Statement

on Quality Assurance of Short Teaching and Learning Packages and the Recognition of their Credentials

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ANECA Statement on QA of Short Teaching and Learning Packages and the Recognition of their Credentials

1. Introduction and scope of the Statement

ANECA publishes a Statement on Short teaching and Learning Packages and the recognition of the credentials related to them. This Statement is included in the efforts made by ANECA to give quality assurance (QA) advice and, where necessary, support to the Spanish universities and to potential students interested in both offering or applying to current such types of short higher education (HE) courses or those that might be delivered in the future.

But ANECA also wishes to share the reflection made amongst the international QA community in order to contribute to exchanging practices for such innovative approaches.

The current health circumstances obviously impact on the way we read and understand this document. However, although most of it was "thought through" and discussed in ANECA before the COVID-19 pandemic, it is inevitable that the situation arising from the adaptation of HE education to the pandemic will give a new context, and even a new meaning, to the document.

However, this document has the ambition to transcend this conjuncture and be useful for the agents of interest in HE beyond the "new normal", whatever this expression will mean in the future.

The Statement focuses on:

- any kind of higher education delivery: face to face, blended or fully online

- independently of the nature of the provider behind the HE course: formally established universities and higher education institutions (HEI), private corporations or companies, on-line platforms, etc.

- QA procedures regardless the focus at the institutional, programme, etc. level

- shorter-term educational courses leading to a particular credential or independent modules or teaching & learning parts belonging to a regular HE programme expressed in terms of achieved learning outcomes

- mechanisms to favour the recognition of a wide array of credentials coming from a very diverse ecosystem of providers awarding multiple credentials in both length and learning outcomes

Bearing in mind the innovative and cutting-edge 'DNA' of these initiatives ANECA is neither interested in designing "turnkey projects" to each one, nor responding to any "learning innovation" with its corresponding "QA-procedure", in a classical stimulus and response reaction.

These types of short term HE courses receive a wide range of names: "Open Educational Resources" (EC, 2018), "shorter-term courses" (van der Hijden, 2019), "short online courses at higher education levels" (Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020[1])

As these "short teaching and learning packages", or "short educational packages" (SEP) to make it shorter, can take part of the teaching offer of HEIs but also of a wide range of different providers, the QA principle underpinning them should be specified and detailed by the provider itself.

The ANECA Statement is delivered for a broad public and audience to contribute on the reflection of the increasing use and demand of these learning tools with the only objective of being useful for both future users and to favour an informative debate among stakeholders.

2. Short Educational Packages. What are we talking about?

This type of learning not only responds to an innovative offer from different providers, but also to a clear demand from different learner profiles. It is increasingly common to find a range of short courses focused on more specific learning that serve to complement more "traditional" student or graduated profiles.

Until the advent of the pandemic, the common denominator and main feature of such courses was their delivery by electronic means the so-called *Open Educational Resources* (OER) mentioned in the *Report to the European Commission on New modes of learning and teaching in higher education* (European Commission, 2014) , as a broader expression to avoid falling into the atomisation of innovative forms of non-conventional teaching-learning (OpenCourseWare (OCW), Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), Small Private Online Courses (SPOCs) and the development of the Blended Learning (BL) and Open Education (OE), amongst others).

This report, chaired by the former President of the Republic of Ireland Mary McAleese, can be considered as the first document which aims to identify the challenges of the vast field of operations in electronic, virtual and non-presential modes of courses and programmes which is open to institutions, governments and interest groups by proposing mechanisms to take advantage of the opportunities offered by this innovative path.

The report highlights the importance of supporting institutions that explore these initiatives, of guaranteeing society the quality of their academic products but also of protecting the student in his or her rights as a user/student/client of these products.

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[1] The Undergraduate Certificate is a formal qualification recognised under the Australian Qualifications framework. Higher education providers, including universities, will be able to issue Undergraduate Certificates until at least December 2021. It certifies completion of six months' full time study towards an existing Australian Qualification Level (AQF) qualification from level 5 (higher education Diploma) to level 7 (Bachelor degree), meaning the learner is already part of the way through completing another higher education qualification.

Despite its length, a quotation from that document and one of its conclusions are included that accurately summarise the spirit that governs quality assurance initiatives when dealing with new forms of teaching by virtual and electronic means.

