



Quality Assurance and Recognition of Distance Higher Education and TVET

Introduction

The spread of the COVID-19 has compelled most countries to impose mandatory, temporary closure of higher education institutions (HEIs) as well as technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions, leaving more than 200 million students out of their institutions. Extended closures of HEIs and TVET institutions may cause not only loss of learning in the short-term, but also further loss in human capital and diminished economic opportunities in the long-term. To mitigate the loss of learning, many countries pursued options to utilize open and distance learning (ODL) to manage and cope with the crisis.

However, issues of equity, participation, infrastructure, broadband capacity, research, assessment and validation of learning outcomes, quality assurance and accreditation, and pedagogic capacity emerged as immediate challenges.

Accordingly, this Issue Note seeks to contribute to the global dialogue and policy debate on issues and challenges in the further promotion of Open and Distance Learning, but also provide practical

suggestions to ODL practitioners, researchers, policymakers and distance higher education and TVET managers for the enhancement of ODL.

Defining the topic and related key issues

Following the COVID-19 outbreaks, Institutions of Higher Education and TVET had to close and figure out how to continue providing their educational programmes to the students. This brought to light a set of challenges. These challenges are: lack of training of faculty to ensure quality education delivery and follow-up of programme delivery at a distance; content not being ready to be delivered online; lack of modern technology access points to meet the sudden and unforeseen demand for students to be able to follow educational programmes; and, maintenance of day-to-day instructional services.

Significant challenges that higher education and TVET systems and institutions will face in the long run include increased inequality in access and retention and the risk for students to discontinue their studies due to increased socio-economic constraints; diminished resources in both public and private institutions; personal and academic challenges caused by permanent closures of programmes and institutions; demand for improved infrastructure to support continued distance and blended learning models; reduced student mobility putting pressure on admission at national and regional universities.

The Education 2030 (ED 2030) Framework for Action in point 43 states that “A well-established, properly regulated tertiary education system supported by technology, open educational resources (OERs) and distance education can increase access, equity¹, quality and relevance, and can narrow the gap between what is taught at tertiary education institutions, including universities, and what economies and societies demand.”

The Qingdao Declaration recognized that ICTs – including mobile learning – must be harnessed to strengthen education systems, knowledge dissemination, information access, quality and effective learning, and more efficient service provision. The contribution of OERs and MOOCs to increase access and improve quality in learning cannot be underestimated. However, they provide a number of challenges in terms of quality assurance and accreditation, and the provision of practical skills in the case of TVET as the range of organizations involved in offering MOOCs are non-traditional and sometimes out of the fold of the quality assurance mechanisms in different countries².

The TVET sector in particular is, in most contexts, underpinned by a competency-based approach. This presents it with unique challenges in the use of distance education including online learning as a delivery mode, especially for those courses focused on practical or physical activities. Despite these challenges, in response to new labour market needs, innovative applications of e-learning have become

¹ According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26, paragraph 1), access to basic education is not a privilege, but a basic human right, and higher education is supposed to be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. Moreover, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights demand that all children, young people and adults have the human right to benefit from an education that meets their basic learning needs, an education that includes learning to know, to do, to live together, and to be. The key twin factors that constrict access to higher levels of education are limited space and high costs of education. It is largely in view of this that most governments support the promotion of distance education. This is because of the firm belief that distance education and open learning, which provides courses that are designed for students studying in their own homes or workplaces, in their own time and anywhere in the region, is core to expanding access to higher education. It is common rhetoric among government officials and politicians that distance education is expected to provide an opportunity for those individuals that have hitherto been excluded from formal residual universities. Against this belief, distance learning institutions are often called upon to devise strategies that would not only fulfill the quality criteria, but also lower the cost in order to expand access to higher education. The possibility and capability of expanding access to higher education is therefore, one of the key assumptions that underpins advocacy for ODL.

² Such as integrity of the national systems, recognition of the providers, protection of the learners from rogue providers, and the relevance of education offers.

an important aspect of TVET. In many countries, distance/e-learning modalities are applied to provide the theoretical part of vocational training, as a strategic policy option to improve access to quality training to reshape their skills development system.

Higher education and TVET are vital for producing the calibre and diversity of graduates needed both for the economy that exists today and for the economy that a nation aspires to. They fuel competitiveness and growth by preparing the human capital for the nation. Higher education through its contribution to knowledge, innovation and capacity development and TVET through the provision of skilled technicians play a critical capacity building and professional training role in support of all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thus, higher education and TVET institutions are challenged to adjust their programme structures, curricula, teaching and learning methods to adapt to new demands. In recognition of this challenge, greater attention needs to be focused on quality assurance as a critical factor to ensuring educational and training relevance. In post-pandemic period, efforts need to focus on most vulnerable students ensuring that technological set-ups and infrastructure investments are geared towards keeping them connected and support their learning process and outcomes.

