Digitization of Higher Education: QA the Missing Link (*to ensure trust*)

**Dr. Dominic Orr**  
Senior Researcher at FiBS Research Institute for Economics of Education & Social Affairs, Berlin  
d.orr@fibs.eu

**Peter van der Hijden**  
Independent European Higher Education Expert, Brussels  
petervanderhijden@outlook.com

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Higher Education Association
Member Practitioners

100+ years old
12,000+ members
2900+ institutions

Melanie Gottlieb
Deputy Director, AACRAO
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Audience Poll: What sector do you represent?

- US-Based Quality Assurance
- Non-US-Based Quality Assurance
- Education Association
- Educational Institution
- Non-Institutional Provider
- Other

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Audience Poll: How much of a challenge to QA is the emergence of digitalization?

- Highly challenging
- Challenging
- Somewhat Challenging
- Not Challenging
Main arguments

1. Quality assurance and accreditation have become key features of good quality higher education. They provide transparency and build trust.

2. In this, quality assurance has a norming and a mapping function in higher education. This means it is also agenda-setting. Therefore, we must regularly review the inherent assumptions behind it.

3. Higher education is changing and will continue to change (more radically) in the coming decade as higher education reacts to the Digital Age and utilises digital technologies.

4. In Europe, we are beginning to react to these, but developments are just beginning.
What is quality assurance?

QA as one of the governance instruments for ‘steering at a distance’, which recognise that higher education institutions are ‘hybrid institutions’ with multiple goals and multiple stakeholders.

In a system of autonomous HEIs, quality assurance should:

- Assure transparency of provision
- Set some (minimum) norms, which must be fulfilled by higher education providers for the learning experience

Impressive developments in the Bologna Process over 20 yrs.

• Quality assurance systems were seldom in 1999, when the Bologna Declaration was signed.
• Today, there is a consensus that QA is necessary to ensure accountability and support enhancement. Improving the quality and relevance of higher education, and establishing trustworthy quality assurance systems have been high priorities for almost all countries, and developments have been fast moving.
• 22 countries have established external quality assurance agencies since the Bologna Process was launched.
• 28 systems have established a quality assurance process where the quality assurance agency or body is responsible for recommending or taking a decision that grants permission to the programme or institution to operate.

The hierarchy of quality assurance / accreditation

Higher education system

HEI (university, college)

Study programme

Learning units (modules)

Usual focus on institutional level

Assumption of internal coherence of smaller units
Audience Poll:
What is QA missing?

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First challenge – MOOCs not attached to full programmes

• MOOC certificates are first sign of new forms of HE study
New concepts are being developed to cope with assessment and recognition practices in Europe (OpenCred). EUR 27660 EN. JRC Science for Policy Report. https://doi.org/10.2791/809371
New concepts are being developed to cope

Starting point: EAR-HEI manual “Practical guidelines for credential evaluators and admissions officers to provide fair and flexible recognition of foreign degrees and studies abroad”

- Level: European Qualification Framework
- Quality: QA procedures
- Workload: European Credit Transfer Sys (ECTS)
- Profile: Descriptors, e.g. Diploma Supplement (DS)
- Learning outcomes: Nat. Qual. Framework / DS

Audience Poll:
What alternative learning projects are you (or the body you represent) involved in?

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How this can work – merging learning from two sources

Case 1: Recognition of previous home country credits and open online learning credits

- Male, 27, from Syrian Arab Republic
- Kiron studies: joined October ’15, Business & Economics
- Transfer in: October 2017
- Transfer University: BAU International Berlin
- Transfer Study Program: Bachelor Business Administration
- Scholarship from Foundation of German Business (sdw)

- Recognition of 90 ECTS from interrupted studies (Damascus University)
- Recognition of 30 ECTS from Kiron Credit points (60 CP would be possible but not reasonable)
  → transfer into 5th semester

See https://kiron.ngo/
What was behind this success for KIRON?

- Creating a QA-system based on the Bologna tools increased trust amongst university partners and their willingness to recognize open online courses
- Translation of non-formal Kiron credits into formal ECTS was made possible by several HEIs, who partnered with Kiron

Advantages of such a system:
- Successfully completed MOOCs can prove knowledge and skills of prospective students and increase chances to get admitted to a programme or a scholarship
- Recognition of prior digital learning can not only serve as a substitute for courses within a study programme but also support university admission on first- and second-cycle level
Looking to the future of Higher education: digitalisation as facilitator...

Higher education provision made up of 3 core processes

Digitalisation as facilitator for
2 dimensions

- flexibility (organizational openness)
- inclusion (social openness of processes)

The changing environment for today’s learners

- Job market
- Demography
- Knowledge and competency profiles
- Technology

[ LEARNERS]

[ ENVIRONMENT ]
Challenge: working students

- 51% of European students have paid work
- 75% of European students over 30 years
- Currently, this effects the amount of time they spend on studying, especially working >15 hrs/week

- But widening participation is likely to increase the number of part-time students
- These students bring work experience and competencies to their studies
Higher education for learners...

[LEARNERS]

Job market

Demography

Technology

[ENVIRONMENT]

Knowledge and competency profiles

[ HIGHER EDUCATION]

Access to and delivery of learning opportunities

Recognition and certification of knowledge and competencies

Learning content, support and didactics
Audience Poll:
What are the main challenges to QA today?
4 learning pathways thru higher ed according to AHEAD

Model 1 - Tamagotchi  (Status quo plus)

Model 2 - Jenga

Model 3 - Lego set

Model 4 - Transformers

https://ahead.tugraz.at/en/a-higher-education-digital-for-2030-ahead/
Summary of challenges

• Digital solutions offer new forms of learning and new modes of learning delivery; however, they also present new challenges to existing quality assurance procedures.

• QA agencies should work together and identify a set of quality criteria (rubrics) and quality indicators that would help higher education institutions, students and accreditors gauge the quality and relevance of online learning provisions and alternative learning credentials.
Audience Poll:
What do you think should be considered in a QA rubric or indicator for alternative credentials?
Europe needs new visions for contemporary higher education in the digital age. Digital transformation is not so much an additional challenge, but an effective means to address key challenges for higher education in the 21st century.

- preparation and admission
- skills for the digital age
- recognition
- quality assurance
- virtual exchange and mobility
- strategies for teaching and learning

Ref.: see also https://hochschulforumdigitalisierung.de/de/blog/bologna-digital-2020-workshop-berlin
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www.fibs.eu

FiBS, Michaelkirchstr. 17/18, D-10179 Berlin, Germany
Tel: +49 (0)30 8471 223-0 · Fax: +49 (0)30 8471 223-29