> *"It is equally important that quality assurance procedures do not act as a barrier to the emergence of creative and innovative pedagogical developments and course design. In particular, requirements for individual programme accreditation sometimes create rigidities that do not encourage the timely adaptation of courses, including the introduction of novel approaches and pedagogies. In this regard it is promising to note (...) that there is an on-going trend in external quality assurance, from the traditional focus on accreditation of individual programmes to the evaluation of the entire institution. This will allow for a much greater flexibility in course design and delivery, and the integration of emerging technologies and new pedagogies within normal provision (e.g. OER, classroom technologies, etc.). (...)*
>
> *To go a step further, digitalised learning and teaching modes offer the opportunity to bridge procedures of quality assurance used in research and in education. In the area of research, peer review of content (and conduct) are institutionalised procedures. Teaching and learning in digitalised formats allow ex-ante peer reviews of course material and these should become an integral part of quality assurance of online provision. This can further add to the quality of learning and teaching across our higher education systems."* (p. 39).
>
> *Recommendation 11: "Higher education institutions should ensure that quality assurance arrangements apply to all forms of credit awarding provision in the institution. Institutions should use the quality assurance system to monitor retention rates and inform the development of appropriate supports." (Ídem p. 43)*

This report can be seen, and is taken as such here, as a turning point of future initiatives accomplished within Europe.

3. Flexibility versus rigid learning paths: What does the student need? What does society require?

An increasing number of HE initiatives worldwide focusing on the flexibility of academic curricula have taken place. Beyond the emergence in the second decade of the 21st Century of the MOOCs, nano-degrees and a plethora of educational proposals based on electronic means and online provision, a reflection on a more flexible academic curriculum is taken place in Spain, France and other European countries. A do-it-yourself sort of a programme set up on interdisciplinary modules chosen by the student is becoming a new opportunity to face new labour-market and research challenges. But these approaches have also been developed in other academic traditions such as in South Africa, India and the countries of the Gulf.

The Student-centred learning approach claimed in the 2015 revision of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance of Higher Education (ESG) could also be part of this new reflection on a modularisation of the study programmes towards a more international and interdisciplinary diploma. The

diverse and challenging "*European Universities Initiative*" run by the European Commission could also benefit from this approach[2].

The QA of such a new approach should face the challenge of more flexible HE paths for students. Usually flexibility and QA procedures seem contradictory or even an oxymoron to the HE community. This Statement aims to change this biased vision of QA submitting different ways to sort out not only one particular educational approach that we could bear today in mind, but mainly and above all anyone that could be envisaged by HEIs in the next future.

4. The Quality Assurance of Short Educational Packages: Much ado about nothing?

Whilst there is not yet an overarching "canonical" model on the QA of these experiences, we can certainly agree on the difficulty to provide a common approach for such a diverse teaching and learning landscape without risking to design a straitjacket rather than a flexible QA methodology.

Peter van der Hijden, which wrote what we could deem the very inspiring first proposal on "*Quality of Shorter-term Educational Experiences*" and their credentials, after the work accomplished by the CHEA Digitization of Credentials and Assuring Quality Expert Group Meeting on March 2019, considers that a classical accreditation/QA approach would work for that purpose:

> *Expanding the scope of accreditation to shorter-term educational experiences would continue the historic mission of accreditation and quality assurance of upholding standards in higher education in respect to the quality features outlined in this note. Accreditors and quality assurance bodies and their networks would continue to identify those standards, debate and promote them in dialogue with stakeholders inside and outside higher education (Hijden, 2019: 12).*

From the point of view of a fit-*to*-purpose QA approach, such statement is absolutely relevant and appropriate and we all should agree upon. But bearing in mind the current circumstances derived from the pandemic and the huge efforts both HEIs and QA agencies are facing to deal with their "daily work", a need, even a plea, for simplicity without sacrificing the rigour of judgement is therefore required.

A particular QA/accreditation procedure would thus request an individual effort for the specific SEP to prepare a self-evaluation report and its counterpart at the QA agency. The QA agency should respond with another particular procedure multiplied by the potential number of HEIs, programmes, departments or organisations that would be involved. A fact that makes impossible to the QA agency to foresee and plan the number of these particular procedures for the next term.

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2 https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/european-universities-initiative_en

An alternative way could be the following: to ensure that the specific organisation in charge of the delivery of the SEP will submit its own internal QA arrangements. These arrangements need to be responsive to the issue raised and must be related to a strong and formalised internal QA system regardless of the provider, be it a HEI or a company.

