



NetCu Handbook

Guidelines for organising networked curricula

NetCu



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme



NetCu handbook

Guidelines for organising networked curricula

Authors

1. Introduction: Piet Henderikx (EADTU)
2. General Model: Piet Henderikx and George Ubachs (EADTU)
3. Goals: Patricia Mata, Beatriz Malik and María Luz Cacheiro (UNED)
4. Partnerships: Sirje Virkus (Tallinn University) and Fred Truyen (KU-Leuven)
5. Students and students characteristics: Beatriz Malik, María Luz Cacheiro and Patricia Mata (UNED)
6. Models and Formats: Fred Truyen (KU-Leuven)
7. Design: Dario Assante (Uninettuno)
8. Legal frameworks: Sandra Caeiro, Ana Paula Teixeira Martinho, Lina Morgado, Alda Pereira (Universidade Aberta)
9. Quality assurance in Higher Education in Europe: Alda Pereira, Lina Morgado, Sandra Caeiro, Ana Paula Teixeira Martinho, (Universidade Aberta)

Partner institutions

European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (The Netherlands), Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (Spain), Open Universiteit (The Netherlands), Tallinn University (Estonia), FernUni in Hagen (Germany), KU-Leuven (Belgium), Anadolu University (Turkey), Open University Cyprus (Cyprus), Universidade Alberta (Portugal), VUB (Belgium), Hungarian e-University Network (Hungary), CADUV (Czech Republic), Moscow State University of Economics, Statistics and Informatics (Russia), Formation universitaire à distance (Switzerland) Kaunas University of Technology (Lithuania), Uninettuno (Italy)

Final editing:

Miriam Goes (CC-Onderwijs)
Erato Ioanna Sarri (Open University Cyprus)
Fred Truyen (KU-Leuven)
George Ubachs (EADTU)
Annette Diederer (EADTU)

Coordinated by:

George Ubachs (EADTU)

Correspondence:

European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU)
att George Ubachs, Managing Director
Valkenburgerweg 177, 6419 AT Heerlen / P.O. Box 2960, 6401 DL Heerlen, The Netherlands
Tel: +31 (0)45-5762214 / e: secretariat@eadtu.eu / i: www.eadt.eu

© 2012 EADTU / ISBN: 978-90-79730-11-7

You are free to share, copy, distribute and transmit the work under the following conditions:

- Attribution. You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author of licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work)
- Non-commercial. You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- No derivative works. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.
- Reuse. For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.



The NetCu project is carried out with the support of the European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture, under the Lifelong Learning programme. However the sole responsibility of the information contained in these pages lies with the authors and the Commission is not responsible for any use that made of the information.



9. Quality assurance in Higher Education in Europe

Authors: Alda Pereira, Lina Morgado, Sandra Caeiro, Ana Paula Teixeira Martinho, (Universidade Aberta)

9.1. Quality assurance and accreditation

Quality assurance is an ill-defined concept that generally consists in different processes. In terms of Higher Education, quality assurance systems seek to guarantee the correspondence between the goals set by an institution or a study program and the expected or attained outcomes. It comprises of a set of procedures that aim at assessing, evaluating and monitoring programs, including the suggestion of correcting measures to address identified problematic areas and shortcomings and to promote innovation and development. In brief, quality assurance refers to the systematic, structured and continuous attention in terms of maintaining and improving quality.

There are several quality assurance models in Higher Education, focusing on different aspects, such as educational policy and educational projects, conditions for the implementation of teaching, factors relating to teaching and learning and to the modes and results of evaluating the expected outcomes.

Quality assurance processes can involve (a) **internal assessment** by institutions or entities providing study programs, using self-assessment models, and/or (b) **external assessment**, generally carried out by expert panels, professional entities or government agencies. In internal quality assurance, the actor of the activities is the institution itself. The external quality assurance is performed by a body or organisation outside the Higher Education Institution. In some cases, institutions combine the two quality assurance models and implement both an internal and an external QA system.

In the European Union there is no homogeneity in the mode or the focus of higher education quality assessment systems, although there is an increasing trend towards making the processes comparable and compatible⁵. Several countries in the EU have their own legislation or they have created standards and criteria for quality assessment for HEIs, while others have specialized government agencies in order to achieve that effect.

