

# ***Networked Curricula in Open and Distance Education in Europe: the Importance of Legal and Quality Assurance Aspects***

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**Abstract.** The aim of this paper is to present the importance of legal and quality assurance aspects when setting open and distance learning (ODE) networked curricula in higher education, highlighting the main steps to take and decisions to make about those aspects. This work is being developed within an Erasmus project - *Networked Curricula* (NETCU) where guidelines are being developed to set an open and distance networked curricula.

**Keywords:** *networked curricula*, open and distance education, NETCU, legal aspects, quality assurance.

## **1. Introduction**

A successful modernization of the universities and the improvement of their curricula as well as the provision of high-quality, state-of-the-art, internationalization and innovative knowledge to their students is a common goal of all the universities. Virtual mobility and networked curricula are a good way to contribute to this modernization but their quality assurance and legal constraints can be an obstacle for their implementation if not properly issued.

Within the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020') it should be enhanced the creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training. Well-functioning cooperation using new, transparent ways of networking is needed not only between the relevant EU institutions but also other international institution [1].

The aim of this paper is to present the importance of legal and quality assurance aspects when setting distance learning networked curricula in higher education, highlighting the main steps to take and decisions to make about those aspects. This work is being developed within an Erasmus project - *Networked Curricula* [2] where guidelines are being developed to set an open and distance networked curricula.

## 1.1 What is Networked Curricula? Defining concepts

*Networked Curricula* and *Networked Mobility* are part of a framework whereby partner institutions agree on mobility flows of groups of students to consistent course packages, defined in advance. These course packages already pre-exist or are especially composed in the program of the partner university. They can consist of major or minor courses which probably are not organized in the home university, specialization courses, internships or projects and thesis work. Networked curricula program can consist not only within formal courses but also collaboration within non-formal, informal programs.

A *Networked Program* is more attractive for students from abroad since they benefit from more diversified opportunities and of mobility schemes and hence probably a stay in more than one European country.

It is clear that a networked curriculum and mobility require a stronger engagement than in the case of exchange partnerships. *Networked Curricula* are built with reliable, preferential partners, that already collaborate in research or innovation. The scheme allows for broader range of complementarity of subjects and of specialization opportunities for students. Of course, the success of this scheme is depending on the strength and actual involvement of each of the partners.

Weak points are that students can be lost to other institutions, but there can also be a gain. Also, there can be a loss of identity of the curriculum if too many bits and pieces are allowed.

*Integrated curricula* or courses are organised jointly by the partner universities, basically according to the *Erasmus Mundus* model. They must also be targeted to the students that belong to the partner universities themselves (which is less the case in the current *Erasmus Mundus* program, that in a first phase was even only meant for third country students). It is a strong cooperation where universities co-organise the programme that is managed by a consortium. This consortium is preferably small and it can include non-university institutions.

The curriculum is integrated with typically a common part (*truncus communis*) followed by complementary options, but also other structures are possible (for example a ring-shaped structure with consecutive parts). Mobility (physical, online) affects almost all students. At the end of their study, students receive a joint certificate or joint degree.

*Integrated Curricula* require a strong partnership, with agreements for at least 5 years. Costs are saved by sharing staff and resources. Integrated curricula and courses provide a really international environment with mobility of all students involved. By the involvement of more institutions in one program, in principle high quality can be achieved.

There are many reasons and opportunities to start with such a collaboration. It can follow from a university policy, and be implemented top-down, or could start from an initiative of two university professors who meet at a conference and want to collaborate on their teaching.

## **2 The Networked Curricula Project (NETCU)**

The project NETCU curricula endorses a set of combined activities, and approaches, guidelines and tools for successfully creating internationally networked curricula in open and distance education (ODE) and blended learning. These products will facilitate the establishment of such curricula. Close collaboration is also an integral part of the project leading to mutual trust between the partners laying the structures on which further collaboration can be set. All together these guidelines and activities of the NETCU project will help: a) to enhance the quality of the curricula and programme structure of European higher education institutions by providing more and more diverse study opportunities; b) to strengthen the national and European position of the partner's course offers, and c) to create a European identity of study programmes in open and distance education and blended learning.

On the structural level the project will lead to a successful modernization of universities and contribute to the improvement of their curricula. On the societal level universities will be equipped with an instrument that allows them to properly reflect on and to respond to the new skills needed in a globalised, creative knowledge society. In addition, the incorporated methods will provide students and especially lifelong learners not only with the best academic knowledge available but also with and international experience and the (soft) skills needed for competitive participation in today's labour market.

The project deliverables will be done via a set of operational objectives:

As a first step a comprehensive mapping, description and analysis of the currently existing networked curricula (case studies and literature) are made. A set of key areas are being analyzed, e.g.:

- the educational model,
- the ways of sharing of content,
- the role of mobility,
- issues of assessment,
- recognition and quality assurance,
- language provision,
- the role and usage of ICT in the curriculum,
- its management and business model,
- Which advantages has the curriculum for the partners and which obstacles were/are faced?

- How do the students embrace it?
- How are the national, legal and institutional frameworks defined?

Information on these and further questions will deliver at the end of the project comprehensive data for deriving systematic models of networked curricula in ODE and blended learning. With these models specific cases will be transferred into common features of networked curricula in ODE and blended learning and translated into viable guidelines for developing and implementing transnational networked curricula. To strengthen the important technological dimension of networked curricula in ODE and blended learning innovative ICT solutions will be shared, analysed and plugged into one of the case studies for testing and enhancing.

**The NetCU work tasks are:**

- a) collection and analysis of *existing networked curricula* in the field, with the implementation of a questionnaire;
- b) development from this analysis of *models*;
- c) development of *guidelines* to create and implement different forms of networked curricula in ODE and blended learning;
- d) Share, transfer, test and evaluation of *experiences* with advanced ICT solutions and emerging practices, e.g. *social software* and Open Educational Resources (OER).