Therefore, the immediate response to QA of a SEP should be considered in terms of "how it is referred to the internal QA of the HEIs/provider involved". It is important to define the QA arrangements which a particular educational 'bit' will be subjected to.

In order not to leave HEIs and providers at their mercy, but also to avoid giving only room to the rigid national regulations in charge of ruling on that, a general set of principles and their corresponding guidelines, should be agreed upon. And for that purpose, the regional QA networks and associations could play a crucial part looking for general trends and shared practices.

For the analysis of online and blended learning models, one of the key mechanisms to safeguarding quality lies in the internal quality assurance systems (IQAS). The evaluation of these internal systems at the HEI level allows agencies to assess their robustness in assuring the quality of the various learning options and technological modalities used by the institution, centre or department. This approach shifts the quality model from purely "external review" to "self-monitoring" and "co-responsibility" for the institution.

In such well-established framework, the specific technological and educational modalities used for learning must give room and importance to the teaching and learning experience as a whole. The focus on learning outcomes makes it possible to go beyond the particular means used to enable the student to acquire the learning objectives and intended learning outcomes previously established.

On the one hand, the model gives greater responsibility to the teaching and learning institution/provider in defining the QA mechanisms of such learning and their modalities. On the other hand, the accrediting body can evaluate the system and the fulfilment of those learning objectives and the achieved learning outcomes by also using other quality assessment instruments than the processes based exclusively on face-to-face learning.

Therefore, the problem does not deal with the short online or face-to-face training. Both ways are used in the form of teaching and learning modules or any other educational bit chosen by the student. The crucial element is to be able to define its impact in terms of learning outcomes, regardless the mode of delivery, to be achieved by the student in combination with other modules that have been taught in a face-to-face or online way.

This would make it possible to identify (i) which part of the training is essential for obtaining learning outcomes, (ii) which should be subject to more detailed and secure assessment, and (iii) which could be resolved by less formalised methods

(written tests, short oral tests by telephone or videoconference, written assignments, etc.).

The flexibility of the internal QA model facing any external QA procedure concerning SEPs is going to be subject to continuous challenges, and given that the initiatives are extremely innovative in terms of technology and academics. It is essential to have versatile QA tools that can deal with two significant independent variables: the protection of the student's solvency in the course in which he/she is enrolled and the quality of the academic resources and the academic staff that teach it. (Table 1)
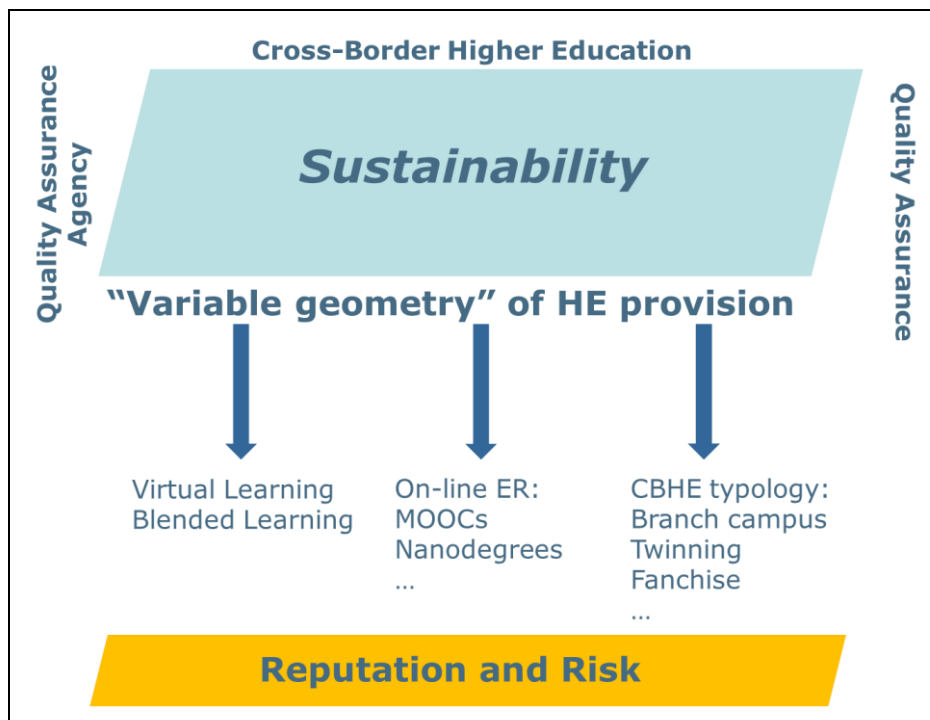

