gives advice on appropriate online behaviour (netiquette rules).

1.4. STUDENT ADMISSION, PROGRESSION, RECOGNITION, AND CERTIFICATION

Standard: Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student “life cycle”, e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification.

Elements to consider

Institutions can support students in making responsible decisions by providing advising services, diagnostic tests, and information about prerequisite knowledge and/or any required competencies. It is also helpful to share information about the e-learning courses, such as ECTS and level, subject content, relationship with other courses, mechanisms for dissemination of course materials, assignments, e-assessment, IT requirements, and an estimate of the amount of time that students will need to dedicate to the course.

E-learning students will expect to be supported in their development and application of new skills and techniques through a range of mechanisms and services.

Recognition plays as important a role in the e-learning context, as it does for on-campus studies. Academic recognition still has to be assured, and it will be important for institutions to give attention to the qualifications offered by online programmes in order to ensure the same level of recognition by professional bodies and employers providing the same learning outcomes. Institutions that deliver courses internationally are advised to be aware of the national policies and legislation regarding the recognition of qualifications gained by students located abroad.

Indicators

- Students/prospective students are informed about requirements concerning equipment, e-learning and digital skills, pre-knowledge and prerequisite subjects, and attendance.
- Students are informed about the workload and pedagogical model of the e-learning programme.
- The institution has a policy and procedure in place for recognition of prior learning.

1.5. TEACHING STAFF

Standard: Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff.

Elements to consider

Well-developed educational models acknowledge the crucial role of teaching staff in the quality of e-learning, and as such, their structures, profiles, and roles are defined. Professional development for the teaching and facilitation in the e-learning context may be required, particularly as it relates to those transitioning from a traditional face-to-face teaching environment, who may need technological and pedagogical support services for the development of courses and training in the use and mastery of learning technologies. However, institutions should be careful that staff are not burdened with a greater workload owing to any additional training. The workload (with extra professional development trainings included in the calculation) of teaching staff involved with e-learning should be comparable to that of those delivering face-to-face provision.

The design of training programmes for teaching staff may be informed by a training needs analysis that identifies training requirements (for example, by job function) and addresses the needs of existing and newly recruited staff. Training can be further improved if the institution promotes interaction among teaching staff for the sharing of good practices and teaching and learning achievements. Where academic support staff are concerned, innovation will be of key interest.

As the staffing needs for institutions offering e-learning provision may differ from those in traditional education contexts, it may be helpful to enact a policy of careful recruiting and hiring of both teaching and external staff. It is important to bear in mind that, in general, offering e-learning may involve a wider range of staff than is normally required in traditional education settings, and that coordination, also with external suppliers of various services, may be more complex.

Indicators

- The institution has defined the structure, profile, and role of the teaching staff that is aligned with the pedagogical model.
- The institution uses appropriate instruments to guarantee that the profile of the teaching staff corresponds to their duties.
- The teaching staff is trained and proficient in the use of learning technologies and e-assessment methods. There are particular training activities for new staff.
- The institution has developed procedures to identify the support requirements of the teaching staff.

- Technological and pedagogical support services for teachers are adequate, accessible, and timely.
- The teaching staff-student ratio avoids excessive workload for teachers and tutors.
- The institution has implemented appropriate procedures for recruiting and hiring teaching staff.
- The teaching staff is coordinated effectively.

1.6. LEARNING RESOURCES AND STUDENT SUPPORT

Standard: Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.

Elements to consider

Learning resources

It is considered a good practice for institutions to include in their overall strategies an explanation of the development of their e-learning programmes and technological innovation, an analysis of the particular needs of e-learning programmes, and indicators that define the functionality and good use of the infrastructure. It may prove to be even more beneficial if the institution develops a separate, all-inclusive, fail-safe technology development plan that includes:

- electronic security measures (password protection, encryption, back-up systems, etc.) to ensure standards of quality and information integrity and validity, and
- a centralised system that provides support to the building and maintenance of the infrastructure for online education.

