EUROPEAN DIMENSION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE
DATA MINING STRATEGIES FOR E-LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS
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ABSTRACT
International Business School (IBS) is a private not for profit university devoted to high quality learning and research. Distance learning is an integral part of the University. International Business School has ten undergraduate and graduate degree programs delivered online. Approximately 3000 students are enrolled in distance learning programs. In the past ten years in Europe substantial progress has been made in quality assurance as well as in other Bologna action lines such as qualifications frameworks, recognition and the promotion of use of learning outcomes, all these contributing to a paradigm move towards student-centred learning and teaching. A number of strategies contribute to the success of IBS’s distance learning efforts and their alignment with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. In this paper some of IBS good practices, which may be beneficial to higher education institution struggling to implement fully-fledged Internal Quality Assurance Systems are presented.

KEYWORDS: Best practices, Bologna process, Qualifications, Quality assurance system

INTRODUCTION
In the past ten years in Europe substantial progress has been made in quality assurance as well as in other Bologna action lines such as qualifications frameworks, recognition and the promotion of use of learning outcomes, all these contributing to a paradigm move towards student-centred learning and teaching. In 2005, Ministers responsible for higher education in Europe adopted the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), prepared by the so called “E4 group”, namely ENQA European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in cooperation with ESU European Students’ Union, EURASHE European Association of Institutions in Higher Education that prepared A Manual for Internal Quality Assurance in Higher Education with a Special Focus on Professional Higher Education (Bollaert, 2014), and EUA European University Association.

Interesting is either the Bucharest Communique Making the Most of Our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area (Bucharest Communique, 2012).

In 2012-2015 European Higher Education Areas were revised to “improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness, including their scope” since its’ adoption with EQAR European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education. This resulted in the adoption of new Standards and Guidelines by the ministers in the Ministerial Conference in Yerevan in May 2015.

It is supposed that European Higher Education Area 2015 apply to all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of the European Higher Education Area, in spite of study cycle or place of delivery, as a
Our experience shows that faculties and students have become less sceptical towards quality assurance for learning and teaching among all stakeholders. The focus of the European Higher Education Area is on quality assurance related to learning and teaching in higher education, including the distance learning environment and relevant links to research and innovation. Quality assurance in higher education in Europe began to emerge at the beginning of the 90’s and the first initiatives correspond to a discrete evaluation of programmes in specific areas, carried out by international teams of experts. A learning process began with this first international assessment processes that led to the development of the concept and the tools of quality assurance (Harvey, Williams, 2010). Later, the systems of quality assurance became one of the most relevant drivers for the implementation of the aims of the Bologna Declaration and turned out to be the pillars of the mutual recognition of degrees and study periods, supporting the transferability of academic and professional qualifications and the mobility of students, graduates and workers over Europe. Institutions at all levels and regional contexts have by now travelled a long way and have built up much knowledge on QA. At present, a complex system of supranational institutions as well as national agencies and other structures exist in Europe and outside, regulating QA in higher education, researching and developing new concepts and tools, modernising and innovating constantly in a way that QA in Higher Education is currently taken for granted all over the world (Sursock, 2015).

After the initial period of implementation of the Bologna Process, somehow “turbulent” in the wording of Sursock and a second phase of growth and strengthening, QA schemes reached a mature stage and a better awareness of all the specific features of higher education. The first initiatives on the design of IQAs were strongly influenced by the methods of QA on the industry and management sectors and some instruments were imported, as it was the case of various tools of certification, like the ISO certifications. The International Business School is applying this approach since 2004. There has been, since then, a great evolution and modernisation of our system. QA development in IBS is characterised by a very dynamic process of innovation and creativity. At present, the system is more tailored to each form of educational delivery and the involvement of actors has widened to more stakeholders and this is a clear trend in European Higher Education area as stated by Eurydice Network of European Commission in 2015.

**Institutional Dedication to Distance Learning and Framework of Quality Assurance**

International Business School is a private not for profit university devoted to high quality learning and research. Distance learning is an integral part of the University. International Business School has ten undergraduate and graduate degree programs delivered online. Approximately 3000 students are enrolled in distance learning programs. After twenty years of development the nature of the IBS changed rapidly having become more complex organisation, more open to the outside with a wider range of stakeholders involved on university management. Quality expanded beyond the subject department. The fact that the quality is no longer an exclusive issue of quality experts is firm tendency for decades (Yorke, 2000).

