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## **Digital higher education: the need to ensure its quality**

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### **Key points**

Online education in universities, as formed by the Covid-19 pandemic is a new reality which is not temporary. Therefore, coordination to secure its quality is needed. New challenges have arisen with the use of digital technology in higher education. It is important to strategically design how the tertiary education will be shaped after being completely or partially online. A long-term strategic approach should be defined by the European Union to ensure the quality of the digital courses and degrees.

### **Suggestions**

- Coordination of QA policies and common quality standards within the European Higher Education Area
- Different tools of accreditation to prevent malpractice
- Innovative ways of digital learning

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## Introduction

The digital age came sooner than we thought. As a response to Covid-19 restrictions, universities are adapting their teaching, offering online courses and degrees. Digital education grants the opportunity for educators and learners to stay connected while they are in separate locations. Distance learning has become the main way universities continue to work. This situation requires us to rethink how education in all disciplines is designed and provided so as to meet the demands of an increasingly changing world.

Firstly, member states of the European Union (EU) are the main actors who are in charge of the material to be taught and its organization. EU's action contributes to the development of quality and inclusive education, the exchange of good practice frameworks, research, recommendations and other tools. Likewise European Commission's Digital Education Action Plan for 2021-2027 points out that high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe is a goal that can be accomplished by stronger cooperation at European level. Due to the covid-19 crisis, digital technology is employed at an unprecedented scale in education. Therefore, it is crucial for the education systems to adjust and be fit for the digital age. Particularly the Digital Education Plan emphasised on the primary and secondary education and did not suggest ways in which specifically the tertiary education can be competitive and ready for the digital age. It did though mention that the quality of the education systems should rise, since education is the key for personal accomplishment, social coherence, economic development and innovation. In addition, the action plans and strategies developed by the European Union in 2020, for instance the first "ERAvsCorona" action plan, have not focused on securing the quality of the remote education. It is demanding to draw attention to the protection of education in these difficult times of the covid-19 crisis.

## What needs to be accomplished?

Institutions and stakeholders within the European Higher Education Area should cooperate in order to provide a common quality assurance framework specifically designed for digital education. Notably, the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance should be updated and each institution will then be required to integrate and implement the QA(Quality Assurance) reforms in order to secure the value of online learning outcomes.

Firstly, there are certain dangers in having fully online degrees. Apart from a good internet connection which is required to attend the classes and students in rural areas have a disadvantage in many EU countries, there are other issues arising, considering the quality of the education. Online degrees or online classes need to assure that, until universities offer again lectures in-situ, can provide a high standard education. Specifically when



everything, including the exams, is online it is easier for students to cheat on their exams and get a passing mark without deserving it. Not only is this unfair for the hard-working students, but it can also lead to bigger problems, when students graduate and they have not actually acquired the knowledge their degree is for.

Additionally, many school final exams and university-entrance exams are being carried out normally even though school classes might not be taking place. That is the case in Germany and Greece. In many countries like France and Norway, written exams were cancelled and not substituted by online ones. And this is because it is known that online exams can not replace the objectivity and transparency of the national in-situ exams. Unlike school students, university students usually do not come from the city in which their university is located, on-site exams would be a big threat for the public health in times of the pandemic. Yet, there are still some alternative ways of assessing students effectively.

To be precise, blended learning is a mixture of in-situ and online study. Blended education will become common practice and then it has to be ensured that even though lectures are online, the exams should take place like they would normally do. Then exams in class should occur whenever is possible even though some degrees are completely online. If that is not possible even after the pandemic ends then the design of effective accreditation mechanisms for students' knowledge and skills should be a priority.

Code of conduct and authenticity issues could also arise regarding students' essays and projects, since students could now easier have others do their papers for them. The professor's work of course should not be to always search who is not fair but other ways of assessment should be included on many occasions. Students' presentations or oral exams are suggested as some of the tools.

Consequently, it is extremely important to secure the quality of the degree and the grades acquired. To that end different ways of assessment or other activities to improve students' learning and skills can be a part of the digital education. There should be a variety of methods and not only depend on web-based lectures. Professors can organise their teaching differently and interact with the students. Long hour lessons impact on concentration so they have to be shorter than they would normally be on-site, because using the screen all day can be a burden on mental well-being. The use of an e-class or other means of sharing information and useful papers, as well as other innovative ideas ensure the interest and the participation of the students. Furthermore technology can be an engaging tool for cooperative and creative learning, so team projects and tasks which will concern more than one student, will give the opportunity to students to exchange their ideas and self-improve while working with other people.

Certainly it depends on each field of studies for which measures and methods to be applied so as to secure the quality. Not every innovative idea and mean is suitable for every degree.



Specialised forms of assessment or other ways of online learning are required in order to provide a good-quality higher education. For instance in the field of political studies there could be simulations of the various political institutions. In addition, a winner idea of EU's Hackathon 2019 is "The Cubers" which is a virtual tool for enhancing students' learning experience in science. Different innovative ideas are needed to provide students a better quality education which will be specified for each degree.

Notably, there is the need to examine some standards that all online degrees and in general distance learning in the European Union would be highly advisable to conform with. Some of the parameters to be assessed would be the duration, teaching hours and accreditation process.

### Conclusion

The key lesson of the Covid-19 pandemic is that digital learning should be considered as an integral part of higher education. Some European universities introduced new bachelor's and master's degrees entirely online as a response to covid-19 challenges and in-situ restrictions. But is Europe ready for a digital transformation of its higher education systems? Structural reforms of the digital approaches are required to be adopted and coordination should be strengthened in order to contribute to the competitiveness of Europe's higher education systems. Specifically the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance should be revised and updated. Institutions and stakeholders will need to cooperate within the European Higher Education Area. New tools are required to render remote learning more appealing to students and with higher quality. Higher education has to be transformed with the main goal to secure what was already achieved before but also to guarantee progress. In conclusion, the integration of online courses to higher education should be accomplished with coordination at European level in order to ensure the quality and avoid malpractice.

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