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Author(s)

Name: Esther Huertas Hidalgo (presenter)

Position: Project Manager

Organisation: AQU Catalunya (Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency)

Country: Spain

E-mail address: ehuertashidalgo@aqu.cat

Short bio (150 words max): Dr. Esther Huertas received her qualification as Agronomist Engineer from the Polytechnic University of Catalonia and her B.S. (Food Science and Technology) and M.S. (Environmental Sciences) degrees from the University of Barcelona. She has also received her Ph.D. in Chemical Engineering from the University of Barcelona. In her first appointment, Huertas served as a researcher at the University of Barcelona and followed her professional activity as an assistant professor at the University of Barcelona for three years. She began to collaborate with AQU Catalunya as a student expert at TEEP II project, and in 2006 she got a position at the Quality Assurance Department of the Agency. Huertas has been involved in different international groups as the European Consortium for Accreditation and AUDIT network. She is currently the work package leader of Quality assurance in online higher education in TeSLA project and the chair of ENQA's working group of e-learning.

Name: Sandra Marcos Ortega (presenter)

Position: Head of International Affairs and Internal Quality

Organisation: ACSUCYL (Quality Assurance Agency for the University System of Castilla y León)

Country: Spain

E-mail address: sandra.marcos@jcyl.es

Short bio (150 words max): Sandra Marcos has studied Information Management at the University of Salamanca and a Master in Information Management at the Institute for Directors of Enterprises. Before joined ACSUCYL, Sandra worked as project manager in a private company and also as teacher of Spanish as a foreign language in Sheffield. In 2005 she joined ACSUCYL and has been working in the field of international affairs and internal quality system. She has been working since 2010 in some ENQA



working groups related to internal quality assurance (IQA Steering Group; KP3 and ENQA IQA as a chair). She is actually member of the Steering Committee of the AR-NET project about automatic recognition. She is also involved in the European Consortium for Accreditation and in the ENQA's working group of e-learning and quality assurance. Since March 2018 Sandra is associate professor at UOC (Open University of Catalonia) in the Master "Quality and Management in HEIs".

Name: Monika Risse Kuhn

Position: Project Manager

Organisation: AAQ Switzerland (Swiss Agency of Accreditation and Quality Assurance)

Country: Switzerland

E-mail address: monika.risse@aaq.ch

Short bio (150 words max):

Monika Risse Kuhn has studied history at the University of Bern. Before she joined AAQ, Risse Kuhn made experience in working on historic research projects as well as being redactor at a daily newspaper. She has since several years now the position as project manager at AAQ and has carried out many national and international evaluation and accreditation procedures. Risse Kuhn is member of the ENQA's working group on e-learning and quality assurance.

Name: Georg Seppmann

Position: Scientific Advisor

Organisation: evalag - Evaluation Agency Baden-Württemberg

Country: Germany

E-mail address: seppmann@evalag.de

Short bio (150 words max): Georg Seppmann has originally studied Social and Cultural Anthropology at Frankfurt University where he first came into contact with new media in education through various student projects in the early 1990s. Later, at the German Institute for Adult Education (DIE) he was working on several certificate programmes for IT qualification. Before he joined **evalag** in 2014, Seppmann has worked for 14 years in the development of e-learning programmes and concepts at different universities in Germany, last at the Bavarian Virtual University (vhb), a university network that offers more than 450 courses to students enrolled at Bavarian universities. At **evalag**, Seppmann has meanwhile carried out several national and international evaluation and accreditation projects. He is also part of the ERASMUS+ funded project E-TALEB where seven Lebanese universities together with partners from France, Germany and UK are developing a professional standards framework for excellence in teaching and learning for Lebanon. Seppmann is member of ENQA's working group of e-learning.