Lessons from past practices and current crisis

At the outbreak of the pandemic, both European Network on Quality Assurance (ENQA) and European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) encouraged the National Quality Assurance Agencies to respond flexibly to the current situation through their on-going external quality assurance processes. EQAR indicates that during the period when site visits to higher education institutions could not be organized the agencies could decide either to replace them by video conferencing or other appropriate formats, or to postpone them to a later time. Both statements also highlight the role quality assurance agencies can play in helping to overcome the current, unprecedented challenges. For instance, the agencies can offer guidance on matters such as the transfer to online learning and teaching, alternative assessment methods and maintaining academic standards and student support services. Furthermore, the statements reassured the agencies that decisions on ENQA membership and EQAR registration would not be jeopardized in case of suspension or adaptation of activities due to the pandemic. In terms of support, ENQA is in close communication with its member agencies that are currently undergoing an external review in order to adapt the timelines where necessary in relation to the postponement of site visits. ENQA has also launched a social media campaign, through which the agencies are encouraged to share their policies, practices, and other resources for learning purposes. On its website, EQAR also provides answers to questions related to the compliance with the ESG and EQAR registration.

Since 2015, the Ministry of Education, People's Republic of China, has been supporting the development and application of MOOCs in HEIs. As of today, 1000 HEIs built 18,000 MOOCs with 310 million enrolment. As part of the reform of higher education system in 2016, the Ministry promoted the integration of information technology in education, notably in teaching. The reform process includes the credit transfer system among HEIs in the country. In February 2020, the Ministry issued instructions for deployment of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) online teaching, and guidance for protection and support of teachers during COVID 19 outbreak.

In Italy, since the only way to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic was to physically close institutions, Universities worked on the enhancement of alternative teaching tools. All teaching activities were delivered online. Universities implemented and strengthened several technical options to connect students and faculties, including Google Meet, Moodle, Classroom, and YouTube dedicated channels. University websites were updated monitoring the institutional news related to the spread of the virus and the measures to counter its effects.

Key messages and practical tips for designing policy interventions

1. Conduct rapid technology assessment on the status of digital infrastructure at: a) institutional level to identify what is needed to sustain continued teaching and learning; and, b) at system level to identify weaknesses in terms of connectivity, equipment and human and financial resources needed in its functionality and maintenance.
2. Establish functional mechanisms of quality assurance and accreditation as well as availability of reliable statistical data required for a sound policy orientation considering important areas such as training of trainers in open and distance education, including cross-border education provision; and strengthening and maintenance of a culture of quality assurance in ODL.
3. Develop effective governance, leadership and management systems.
4. Ensure sustainability of distance education institutions, projects and programmes; create distance education readiness; and create ICT readiness at the national, institutional, and learner community levels, as well as programmes and courseware availability across borders and institutions, including the use of under-used decentralised facilities such as learning and ICT centres.
5. Build a common understanding of quality in distance education through broad-based consultation, introducing mechanisms for programme accreditation and institutional audits against sound criteria, ensuring collaboration and partnerships including engagement with the private sector in setting quality criteria, and promoting internal and external forms of quality assurance in order to prevent sub-standard practices and to stimulate innovation.
6. Regulatory frameworks for distance and online education should be viewed and assessed in terms of type, scope, relevance and impact in areas such as:
 - academic standards;
 - skills development;
 - awarding powers of degrees and technical awards;
 - quality assurance (in terms of inputs, process and outcomes);
 - funding (both public and private, including financial aid in terms of rules governing financial aid to institutions/students);
 - ICT regulatory and policy regime; and,
 - cross-border provision.
7. Developing and sustaining awareness of and commitment to lifelong learning, mostly in developing systems, is a major challenge to higher education and TVET institutions. Therefore, there is need to ensure the attainment of completion rates, thus calling for formulation of research-based policies as intervention measures to promote higher achievement levels and improve marketability of the programmes in respective countries, and also reducing attrition levels among distance learners.
8. Manage the tension between legal and social legitimation of ODL programmes and products. To a considerable degree, most digital education provision modalities still suffer negative public perception compared to the conventional provision approaches. Even in situations where national regulatory agencies have accredited the ODL provision, this does not often translate to more positive perception from society.
9. Define the quality of Distance Higher Education through addressing the following questions: How to define and measure quality in the face of a multiplicity of expectations and indicators modelled on conventional universities and TVET institutions: number of graduates, throughput

rates, full-time equivalencies; What should be the balance between quality as a perception, quality as a process, and quality as a measure; how should ODL institutions address this?

10. Ensure cost-effectiveness, equity and quality: How should Open and Distance Higher Education institutions achieve, ensure and indeed demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of Open and Distance Learning in the face of constricted state funding, drive for profit by private providers, and skewed distribution of ICT infrastructure? Emphasis on public accountability by higher education and TVET institutions.
11. Increase attractiveness, inclusiveness and accessibility of TVET and fostering capabilities that enable progression from TVET to higher education and for TVET graduates to access further learning.

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UNESCO Education Sector's issue notes cover key topics related to the COVID-19 education response. They provide evidence of good practices, practical tips and links to important references for each topic in an effort to mitigate the impact of school closures.

The issue notes cover several topics under nine thematic areas, namely: Health and wellbeing; Continuity of learning and teaching; Gender equity and equality; and learning; Higher education and TVET; Education and culture; Education policy and planning; Vulnerable populations, as well as Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development

They are prepared collectively by UNESCO education colleagues across the world. The present note was developed by: the Section for Higher Education and the Section of Youth, Literacy and Skills Development of UNESCO' Education Sector.

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