Cultural Impact on Online Education Quality Perception

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Abstract: Numerous stakeholders in the field of education have been working on the development and extent of the use of ICT in different learning communities (higher education, vocational training) and in different multicultural contexts thanks also to EU funding opportunities.

In this framework, they have participated in the building of various cross-national teaching and learning models.

The strategies which supported the development of such educational projects introducing online teaching and learning activities in the framework of European projects generally rely on the basic premise of the homogeneity of the educational systems likely to be used, and according to similar methods, the resources and training devices with ICT. This can lead to the negation of potential discrepancies, particularly cultural ones, in educational systems.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the concept of "quality in online education within European Online Academic Education's context", how this concept takes shape and how it becomes – or not – part of teaching and learning practices. We decided to focus our attention on the concept of "quality" to understand the eventual impact of the cultural factor on the developing scenario of virtual education because this concept seems to be particularly revealing if we take into consideration its "open nature".

The increasing number of virtual campuses reveals how common the development of teaching modules are nowadays together with complete degrees based on inter-university and transnational collaborations with the aim of transferring learning objects from one educational context to another. Virtual mobility is thus becoming a reality for a greater number of students.

However, the multicultural dimension of these new environments has not been investigated yet and in particular the notion of "online teaching quality" is still under-exploited.

This paper intends to provide a review of current works on Online Education Quality Measurement in general focusing on the investigation of Cultural Impact on Quality issues. At the same time this paper intends to shift the attention from students' to teachers' perception of quality and consequently on the possible different evaluation frameworks used within the same context: European Online Education.

The paper is part of a PhD research aimed at exploring the impact of cultural dimensions on the design of online courses offered by universities from different European areas. The research notably aims to reveal differences between online courses' models, in order to uncover which one of them can be connected to the cultural dimension they belong to.

Keywords: cultural impact, cultural differences, quality, online education, virtual campus, virtual mobility.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to develop a framework for the analysis of the concept of "quality in online education within European Online Academic Education's context", focussing our attention on its cultural dimensions.

A premise to the research activity is the analysis of the use of the term "culture" within the current literature. Good examples of definitions of the term "culture" can be found in Branch (1997): "Culture is regarded as the epistemology, philosophy, observed traditions, and patterns of action by individuals and human groups", or Matsumoto (1996): "Culture as a set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next".

Referring to our research purpose, we recognized this use of the term culture to be too vague but consider as significant the interpretation of the concept of culture given by Flowerder and Miller (1995) who propose a cross-cultural interface composed of four elements or "cultures":

- Ethnic culture: "socio-psychological feature which affect the behaviour of the students and which may contrast with the social-psychological make-up of Western lecturers".

- Local culture: "aspects of local settings with which the members of a particular society are familiar".

- Academic culture: "academic values, roles, assumptions, attitudes and patterns of behaviour common to the learners' culture".

- Disciplinary culture: "theories, concepts and norms, and so on of a particular academic discipline".

We consider this approach to the notion of culture very useful as it represents a good example of how one can deal with this concept in a problematic way, avoiding the common trend to use the term "culture" as a synonym of "nation" and consequently to treat national cultural traits as systematically predictable behavioural patterns.

2. Context

The dazzling development of ICT during the last fifteen years has proved to be a societal revolution as much as a technological one because of its consequences on behaviours and forms of exchange. In the field of education, this increase in the power of ICT materialized, spurred on by the European Union, in the development of virtual mobility.

In this sense, the growing number of virtual campuses reveals how frequent nowadays, is the development of teaching modules, and complete degrees based on inter-university and transnational collaborations, with the aim of transferring learning objects from one educational context to another. Virtual mobility is thus becoming a reality for a greater number of students, teachers and institutions.

Focusing our attention particularly on the European context we can observe that - in the last decade - the European Commission has funded different projects aimed at building virtual campuses in Europe, encouraging the development of new organisational models for European universities and for European exchange and sharing schemes - virtual mobility.

