AQU CATALUNYA

FULLY ONLINE OR BLENDED DEGREE PROGRAMMES: DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION AND ASSESSMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The Catalan university system, like other university systems in the region and around the world, has faced major **challenges and changes** over the last two decades as a result of the **integration** and **use of technology, especially the internet, across all administrative and educational processes in higher education institutions**. As these challenges and changes have arisen, the Catalan people have changed, too, in terms of their daily use of the internet in their personal, social and professional lives.

The use of digital information and communication technologies in teaching and learning processes has become commonplace in most of the degree programmes offered by Catalan higher education institutions. These institutions have invested in the implementation of **virtual learning environments**, also known as "virtual campuses", which provide students with access to programme and course planning, course-specific learning resources, assessment processes and, crucially, direct communication with teaching staff, classmates and/or fellow students on the same degree programme. The efforts of higher education institutions to create these virtual learning environments, develop the teaching and learning activities hosted within them, and make it all available to the educational community have often been the result of **strategic planning** driven by trends in society's acceptance and use of digital technologies. It is not only that higher education institutions have invested money over the years in acquiring, maintaining and updating the technology systems that have transformed university campuses. They have also devoted time and resources to transforming their administrative services, to facilitating and promoting access to learning resources through the redesign of their libraries and learning resource centres, and, most importantly, to educating and training teaching staff, services staff and students in how to optimise the educational use of digital technologies.

This document aims to provide guidance to universities and assessment committees on how they should approach the design, implementation and assessment of online degree programmes.

Emergency remote teaching: takeaways, changes and challenges

In early 2020, the Catalan university system was faced with the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic and took **emergency measures** to ensure that students could continue their education, building on previous investments in digital technologies and the training of teaching and services staff. Considering the impact of the pandemic on the Catalan university system and other university systems around the world, higher education institutions have initiated processes of **reflection and self-assessment**. What was learned during this teaching and administrative emergency changed the perspective of the ongoing transformation process and opened up new horizons.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced higher education institutions to provide an emergency response to a completely unforeseen situation, making full use of the potential gained from investments in technology and knowledge. The Catalan university system is now in a period of reflection and consolidation of the lessons learned from these events and the responses they were met with. Higher education institutions are embracing **new ways of teaching and learning**, assessing learning, and communicating and interacting with students. The transformation of teaching and learning through the educational use of digital technologies – a process which has led to alternative learning formats – must be adequately monitored and assessed to ensure quality.

Quality assurance

As in other university systems, internal and external quality assurance systems in Catalonia have not been left out of this context of change. The Catalan universities and AQU Catalunya have had to adapt to this reality by adjusting the assessment methodologies and processes that the universities and their degree programmes must undergo periodically.

Using the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*[1] as a main reference point, more specific guidelines have appeared at international level, such as the "Considerations for quality assurance of e-learning provision"[2] published by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). These guidelines have facilitated the adoption of criteria for implementeing and assessing on-line degree programes and have guided the preparation of this document.

The Catalan universities and AQU Catalunya are faced with the need to assess the quality of these programmes, mainly in the processes of:

> **Validation** of degree programmes designed to be delivered entirely or largely online.

> **Modification** of degree programmes that are being transformed to include fully online or blended options.

> **Accreditation** of degree programmes that have implemented these options.

> **Institutional accreditation** of institutions that have embraced an e-learning strategy and offer fully online or blended degree programmes.

Of course, in all of the above processes, the assessment of fully online or blended degree programmes is bound by the framework and criteria set out in the various assessment guides for all official degree programmes. However, there are a number of preliminary

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[1] EHEA Ministerial Conference, *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* (ENQA, 15 May 2015).

[2] Esther Huertas et al., 'Considerations for quality assurance of e-learning provision', *ENQA Occasional Papers*, 26 (2018): 27.

considerations that need to be made when dealing with these assessments:

> For **institutions**, the assessment approach must take into account the nature of the university (whether it is an online university or a face-to-face or "traditional" university).

> For **degree programmes**, the assessment approach needs to take into account the subject area, for example one that may require special relational, creative or practical skills. Consideration must also be given to whether the subject area is regulated or unregulated, given the implications of the specific regulations that apply. This would affect certain programmes in Health Sciences, Education, Engineering and Law.

> For **modules/courses**, the approach to assessment must take account of their nature and characteristics, e.g. whether they are more practical or theoretical, whether they have an instrumental component or whether they require specific material resources.

