

## ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF DISTANCE LEARNING AT WESTERN BALKAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, the project “Enhancing the Quality of Distance Learning at Western Balkan Higher Education Institutions” (DL@WEB) is presented. The goal of the project is to improve, develop and implement accreditation standards, guidelines and procedures for quality assurance (QA) of distance education study programs at national system levels in Western Balkan countries. Hence, the project is aimed to make a wide impact on the national accreditation systems in Western Balkan partner countries. The synergy of Western Balkan higher institutions and their national higher education public authorities, as well as, with the meaningful support from carefully selected European Union partners is expected to bring up the quality of distance learning (DL) studies on a system level which would bring significant benefits to all prospective students of the Western Balkan region.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The online teaching paradigm has an increased progress in worldwide higher education institutions nowadays. The number of high schools in Western Balkan countries that apply some form of the distance education methods is continuously increasing, as well. However, what is the most questionable in this process is the quality of conducting the online teaching techniques.

The DL@WEB project has been designed to improve the quality and relevance of distance learning (DL) with the focus at Western Balkan higher education (HE) institutions. The main project goal is to make a significant progress into improvement, development and implementation of the accreditation standards, guidelines and procedures for quality assurance of DL study programs at national system levels in WB countries. Those standards will assimilate the quality of DL courses offered by higher education institutions in WB countries. Developed standards would be incorporated into existing legal and sublegal acts at the national levels and also at the HE institutional levels, in University regulatory documents.

The project tends to provide the necessary capacities through establishing a framework for improving eLearning methodology and DL quality assurance at HE institutional level. The framework is supposed to be included in the University regulatory documents in Western Balkan beneficiary countries. This way, the appropriate solid base is expected to be placed for the implementation of newly developed accreditation standards. This process is also supplemented by conducting the extensive training for all levels of staff involved in accreditation or delivery of DL study programs, starting from the teaching staff, trainers, evaluators, official accreditation reviewers and HE public authorities.

### II. PROJECT BACKGROUND

Sometimes, the conventional institution attendance appears to be impractical, or even impossible. Moreover, the scheduling conflicts in the traditional way of education bring problems to some, potentially significantly high, level, that disables students' attendance to some courses. These reasons together with the preference for the distance education system itself motivate students to choose distance education courses.

In that context, distance education has become paramount as an alternative method of course delivery being used by colleges and universities worldwide. One of the benefits of exploiting the DL methodologies is that they expand access to higher education at both the national and international level [1].

Another obvious advantage is connected to the fact that through avenues such as distance education, individuals are able to enhance their social and economic well being, as well as, to raise their educational attainment level [1]. This makes the DL methods an un-doubtable recommendation for every student. Moreover, in today's higher education environment, when students are increasingly expecting information that is immediately and easily accessible “anytime, anywhere”, the online teaching is becoming not only the recommendation, but an inevitable way of education as well.

However, students could often face some problems related to the distance learning base itself. One of those is the problem of not knowing what they can expect in courses or study programs marked as “online”. In such a fast moving field, it is obvious that program revisions and staff retraining should definitely take place frequently, since the institutional motivation is not enough for achieving required level of quality. Another problem is that it is possible DL courses to be more time consuming and more demanding than traditional courses. Thus, many students drop DL courses because of the same reason they enrolled in them, busy lifestyles [1]. Improving the quality, efficiency, and the way the DE courses are organized, presented, and performed to the students, could overcome this problem.

There is one very important aspect related to the DL that should be considered. The environment in which the DL is intended to be conducted plays an important role. The project is primarily focused on exploring the Western Balkan region. Turbulent times in the last decade have affected higher education in Western Balkan region and there is an urgent need to adopt European practices. The opportunities for regional student exchanges, joint DL study programs and borderless cooperation are immeasurably strengthened by having a shared language, by being geographically contiguous and by the proximity of the centres of population. Taking into consideration the population of Western Balkan partner countries which exceeds 25 million of people, a joint effort for the uniformity of e-learning methodology, quality standards and harmonization of the national accreditation systems with the European quality assurance system would play a significant role for potential students throughout the region.