The strategies which supported the development of such educational projects at a distance in the framework of European projects generally relied on the basic premise of the homogeneity of educational systems likely to be used, according to similar methods, the resources and training devices offered by ICT. This leads to the negation of potential discrepancies, particularly cultural ones, in educational systems. The other premise we can identify is the use of norms and standards in terms of conception and usage of material and pedagogical support in order to re-use, through different technical architectures, the same content bases.

The European Union defined clearly its vision of virtual mobility as follows: within a workshop that was part of the dissemination activities of the eLearning programme funded by the European Commission titled *'The 'e' for our universities - virtual campuses'*, three definitions which emphasize different aspects of a virtual campus were suggested:

- Collaboration perspective: the term "virtual campus" denotes ICT-based collaboration of different partners supporting both learning offers and research in a distributed setting;

- Enterprise (economic) perspective: the term "virtual campus" denotes an ICT-based distributed learning and research enterprise;

- Networked organisation perspective: the term "virtual campus" denotes an environment, which increases and/or integrates learning and research services offered by different partners.

This is the vision of the European Union, but not only the European stakeholders are engaged in promoting the diffusion of virtual mobility: several countries are developing their own internationalization policy for higher education (HEFCE 2005), in particular those belonging to the English speaking area : United Kingdom, United States, Australia and Canada. Examples of how a country like Australia deals with this issue has been analyzed in different publications: *Globalization/Internationalisation of Online Content and Teaching*, Australian Flexible Learning Quick Guide Series or the Quick Guide on *Cross-cultural Issues in Content Development and Teaching Online*.

This trend seems to reveal an "easy road" to a global educational scenario.

As Mason (2003) powerfully described, "Every day there are announcements of new companies being formed to market online and distance-taught courses, or new partnerships among existing institutions to broker courses and programmes both nationally and internationally. Just like airline companies, universities around the world are 'partnering up'. There are a variety of reasons for forming partnerships or consortia of universities:

- sharing resources, costs and infrastructure to deliver e-learning;

- competing with international providers;
- reducing duplication among existing universities".

But is this really the direction that has already been taken? Are we all – teachers, tutors and students - going to deal with a borderless higher education (referring to the definition of 'borderless education' provided by the English Observatory on Borderless Higher Education: "The term 'borderless education' encompasses a broad range of activities and developments which cross - or have the potential to cross - the traditional borders of higher education, be they geographical, sectoral or conceptual")?

There are a lot of eminent voices to support this idea of a *borderless education context*. This kind of boundaries includes (Middlehurst 2002):

- levels and types of education, such as further and higher education, vocational and academic education, adult and continuing education; in some cases this represents a genuine effort to create seamless lifelong learning opportunities;

- private and public, for-profit and not-for-profit education: combining 'public good' and 'private gain' organizational structures and forms of provision;

- state and country boundaries, for example, between business and the public sectors and higher education, creating new corporate universities, transnational consortia as well as joint ventures and strategic alliances;

- boundaries of time and space in the creation of virtual learning environments, online learning programmes and e-universities.

Does this borderless scenario apply as easily? Are the educational actors (teachers, tutors, students, institutions, etc.) ready to face this change?

Some researchers do not totally agree with this assumption.

The first important contribution is Collis, Parisi and Ligorio's (1996), who reports a list of barriers to effective online learning and global communication:

- cultural and environment problem;

- teaching style differences;

- problems of language and semantics;

- technical problems relative to platforms, operating systems and lack of standard interfaces.

As Moore suggests, behind educational traditions lie philosophical ideas. "These can vary significantly from one culture to another, and it is in these variations that lies the root of problems in cross-cultural understanding – and misunderstanding (Moore 2005)".

More recently and in the same vein, Banks (2006) offered us a meaningful analysis of a case that addresses the themes of cultural differences in e-learning, intercultural collaboration for joint development and understanding of e-learning, inter-cultural decision-making in e-learning and the impact of these factors on the professional development of members of the team. Banks strongly affirms how integrating pedagogical ideas to implement in the design of e-learning means more than identifying underpinning theories that inform particular learning and teaching practices. According to Goodyear (2001) it involves bringing together pedagogic ideas with methods, tools and processes for facilitating learning and is linked closely to the design of learning tasks and activities and the functionalities of the technologies being used. It also encompasses the existing context of learning and integration with existing learning and teaching practices that will inevitably be adapted and changed through its impact.