> Finally, on a smaller scale, the approach to assessment must take into account the nature and complexity of the **learning outcomes** being proposed. In this respect, it is necessary to have a particularly well-defined strategy and model (in terms of online resources and teaching methodologies, learning activities and assessment systems) for developing and assessing complex knowledge, skills and competences[3] in an online environment.

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[3] See the KSC (knowledge, skills, competences) model used in the *Catalan Higher Education Qualifications Framework* (AQU Catalunya, 2019) and in *Degree programme profiles* (AQU Catalunya, 2022) from the 'Focus: Tools for university quality' collection.

LEARNING FORMATS

Background

Distance learning has been a reality in higher education for more than a century, either as a complement to or a substitute for face-to-face learning.[4,5] Originally, distance learning was only considered for people who, for whatever reason, could not get to the physical place of learning. One of these reasons was, as the name implies, distance. The programme content was delivered to these students' homes in a variety of physical formats. The communication technologies that emerged in the 20th century – first radio and then television – widened the scope and increased the accessibility of distance education. However, it was not until the end of the 20th century, with the advent of the internet and the creation of the **Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC)** as the world's first fully online university (or distanceless university, as its first slogan put it), that a new era began for university education around the world.

Thanks to the internet, or what we have agreed to call **digital technologies**, distance learning has become **online learning, virtual learning or e-learning**, and **blended or hybrid options** have also been made possible. These learning are based on the following premises, which allow the use of digital technologies (with varying degrees of intensity) in higher education:

> A **more or less intensive use of digital learning environments** to facilitate teaching, provide access to information and learning resources, and enable multidirectional and ongoing communication.

> Teachers and students being **physically present or not** in the same place (face-to-face or non-face-to-face).

Under these premises, bachelor's and master's degrees are classified into specific learning formats. The **extent to which a degree programme is taken on site** determines its learning format, which can be:

> **Face-to-face:** teachers and students interact and engage in the teaching-learning process in a shared physical space. This includes classrooms in an educational institution, laboratories, workshops, university hospitals and work placement centres.

> **Online**: teachers and students interact and engage in the teaching-learning process (synchronously and/or asynchronously) without physically meeting in an educational institution or other physical space where this process might otherwise take place.

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[4] Desmond Keegan, *Foundations of Distance Education* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996).

[5] Börje Holmberg, *Theory and Practice of Distance Education*, 2nd ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 1995).

> **Blended**: teachers and students interact and engage in the teaching-learning process in both a shared physical space and online, combining the two formats in a consistent and integrated way.

The key factor in determining whether a degree programme is face-to-face, online or blended is the number of **teaching hours** carried out in each format. For the purposes of this document, these hours refer to directed learning and assessment activities – theoretical or practical lectures, seminars, classroom-based academic practicals, etc. – in which teachers and students interact. Teaching is different from undirected activities or autonomous student work: hours spent studying, preparing for exams, working on projects, etc. It is therefore important not to consider these hours as non-face-to-face teaching when determining the learning format of a degree programme.

Despite the above, current experience shows that strict adherence to the three defined formats can be difficult. This is because higher education institutions provide students on face-to-face degree programmes with access to virtual learning environments, which allow online communication between teachers and students, and autonomous access to learning resources; whereas students on online degree programmes often have to complete work placements, assessments or final project defences in person. Hence the complexity of defining and delimiting the three learning formats, and of classifying a given degree programme into one of them.

We can agree, however, that face-to-face and online programmes are the easiest to distinguish: a face-to-face programme may include occasional online elements without this calling its format into question, and vice versa for online programmes. This means that the challenge is to define what it means for a degree programme to be blended or hybrid.

The challenges of blended learning

A degree programme is defined as **blended** when there are justified pedagogical reasons for when students meet face-to-face and when they study online. It is not about randomly stringing together face-to-face and online learning. The aim must be to create a **consistent and integrated teaching continuum**[6] along which students engage in the various synchronous and asynchronous components of the curriculum (i.e. learning and assessment activities). Creating this continuum is the main challenge of blended learning.

The definition and implementation of a blended degree programme will be determined by at least the following factors:

> The **pedagogical justification** for including online elements.

> The **characteristics of the students** targeted by the programme, in particular their

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[6] Luz Adriana Osorio-Gómez and Josep M. Duart, 'Interaction Analysis in Hybrid Learning Environment', *Comunicar*, issue 37 (1 October 2011): 65-72.

digital literacy.