Institutions can better guarantee the effectiveness of delivering an e-learning programme by acquiring, operating, and maintaining a computer-based system capable of: registering students for courses and programmes; distributing e-learning materials to students; maintaining and updating records of student performance; conducting aspects of e-business; and facilitating communication between the institution, its students, and staff. Computer-based systems can also provide accurate returns to the quality management. Institutions often prefer that their chosen technical solutions comply with platform-independent and non-proprietary web standards.

VLEs deserve special attention, for example, in order to ensure that sufficient financial resources are secured, thereby achieving system security and reliability, as well as service availability. Good VLEs are interoperable and robust, aligned with the institution's technical infrastructure, and regularly subjected to internal evaluations, updating, and improvements as needed. The technical infrastructure should ensure the accessibility of learning materials and the e-assessment system by students with special educational needs.

Providing students with adequate library resources (ie. an e-library service), and any required training, is an institutional responsibility. Study programmes could include virtual labs designed to guarantee the acquisition of particular learning outcomes.

Student support

Proper student support, which is often addressed by institutional policies and strategies and covers aspects such as tutoring, pedagogical, technological, and administrative-related needs, can help improve the student retention rate and success and satisfaction of students (assuming that students are aware of, have access to, and make use of the support). Support may be further enhanced if the institution analyses the profile of e-learning students (including, for instance, their cultural backgrounds, technical experiences, technological equipment, etc.), and uses it to meet the specific needs of its students (for example, students with disabilities). Student support can be tailored to individuals, or even at the class or subject level.

Effective student support will be adapted to the e-learning environment and made easily accessible, available as often as possible during the learning period, and appropriate considering the levels of intervention that may be needed (routine error correction and personal and human support for major difficulties).

Institutions may consider encouraging the virtual mobility of students and academics, providing them with opportunities to participate in activities offered by other institutions.

Indicators

- Learning resources:
 - The VLE supports a variety of methods and tools.
 - The technical infrastructure ensures the accessibility of the e-learning programme by students with special educational needs.
 - The institution defines the electronic security measures that guarantee standards of quality and information integrity and validity.
 - The VLE is based on non-proprietary web standards and is constantly updated to reflect technological changes.
 - The institution provides students with an adequate e-library and virtual labs.

- Student support:
 - The institution has procedures in place that cover student support, including tutoring, pedagogical, technological, and administrative elements.
 - Student support is offered according to the student's profile and their specific needs.
 - The student support reflects characteristics of e-learning.
 - Support for the development of learning, as well as digital skills (students are guided towards reflection, developing time management skills, etc.), is provided.
 - Students receive guidelines/training in using e-learning resources (VLE, e-library, etc.).
 - Hours of support are transparent and suit the needs of students; for instance, periods of peak demand (evenings, weekends, holidays, etc.) are considered.

- Institutions provide opportunities for the virtual mobility of students and academics.

1.7. INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

Standard: Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.

Elements to consider

A good information management system will enable the agile, complete, and representative collection of data and indicators derived from all aspects related to e-learning. Particular indicators for different e-learning scenarios (online learning, distance learning in programmes or modules, and blended learning) can be included (for example, dropout rates, graduation/completion rates, etc.), and, combined with the measuring of processes and key results (specific indicators for e-learning should be defined), will help institutions comply with this standard.

It is important to steer the e-learning activity in the institution, for example, by conducting studies on the profile of students enrolled in e-learning courses/programmes and the specific needs that can be met by online teaching, analyses on dropout and graduation rates, etc.

Staff are encouraged to access reports and information relevant to their roles and similarly for students and their own records (registration status, progress, achievement, etc.), for example, through web interfaces rather than restricted, campus-based networks.

Where e-learning takes place, the quality assurance system ensures that the collection of data respects the privacy rights of students, and it considers intellectual property issues.

