Academic recognition of e-learning

Recommendations for online learning providers

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Content

Introduction

The aim of this position paper is to provide clarity about what is needed to facilitate recognition of online learning for admission to a higher education institution or for exemption from parts of a (formal) study programme. It is aimed at business developers and staff involved in e-learning provision, both at higher education institutions and at education providers outside formal education (including online learning (or MOOC) platforms). Stakeholders at university umbrella organizations, quality assurance organizations and government bodies are also a target group.

The strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) underlines the importance of lifelong learning and equity in education. The flexibility offered by online education supports the realization of both objectives: it caters to professionals in need of lifelong learning by allowing the possibility to take courses at a time and place most suited to the individual. Online learning is also expected to make higher education more inclusive as it opens up new learning possibilities to groups that traditionally have little access, such as refugees.

However, these objectives are only met if e-learning credentials, like MOOC certificates and online badges, are recognized for employment and/or for further study. Whereas recognition authorities increasingly indicate they are open and willing to recognize new forms of online learning, their work is often complicated by the lack of information on the content and quality of online courses. To improve this situation, online learning providers have an important role to play.

What will we do?
This paper will first explain what is meant by academic recognition of stand-alone e-learning. Next, the reader will be informed about the way e-learning certificates can be assessed on the basis of seven criteria. Finally, concrete recommendations are formulated for online learning providers to further facilitate academic recognition of stand-alone e-learning.

What is stand-alone e-learning?

This position paper focusses specifically on the recognition of 'stand-alone' e-learning. We define stand-alone e-learning as all forms of e-learning that are offered outside of an accredited degree programme. Degree programmes that are fully or partially online or that make use of blended learning are not included in this definition, because in practice recognition of these online degree programmes (if accredited) does not differ from recognition of face-to-face programmes. However, individual courses from higher education institutions that are offered, free or otherwise, via online learning platforms are included in the definition. Course offerings by online providers outside formal higher education are also included.

What is academic recognition?

Academic recognition is the recognition of (foreign) qualifications for admission to a study programme or for exemption from parts of a study programme offered by an accredited higher education institution. In the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), academic recognition is regulated by the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC). The LRC is a binding treaty that covers recognition of all types of learning: formal degree education and periods of study as well as recognition of non-formal education and informal learning. Recognition of stand-alone e-learning also falls within the scope of the LRC, meaning that recognition authorities (including higher education institutions and ENIC/NARIC centres[1]) should have mechanisms in place to deal with recognition of stand-alone e-learning.

Criteria for recognition of e-learning

As e-learning is a relatively new phenomenon, responsible recognition authorities often have little experience in admitting students, or exempting students from parts of a study programme, on the basis of e-learning certificates. Sometimes, procedures for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) are used to recognize e-learning. RPL procedures concern the recognition of non-formal and informal learning and are developed to include a wide variety of highly individualized types of learning. As a result, RPL procedures often are lengthy, involving portfolio development and assessments, and require considerable efforts and costs both from the student and from the higher education institution/recognizing body.

As e-learning in general offers much more standardized study, standard recognition procedures that are used for the recognition of foreign qualifications can also be used as a starting point. These recognition procedures are much faster and less cumbersome. With this goal in mind, a **practitioner's guide for recognition of e-learning** has been developed within the Erasmus+ e-Valuate project. This guide aims to familiarize recognition professionals with e-learning and helps to make an informed recognition decision within reasonable time limits. The procedure is based on seven criteria:

1. Quality of the course
2. Verification of the certificate
3. Level of the course
4. Learning outcomes
5. Workload
6. The way study results are tested
7. Identification of the participant

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1) National ENIC (European Network of Information Centres) and NARIC (National Academic Recognition and Information Centres) centres are responsible for improving academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study. See www.enic-naric.net.

It is important to note that, in practice, the above-mentioned criteria for the assessment of e-learning are interconnected. Any recognition decision will therefore be based on a careful consideration and balancing of the quality, authenticity, level, learning outcomes, workload, testing and participant identification of an e-learning certificate. The traffic light model[2] in figure i is used to assist in making a recognition decision. It helps recognition professionals to establish if an e-learning certificate complies with the criteria for recognition and to develop institutional policy by formulating minimum standards that an e-learning certificate should adhere to in order for recognition to be granted.

Figure i: Traffic light model[3]

Level of robustness	Quality	Authenticity	Level	Learning outcomes	Workload	Testing	ID
0							
1							
2							
3							

Recommendations for online learning providers

Whereas recognition professionals indicate that they are open and willing to recognize new forms of online learning, their work is complicated by the fact that relevant information about the contents and quality of courses is often missing. As a result, it is difficult and time-consuming to gather the necessary information about the seven criteria mentioned above. In addition, the lack of information requires recognition experts to accept a degree of uncertainty. In many cases, this will be a reason not to recognize a credential, for example because the legal framework or institutional regulations discourage this kind of flexibility.

If stand-alone e-learning is to open up new and further learning opportunities for students, online learning providers should take the necessary measures to facilitate academic recognition. The recent initiative of the **European MOOC Consortium** to develop a **Common Microcredentials Framework** (CMF) is an important step in the right direction. The CMF is an agreement amongst Europe's biggest e-learning providers on specifications a micro-credential should adhere to.

Below, three recommendations have been formulated to further standardize e-learning and to support transparency and information provision on the content and quality of online courses. The recommendations are aimed at online learning providers, both within formal and informal education.

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2) JRC Science for Policy report, 2016: Validation of non-formal MOOC-based learning - An Analysis of Assessment and Recognition Practices in Europe (OpenCred), p.61

3) This traffic light model was also presented in Nuffic's publication 'Oops a MOOC! Dealing with eclectic learning in credential evaluation' (2018). For the e-Valuate project the different levels of robustness have been further elaborated and explained.