Table 1: Sustainability from the perspective of a QA Agency

5. Towards a Toolkit for internal QA practices on Short Educational Packages: an "incremental approach"

The key to tackling these challenges from a QA perspective should not be to create "ad hoc devices" for every technological or educational innovation. HEIs, centres, bodies that provide SEPs must have a flexible framework within their IQAS. In this way, the body responsible for carrying out the external evaluation of these systems need to receive enough information about the teaching and learning arrangements between a SEP (an independent module, a MOOC, etc.) that should either be taken in isolation within the individual learning path of the student or as a "learning assembly" with other SEPs, several modules in a programme, etc.

The huge amount of teaching and learning combinations would need to be clarified within the contextual and evolutionary path of the learner throughout his

or her lifelong learning process and have to be identified with their corresponding credentials. This is a topic which leads us to another point of this Statement.

An information tool that could be turned in a "QA and recognition Toolkit for SEP" which should provide a particular a DNA-rooted set of answers to the headlines this Statement has been broken down.

This approach highlights the experience of each university, its centres and its programmes and qualifications through the IQAS in place linked to the specific procedure implemented.

The same autonomy of action and maturity that governs the implementation of an institutional quality policy that goes beyond the specific procedural instrument in charge of regulating it, must underpin the actions necessary to ensure the quality of the initiatives defined by the institution in relation to all types of SEPs offered.

The only contribution to be made by QA agencies is the definition of a set of guidelines aimed at supporting universities in ensuring the quality of SEPs.

This is a proposal to develop a procedure to promote an institutional approach to QA in order to meet national requirements and the internationalisation needs of HEIs, in a context of economic constraints to which must be added the difficulties arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

What does an "incremental approach" mean?

The QA development framework for SEPs offered by a HE institution, including the offer of disaggregated modules of the total programme linked to a qualification in which they are offered, would be shifted to an exercise on "incremental quality assurance".

The burden of internal and external accountability lies primarily with the HE institution's IQAS, regardless of the model of and its periodic external assessment (institutional, programme accreditation, etc.)

The term is taken from the theoretical current of Latin American architecture exemplified by Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena, winner of the 2016 Pritzker Architecture Prize.

Our model shares Aravena's idea of reacting to the scarcity of resources and in our case to the enormous evaluative task on the part of governments according to the "principle of incrementality", when not everything can be done, we must focus on that which is "most difficult", in the sense of what ensures the common good (institutional welfare).

The implementation of internal QA systems at the HEIs level according to the strategic plan of each particular institution to support and feed with information the decision-making processes at the governance level, goes far beyond the compliance with national or sectoral regulations. It opens a new dimension to institutional strengthening and new governance that exceeds academic management of limited human and economic resources.

We can literally transplant Aravena's statement on our HE landscape: "Architecture can introduce a broader concept of profit: design as an added value rather than an additional cost; architecture as a shortcut to equity." The HE institutions governing bodies can take the information gathered by the IQAS to inform the decisions to develop of a much more sustainable HE for the benefit of their academic community, students, graduates and society at large (See Table 2).
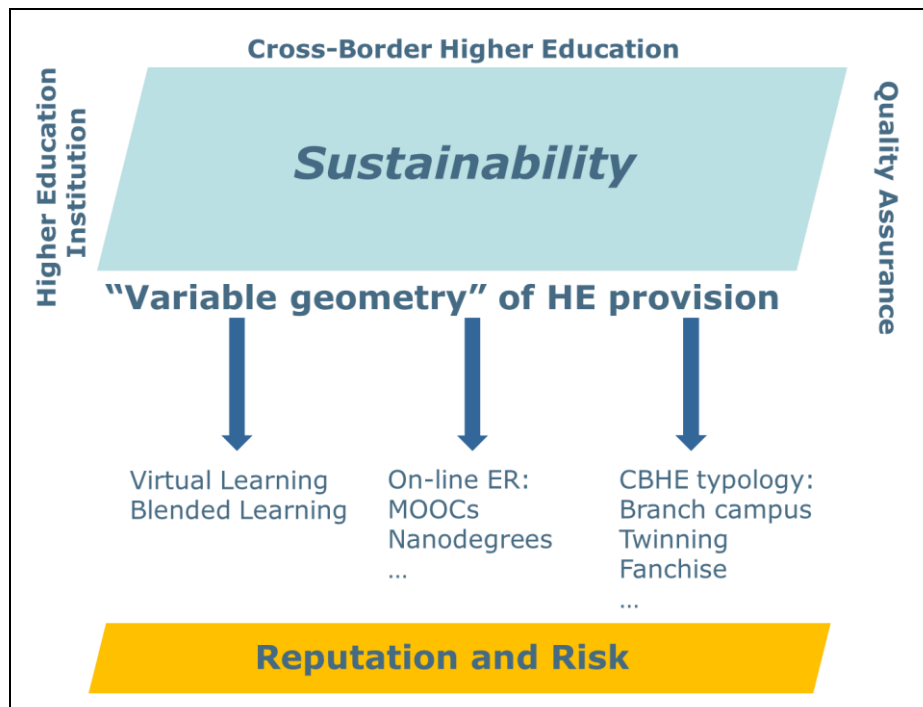