We collocate our research in the same trend of investigation: our aim is – in fact - to build a framework of analysis able to support the understanding of this phenomenon, and to verify whether and how teachers and tutors are aware of the possible cultural gaps and are prepared to face them (identify the critical success factors, barriers, and issues associated with globalisation/internationalisation of education).

3. Current literature

This chapter is dedicated to an analysis of the current literature on the themes investigated into this paper.

So the first review will be dedicated to the literature on quality issues and the second to the impact cultural differences on online education.

3.1 Online education quality measurement

As well described by Sanyal and MartinWhile (2007), traditional institutions are still playing a dominant role in providing higher education to meet the aforementioned needs, they are also changing their roles as follows:

- They are becoming partners in regional and international consortia.

- They have engaged in different forms of transnational education.

- They have joined virtual university initiatives.

- They are building partnerships with industries.

These different trends are responsible of a growing interest on the quality: internationalization policies and practices are lacking a quality assurance dimension and quality assurance approaches seems to be too much confined to national contexts.

Moreover: the concept of quality is not strictly defined and it has also evolved over time.

An analysis of the current literature allow us to identify a lot of different definitions of the concept of quality: excellence, exceptionality, perfection or consistency, providing value for money, conforming to specifications, getting things right the first time, meeting customers' needs, having zero defects, providing added value, exhibiting fitness of purpose, transformation.

Going deeper into the definition of quality of online education the trend is confirmed: a systematic, formative methodology to measure and ensure quality is lacking. The most common tools for gauging quality are surveys and course evaluations in which instructors, learners, or sometimes administrators provide their perceptions, opinions, or experiences. Data collected from surveys or course evaluations only touch on some aspects of a course's quality—mostly issues related to teaching and learning, such as how an instructor performs in class or how the learning experience affects learners. Often, aspects not obvious to faculty or learners are ignored, such as instructional design, course development, and the use of technology (Chao, Saj, Tessier 2006).

To be totally understood this phenomenon has to be connected to the fact that there are two types of quality assurance: internal and external. We have also to consider a variety of practices of quality assurance, among which three mechanisms can be distinguished. Also in this case the analysis provided by Sanyal and MartinWhile is useful.

The mechanism are: quality audit, quality assessment and accreditation.

The first and the last one are external mechanisms, while quality assessment could be both internal and/or an external mechanism.

- Quality audits examine whether an institution or one of its sub-units has a system of quality assurance procedures and determines its adequacy.

- Quality assessment involves evaluating (reviewing, measuring and judging) the quality of higher education processes, practices, programmes and services using appropriate techniques, mechanisms and activities.

- Accreditation is a process that usually results in the award of a recognition status (yes/no, a score on a multipoint scale, a combination of letter grade and score, an operating licence, or conditional deferred recognition) for a limited period.

Accreditation is the most widely used method of external quality assurance. And the trend seems to go toward accreditation, being perceived as the mechanism able to ensure a specific level of quality according to the institution's mission, the objectives of the programme(s) and the expectations of different stakeholders, including students and employers.

Regardless of the quality model adopted, there are many methodological problems involved in measuring quality. Many characteristics of quality are not measurable and must be assessed through proxy variables.

Scores on ordinal scales are imprecise, and so are opinionated judgments.

Lee Harvey expressed serious reservations about accreditation when he stated: "Europe is rushing precipitously into accreditation and that the approach being taken is based on naïve views of what accreditation is and what it can achieve. More fundamentally, there is an underlying but unspecified and unexamined set of taken-for-granteds that legitimate accreditation. Accreditation is neither neutral nor benign; it is not apolitical. Quite the contrary, the accreditation route is highly political and is fundamentally about a shift of power but a shift concealed behind a new public management ideology cloaked in consumerist demand and European conformity". (Harvey 2004). So, from our point of view a growing consciousness about quality issues is needed, in particular among teachers and academics because even if this topic has acquired a relevant importance, it is expected to focus efforts in this way in the forthcoming period. In this sense quality must not stay anymore a concept at the level of mere bureaucracy. It should be able to signify something real and concrete that assures effective and measured results which will facilitate the training institutions to go further in their tasks, but to do this the main actors involves should acquire specific competences and awareness of all the variables involved, in particular the cultural ones.

