
UNIQUE – EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY QUALITY IN ELEARNING

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The Reform of European Higher Education

The background of the UNIQUE project is the broad Bologna process(1), which aims at creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) more compatible and comparable, more competitive and more attractive for our own citizens and for citizens and scholars from other continents. The action programme set out in the Bologna Declaration has, amongst others, the specific objectives of establishing a European dimension in quality assurance, with comparable criteria and methods.

Enhancing the reform of European Higher Education through ICT

The reform that the European higher education area needs, in order to play a leading role in the Europe of Knowledge and at global level, can be enhanced and facilitated by improving the way European Universities adopt and integrate ICT in their activities, both at the level of the pedagogy of e-learning and at the level of the process through which universities adopt and integrate ICT in their work.

Also the European Commission's eLearning Action Plan(2) stresses the importance of ICT in Higher Education when it defines eLearning as "the use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning, by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration".

Quality of ICT in Higher Education

If it is in fact true that today most of European universities are integrating technology in their daily work, it is also true that, due to the fact that ICT based learning is still a rather new phenomenon and that different "visions" of eLearning exist (just to quote two extreme visions, it is very difficult to compare content-based eLearning and activity-based eLearning), the culture of quality in eLearning of European universities is frequently weak, and, when present, is focussing on the didactics of eLearning and not so much on the more general impact that ICT is having at different levels (management, funding, international academic collaboration) of the university sphere.

In other words, despite the broad consensus that much more effort should be put into the question of quality awareness, improvement and management at university level, the quality of both the products and programs in the field of ICT-based learning vary widely between EU higher education institutions and a common concept of quality improvement which is theoretically sound and at the same time meeting the expectations of practice is still lacking.

UNIQUE, an eLearning Label to Ensure Quality

Against this background, the UNIQUE - eEuropean uNiversity Quality in eLearning project, supported by the Socrates Programme of the European Commission, aims at enhancing the reform process of European Higher Education institutions by creating, testing and mainstreaming an eLearning label for universities that certifies quality of eLearning-related processes and costs and at that the same time facilitates, through a benchlearning approach, improvement in the ICT adoption and integration strategy of European universities. UNIQUE will set up, test and disseminate a quality label for ICT use in higher education, and at the same time it will establish a continuous collaborative learning icommunity, where university managers will be able to learn from the best practices existing in Europe and, by tending to these ICT leaders, will improve their performance.

The innovative approach of UNIQUE

The project approach to quality labelling is innovative in the sense that it does not intend to set up a static quality label and to simply certify institutions that comply with it, but rather to use the label as a catalyst to set up a collaborative benchlearning process among universities as far as ICT adoption and integration is concerned.

Some definitions are at this point needed.

“*Benchlearning*” is defined a collaborative process of learning through *benchmarking*. Benchmarking identifies gaps in performance, but is merely a starting point, followed by a programme of learning from *best practices* and other good examples. “Adoption” is hereby defined as the process through which ICT is voluntarily accepted as a means to innovate and improve higher education environments, as opposed to “penetration” that rather includes also a relatively imposed use, while “integration” is defined as the process of incorporation, at system and organisational level, of ICT as a complementary component of the education supply (changing processes in pedagogies, management, delivery of learning).

UNIQUE will look at ICT adoption and integration in an extremely holistic way, based on the starting point that the adoption of e-Learning strategies by universities does not only need to integrate pedagogic or technologic approaches onto their strategies but to provide a set of support services that will facilitate their integration into the University provision.

Links with other relevant initiatives

The UNIQUE label will be built starting from CEL (Programme accreditation for teChnology-Enhanced Learning)(3), a quality label successfully developed by the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD), and will broaden the scope of this certification scheme to all eLearning related activities that European universities need to enhance in order to increase their efficiency, quality and attractiveness to the world. This means that the first activity of the project will not be the study and the set-up of a quality mechanism, but rather the adaptation, in strict collaboration with a pool of higher education institutions, of a scheme that already works. This will allow the project to concentrate on the testing, benchlearning and dissemination phase.

Being built on CEL, the UNIQUE system will be monitored by the Supervisory Board (built around the project Advisory Board). The Board will decide upon the eligibility of accreditation candidates, will recruit auditors and will implement quality assurances for the auditors. The Award will work through a six steps approach:

- Step 1: Application
- Step 2: Eligibility
- Step 3: Self-Assessment
- Step 4: Peer Review
- Step 5: Awarding Body
- Step 6: Continuous Quality Improvements

Building on the Massive project (4) methodology, 6 areas have been identified as particularly critical and needed in the EU higher education institutions:

- Didactics and e-learning
- IPR management
- Institutional incorporation of learning
- eLearning partnership strategies
- Strategy towards the integration of virtual components

- Change management

Activities leading to the UNIQUE Label

The UNIQUE project will be performing the following activities:

- Preliminary analysis of the success stories and pitfalls of eLearning in European higher education in different domains (didactics, university management, institutional incorporation of eLearning, eLearning partnership strategies, costs and IPR, change management etc.)
- Study how to adapt the successful experience of the Programme accreditation for teChnology-Enhanced Learning (CEL) from the management education field to the broad field of eLearning in higher education
- Set up and animation (3 seminars and web animation) of a Steering committee composed of higher education reform experts, so to make sure that the project activities are coherent with the overall developments in the field in Europe (expert validation)
- Set up an Steering Committee including an eLearning experts component and a Policy Uplink Component (representatives from national rectors conferences, representatives of national quality systems, representative from governments, etc), so to make sure that all the project outcomes will have an impact at the system level of higher education institutions (policy adoption)
- Set up and animation of a community of practices able to support a benchlearning process among the universities involved in the project piloting (field validation)
- Preparation of specifications for the UNIQUE quality label and test it through peer-review visits with a network of 12 universities, clustered following the different dimensions of the label (technical-methodological and financial-institutional)
- Launch of the UNIQUE quality label in a specific high level conference
- Collaboration with the European Foundation for Quality in eLearning, to ensure sustainability and visibility of the project results

Further Resources

Higher Education Institutions that are interested to test the label and go through the certification process can contact the consortium which consists of:

- MENON Network EIG (Coordinator) : MENON is a European innovation and research network providing information and advice to policy makers and authorities, education communities, and the ICT and media industry on issues related to innovation and changes in Education and Training, Lifelong Learning and Knowledge Society developments in Europe and worldwide.
- EuroPACE ivzw: EuroPACE is a European network fostering collaboration in eLearning. Its members and partners are Higher Education institutions, non-profit organisations and other educational networks and companies.
- European Foundation for Quality in eLearning (EFQUEL): EFQUEL is a new initiative from three successful European eLearning projects (EQO, Seel and Seequel). They approach quality in e-learning from different and complementary perspectives and develop full-scale services for all educational fields, regional contexts and target groups.
- European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD): EFMD is an international membership organisation, with more than 600 member organisations from academia, business, public service and consultancy in 65 countries,

References

1. CONFEDERATION OF EU RECTORS' CONFERENCES AND THE ASSOCIATION OF EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES (CRE) (2001), *The Bologna Declaration on the European space for higher*

education: an explanation,

<http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna.pdf>

2. (2001), Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, The eLearning Action Plan, Designing tomorrow's education, Brussels, 28.3.2001, COM(2001)172 final, http://www.europa.eu.int/eur-lex/en/com/cnc/2001/com2001_0172en01.pdf
3. For more information on CEL please see <http://www.efmd.org/>
4. For more information on MASSIVE please see <http://cevug.ugr.es/massive/>

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