> The **student support system**, especially for the online components of the programme.

> The **learning assessment system,** which must be consistent with the blended approach and integrate the competences developed during the online parts of the programme.

> The **subject area** of the programme and the possibility of e-learning.

> **Teacher training** for online teaching.

> The **technological services** provided by the higher education institution to facilitate online learning and access to learning resources.

Demand for blended and online programmes is growing. Online programmes are ideal for facilitating lifelong learning for people who work or live in areas where face-to-face education is not available. Blended programmes provide access to education for people who can combine work with non-intensive periods of face-to-face learning.

GUIDELINES FOR THE DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION AND ASSESSMENT OF FULLY ONLINE AND BLENDED DEGREE PROGRAMMES

The following are guidelines and criteria for the factors to be considered when implementing fully online or blended degree programmes, or when starting a process of transforming programmes from one format to another.

Institutional strategy and policies

Any initiative or strategy for delivering fully online or blended degree programmes must be part of the overall strategy of the institution, i.e. both the university and the centres that offer or intend to offer these programmes.

The institution's online learning strategy, however intensive, must be used to develop a centre policy. This policy needs to be formally adopted, made public and developed with the input of the institution's key stakeholders. It should be kept up to date by analysing the results of the implementation of the policy itself and the innovations that are constantly emerging in the field of educational technology and teaching methodologies for online or blended learning. The institution and centre must also demonstrate that they have analysed the risks associated with their blended or online learning policy and that this risk analysis is carried out on a regular basis.

Under this policy, the institution must provide a framework within which academic directors can design degree programmes and carry out the teaching-learning process in a way that is consistent with the strategy, policies and resources provided for blended or online learning. This framework must include general criteria for defining the educational objectives of the online components of the programme, as well as criteria on pedagogical models, innovation strategies, learning outcomes assessment and data protection in digital environments.

In order to ensure the quality of "non-traditional" degree programmes within an institution or centre, there must be a clear and coordinated institutional strategy for delivering them. The new learning format(s) used to deliver these programmes must be reflected in institutional documents setting out a quality assurance policy. When adopting new earning formats as an institutional strategy, a number of factors need to be in place, including implementation plans, support, educational and technological resources, and budget.

As outlined below, higher education institutions' internal quality assurance systems (IQAS) play a central role in ensuring that their policies are properly implemented, updated and subjected to risk analysis procedures.

Internal quality assurance systems (IQAS)

According to the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher*

Education Area (ESG),[1] the policies and processes that make up an IQAS are the main pillars of a coherent institutional quality assurance system.

Thus, as institutions adopt online learning strategies and policies, they must also design or revise and implement the processes and procedures that shape their IQAS to meet the needs of their online and blended degree programmes.

With this in mind, institutions and centres that have started (or are considering) moving their degree programmes online will need to:

> Update their quality policy and objectives.

> Ensure that their processes are fit for purpose and interrelated.

> Consider the need to set up new processes.

> Verify the effectiveness and completeness of these processes in achieving their objectives through analysis and, where appropriate, the design and monitoring of IQAS improvement plans.

By updating and adjusting their IQAS, institutions and centres should be able to:

> Appropriately assign any responsibilities arising from the implementation of these learning formats.

> Produce qualitative and quantitative information on, as a minimum, student admissions, development, satisfaction and academic performance, allowing for segmented analysis by learning format.

> Ensure that students and other stakeholders in blended and online degree programmes are represented in the organisational structure of the IQAS and in the various representative bodies.

> Identify and effectively manage risks to degree programme viability.

Face-to-face, online or blended: choice and justification

As noted in "Institutional strategy and policies ", an institution's online learning strategy, policies, criteria and educational model need to be taken into account when deciding on whether a degree programme is best delivered face-to-face, online or in a blended format.

This decision should also be based on the processes set out in the IQAS, so as to ensure that the design and/or revision of the degree programme is informed (stakeholder feedback, data and indicator analysis, etc.) and has the approval of the relevant bodies.

Whether the programme should be face-to-face, online or blended must be justified on the basis of the suitability of the format in relation to a number of factors:

> Student profile (international, previous professional experience, etc.).

> Whether there are already examples of degree programmes taught in the proposed

format in the country or abroad.

> The future potential and past experience of the centre(s) with respect to online learning.