Contextualizing our attention on the European region, we have to highlight the information provided by Ulf-Daniel Ehlers with his study 'Use and distribution of quality approaches in European e-learning' that was carried out as part of the EU-supported research project 'European Quality Observatory' (EQO) and provides detailed information about opportunities and difficulties in the area of quality development.

What is important to emphasize that the findings of the study demonstrate the need to develop a generally recognised standard which leads to certification of e-learning provision (or of providers). An outline of the main requirements for the formulation of such a standard can be summarised in the key words 'participation', 'transparency', 'degree of familiarity and acceptance', 'openness', 'adaptability and scalability', 'harmonisation and integration', 'integrated methodology', 'quality awareness' and 'measurability'. At the same time this study shows clearly that although there are already a wide range of strategies and proposals for quality development, many of those involved in e-learning as decision-makers at an institutional or policy level, as teachers applying e-learning at the operational everyday level, or as media designers developing e-learning, as well as many users, demonstrate too little quality competence to meet the 'quality' challenge.

The existence of different quality models (ISO, EFQM, TQM **,** etc) serves as a reference for institutions to be engaged in this matter. This involvement may differ from one institution to another by a wide range of considerations. To begin with, it depends on the adopted theoretical options; the most frequents are the cited International Standards Organisation (ISO), the European Foundation for the Quality Management (EFQM) or the Total Quality Management (TQM).

Apart from these, there are other relevant actors of the process of standards' definition: UNESCO/OECD, the INQAAHE, and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education but as has been seen, no standards have yet achieved general recognition in the field of quality management and quality assurance.

Taking into account this premise, an important contribution is given by Ehlers with his classification of standards, that – as we have underlined - are as numerous as the quality approaches themselves.

The standards can be classified according to the following features:
1. context: in what context is the standard developed and used (e.g. industries, sectors)?
2. purpose: what is the aim of the standard (e.g. more successful learning, better value for money, company targets, integrated objectives)?
3. quality dimension: what items are investigated (e.g. process orientation, product orientation or competence orientation)?
4. perspective: what actors are involved (e.g. learners, authors, administrators, external assessors, internal quality monitors)?
5. methodology: what methodology is followed by the standard (e.g. certification, guidelines, regulations, outlines, frameworks)?
6. measurement: how is compliance or success measured and checked (e.g. audit, document review, statistics)?

3.2 Cultural differences in online education

What emerged from an analysis of the literature (Milani 2007) on this issue is that the most evident feature is the almost exclusive focus on the cultural differences emerging from Western-non Western learning contexts, non-Western being, in most cases, Asian (Robinson 1999; Shattuck 2005) and to a lesser extent Arabian (Al-Harthi 2005) students.

Moreover the concept of "Western" is so wide and vague that it actually resembles the educational American model: the term "Western" is an inappropriate descriptor.

Another interesting element of reflection is that the most detailed studies belong, except for the USA area, to three territorial areas: UK, Australia and Canada, three countries that have been focusing their attention for a long time on the risk of a growing educational American imperialism ("American packaging of culture"), which finds in the Internet its propulsive push. The extent and seriousness of these studies are an indicator of the importance with which globalization is viewed by the higher education sector.

On the other hand, the major part of the current reflections on this issue seem to concentrate only on the students' behaviour (Moore 2005; Pincas 2001) and only little attention is paid to the observation of cultural differences in teachers' behaviour and practices.

The main concept of the current research seems to be the "*educational globalization*". Mason (2003) in particular, identifies some elements of the educational scenario associated with this concept: international communications based on telecommunications, information and media technologies, which facilitate transnational circulation of text, images and artefacts,

- international movement of students to study in other countries as well as a demand for online courses without a residency requirement in another country,

- increasing multicultural learning environment whether online or on campus,

- increasing global circulation of ideas and particularly Western pedagogical Systems and values,

- a rise of international and virtual organizations offering Web-based education and training.