At the same time, in accordance with the guidelines of the Bologna Process, each institution has the responsibility of developing a quality assessment system aligned with its mission, goals and institutional

⁵ *The European Higher Education Area* (1999). Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education convened in Bologna on June 19, 1999; *Towards the European Higher Education Area* (2001). Communiqué of the meeting of European Ministers in charge of Higher Education in Prague on May 19, 2001

culture. Although they may adopt different models, quality assurance mechanisms generally seek to evaluate curricula, technical and organizational infrastructure, learning materials, learner performance, tutors, learning facilities and assessment outcomes. Quality assessment systems can rely on expert panels that determine the assessment modes and instruments. The assessment systems are in many cases based on document analysis and surveys taken by the actors involved: administrative staff, faculty and students.

In order to disseminate existing perspectives in the EU concerning quality assessment and the adoption of convergent practices in this field, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) has conducted several studies and prepared some reports on internal quality assurance and external quality assurance.

In 2009 the ENQA released a detailed report which outlines a broad framework of standards and guidelines that have been adopted, thus seeking to i) provide a source of assistance and guidance to higher education institutions and other relevant agencies in developing their own culture of quality assurance; ii) contribute to a common frame of reference for the provision of higher education and the assurance of quality within the EHEA⁶. This report, a response to the request about quality assurance in the EU made in the Berlin Communiqué (September 19, 2003) by the Ministers of the Bologna Process signatory countries, was addressed to the European Ministers of Education. It includes guidelines and standards for internal and external quality assurance in European Institutions of Higher Education, for external agencies that provide quality assurance and for a peer review system for quality assurance agencies.

This document points to quality patterns and guidelines for quality assessment in European institutions of higher education within the framework of both quality assurance systems: internal and external evaluation. Seven quality patterns are emphasized for **internal evaluation**:

- 1) The need for institutions to define and implement a strategy so that the quality of their programs is assured as a process of continuous improvement, to formalize and publish the procedures to that end. Within this framework, institutions build an internal quality assurance system and implement a “quality culture” through at their organizations;
- 2) Periodic monitoring of the programs in all aspects (academic, administrative, student support system, etc.);
- 3) Student assessment based on publicized regulations and criteria; used procedures should be applied consistently;
- 4) Safeguard that the teaching staff is qualified and competent;
- 5) Guarantee that students are provided with adequate resources and support concerning the programs offered;

⁶ ENQA (2009) *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, p. 14, [http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20(2).pdf).

- 6) Deployment of an information system that guarantees the collection and processing of data relative to an effective management of teaching programs and other activities;
- 7) Regular publication of objective and impartial information, both qualitative and quantitative, about the programs and degrees offered.

Regarding the quality patterns for **external evaluation**, the same entity (ENQA, 2009) highlights the following:

- 1) External evaluation procedures should take into account the internal processes of quality assurance;
- 2) The goals of the evaluation process should be previously defined and published, along with the description of the procedures to be used;
- 3) The criteria underlying the decisions taken should be applied consistently and are pre-defined;
- 4) All processes in the external quality evaluation should be designed so as to guarantee their adequacy to the established goals;
- 5) The reports should be publicized and clearly written, so that decisions and recommendations can be easily disseminated and communicated to the various stakeholder and adequately consulted;
- 6) Reports including recommendations for new actions should be accompanied by predetermined follow-up procedures;
- 7) External evaluation of institutions or programs should be carried out cyclically, within previously defined and publicized periods of time;
- 8) Quality assurance agencies should produce reports of the performed evaluations on a regular basis.

In 2010, ENQA⁷ produced a report on quality assurance of e-learning where it is stated that quality assurance agencies can use the aforementioned document (*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*) as a working basis, developing additional material that takes into account the specificities of e-learning (Grifoll et al., 2010). This report includes several contributions on quality assurance in e-learning contexts. Namely, in Chapter 2, the authors describe the quality evaluation system in the case of a virtual university, taking into consideration that the student's profile is different from the profile of the conventional student, and present a model focused on evaluation at two different levels: institutional and programs offered. Other chapters are related to systems developed by several European institutions for e-learning contexts, including blended learning.