> The added value of implementing online learning in the design of the degree programme and in the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

These aspects are particularly relevant in degree programmes that qualify graduates to work in regulated professions or that have a strong practical and/or experimental component.

For programmes taught in more than one format, the suitability of each format must be justified on the basis of pedagogical and/or admissions criteria, taking into account the main differences between the formats and the advantages of the proposal.

The degree programme learning profile

As described in Focus 1 (*Degree programme profiles*),[7] the learning profile is constructed around the learning outcomes of the degree programme as a whole. Learning outcomes, in turn, are used as statements of what students are expected to know, understand and/or be able to do if they successfully complete the degree programme or a particular course. They are also directly linked to a teaching and assessment strategy that enables students to achieve them.

Therefore, it will be necessary to ensure that online or blended programmes have a well-defined strategy and model for developing and assessing complex knowledge, skills and competences in an online environment.

In other words, learning outcomes should be formulated in such a way that it is clear that students will be able to achieve them by completing the learning activities and using the teaching and support resources provided.

For programmes delivered in more than one format, it is necessary to ensure that students can achieve the same learning profile regardless of the format they choose.

Implementation of the curriculum

The curriculum of a degree programme is the final form of an educational proposal and becomes the university's commitment to society to deliver a quality programme that enables students to achieve the stated learning outcomes.

Online and blended degree programmes must provide a detailed definition of the format(s) chosen, ensuring that the main features of the educational proposal are clearly specified

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[7] Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency, *Degree programme profiles: learning objectives, graduation profile and learning outcomes* (Barcelona: AQU Catalunya, 2022).

and that they are consistent with the underlying institutional educational model.

For online programmes, it is necessary to clearly define and communicate the rationale for how much of the programme is face-to-face (i.e. whether it is 100% online or whether students are required to report in person for certain occasions such as work placements or exams), as well as the size and characteristics of student groups (i.e. whether there will be a single group or a model of concurrent groups and coordinated virtual classrooms on a single curriculum).

For blended programmes, it is necessary to clearly define and communicate the rationale for the programme's blend of face-to-face and online components (i.e. its curricular design), as well as how this blend is implemented (i.e. whether it is done by module and/or course or whether there are face-to-face and online components to each module and/or course).

Horizontal and vertical coordination methods are also highly relevant and should specify the measures taken to coordinate teaching staff using information and communication technologies throughout the academic year.

For degree programmes delivered in more than one format, the curricula must include a number of identical, format-independent aspects:

> The degree programme profile, as specified in the learning objectives and outcomes, expressed in terms of knowledge, skills and competences, both for the programme as a whole and for each module.

> The curricular structure, consisting of modules and courses, each with its name, type (core, compulsory, elective, etc.) and the number of ECTS credits it is worth.

Consistency in the teaching-learning process must be ensured if modules are taken at different points in the programme depending on the format.

Student-centred learning and teaching

The implementation of student-centred learning and teaching respects and addresses the diversity of students and their needs, while allowing for flexible learning pathways.

This principle is particularly relevant for degree programmes that are to be delivered partially or fully online. As mentioned above, the profile and specific needs of students are among the factors that determine the choice of learning format.

In this respect, the implementation of teaching methodologies and learning activities in online or blended learning environments must be broad and varied enough to enable students to develop and achieve the expected knowledge, skills and competences in all courses of the curriculum, as well as to assess this achievement. The curricular design of blended programmes in particular must optimise the potential of both face-to-face and online learning, in keeping with the proposed learning activities, the teaching methods, and the learning support and assessment system.

When it comes to online programmes, students need to be able to interact in educational and social spaces, especially over stretches of time with no face-to-face activity. Likewise, there must be a system for teachers to support and monitor their students. It is also imperative to provide students with the necessary tools and resources for a complete educational experience, in both face-to-face and online settings. It is therefore necessary to establish and specify:

- Group and collaborative learning activities, providing the resources to carry them out in virtual learning environments (forums, chats, virtual meeting rooms, etc.) to avoid isolation and feelings of loneliness.

- Assessment systems that include learning activities and outcomes worked on collaboratively and as part of a group in online settings.

Learning resources

Designing, developing and using learning resources is key to any educational proposal.

In online environments, these resources need to be accessible and instructive, providing what students need to know in order to reap the expected educational benefits. It is therefore necessary to ensure a proper selection and definition of learning resources that fit the learning objectives and the number of ECTS credits of the given module.