One of the more relevant contributions in this field of research can be identified in the paper written by Claire Bélisle "*eLearning and Intercultural dimensions of learning theories and teaching models*", where the author describes how "designing elearning environments has required that educational actors clarify, rationalise and formalise their practices. In order to introduce mode coherence and relevancy, implicit cultural assumptions have had to be revisited, bringing about a deeper awareness of the kind of learning that schools and universities are specialised in and of the underlying choices of values and beliefs. In multicultural and multilingual societies, the implicit pedagogical assumptions of eLearning environments need to be made explicit" (Bélisle 2007).

The real improvement of this trend of research is recognizing that in uncovering the learning theories that organize the pedagogical practices, it is the whole pedagogical culture of teachers that is brought into light. More research is required in this direction: there's a growing weight of stressing the need for educational actors to become aware of the cultural embeddedness of their activity, in traditional teaching as well as in online teaching.

But also in this field, we have to be aware of the risks highlighted by Lee Harvey referring to the quality issues: also when we talk about the need to develop an awareness of the cultural embeddedness of pedagogical practices we have to face – at the same time – the process of attempting to absorb other pedagogical practices into an increasingly narrowly defined and hegemonic north European culture, within the European context, and an even more hegemonic American teaching culture. What is happening nowadays seems to indicate a tension between visions, one of a movement towards a hegemonic culture, the other seeing the emergence of a more multi-cultural context.

Last but not least, we want to point attention to the e-Quality project, that was carried out with the support of the European Community within the Action MINERVA of the Programme SOCRATES (110231-CP-1-2003-FR-MINERVA-M) and gathered five European Countries, representing six academic institutions. The e-Quality project was one of the first actions aimed at facing what is cultural and organisational diversity among European Higher Education, it could be considered one of the first researches which combine the attention of both cultural and quality issues in Higher Education.

The e-Quality project started with the comparative analysis of the partners' context that allows awareness and detects a set of existing blocking factors in the implementation of quality.

National studies have been conducted in the five countries, using this common questionnaire.

Five reports and a synthesis have been written and are available on the project website. The synthesis includes also an interesting comparison on blocking or helping factors for quality implementation in Higher Education institutions, in general and for ODL in particular [Dumont, Sangrà 2005].

In the frame of the e-Quality project through a collaborative work, a set of criteria and indicators are being developed. The idea is offering guidance enhancing the improvement of ODL higher institutions in quality terms. Furthermore this information may be considered as key success elements when implementing quality methodologies.

We can consider this project as a very good example of investigation of the context but what is still under-exploited is the deep analysis of the impact of cultural differences on the generation and management of quality issues in European Higher Education; in this field other research is required.

4. The research issue

To understand the potential impact of the cultural factor on the developing scenario of virtual education we decided to focus our attention on the concept of "quality", that seems to be particularly revealing because of its "open nature". As we have emphasized in the previous chapter, there is indeed no normative definition for quality, which is why to understand which notion of quality has a direct impact on teaching practices we should start by understanding how teachers – first of all - evaluate the quality of an online course.

4.1 What does quality mean?

As described before, the greatest challenge when trying to define quality in any product or service is the relativity of the "quality" experience, as it mainly depends on an individual's level of expectations.

To go deeper into the analysis of the concept of quality, the Quality Decision Cycle of the European Quality Observatory is a good starting point.

Ehlers (2006) adapted this cycle by identifying four steps users have to engage in to develop quality: knowledge about quality development for general orientation and selection, experience with the usage of instruments for quality development, ability of innovation and modification to adapt instruments and concepts to their own situation or develop new and analysis abilities for assessing needs and evaluating existing tools and concepts.

But does the term quality – as used within this specific context - always refer to the same meaning?

We propose (Milani 2007) to reflect on four different "dimensions of quality":

- First level - Expected quality: It is the ideological dimension (What I – as a teacher – think is the best for me and the other actors)

- Second level - Operational quality: It is the level that defines how the teacher invests in what he/she thinks is "the best"

- Third level - Achieve quality :It is what "in fact" has been done about quality

- Fourth level - Perceived quality :It is what the users (may be also the other teachers) think about the quality level of the course.