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Proposal

Title: Main considerations for quality assurance of e-learning provision

Abstract (150 words max):

In recent times e-learning in different forms has been integrated in a high percentage in the study offerings of HEIs in Europe. The quality assurance of this type of provision has become a concern both for HEIs and for QAAs. Considering this and the fact that a new version of the revised ESG was published in 2015, an ENQA's working group on quality assurance of e-learning was established. The aim of the working group was to work on a set of considerations for quality assurance of e-learning provision taking as reference the ESG 2015, examining the applicability and relevance of the ESG. The methodology used was inter alia the analysis of relevant reports, international projects and studies as well as conducting a "consultation survey" for validating the outcomes among stakeholders in the sector including student representatives. The main results of the working group are presented in this paper.

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? Partially. Occasional paper 26, ENQA, 2018.

Text of paper (3000 words max):



1. Introduction

The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) (2015) [1] are equally applicable to all modes of teaching and learning, however, the necessity for an appropriate interpretation for using them persists.

According to EUA's 2014 e-learning study, 91 percent of the institutions surveyed have integrated e-learning into their teaching, in different forms (distance learning, blended learning, problem-based learning...). 82 percent admit to offering online learning courses. In contrast, the quality assurance of such provision has been given far less consideration [2].

Within this framework, ENQA decided to launch a working group on quality and e-learning (summer 2016). The aim of the ENQA's working group was to work on a set of considerations for quality assurance of e-learning provision taking as reference the ESG 2015 [1], examining the applicability and relevance of the ESG (Part 1 "Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance" and Part 2 "Standards and guidelines for external quality assurance").

The project relates to four of ENQA's strategic goals:

- 1) ENQA supports the continuous development of independent and trustworthy quality assurance agencies operating in line with agreed standards throughout Europe.
- 2) ENQA is a key source of reliable information, expertise and know-how on quality assurance.
- 3) ENQA is a reference point for European quality assurance in the international context.
- 4) ENQA contributes to the enhancement and innovation of quality assurance.

The working group was composed of the following members: Ivan Biscan (ASHE, Croatia), Ana Capilla (FMID, Spain), Charlotte Ejsing (UKÄ, Sweden), Esther Huertas (AQU Catalunya, Spain), Liza Kozłowska (NVAO, Netherlands/Flanders), Liia Lauri (EKKA, Estonia), Sandra Marcos Ortega (ACSUCYL, Spain), Monika Risse (AAQ, Switzerland), Kerstin Schörg (AQ Austria, Austria), and Georg Seppmann (evalag, Germany). The working group under the coordination of Lindsey Kerber from ENQA Secretariat and was chaired by Esther Huertas.

The working group finished their analysis in June 2018. The final document has been published by ENQA "[Occasional paper 26, ENQA, 2018](#)" [3].

The aim of this paper is to present the main findings of the working group, focus on the main elements that may be considered by higher education institutions (HEIs) and quality assurance agencies (QAA) for fulfilling the ESG from the e-learning perspective.

2. Methodology

The basis of this work combines elements from the working group's analyses of relevant international reports; 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 Education [4]. Furthermore, outcomes from international projects, such as TeSLA [5] and SEQUENT [6], have been taken into account.

A consultation on the first draft of the document was held in order to gain validation from stakeholders in the sector, including student representatives, higher education institutions and experts on the field around Europe [2]. The comments, proposals and recommendations received were analysed and taken by the working group.

Finally, taking into consideration all information, the final report was produced [3]. It includes elements to be consider under each standard as well as some indicators.

3. 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 [7] valid for the context of this 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.

For the purpose of this document, considering the definitions stated above, **e-learning is understood as encompassing every form**, including blended learning (but excluding massive open online courses - MOOCs and open education resources - OERs), and that which is facilitated through the use of ICT.

4. Considerations for higher education institutions

ESG [1] include a set of standards for the internal quality assurance (see figure 1) in HEIs. As it is recognised in the document published by ENQA (ESG, 2015), the standards provide guidance on teaching and learning process. The analysis carried out by the working group demonstrates that all standards (see figure 1) are fully applicable to any type of e-learning approach. Nonetheless, special emphasis should be paid on some standards (marked with an asterisk in figure 1). It is important to note that some elements considered in this work may not be fully applicable - nor equally important - to every institution or programme.