Technological and institutional support is needed to develop resources, continuously improve them and assure their quality. In this regard, there is also a need to provide and use documentary resources for online learning and subject-specific references. This requires a clear policy on the in-house development of learning resources for online and blended programmes, as well as on the availability and use of existing subject-specific documentary resources and references.

These resources are expected to be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure that they meet the programme's learning objectives.

Addressing students' educational and technological needs

The needs of students on online or blended degree programmes must be met to ensure a satisfactory teaching-learning process.

To this end, an integrated system must be implemented to ensure ongoing student support and to monitor students' academic progress. This system must be adapted to the learning format and available during the learning period.

The support provided must include ongoing tutoring to deal with non-academic issues related to personal skills for self-directed learning and the digital technology used in the programme, as well as academic issues related to the completion of learning activities and the learning assessment system. In defining this support, it is necessary to take into account

the diversity of student profiles on these programmes, as well as the accommodation of students with special educational needs. It is also important to ensure that the technological requirements of the programme do not become a barrier for students with limited financial resources.

Given the importance of support and guidance mechanisms, these should be part of the institution's policy and strategy and may be formalised in a tutorial action plan or similar.

Student tutoring and monitoring mechanisms should include, as a minimum:

> The functions of tutors.

> The procedure to be followed and the criteria to be applied in monitoring each student's online participation and interaction in modules, courses, discussion forums and other proposed academic activities.

> How often tutors must contact students and, in particular, when alerts are triggered (e.g. when a student fails to complete assignments).

> The maximum response time for student queries sent to a tutor or guidance service.

> The measures taken to ensure tutoring and monitoring services when students from other time zones are enrolled in the programme.

Designing systems and procedures to assess and certify learning outcomes

Procedures for assessing and certifying learning outcomes are an essential part of any educational model. They must also be consistent with the learning format, in this case integrating appropriate face-to-face and online assessment strategies.

In order to ensure that assessment procedures work as intended in online and blended degree programmes, there must be a system in place to facilitate mechanisms for monitoring student learning and providing educational feedback, and to ensure the enduring availability of evidence for monitoring and assessing students in both the face-to-face and online parts of the programme.

This integrated learning assessment system must clearly set out the assessment model for students, for both face-to-face and online activities. In defining this system, new methodologies and dynamics of educational innovation can be incorporated.

Of course, learning assessment systems for online and blended degree programmes cannot be based solely on face-to-face activities or on the assessment of learning that has taken place in a face-to-face environment. Mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure the assessment of learning activities carried out online, whether individually or as part of a group. The necessary feedback mechanisms (communication channels, response time, etc.) must also be put in place to ensure that students are able to understand and recognise their learning.

The introduction of policies to prevent plagiarism and ensure the academic integrity of the assessment process is essential to certify the achievement of learning outcomes and guarantee the quality of the programme.

The profile and professional development of teachers and support staff

In addition to qualifications specific to university education, teaching, support and administrative staff must have the necessary skills and knowledge to teach and provide support in non-face-to-face degree programmes. Teaching experience in online or blended environments and in the pedagogical use of digital technologies is certainly an asset. However, in order to ensure the quality of online or blended degree programmes, teachers must undergo training that lays the pedagogical foundations for these learning formats.

Teaching in digital environments during the online parts of a programme requires different communication and technological skills than those normally used by teachers in face-to-face environments. It is not simply a matter of "doing the same thing" using technology. It is about identifying the best communication and teaching strategies in these new environments that will enable students to achieve the learning outcomes set out in the programme.

Therefore, institutions must train their academic and support staff to perform their tasks online and in blended formats. There needs to be a training and support programme in place for teachers of online and blended programmes, covering aspects related to online learning technologies, the pedagogical model and teaching innovation. By continually updating their knowledge of these aspects, teachers should be able to incorporate methodological innovations into their teaching.

The following aspects relating to teachers should be clearly defined for online and blended degree programmes:

> Structure, profile and role of the academic staff involved in teaching the programme.

> Profile of the teaching staff responsible for designing and coordinating the programme: category, accreditation and area of expertise. These teachers must be part of the centre's in-house (permanent) teaching staff, hold a PhD and be accredited by an assessment agency, as is the case with all degree programmes in the university system. They must also have teaching and research experience in the relevant subject and learning format(s).

> How to calculate the teaching hours invested in these programmes, in order to determine the right amount of human resources to deliver them successfully and to recognise teachers for the amount of work they have done.