### **3 Does Legal Aspects and Quality Assurance matters in european Networked Curricula?**

At European level the Council Resolution of 13 July 2001 on e-learning defines the guidelines for Member States' employment policies for 2001 which stress that in connection with developing skills for the new labour market in the context of lifelong learning, Member States will aim at developing open and distance education for all citizens. This Resolution aims to foster the European dimension of joint development of ICT-mediated and ICT-complemented curricula in higher education. It also invites the Commission to: i) continue supporting existing European portals and to encourage the development of other portals to facilitate access to educational content and to promote collaboration and exchange of experiences in the area of eLearning and pedagogical development, especially with a view to supporting transnational virtual meeting places, stimulating European networking at all levels and in this context establish and provide networks for the benefit of teacher training, supporting directories of existing quality Internet resources; ii) to support the development of European multilingual educational resources, platforms and services, taking into account, when necessary, education and training-related aspects of intellectual property rights and the use of new distribution methods, and the development and promotion of internationally aspects standards and open source software [3].

The European Commission's has different international co-operation programmes and training that enhance/recommend joined curricula for formal learning in higher

education. *Erasmus Mundus* is one of the more important co-operation and mobility programme. It aims at enhancing the quality of European higher education and promoting dialogue and understanding between people and cultures through cooperation with third countries in accordance with EU external policy objectives in order to contribute to the sustainable development of third countries in the field of higher education. *Erasmus Mundus* support top-quality programs at postgraduate level (Master and Doctoral), where legal aspects are quite well defined as well as guidance to independent experts when assessing *Erasmus Mundus* [4, 5].

Within each European country different legal aspects are applied for joined curricula in elearning regime. But there is mainly no legal framework specific for networked curricula (formal, informal or non formal) besides *Erasmus Mundus* (formal), even less in elearning. Some countries encourage the development of joined curricula although not specifically for open and distance learning or for elearning.

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 study program and the expected or attained outcomes. It comprises a set of procedures that aim at assessing and monitoring programs, including the suggestion of correcting measures to address identified flaws 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 project, conditions for the implementation of teaching, factors relating to teaching and learning and the modes and results of evaluating the expected outcomes.

Quality assurance can take the form of internal assessment by institutions or entities providing study programs, using self-assessment models, or 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 organization outside the Higher Education Institution. In some cases, the quality assurance adopts both of them, an internal and an external 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 compatible [6]. Several countries in the EU have their own legislation or have created standards and criteria for quality assessment, while others have specialized government agencies responsible for that issue.

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 culture. Although they may adopt different

models, quality assurance mechanisms generally seek to evaluate common issues like: i) curricula, ii) technical and organizational infrastructure, iii) learning materials, iv) learner performance, v) tutors, vi) learning facilities and viii) assessment outcomes. Quality assessment systems can rely on expert panels, who determine the assessment modes and instruments, and 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 the assessment of quality 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 for the internal and external quality assurance.

In 2009 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 EHEA [7]. This report, is 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. It includes guidelines and standards for internal and external quality assurance in European Institutions of Higher Education, for external agencies who provide quality assurance and for a peer review system for quality assurance agencies.

In 2010, ENQA produced a report on quality assurance of e-learning, where there are suggestions on the methodology, design and implementation of the process of assessing quality in an e-learning institution and on benchmarking e-learning in Higher Education [8]. Besides these issues, there is another type of certification of educational institutions and programs: the accreditation system. Several countries have government agencies for the accreditation of higher education institutions. In these countries, the accreditation of formal programs leading to a degree is mandatory. Accreditation represents a judgment about 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 to the public in general the quality of the educational provision [9]. The result of an accreditation process is a formal yes/no decision about the quality of the program.

## 4 Guidelines for Legal Aspects and Quality Assurance in Networked Curricula

### 4.1 Legal aspects: Decisions to make

The first important decision to make is at what type you will take the initiative: at formal level, informal or non-formal. In case of formal programs at what level (undergraduate, master or PhD).

Second, decide on the kind of program (example: pilot, join degree, double/multiple degree, open course). After deciding the type, level and kind of program, then each legal requirements should be search at each partner country level.

According to earlier analysis and bibliographic search there is no specific legislation at European level about networked curricula. Also at country level the laws are scarce. Nevertheless *Erasmus Mundus* have a detail criteria to structure a join course so their guidelines are a good example to follow. In terms of homogenization of work load and credits, the system of ECTS and Bologna process should be applied.

#### Steps to take

- Search legal aspects in each partner (e-learning, network curricula, type, level)
- In case of lacking of legal aspect adopt/create your one rules, set up as the *Erasmus Mundus* as an example and follow their rules;
- In case of just one partner with legal aspects requirements, then the consortium should follow that requirements;
- In case of several and different legal requirements among the partners, each partner should use their one and a working group should be formed to find the best consensus, in particular in formal courses.

### 4.2 Quality Assurance: Decisions to make

At the same time of defining the goals, format, level and partnership the first important point regards analyzing the networked curricula type is: is it formal or not formal? Second, you must analyze with the partners involved if there is specific legislation or guidelines concerning programs, either formal or not formal, in the respective countries. 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?

### **Steps to take**

- Form a working group representing all the partners involved.
- 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.

## 5 Final remarks

In this work we present the importance of legal and quality assurance aspects when setting distance learning networked curricula in higher education, and list the main steps to take and decisions to make about those aspects. These guidelines were defined within an on-going Erasmus project - *Networked Curricula* where an handbook [10] was developed to set an open and distance education *Networked curricula* where issues like general model, goals target group, models, and design are discussed. These handbook will be evaluated by internal and external workshops with several stakeholder.

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