### III. PARTICIPANTS

The participants from Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, France, Italy and Belgium are involved in the project. Several institutions from each country are part of the DL@WEB project. The following institutions from Serbia participate in the project: the Universities of Kragujevac, Belgrade and Niš, the Ministry of Education, the National Council for Higher Education, and the Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance. The University of Montenegro, the University Mediterranean, the Ministry of Education and Science of Montenegro and the Council of Higher Education are the Montenegro representatives involved in the project. From the Republic of Macedonia, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, the FON University, and the Ministry of Education and Sciences participate in the DL@WEB project. Additionally, the University Macerata from Italy, the Université Paul Cézanne from France, the University Primorska from Slovenia, as well as, the European

Foundation for Quality in eLearning from Belgium, are the European partners.

### IV. REALIZED ACTIVITIES

Complete list of project activities can be found at the project web-site [2]. Since the beginning of the project, these activities were realized:

- *Review and analysis of existing European DL practices and principles for QA and accreditation of DL study programs in higher education.* In this phase, the existing European practice and principles for quality assurance in DL were analyzed. During this phase, the analyses of the policy level documents addressing internal or external accreditation of DL study programs in HE is performed, as well as, the review on benchmarking methodology and quality monitoring tools [3,4,5].
- *Establishing the framework for improving DL QA and eLearning methodology on HE institutional level in WB PCs.* This phase includes the analyses of the existing Western Balkan practice in DL and cross-matching with European practices and standards, and defines the eLearning methodology and the possible QA issues for content, delivery and support processes. The stakeholders seminars (feedback, advice, and validation) are also the part of this phase. At the end of the phase, the handbook for QA in distance education, as well as, the policy and plan roadmap for implementing and managing QA procedures and principles is developed [6,7,8].

### V. REVIEW OF EXISTING DL REGULATION IN WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

The analysis of the existing regulations in Western Balkan countries is performed. As a result, some crucial points are noticed and presented in this subsection.

#### A. Serbia

The distance learning in Serbia was initiated through individual personal interests and international connections of the university researchers interested of Internet-based technologies applied to education in various forms. Moreover, the usage of the learning management systems was introduced in almost all Serbian Universities. DL courses are offered by several universities in Serbia [9].

Even more, according to the Committee for Accreditation and Quality Assurance in higher education in Serbia (CAQA), there are six distance learning programmes officially accredited at the university level in Serbia. Three of them are at state universities, while the other three are at private universities. Additionally, four DL programmes are

accredited at the college level. An example of accredited DL study program is the "M.Sc. in distance learning" at the Technical Faculty of Cacak [10].

### B. Macedonia

The DL basis in Macedonia lies on the several successful projects. More detailed information about one of them could be found at [11]. According to the legislation in Macedonia, e-learning and distance learning are not considered different from the conventional classroom based learning. However, different e-learning and distance learning methods are adopted and used in practice. Almost all universities in Macedonia use some sort of LMS [9].

About the QA in DL in Macedonia, it should be noticed that the quality assurance procedure of study programs is well defined in the higher education legislation acts. The universities have to obtain accreditation from the unique Accreditation and Evaluation Body. Periodically evaluation (quality assessment) that includes external, internal (self-) evaluation, and evaluation of the academic staff quality is also considered in the legislation acts. However, the new law for Higher Education does not consider the DL as specific way of learning and there is no any adopted QA standards for eLearning or DL programs [9].

### C. Montenegro

The distance learning and e-learning in Montenegro came with the successful projects of WUS Austria. Basically, the first implementation of eLearning in Montenegro was made by the University of Montenegro (UoM). It has one main eLearning center, which is a part of the Center of information system (CIS). The provided eLearning service includes any type of eLearning such as videoconferences, distance learning, LMS Moodle, etc. Additionally, a lot of UoM faculties have e-learning facilities [9].