Although there is a perceptible lack of experience in quality evaluation of e-learning at a European level, a notable effort is made towards establishing patterns and standards in this field. Section 9.4 presents some models designed on the basis of projects involving several organizations and institutions that could stand for good examples of quality evaluation in e-learning. It is worth to notice some key aspects when evaluating quality in e-learning:

- Technical and organizational infrastructure

⁷ Grifoll, J. et al. (2010). *Quality Assurance of E-learning*. ENQA, <http://www.enqa.eu/pubs.lasso>

- Curricula
- Educational material
- Performance
- Teachers
- Students
- Assessment tools

References to quality assurance and to the aspects that should be taken into account are even scarcer when it comes to non-formal learning. Regarding this, the document produced by the Commonwealth of Learning, that tries to bring together thoroughly the fundamental traits of a quality assurance system for non-formal open and distance education programs,⁸ deserves attention.

Besides this, there is another type of certification of educational institutions and programs: the accreditation system. Several countries have governmental agencies for the accreditation of higher education institutions. In these countries, the accreditation of formal programs, leading to a degree, is mandatory.

Accreditation represents an assessment of the validity or adequacy of an institution or study program or module. It is usually valid for a limited period of time, after which the program is reevaluated. It is common for the accreditation to include a component of quality assessment (internal and external) in order to guarantee the public in general the quality of the educational provision⁹. The result of an accreditation process is a formal yes/no decision about the quality of the program.

9.2. QA in networked curricula – lessons learned

In this section we discuss the results obtained through questionnaires focusing on quality the assurance aspects of the examples of networked curricula across Europe.

9.2.1. Who is responsible?

According to the study, the procedures of quality assessment in networked curricula have taken different forms, which can be summed up in four categories:

1. Partner institutions implement quality assessment autonomously, often taking into account national legislation and standards. These are internal systems, based on evaluation committees, although they can also include external experts. The committees design the procedures to be adopted and produce periodic reports. The results are passed on to the coordinators, who adopt the suggested changes if needed.
2. Coexistence of internal assessment systems, led by the coordinators of each consortium, and assessment carried out by external experts. Quality assurance is performed for all the partners of the consortium by external consultants. The results of this quality report are used to improve the procedures of the consortium.

⁸ Commonwealth of Learning (2012). *Quality Assurance Toolkit for Open and Distance Non-formal Education*.

⁹ European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2003). *Quality procedures in European Higher Education*.

3. The quality assurance procedures are shared among all the partner institutions and are based on a conjoint panel of experts from the institutions, which can also include external members. These expert panels meet regularly and the reports are subsequently analyzed by the program coordinating committee, in order to implement measures to improve the program. Sometimes the staff members of the different universities, coordinated by the central coordinator, define joint procedures. This is a shared process, based on group reflection, reports from student groups, observations by tutors and experts, and impressions by the central coordinator
4. Quality assessment is carried out in compliance with national accreditation agencies, that assess the curricula in each country in advance. After accreditation, quality assessment is performed collaboratively by the different partners.

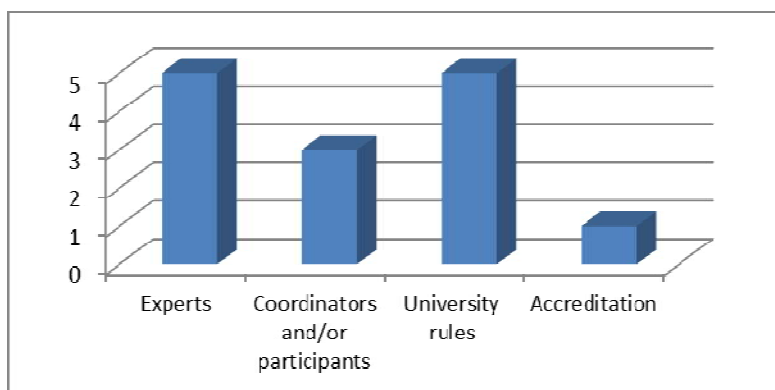


Figure 9.1 - Who is responsible for the quality assurance of the networked curricula.

9.2.2. Shared or independent?

The second aspect analysed is whether the quality assurance (QA) system implemented in the various networked curricula examples is a shared or an independent process. A shared QA means the expert panel is composed by members from all the partners, with in one case including external experts. Most of the existing networked curricula are organized as independent, as shown in Figure 9.2. But in one case, QA will change from the “independent” to the “shared” model after 2011.