Table 2: Sustainability from the perspective of a HE Institution

6. The recognition of Short Educational Packages' credentials: In trust we trust in the EHEA

This Statement wants also to pay a significant attention to the issues of recognition of the credentials associated to such SEP type of provisions.

The focus on the management of the SEPs within the IQAS of the HEIs provides an immediate framework of quality management at the institutional level that ensures that:

- this types of provisions comply with the internal QA mechanisms in terms of design of the educational package,

- delivery of the contents by appropriate academic staff,

- sufficient technical and communicational support where online provision is involved,

- fair assessment system for students and safe and sound identification of students in terms of authentication and protection of personal data,

- number of ECTS or a clear reference to a recognised and cumulative teaching and learning pattern,

- clear assignment of the SEP to a particular level within the National Qualifications Framework or its counterpart in the corresponding level of the UNESCO ISCED level and

- clear identification of the awarding body backing the credential issued, as well as the nature and location of the register or archive where the credential and the data of the student is kept.

The above information could be submitted in a sort of supplement to the credential or issued independently.

However, the delivery of a SEP awarding a credential requires in many HE systems the involvement of an external QA body to certify or accredit the course and its credential.

But a general agreement on the assumption of an internal QA procedure dealing with SEPs at the HEI level, could prevent the "automatic" implementation of any external QA procedure and the inevitable, predictable and cumbersome process, which implies a high cost in terms of time and resources involved.

A permanently updated public catalogue or register, run by every HEI or organisation offering SEPs, should be required for information purposes of futures students and employers and at the disposal of both HE authorities and QA agencies.

Finally, the National Qualifications Framework should be involved in order to contribute to the clarification of the level of all SEPs for the sake of student's protection and information as well as for the benefit of employers and stakeholders in recognising the value of these educational bits, but also for international recognition purposes.

7. Flexibility of curricula: A new paradigm for internationalisation of higher education?

The model presented should be understood not as a closed "procedure" but as an "approach" to QA of SEP as an independent or dependent variable in the teaching/learning process assumed by the individual learner in his or her particular student-life.

This means that it should make it possible to create the necessary conditions for transferring "parts" of the curriculum designed as classroom-based to online in any of the possibilities and modalities that this teaching method currently offers (and those that will be implemented in the immediate future and that we are not aware of at present). The model should also facilitate its inclusion in the internal QA system to which the programme (or a module if we are dealing with a modularisation pattern) shall respond to, without paralysing or complicating their implementation.

The QA system should therefore be open and "incremental" according to the needs of either the final programme or separate modules. It is, therefore, important to establish priorities to implement the necessary combination of different teaching and learning bits and pieces gathered together in an individual learning path.

In this context, the people in charge of the module or the SEP will effectively set the priorities according to their teaching and learning objectives. The Toolkit mentioned before would function as a "protocol" designed by the external evaluation body to set out the basic conditions that should be taken into account to ensure the student teaching and learning process, as well as the learning objectives. The Toolkit replaces the action of the external QA agency, making the procedure more flexible and efficient, but it does not replace at all the "QA principle" and the responsibility with the SEP assumed by the HEI, programme, module or organisation in charge of its delivery and awarding the corresponding credential.

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About the Australian initiative "Undergraduate Certificate"

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About Incremental Architecture

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