> Availability of academic management adapted to the delivery of online and blended programmes.

From an institutional point of view, it is important to ensure that teaching and technological support infrastructures are available to teaching staff at all times and that programmes have sufficient teaching support staff with experience in online teaching environments.

A virtual campus for online education

Higher education institutions must ensure that they have the technology systems in place to support the different types of teacher-student relationships in online environments. They also need to ensure that their technology services, remote support, group scalability criteria and other aspects are working optimally.

Virtual campuses and any other digital resources and services to be used to deliver online or blended degree programmes must be implemented taking into account aspects such as:

> The platform's technological benchmarks. The choice of technology should be based on good examples of other applications or software. Institutions should also consider whether the chosen system or platform has a recognised certification.

> The suitability/functionality of the software in relation to the needs of online teaching.

> The mechanisms used to ensure the usability of the software and its accessibility for students with special educational needs. Prior to use, the technological infrastructure must be adequately tested.

> The robustness of the software. Indicators for this criterion include the number of concurrent connections that the system can support and, in particular, the functional, integrity and load tests that ensure the integrity and persistence of information (especially information that provides traceable evidence for student assessment).

> The application's commitment to availability and the measures taken to ensure it (duplication, redundancy systems, control systems, etc.).

Institutions or centres offering online or blended degree programmes should also have an information security plan that includes:

> Electronic security measures (users, encryption, backup systems) to ensure the validity and integrity of information.

> A centralised system to support the creation and maintenance of infrastructure for online and blended learning.

> Guaranteed student access to learning resources and materials (e.g. online libraries) and information on how these resources can be used.

> Mechanisms to verify students' identity and prevent fraud, unauthorised access, denial-of-service attacks, etc.

> Human resources available to support and maintain the systems, platforms and functions, and an explicit statement of whether the service is provided 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

> Service agreements or contracts in case the system or platform has been outsourced.

Providing the right information about the degree programme

Higher education institutions must provide public information on the academic and technical needs of students who choose to enrol or are enrolled in online or blended degree programmes. This information must clearly describe the system of teaching, tutoring, support, access to learning materials needed to follow the programme, etc.

Online or blended programmes must provide information on the main features of the educational proposal to students who choose to enrol:

> How much of the programme is strictly face-to-face.

> The pedagogical model and the associated workload.

> The hardware or software required to engage in the online learning process.

> The educational materials and resources available.

> Student services and help points.

> The maximum response time to queries.

> Any other information deemed relevant to student participation in the programme.

It must also be clearly stated whether students are required to report in person for any of the modules/courses in the curriculum, including external academic placements. Students must be specifically informed of this requirement.

It is also necessary to inform enrolled students about the mechanisms for addressing their needs, e.g. when there are students in different time zones participating in synchronous activities or when a student wishes to switch to a different learning format after the start of the programme.

Academic outcomes

Online degree programmes may employ indicators that are specific to this learning format.

For both online and blended programmes, it is necessary to set up monitoring systems using their digital environment (learning analytics) to detect situations of risk and dropout and to take preventive measures accordingly. It is also necessary to take into account the profile of the students – whether they work, have family responsibilities, have disabilities, etc. – in order to define the parameters of the expected academic outcomes.

For programmes delivered in more than one format, if the expected academic outcomes or the achieved outcomes (in the case of monitoring and accreditation reports) show differences between the formats, a justification must be provided as to the reasons for these differences; for example, the predominant student profile or type of enrolment (full-time or part-time) in each format.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As discussed in this document, the application and use of technology in higher education (in particular the use of virtual learning environments) and the consequent implementation of non-face-to-face or non-traditional degree programmes are the subject of ongoing and recurring debate in higher education systems everywhere. As in other areas of society, the possibilities of web-based communication have opened up new perspectives in the world of higher education, a change that was accentuated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Higher education institutions are undertaking initiatives to transform their degree programmes and adapt them to new imperatives in the respective subject areas, new demands from society and new target groups in the local and international environment. This is a complex transformation that requires the various stakeholders in higher education to adapt to an ever-changing landscape.

In order to ensure the quality of fully online or blended degree programmes, we need to do more than define these learning formats or build a common frame of reference for understanding the concepts associated with face-to-face and online education. We must also integrate an institutional and strategic perspective, the quality policies and IQAS of higher education institutions, and the methodological, pedagogical, technological and student and teacher support requirements for the design, implementation and assessment of such programmes.

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