5. Methodology
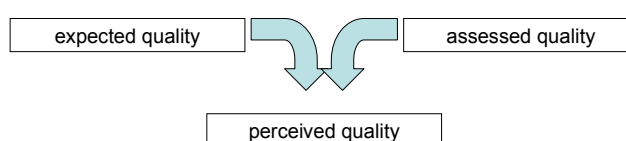
Figure 1: Quality perception

As expressed in Figure 1, the way quality is perceived is the result of the differences between the quality expected and the quality observed. Consequently the two issues to investigate are: how does a teacher develop his/her own idea of quality; how does a teacher measure quality?

We have to face the two following methodological problems: build research tools to understand how the idea of quality develops, and tools to understand how teachers measure the quality on an online course.

For both these research issues, a qualitative approach seems to be the most appropriate.

5.1 Develop an understanding of how the notion of quality in an online course emerge

As previous analysed in Chapter 3, the term "quality" is often understood – even in the literature - as shorthand for Totally Quality Management (TQM), thus adopting the business model associated with this term.

Another relevant way to think about quality is the reference to the ISO model: in 2005 the ISO/IEC 19796-1:2005, the ISO/IEC standard benchmarks for e-learning appeared and has been presented like the new international standard aiming at harmonizing the various approaches used around the world for assessing the quality of e-learning initiatives.

In the same years, the formulation of quality assurance systems of online education, while most frequently regulated at a regional or national level, has been driven by international developments.

In particular within Europe, new initiatives raised: E-xcellence (http://www.eadtu.nl/e%2DxcellenceQS/), SEEQUEL - Sustainable Environment for the Evaluation of Quality in E-Learning (http://www.education-observatories.net/seequel/index), EFQUEL – European Foundation for Quality in e_Learning (http://www.qualityfoundation.org/ww/en/pub/efquel/index.htm), Qual e-Learning (http://www.qual-elearning.net/), etc.

Most of these frameworks present a great number of tools and guidelines on the procedures to assess products and processes, distinguishing among the processes related to the service dimension and the processes related to the teaching and learning dimensions.

How much of this large amount of information, suggestions, benchmarking, guidelines etc. really impacts on the notion of quality that each single teacher applies in his/her teaching practice?

The only way to answer is to investigate this issue directly with teachers, taking into account that interviewing teachers from different countries implies a parallel analysis of their country's approach to quality.

5.2 Develop an understanding of how teachers measure quality

To analyse this level of quality we should develop a way to collect information directly from teachers, asking them to explain what they consider to be an indicator of quality for an academic online course. Therefore teachers will be invited to list their indicators of quality and to define their weight into the design of a quality measurement.

We have to take clearly into account that in the European context teachers are not used to evaluating explicitly the quality of their courses and – at the same time – evaluating other teachers' courses. There is a commonly developed experience (from the very beginning of an academic career) to evaluate and be evaluated only from a research point of view and research results will determine the career of a teacher.

This behaviour has had a direct impact also on the constitution of the international research community. We cannot say the same about the existence of an international teaching community.

One of the few cases of peer teaching assessment can be found in teaching rewards in some universities (mainly in the Anglo-Saxon area). However, even in the case of teaching rewards, the peer assessment is only part of the total assessment and never the most relevant one.

Referring to these premises, what specific methodology should we use to investigate how teachers evaluate their own course and their peers' courses?

What variables do they use to assess the quality of an online course? And what are their relative weights?

We are going to collect data from interviews with teachers using the following structure:

- What rules do you follow to try and design a good online course?

- What are the variables you look at to evaluate the quality of a course?

- What are their relative weights?

- Can you give us an example of a good online course?

- Why do you think that this course is of good quality?

- Can you give us an example of a low quality online course?

- Why do you think that this course is of low quality?

5.3 A case study: the e-LERU Virtual Campus

The e-LERU virtual campus is an initiative of eight European universities, all members of the League of European Research Universities (www.leru.org) whose objective is to share teaching and learning experiences at a European level.

The eight universities involved in this project are: Université Louis Pasteur, Università degli Studi di Milano, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Universiteit Leiden, Université de Genève, Helsingin yliopisto.