Our experience shows that faculties and students have become less sceptical towards quality assurance system and have been taking more openly ownership of the quality assurance instruments. On the higher level institutional framework of quality assurance became very complex and it includes structures at different levels: supra-national (ENQA, ESU, EDAR, EC, ECA), national (Government, National Legislation, Ministry, QAAs) and local, the institutions (HEIs). The complexity of the HE systems is also very large with different types of institutions, different natures, magnitudes, missions and specialisation profiles. At the same time, the actors involved in HE include an equally large and complex network of internal and external stakeholders (Kettunen, 2015). Quality, however, is still not an easy concept when it comes to quality assurance in higher education and especially in distance education area. There are different understandings of the concept of quality, not only by the different stakeholders as well as by the individual higher education institutions, countries or even regions.

At present, the fit for purpose and transformative concepts are dominant in most of the assessment and accreditation systems. Accordingly, threshold indicators define most of the existing assessment tools although the external evaluation approaches are each time more enhancement oriented. The perception of “quality” is different among stakeholders and scientific areas. Stakeholders are also very diverse as is the case of students and so the perception of quality varies also inside groups of stakeholders. The European Universities Association had a pioneer role on the discussion of the concept of quality and quality culture in higher education.

See as an example the Quality Culture in European Universities: a bottom – up approach (EUA, 2008). In 2008, Harvey and Stensaker have built a comprehensive theoretical basis for the concept of Quality Culture in Higher Education gathering contributions from cultural studies, education and other scientific areas (Harvey, Stensaker, 2008). For what concerns it is important to draw out of this study the distinctive nature of an quality assurance system at IBS, embedded in a particular quality culture and not transferable or impossible to copy and paste on another institution or vice versa. What we learn from our experience is the importance to learn with others but their tools should not be imported and use in another university without discussion and adjustments.

**Strategic Framework for Success**

The design and implementation of all IBS distance learning programs, is guided by the university’s strategic plan. Therefore, students enrolled in online programs can expect a student centred learning opportunity, highly qualified faculty with profound expertise, and services focused on providing the same level of support provided to students in face to face programs, throughout their academic life cycle. The core of the strategy for developing the quality culture in IBS is as stated by Harvey:

> Academic ownership and engagement; recognition of the need for a quality system; a focus on changing people’s behaviour rather than the mechanics of a system of reporting and review; clarity of purpose; centrality of students; encouragement of partnership and co-operation; focusing less on individual performance and enabling community engagement and team working; a leadership style that inspires rather than dictates; welcoming of external critical evaluation; an integrated and continuous
process of self-reflection; providing the context to take the initiative to improve, even where it is risky (Harvey, 2008).

IBS is pursuing the needed level of trust in its quality assurance system by the mix of four basic mechanisms – legal legislation, certification, reputation and community norms, structures and procedures. The use of legal legislation and certification are mechanism that fall in an instrumental or rationalist perspective. On the other hand reputation and community norms, structures and procedure fall into the cognitive or normative perspective. The balance is dynamic and is influenced by the instability of the legal national framework and innovative nature of IBS. Short look on the quality assurance models in Europe shows that they are very diversified and dependent on national contexts. There is a constant process of evolution and adaptation of procedures, with different balances between accountability and enhancement. Two main shifts in the recent evolution of evaluation and accreditation systems in higher education have been identified and analysed and discussed at both levels, research and academia on one side and policies, on the other side, having impact at the level of quality assurance systems development. An interesting point of view is provided by Hopbach in Recent Trends in Quality Assurance? Observations from the Agencies’ Perspective (Hopbach, 2014). The most visible change in the recent evolution of evaluation and accreditation systems in higher education in Europe is the shift to a focus on learning and teaching, from a previous period of greater attention dedicated to general procedures and processes of quality assurance including all areas of institutional spectrum (Sursock, 2015). Universities have to respond not just on the quality of their education provision, but also on issues of financial sustainability, productivity, research impact, employability, student satisfaction, staff development, i.e. on a variety of aspects of their performance. The new version of the European Higher Education Area highlights the importance of the core areas of learning and teaching and gives room for much improvement at the level of the design and assessment of learning outcomes. In what concerns models of quality system or quality system prescription the different countries in the Bologna area have adopted different approaches, some more intrusive and others more open and flexible. At present, most models are designed by quality assurance agencies with the aim of external evaluations and certification or accreditation processes (audit programs) or by the HEIs are based on the European Higher Education Area. It is expected that in the short run the existing quality assurance systems will adapt to the new European Higher Education Area 2015.

**GOOD PRACTICES**

The approach of good practice produces examples which are difficult to express in abstract terms and to affirm to refer to diverse situations. The aforementioned means that good practice has distinguishing characteristics and the latter indicates that, unlike a standard, it has its alternatives (an alternative course of action) suitable for specific situations. So, a professional standard allows a range of concrete good practices. In other words, the interrelationship between standard and good practice can be viewed as ranging from planning to execution.