Indicators

- Collected data is used in order to evaluate e-learning programmes (e.g. comparative analysis of course design).
- There is a strategy on the use and purpose of learning analytics within the institution (i.e. the aim is improving student support).
- The information management system includes relevant, updated, and reliable information concerning the institution and its programmes.
- The institution considers ethical norms and government policy with respect to data protection and the privacy of students.

1.8. PUBLIC INFORMATION

Standard: Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to-date and readily accessible.

Elements to consider

Stakeholders appreciate being well informed on issues of recognition of qualifications of programmes, pedagogical development, teaching and learning methods, and resources technology. Transparency, with regard to not only the learning value but also the technological requirements, learning resources technology, and available technical support available, is key.

Indicators

- The institution publishes reliable, complete, and up-to-date information on study programmes (i.e. recognition of qualifications, learning objectives, credits, requirements, assessment methods, timelines, dates relevant for the programme).
- The institution publishes reliable, complete, and up-to-date information on institutional technical support.
- Technical requirements to enable the full and effective use of the system are clearly identified and published.
- The institution publishes information on completion rates, pass rates, and dropout rates.

1.9. ONGOING MONITORING AND PERIODIC REVIEW OF PROGRAMMES

Standard: Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.

Elements to consider

Programme improvements may be stimulated by the enactment of ongoing programmes for evaluating the effectiveness of the online format, for assessing teaching and learning methodologies, and for making systematic use of this information to, for example, inform future planning and align with the institution's strategic direction. Alongside this, recent developments in the field of ICT and pedagogy should be considered continuously.

It is positive when institutions have mechanisms in place to check the quality of how the learning environment works. The distinction between the e-learning programme and other e-learning activities is important, as well as to what extent the e-learning activities are integrated into study programmes as complements or independent components.

The internal quality assurance system would do well to consider how to close the loop where stakeholder feedback (with emphasis on students' view) is concerned, ensuring that communication about how feedback was utilised is delivered.

Indicators

- E-learning programmes are reviewed, updated, and improved.
- Pedagogical developments are aligned with the institutional strategy.
- ICT and pedagogy developments are analysed and implemented when appropriate.
- The internal quality assurance system includes feedback to stakeholders (especially to students).

1.10. CYCLICAL EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard: Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.

Elements to consider

Nowadays it is the case that e-learning provision is included in the external quality assurance procedures in the same way as is provision provided through any other means. Institutions providing e-learning are encouraged to make contact with their relevant quality assurance body to exchange information and help both parties better understand the specificities of e-learning and its assessment.

IV. CONSIDERATIONS FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

PART II. EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

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).

Indicators

- The institution takes into account the European, national, and local policies, as well as ethical and legal considerations when designing its policy for quality assurance and its internal quality assurance system.

2.2. DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

Standard: External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

Elements to consider

As with traditional, campus-based provision, external quality assurance will take into account an institution's particularities – e-learning included. Usually the procedure will include the involvement of relevant stakeholders at all levels. The teaching and learning process, the learning resources, the VLE, and the student support system for e-learning will be additionally considered. It is a good opportunity for institutions to demonstrate their involvement in pedagogical innovation projects and the involvement of stakeholders (students and teaching staff involved with e-learning) in the design of methodologies.

It is a good practice that quality assurance processes are sufficiently flexible to include recognising and supporting new modes of teaching and learning. Reviews can take into account specific criteria, indicators, guidelines, or frameworks, and if there is a strategy supporting the e-learning provision.

Indicators

- External quality assurance considers the characteristics of e-learning in regular procedures, such as innovation in teaching and learning processes (institutional or programme evaluation).
- All relevant stakeholders are involved in developing e-learning criteria (institutional or programme evaluation).
- Specific e-learning criteria for external quality assurance procedures (institutional or programme evaluation) are publicly available.

2.3. IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES

Standard: External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently, and published. They include

- a self-assessment or equivalent;
- an external assessment normally including a site visit;
- a report resulting from the external assessment;
- a consistent follow-up.

