

Paper proposal for the INQAAHE Conference 2019, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Sub-theme 1: New technologies, innovation and quality assurance: how to consider QA and its key principles in a world of disruptive technology and constant change.

Quality assurance of elearning in line with the ESG – what key considerations for student-centered learning?

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A computer and laptop would be required for the presentation of the paper in the conference.

Abstract (100-150 words)

This paper presents some of the key outcomes of a recent (2018) ENQA working group report entitled “Considerations for quality assurance of elearning provision”. It firstly outlines the key framework for quality assurance of elearning provision in Europe and the role of the ESG, and then focuses on how two key standards – namely the ESG Standard 1.3 – Student-centered learning, teaching and assessment and ESG Standard 1.6 – learning resources and student support - could be addressed in this context. The key considerations are to support institutions and agencies in reflecting on how to translate the requirements of the ESG for elearning provision, without compromising their spirit.

Article

1. Context for elearning quality assurance in the EHEA

In the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (the “ESG”) form the basis for both internal and external quality assurance. The ESG are generic standards that apply to all higher education across the 48 EHEA countries, independently of the mode or place of delivery, including thus cross-border provision, distance learning, and all different forms of technologically enhanced learning from full online programmes to blended learning [1].

In order to ensure their applicability in different contexts, and for different forms of teaching and learning, the ESG are by necessity relatively generic. This means that while they set the framework for quality expectations and the ways in which quality should be assured, they need to be “translated” into operational principles in the different contexts, while taking care not to compromise their spirit.

While many European systems have not yet developed a systematic approach to quality assurance of elearning (only 23% of national agencies give specific attention to elearning) [5], some agencies have opted for creating specific criteria, indicators and QA methods to address this form of delivery. Others have chosen the integration of elearning into the overarching framework, which are designed so as to cater equally and appropriately for all forms of delivery [6].

Many argue that the quality principles that underpin successful online teaching and learning are the same as those that boost successful face-to-face provision. While there may be necessarily some differences in the resources and support that are employed, at the end of the day, it is the same judgements of quality that need to be employed [2]. This point is similarly held by the authors of ENQA's 2010 publication on Quality assurance of elearning which states that the agencies could use the ESG as a backbone and create additional material to help the agencies in monitoring the progress and development of elearning [3].

This statement is aligned with - and taken forward by - the recent report by ENQA working group on QA and elearning (2015-2018) [4]. The group looked into how elearning is being addressed by external quality assurance, what current good practice could be identified, and how the ESG can be used to appropriately address quality assurance of elearning from the internal and external quality assurance point of view. The resulting key considerations are not prescriptive, and thus do not form a parallel set of standards, but are rather a tool to help thinking about how to assess elearning quality.

2. Addressing student-centered learning and student support in elearning

Elearning is expected to support student-centered learning (ESG Standard 1.3.) by enabling more flexible learning paths, addressing the diversity of students and their needs, supporting lifelong learning, equipping students with skills for future labour market, and so on. Elearning is freer from geographical constraints than class-room learning, and often also freer from time constraints, which adds to the flexibility and adaptability to students' needs. Often heard arguments connect elearning to student-centered learning also by its potential to employ more innovative approaches in the class-room based parts of blended learning programmes, such as flipped classed room approaches, or the use face-to-face hours for discussion rather than delivery of basic information.

According to the ESG Standard 1.3, programmes should be designed so that students take an active role in creating the learning process and that assessment methods reflect the approach. The ENQA report [4] suggests that in order to overcome the lack of direct interaction, students may need to be provided with different tools, as well as specific encouragement, to engage online with each other, and with the teaching staff. This can be done e.g. by forming discussions groups, but remembering that if peer-interactions are essential for the achievement of the expected learning outcomes, such interaction should be monitored and assessed by the institutions. Institutions are also invited to reflect on the pedagogical model most appropriate to ensure that the teaching and learning process supports the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

Provision of course content, assignments and e-assessment requires teachers to gain a good understanding of the requirements of this mode of delivery. Appropriate training for teaching staff on pedagogy, technology and teaching innovation is thus necessary. Importantly, as elearning

provision requires often input from several individuals (including technical staff), good coordination between various contributors becomes particularly important. Assessment methods should be clear to students, appropriate to measure the achievement of learning outcomes, and technologically sound, including different tools to ensure authenticity and work authorship. Students should be informed adequately of citing and referencing rules, including rules pertaining to plagiarism.

In terms of student support (ESG Standard 1.6.), institutions are required to provide adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support that should take into consideration the diversity of learners and elearning particularities. The ENQA working group recommends the institutions to be aware of and analyse the learner profiles of their elearning students, and reflect on their needs, in order to develop appropriate and well thought-through support systems. Learning analytics can be an important resource in this context, while at the same time scrupulous data protection is particularly relevant as a wealth of data on the students' achievements and study patterns is collected.

3. Conclusions

Elearning has become part and parcel of higher education provision throughout Europe. Approaches to quality assurance of elearning vary, and many countries debate currently what are the appropriate quality criteria and methods for evaluation to be used for this form of delivery. This said, the ESG provide a clear framework for all forms of higher education, including elearning. However, particular interpretation of criteria, guidelines and indicators of quality may need to be used to fairly and adequately identify quality in this context. Analysing current good practice in QA can help in identifying practical ways to approach quality assurance in line with the ESG for elearning provision. Such approaches can support institutions and agencies to reap full benefits of elearning without compromising on its quality assurance.

4. References

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