Key factors for an efficient quality system can be summarised out of some good practices examples: adequate strategic planning, proper organisational structures, adequate internal evaluation processes, feedback loops, committed institutional leadership, active participation of academic and administrative staff, involvement of students and of external stakeholders, integrated information system for data collection and analysis (Santos, 2011). IBS was an active participant in the identification of good practices in the framework of the European Erasmus Plus Project in 2015 focused on Enhancing Internal Quality Assurance Systems, in particular “Final Methodology for identification of Good practice in IQA. Descriptions of examples of good practices in IQA”.

The Library of Good Practices was developed thanks to the EIQAS WP5 group’s effort. The selected samples of good practices cover all standards of European Higher Education Area Part 1. WP5 Group has compiled a Library of Good Practices with 19 examples from different HEIs in the partner countries. The conception of foreign language teaching in our country is undergoing substantial changes. The idea that every European should master his/her mother tongue and two more languages of EU raises and issue how to achieve this aim. The template at the end of the paper will provide a common format to explore example of good practice in IQA at partner HEIs with regard to European Higher Education Area Part 1 (Annex A).

**CONCLUSIONS AND OPEN QUESTIONS**

According to our experience the key benefits of European Higher Education Area compliance can be summarized with the following statements:

- Academic ownership and engagement
- Focus on changing university culture instead of a system of reporting and review
- Increased student satisfaction (centrality of students)
- Clarity of purpose and consistent quality
- An integrated and continuous process of self-reflection and as a result valid data that the stakeholders can trust
- Improved control of quality, processes, and demonstrations of faculty administration and students competence (welcoming of external critical evaluation)
- Improved control during periods of change or growth (focus on the effectiveness of the internal mechanisms)
- Improved performance fewer re-analysis (providing the context to take the initiative to improve)

The presented selection of strategies and practices in this paper reflects a consensus among all the organizations involved on how to take forward quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area and, as such, provides a firm basis for successful implementation. Identified possibilities for improvement include the wish to strengthen the focus on quality assurance, to overcome problems with regulation and overregulation of quality. Quality assurance
Annex A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>№</th>
<th>Descriptive Topics</th>
<th>Text</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Source of example of good practice</td>
<td>International Business School, <a href="http://www.ibsedu.bg/">http://www.ibsedu.bg/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Name of activity</td>
<td>Using self-assessment in modern language teaching and learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Relevance of activity</td>
<td>Standard 1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Self-assessment, viewed as a formative procedure, is used in modern</td>
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<td>language teaching and learning at IBS. The actions entailed by the</td>
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<td>operation aim to achieve the goal of acquiring a second language.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Conceptual basis</td>
<td>The European Language Portfolio is a personal document that has three parts.</td>
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- A language passport
  - Here the language learner can summarize his/her linguistic and cultural identity, language qualifications, experience of using different languages and contacts with different cultures.

- A language biography
  - The biography helps the learner to set learning targets, to record and reflect on language learning and on intercultural experiences and regularly assess progress.

- A dossier
  - In this part of the ELP the learner can keep samples of his/her work in the language(s) he/she has learnt or is learning.

Objective

Students acquire a second language as they record their progress in communicative competence attainment and language performance development (e.g., Self-Assessment Grid in eELP Part 3). This is a continuing process and eELP has turned a powerful tool with its possibility for addition and expansion. eELP is pedagogically useful because it generates student autonomy and student-centeredness on a stable basis. For example, the first step is for the student to create a personal profile in “My Profile” section as shown below.
6. SWOT or other analysis

**Successfulness of operation**
Measured by cost-effectiveness, the operation is successful because it involves all students in the self-evaluation process. All students at IBS benefit from the use of eELP. The instrument’s availability online ensures independence of work which is a major feature of student-centeredness.

**Innovation of operation**
The operation is innovative because it has been implemented recently. eELP has been available for a number of years (since Scherer’s original idea was put forth some 20 years ago) but it is at the moment that it is used by all students at the university.

**Transferability of operation**
Dissemination is possible because the discipline of modern language teaching/learning is a common element of university curricula. This good practice is in fact quite widespread even at the moment so it is ready to be multiplied. Those involved in the implementation of the operation need training as modern language teachers.

**Sustainability of operation**
Current and future self-support of the practice is facilitated by its electronic form. It is available 24 hours and is sustainable without difficulty. Thus, students and teachers are empowered to use their potential in second language acquisition in an autonomous way. On the one hand, this is a constant support of motivation for learning and, on the other, this is a source of the ability to support and uphold the operation.

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