

Press Communiqué

20 April 2016

European open and distance teaching universities decide on the large scale delivery of certified short learning programmes

Considering the modernisation and skills agenda of the European Commission and anticipating on next steps in the Bologna process, the Rectors of all 12 European open and distance teaching universities have signed a Memorandum of Understanding confirming their intent to promote short learning programmes (SLP) in their provisions and to valorise these as full-fledged learning paths. Also, they will mutually recognize modules and courses belonging to these programmes and develop joint short learning programmes with related virtual mobility schemes. This collaboration within the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) should enrich national courses. Students will have European-wide access to SLPs, which will prepare them better for the labour market and career switches. SLP's will be taught in different languages. The Memorandum was signed on the yearly EADTU-EU Summit in Brussels.

Martine Reicherts, Director General of DG Education and Culture, congratulated the open and distance teaching universities. She emphasized the role of SLPs for regional development and education for innovation, entrepreneurship and employability.

Working students

Working students are increasingly looking for shorter awards, certificates or diplomas, Anja Oskamp, the President of EADTU and Rector of the Open University of the Netherlands said, which they eventually can valorise at a later stage in a bachelor or master degree. Many of these students primarily want to update their knowledge during their career or they want to prepare themselves for a career switch. Hence, SLPs respond to the demand of large categories of students for a short study period in order to obtain an award, a certificate or a diploma at undergraduate and postgraduate qualification levels (foundation, bachelor,

master and doctoral level). After studying a SLP, students will have the possibility to integrate credits obtained by SLP modules and courses as building blocks in broader degree programmes.

A more diverse range of learning options

With SLPs, open and distance teaching universities respond better to the need for a more diverse range of learning options in which SLPs could be used as modules or tracks in broader qualification programmes (eg, a bachelor or master degree), with the possibility to integrate credits from a range of providers across Europe and as a step-up to higher level study. SLPs can also be used to foster the inclusion of disadvantaged learners including persons with a migrant background, Liz Marr, Director for Inclusion and Collaborative Partnerships of the British Open University said.

The open and distance teaching universities will develop a common qualification framework for the development of SLPs, based on the European Qualification Framework. Also, they will promote the development of flexible SLPs as a response to the diversity of needs in society and as an opportunity for students to match their study profiles and to the study-time available to them, Alejandro Tiana Ferrer, Rector of the Spanish Universidad Nacional à Distancia (UNED), said. They will activate collaboration and virtual mobility between European open and distance teaching universities in order to enrich the content of SLPs, to improve their educational quality and to raise their European outreach, scale and cost-effectiveness.

Open and distance teaching universities have a long experience and world-wide recognised expertise in offering open and flexible education. Within EADTU, they collaborate with some 200 traditional universities, which organise online and blended programmes. Currently, they reach about 3 million distance students in Europe in all national languages. This collaboration becomes increasingly successful, said Paulo Dias, Rector of Universidade Aberta in Portugal, collaborating with the University of Coimbra and others.

Recognition of MOOCs, OERs and prior knowledge

The 12 collaborating universities also intent to incorporate MOOCs in the framework of SLPs. MOOCs for part, can be seen as flexible building blocks of SLPs. The partnership will develop best practices on the assessment and recognition of MOOCs in combination with other courses that fits the academic and professional levels required. The same could be done for the recognition of other badges and micro-credentials for the recognition of specific skills or prior learning experiences.

The changing pedagogical landscape

This development is demonstrating the changing pedagogical landscape in Europe as in other parts of the Western world. In European universities, three areas of provision emerge consistently: degree education, continuing education (incl. continuous professional development or CPD) and open education (MOOCs, OERs). Online education will upscale the areas of continuing education and open education, while blended education will raise the quality and efficiency of degree education, as also explained in the recent study of the European Commission (Jeff Haywood, Piet Henderikx, Louisa Connelly and Martin Weller, The changing pedagogical landscape. New ways of teaching and learning and their implications for higher education policy. <http://bookshop.europa.eu/en/the-changing-pedagogical-landscape-pbNC0415435/>)

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