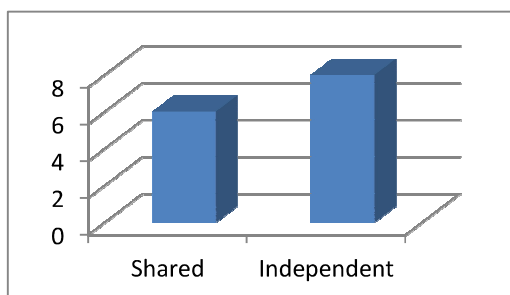


Figure 9.2 – QA shared or independent process.

9.2.3. Internal or external?

Only a few respondents answered that they have external actors involved in the quality assurance and evaluation procedures, at least in some part of the QA process. The majority pointed out that the QA is only internal (Figure 9.3).

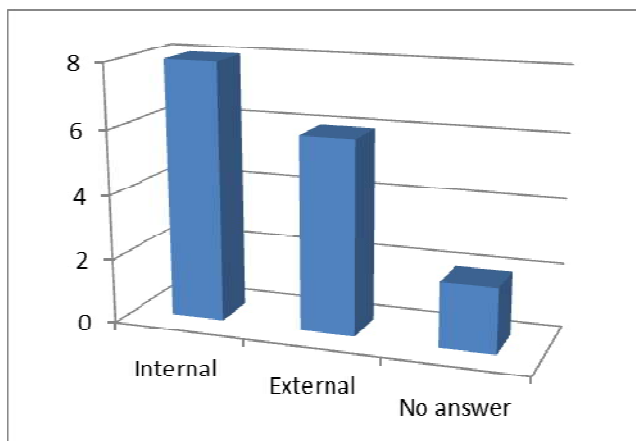


Figure 9.3 - External actors involved in the QA process.

9.2.4. QA for improvement

The fourth aspect was related to how the QA feedback is used to modify and improve the ongoing activities. The answers to this question were very heterogeneous, but we can divide them in three categories:

- 1) Yes - the QA affects the management activities;
- 2) No - the QA does not affect the management activities;
- 3) the respondents do not clearly say that QA is affected or they simply did not answer (Figure 9.4).

In the category "Yes", we present some examples of answers:

"Management board analyzed the periodic reports and adopted corrective actions, in order to improve the program";

"Faculty boards take notice of the Evaluation Team notes and implement the proper modifications";

"The results of the quality report are used to improve the procedures of the consortium";

"The institutional coordinator in each partner institution is responsible for implementing the corrective actions";

"QA feedback will be very important as it will be used to improve the course";

"The workload is greatly increased during the evaluation".

In the category "No", there are answers like:

"internationalization has been recommended by the interuniversity quality control";

"Learning material, slides, and students' activities are constantly revised and improved.";

"QA regulation of the University";

“Modification of study material and course harmonization”, but respondents didn’t say how this evaluation is made or what the drivers are.

There is only one respondent in the category “No answer”.

Nevertheless, we can say that in the majority of cases the QA feedback is used to modify and improve the ongoing activities.

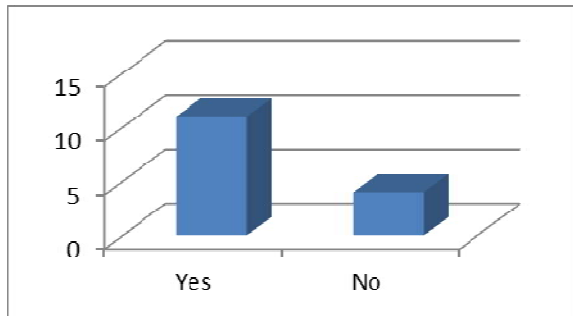


Figure 9.4 The QA affect the management of activities.

9.3. Decisions to make and steps to take in quality assurance

9.3.1. Decisions to make

The first important point regards analyzing the networked curricula type: is it formal or non-formal? Second, you must analyze with the partners involved if there are specific legislation or guidelines, in the respective countries, concerning the programs, either formal or non-formal. If yes, the partners concerned have to decide how to apply these guidelines in the program or course. This is very important when the program is formal and if there is specific national legislation about accreditation.

Third, you should also decide if there should be a quality assurance system shared by all partners or if each one should manage an independent system. If it is shared, you should also decide with the partners on the nature of the procedures to apply: should they be internal at the consortium level, should they be based on external consultants, or both? How will they operate?