1 Course information

When assessing e-learning certificates, a complicating factor is that information about the contents of a course is not always provided in a structured, transparent and verifiable manner. This makes it difficult and time-consuming to evaluate the study results. Verification codes on e-learning certificates sometimes are temporarily accessible or may involve payment. Learning outcomes are not always mentioned on the course certificate and online course descriptions may change over time, or may disappear if the course is no longer available.

Recommendation

Ensure that information about course content and learning outcomes remains freely accessible and does not disappear when the course is revised or no longer offered. Consider how to contribute to rapid information provision. Examples of good practice include the use of unique course numbering systems, making it possible to quickly find the right course description. Online badges can also offer a solution, if a link to additional information on course content and learning outcomes is included.

2 Bologna tools

Since the start of the Bologna process and the introduction of the three cycle system (bachelor, master, doctorate) in the EHEA, common standards for the level, learning outcomes and workload of study programmes within formal higher education have been agreed upon. Levels have been established according to the National Qualification Frameworks (NQF), the European credit transfer system (ECTS) helps to determine the workload and diploma supplements (DS) are widely used to describe the learning outcomes. This standardization greatly supports fast and fair recognition of foreign qualifications.

However, stand-alone e-learning, even when it is offered by recognized higher education institutions, often falls outside the scope of these standardized frameworks. As a result, assessment of stand-alone e-learning requires a greater commitment from the recognition professional, who will often have to find alternative ways to come to an informed recognition decision.

Below the use of NQF, ECTS and DS is further explained:

NQF: although standard practice in degree education, online course certificates rarely indicate the level of a course on the NQF. The recognition professional must then determine the level on the basis of other indicators, such as course access criteria or stated progression opportunities.

ECTS: with the introduction of ECTS, the workload of study programmes has been standardized. This greatly facilitates the transfer of credits within the EHEA. However, e-learning certificates do not always mention the time involved, or give an indication in terms of estimated hours or hours/week (e.g. 12 hours per week for a total duration of 6 weeks).

DS: the DS provides standard information about the learning outcomes of formal degree programmes. Some e-learning providers issue a supplement to the e-learning certificate. This supplement is comparable to the DS and includes information on the course content and structure, learning objectives and grading schemes.

Recommendation
To facilitate academic recognition of stand-alone e-learning, use existing Bologna tools such as NQF, ECTS, and diploma or e-learning certificate supplements to provide additional information about the learning outcomes of a course.

Note that for e-learning providers that operate outside formal education structures, it is not always possible to use the Bologna tools because of legal restrictions. In that case it is advisable, where possible and legally accepted, to make an indirect reference to the Bologna tools. An example of good practice is 'KIRON credit points':

KIRON credit points

KIRON is a German NGO, helping refugee students to access recognized higher education institutions by providing online education. On the basis of a set of MOOC certificates, refugees can get exemptions for a maximum of 60 ECTS credits.

As German law reserves the right to allocate ECTS to recognized education institutions only, students cannot earn ECTS in the online study programmes offered by KIRON. Instead they earn KIRON credit points. In terms of workload one KIRON credit point is comparable to one ECTS. When a KIRON student is admitted to a recognized higher education institution, the KIRON points can be transferred to ECTS credit.

For more information see **https://kiron.ngo/**

3 Quality assurance of e-learning
Quality assurance is an important element for the recognition of formal qualifications in the EHEA. In line with the LRC, study programmes should comply with national quality standards to be recognized. In addition to external quality assurance that is the responsibility of the national quality assurance agency[4], higher education institutions should also have internal quality assurance mechanisms in place.

However, MOOCs and other forms of stand-alone e-learning often fall outside the scope of existing internal and external quality assurance in higher education, making it difficult to establish the quality of e-learning. Sometimes this is the result of legal restrictions, for example if quality assurance takes place at the level of study programmes (instead of at institutional level) and the online course is offered separately in the form of stand-alone e-learning.

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4) Within the Bologna process European cooperation in quality assurance of higher education is encouraged, with a view to develop comparable criteria and methodologies. In 2015 the European Ministers of Education adopted the "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area" (ESG). National quality assurance agencies should adhere to these ESG.

To provide an alternative, the European Association for Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) launched the **OpenUpEd quality label** in 2014. However, as of May 2019 only a handful of higher education institutions have acquired this label. As a result there currently is no widely-established, codified measure of quality in e-learning courses. Recognition professionals then have to measure quality against other indicators, such as the general status of the providing body or labour market acceptance, but that is less convincing.

Recommendation
Make the quality assurance of stand-alone e-learning part of internal quality assurance procedures at higher education institutions. Make sure that national quality assurance agencies can include stand-alone e-learning in their external review procedures of higher education institutions.

Note that e-learning providers that operate outside formal education structures may have their own quality standards. In most cases, these independent procedures do not comply with the national standards for academic recognition. Nevertheless, transparency about the procedures at hand can sometimes be useful, by providing online information on the quality standards used and the way in which the quality of online courses is monitored.

About the e-Valuate project

This position paper is produced as part of the 'Evaluating e-learning for academic recognition' project (e-Valuate), aiming to contribute to more effective policies for the recognition of online learning in the EHEA.

The e-Valuate consortium is composed of representatives from the ENIC-NARIC network: NARIC Denmark, NARIC Lithuania, NARIC Norway, NARIC Ireland UK NARIC and NARIC The Netherlands. Other partners involved are the Vice-President of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee, the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) and KIRON. A higher education resonance group has been formed to provide feed-back on the position paper, including the following institutions: Delft University of Technology, Kaunas University of Technology, Nottingham Trent University, Smartlearning Denmark, University of Limerick and University of Rostock.

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