The Mediterranean University, the first private university in Montenegro has also Distance Learning System (DLS), which provides the distance learning mechanisms to the students by using Internet platform for learning with DLS.

The distance learning in the other private university in Montenegro, University Donja Gorica (UDG), is conducted as a part of regular classes. It is actually used when professors from abroad have lectures via a video link for the students at the university. UDG has developed their own LMS as well, which is particularly adapted to their needs.

However, it should be noticed that the legislation does not consider e-learning and DL different from the conventional classroom based learning.

Besides the Ministry of education and sport (MES) which is the highest authority responsible for the overall education policy in Montenegro, there is the Council of higher

education responsible for high education programme accreditation, external evaluations, and providing the quality of higher education in Montenegro. The Centre of Studies and Quality Assurance was additionally established by UoM to ensure and improve the quality by using continuous process of evaluation. The evaluation is performed through assessment, monitoring, guarantees, maintenance and improvement of the quality of the study programs at the University of Montenegro.

At the private universities in Montenegro, the programs are not accredited as a separate study program, and the QA is internal and done on a traditional way [9], exactly like at the UoM.

In general, the Council of higher education have not accredited any program for DL or some other form of eLearning in Montenegro. Moreover, there is no any adopted QA standards for eLearning programs or programs with elements of eLearnig [9].

## VI. EFQUEL MEMBERSHIP

As a result of the program activities, all seven DL@WEB university partners from Western Balkan have become lifelong EFQUEL members. EFQUEL is essentially a membership organisation with the head office based in Brussels, Belgium that provides a unique forum for information, research, innovation, exchange of best practices and networking for the members. The members benefits are numerous and listed at [12].

The connection with EFQUEL is very important since EFQUEL is aimed to developing new Quality approaches for emerging eLearning issues. By joining EFQUEL the project partners became a part of the largest European network of organisations and professionals and together with their help, the project will continuously act to provide the framework for enhancing eLearning and DL methodology and to ensure the quality in that field.

## VII. BADEN NETWORK

Additional result that will provide a sustainability of the project is establishment of a BADEN network. The BADEN network [13] is created to serve as a network of professionals and practitioners in the field of e-learning and distance education. BADEN was promoted at the MoodleMoot 2011 in Belgrade on 10 December, 2011 with the aim to improve and promote the application of modern technologies in education.

BADEN members have several activities which include:

- Development of informatics society in the region of Balkan through improving and promoting quality e-learning and distance education;

- Modernization of education by promoting regional and international cooperation by connecting institutions and individuals as well as by exchange of information in the fields of e-learning and distance education,
  - Tuning into The European Higher Education Area (EHEA),
  - Raising the level of pedagogical and technical knowledge and skills in the fields of e-learning and distance learning,
  - Strengthening of educational and civil sector for successful application of e-learning and distance education,
  - Fostering and cherishing research spirit for further development of e-learning and distance education,
  - Strengthening of responsibility within pedagogic practice in the field of e- learning and distance education,
  - More effective employment and improvement of economic development,
  - Raising social awareness about the significance of e-learning and distance education in all aspects of formal and non-formal education
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#### VIII. CONCLUSION

In this paper, the DL@WEB (Enhancing the Quality of Distance Learning at Western Balkan Higher Education Institutions) project was presented. The project is devoted to enhance, develop and implement accreditation standards, guidelines and procedures for quality assurance (QA) in the distance education programs at Western Balkan higher education institutions. For that purpose, different activities were planned, and an overview of realized activities is presented in the paper. Moreover, a review of the existing DL regulation in WB countries was given in the paper. The people involved in the project will continue to work on improving the quality and relevance of distance education at higher education institutions in the Western Balkan countries and to enable easier inclusion of partner country institutions into European Higher Education Area.

#### REFERENCES

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