- Standard 1.1.** Policy for quality assurance*
- Standard 1.2.** Design and approval of programmes*
- 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

Figure 1. List of ESG – Part 1. Internal quality assurance [1]

Policy for quality assurance



HEIs should be aware of the e-learning strategy and it should be part of the overall institutional strategy. Attention to quality by means of innovation and earmarked resources 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.

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.

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.

Design and approval of programmes

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.

Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

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, 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. Online spaces for communication between teachers and students and among teaching staff can exist, too.

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.

Utilising technologies that match the course content will enhance and expand learning for all types of students' needs. Virtual learning environments (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.

The development and implementation of e-assessment includes protective measures that guarantee learner authentication and work authorship.

Student admission, progression, recognition and certification



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 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.

Teaching staff

Teaching staff is a crucial element in the teaching and learning process. The institution should define the structures, profiles and roles of teaching staff. Due to particular characteristics of e-learning, professional development 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.

The design of training programmes for teaching staff may be informed by a training needs analysis that identifies training requirements and addresses the needs of existing and newly recruited staff. Where academic support staff are concerned, innovation will be of key interest.

Offering e-learning may involve a wider range of staff than is normally required in traditional educational settings, and that coordination, also with external suppliers of various services, may be more complex.

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 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.

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.

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). Student support can be tailored to individuals, or even at the class or subject level.

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

5. Considerations for quality assurance agencies

As it is mentioned before, ESG [1] includes a section where standards and guidelines for external quality assurance is described (Part 2). Similarly to previous section (“Considerations for HEIs”), it was proven that all standards (see figure 2) are fully applicable to any type of e-learning approach. Nevertheless, some standards are more relevant than others (marked with an asterisk in figure 2).

Standard 2.1. Consideration of internal quality assurance
Standard 2.2. Design 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

Figure 2. List of ESG – Part 2. External quality assurance [1]

Design methodologies fit for purpose

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.

Implementing processes

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.

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.

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.

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 involved in the teaching process may be more diverse than in traditional settings; interviews will reflect that.

Peer-review experts

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.

6. Quality assurance experiences in e-learning review

Following the "Considerations for quality assurance of e-learning provision" [3], the Spanish Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (REACU) has developed a common framework to be followed for all QAA in Spain when evaluating ex-ante programmes and the same will be done for ex-post accreditation programmes. This framework serves as a basis for the development of evaluation procedures of each Regional Agency that operates in Spain.

In some Regional Agencies of Spain the evaluation procedure has been already published and implemented as a result of which some difficulties have been identified. Some of the main difficulties faced are related to the methodologies used and the teaching staff involved, mainly about their profile and the workload.

7. Conclusions

The main result of this study is that the ESG are fully applicable to e-learning provision. Taking into consideration the great diversity among institutions, programmes, and approaches to e-learning, as well as quality assurance procedures, HEIs and QAA should reflect their own context and analyse the described considerations and decide their relevance.

The present challenge remains with HEIs and QAA. On one 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, while on the other hand, QAA should develop external review procedures that take into consideration the particularities of e-learning.

The working group trusts that its work should contribute to a common understanding for HEIs as well as QAA when talking about e-learning provision. Furthermore, this work should prove useful for training sessions of external reviewers and may contribute to enhancing the expert profile of panels when it comes to a quality assurance procedure of e-learning provision.

References:

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[7] Bates T. (2017). www.tonybates.ca/2017/04/25/what-is-online-learning-seeking-definition.

Discussion questions:

- From HEI point of view, which are the main challenges you would face when implementing the considerations for quality assurance of e-learning provision?
- From QAA point of view, which are the main challenges you would face when implementation the considerations for quality assurance of e-learning provision?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 24 July 2018 to QAForum@eua.eu. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.