Elements to consider

An appropriate opportunity for the institution to explain its motivation in deciding to educate students via e-learning and how they chose to do so is during the self-assessment. A description of the pedagogical model, and a detailed explanation of the VLE, can help to inform the review team. Together with the report, all necessary data for accessing the system, classrooms, debate forums, teaching materials, etc. should be provided, and reviewers can ensure their good preparation by analysing the report and evidence provided and accessing and navigating the VLE before the site visit.

The site visit is an excellent opportunity to examine the institution's pedagogical model, the innovation and technical infrastructure, and the experience and knowledge of its teaching staff, as well as the services and support received by students and academics.

It is convenient for the site visit to take place at the same location as where most of the institution's technical infrastructure is situated. An intensive examination of the technical infrastructure should be possible during the site visit, as well as direct contact with technical and support staff. To assess accessibility and usability, it is necessary for reviewers to interview former and current students.

Aside from those just mentioned, during the site visit, reviewers will likely also interview all stakeholders involved in e-learning provision (at the institutional or programme level). It should be noted that staff (for instance, authors, lecturers, tutors, mentors, study directors, technical support staff, etc.) involved in the teaching process may be more diverse than in traditional settings; interviews will reflect that.

The site visit may include a combination of virtual and face-to-face interviews with stakeholders (for example, students and teachers). The institution is responsible for providing appropriate ICT tools to conduct virtual interviews in order to guarantee a proper dialogue between reviewers and stakeholders and to avoid wasting time.

Indicators

- The self-assessment report makes specific reference to e-learning by describing, for example:
 - the institutional strategy, pedagogical model, and VLE;
 - the innovation of instructional design;
 - the profiles and experience of teaching staff;
 - the online study programme (with detailed learning outcomes, course description, and competencies of teaching staff).

- Site visit
 - The site visit takes place at a location where most of the institution's technical infrastructure is situated.
 - Interviews with stakeholders include representatives of all groups involved (i.e. teaching staff, tutors, students, technical staff, administration, alumni, employers, etc.).
 - The institution provides reviewers with access to the VLE, classrooms, e-library, etc.

2.4. PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS

Standard: External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

Elements to consider

It is preferable for reviewers to have experience with online teaching and/or learning (for example, student reviewers would preferably have experience in e-learning from a learner's perspective, while another reviewer could have knowledge of e-learning methodology). In any case, reviewers should be trained on the unique characteristics of e-learning. It would be helpful if at least one of the experts has a deeper technical understanding that allows for an assessment of the suitability of the VLE, considering the teaching and learning process.

Indicators

- The criteria for the composition of expert groups includes e-learning competence/experience.
- The QA agency holds trainings for all experts before the site visit. Special attention is given to characteristics of e-learning.

2.5. CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES

Standard: Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.

Elements to consider

No particularities. Since the process itself is not dependent on the characteristics of the institution (whether it is a traditional or online institution), the role of criteria and their importance must not be modified.

2.6. REPORTING

Standard: Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.

Elements to consider

No particularities. The way of reporting and the publishing practice should follow the same procedures as other quality review processes.

2.7. COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

Standard: Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

Elements to consider

No particularities. Complaints and appeals processes are independent from the structure of the evaluated institution or programme.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This work shows that not only are the ESG applicable to e-learning, it also exemplifies how quality assurance methods with new indicators can be developed.

The present challenge remains with HEIs and QA agencies. On one hand, QA agencies should develop external review methodologies that take into consideration the particularities of e-learning, while on the other hand, traditional institutions providing e-learning or blended programmes should adapt their internal quality assurance systems in order to guarantee the quality of their teaching and learning processes.

The present document can be used as a reference for HEIs and QA agencies, and it might contribute to a common understanding of the concept itself, as well as to the relevant terminology. The document may also prove useful for training sessions of external reviewers and may contribute to enhancing the expert profile of panels.

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