9.3.2 Steps to take

- At the same time of defining the goals, format, level, partnership, decide about the quality assurance system/processes to use for the networked programme.
- Form a working group representing all the partners involved (including administrative /international collaborators) that will deal with evaluation and quality assurance
- Look for national specific legislation or guidelines for the type of programs the consortium will implement and assign a responsible in each partner for the application of these orientations.
- Start an inventory of quality assurance possibilities and advantages of each of them: totally independent? Internal and shared within the consortium? Internal to the consortium with

external consultants? Performed by an external committee? How to fund in the case of external committee or external consultants?

- Start an inventory of the procedures to implement according with the decisions made: how to perform the analysis? Who will be the actors involved in the evaluation? Which will be the documents to analyze? Should specific surveys be created?
- Set up a plan to make the chosen quality assurance system operational.
- Run the plan.
- Discuss results.
- Set up a plan for possible required adjustments or changes to do in future.

9.4. Examples of models of quality assurance in e-Learning

In this section you can find some organizations and networks that provide valuable resources regarding aspects to take in account, namely quality on e-learning, due to the importance of ICT and distance education in the field of networked curricula.

9.4.1 E-xcellence - Quality assurance in e-learning

Led by EADTU, “E-xcellence” - <http://www.eadtu.eu/e-xcellencelabel/> - is a European movement concerned with QA in e-learning. More specifically, it aims at building an e-learning benchmarking community of Associates in Quality.

The proposed evaluation is focused on 6 areas:

- strategic management
- curriculum design
- course design
- course delivery
- staff support
- student support.

In total, it includes 35 benchmarks with indicators and the definition of the level of excellence.

You can access a guided self-assessment and obtain a label regarding the usage of the E-xcellence instrument.

9.4.2 EFQUEL – European Foundation for Quality in e-Learning

EFQUEL is a network with over 100 member organisations from Europe and beyond, such as other networks, universities, corporations and national agencies. You can find useful information at the EFQUEL site at <http://www.qualityfoundation.org>.

A quality evaluation system for e-learning has been developed within this network, based on a peer-review international community (OPEN ECBcheck, <http://ecb-check.org/>)

EFQUEL maintains a quality certification process, the UNIQUe system (Certification for quality use of ICT in Higher Education), based on 3 areas of analysis:

- Learning / Institutional Context (Strategy and e-learning, Commitment to Innovation and Openness to the Community)
- Learning Resources (Resources for Learning, Students, University Staff and Technology & Equipment)
- Learning Processes (Quality of the Offer, Assessment of Learning and Human Resource Development)

9.4.3 Epprobate – The international quality label for e-learning Courseware

Epprobate is a joint organization of three agencies - The Learning Agency Network (LANETO), the Agence Wallonne des Télécommunication (AWT) and the e-Learning Quality Service Center (eLQSC)- who provides consulting in quality in e-learning courses. You can find information about a label quality on e-learning in <http://www.epprobate.com/index.php/es/home>.

References

- *The European Higher Education Area* (1999). Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education convened in Bologna on June 19, 1999.
- *Towards the European Higher Education Area* (2001). Communiqué of the meeting of European Ministers in charge of Higher Education in Prague on May 19, 2001
- ENQA (2009) *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, p. 14, [http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20(2).pdf)
- Grifoll, J. *et al.* (2010). *Quality Assurance of E-learning*. ENQA, <http://www.enqa.eu/pubs.lasso>
- Commonwealth of Learning (2012). *Quality Assurance Toolkit for Open and Distance Non-formal Education*, http://www.col.org/PublicationDocuments/QA%20NFE_150.pdf
- European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2003). *Quality procedures in European Higher Education*. <http://www.enqa.eu/files/procedures.pdf>
- Ehlers, U-D. *at al* (2011). *Shared Evaluation of Quality in Technology-enhanced Learning*. White Paper. SEVAQ+ project.
- Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (2008). *E-learning quality – report*.
- The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2011). *Recognition scheme for educational oversight*, www.qaa.ac.uk
- European University Association (2011). *Institutional Evaluation Programme: Guidelines for institutions*.
- European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (2005). *Quality in e-learning. Use and dissemination of quality approaches in European e-learning*, <http://europa.eu.int>