The aim of the e-LERU project (www.eleru.leru.org) is to create a virtual campus as a common e-learning offer, enabling each partner university to offer its students virtual mobility (by means of teaching modules from other partner universities to be undertaken through distance learning), as a complement, or in preparation to physical mobility.

This project represents a perfect case study for our research because it will give us real significant data to answer some of our research questions.

We will focus our attention on two segments of this project that are relevant for our research: the certification scheme adopted by the partners and the quality guidelines designed and adopted.

5.3.1 The e-LERU Certification Scheme

The e-LERU partners are all involved in the implementation of the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) credit system, even though they are not at the same stage of its implementation. However, as far as student mobility is concerned, they all decided to rely on the procedures used within the Erasmus programme, as a recognised best practise of European mobility.

In the framework of our research, the most relevant document is the e-LERU description form that the teacher has to fill in to describe his/her e-module.

To build the e-LERU description form, the partners decided to focus this description on the learner and therefore always reflect in terms of learning outcomes.

These are the information available on the form:

- Course-Module Name

- Course-Module Code
  ECTS credits

- Duration
  Term
  Type
  Language

- Prerequisites
  Post requisites

- Developing Institution(s)
  Offering Institution(s)

- Course module leader
  Teaching Group

- Fees

- Aims and Objectives

- Content Description (Learning Units)

- Mode of delivery (V-classroom activities)

- Infrastructure needed

- Teaching Methods

- Assessment

- Other Remarks

- Learning Resources

This form is the main element a university will use to decide whether it is interested in integrating an e-module in its curricula: the first analysis of the quality of an e-module clearly comes down to one or more teachers.

5.3.2 The e-LERU quality process

The concept of a virtual campus built on the existing LERU (League of European Research Universities) network should however be synonym of "excellence". To this end, the setting up of a formal quality process was necessary to ensure the quality of e-LERU outcomes. This quality label is established through a specific quality process which should apply to the e-learning modules (also named "e-modules").

The method defined by the partnership to design the quality process for the e-learning modules was not created from scratch but was empirically established on the basis of other similar experiences and the international standard ISO 19796, dedicated to quality management in the field of education and training.

A quality process consists of four stages:

1. Identifying the main steps the partners have to go through to develop e-learning modules;

2. Identifying the milestones which mark out the development of e-learning modules;

3. Identifying the quality criteria which will define the e-learning modules;

4. Identifying the assessment and evaluation tools (survey, questionnaire, etc) which will be used to make sure that quality objectives have been achieved.

These characteristics naturally lead to the following list of quality criteria to be applied to e-modules:

- the e-module is compliant with ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) guidelines

- the e-module is fully described

- the ECTS grading policy is transparent and easy-to-understand

- feedback to student assignments and questions is ensured (constructive and provided in a timely manner)

- instructional materials are self-contained and presented in a format appropriate to the online environment

- technologies required for the e-modules are specified and provided (or easily downloadable)

- copyrights are respected

- usability and accessibility have been taken into account.

Our analysis of this case study will now follow these stages:
First step: we will have interviews with teachers involved in the design and/or adoption of an e-module (being part of the offering or of the receiving institution) to analyse how these teachers evaluate their e-modules and

the ones designed in other universities. To complete this task we are going to manage the interviews following the structure presented into the paragraph 5.2 of this paper.

Second step: we will try to understand how this kind of "general quality guidelines" really become part of the teaching practice and which quality issues are tacit. We will try to make them explicit and to understand if there are cultural differences in the way they evaluate quality and therefore to deal with the teaching and learning activity.

Through this case study we are going to validate the methodology of research that we are going to adopt to investigate other virtual campuses experiences.

6. Future research

This article raises a number of questions, some for future research and some with concrete implications. One question is central to a better understanding of what quality, within the context of online education, means: how teachers – first of all - evaluate the quality of an online course.

A second stage could be the mapping the variables used by the teachers involved into virtual campus activities to describe their perception of quality and the comparison. Then this mapping should be compared with the mapping of the variables involved into the "official" construction of the standards (referring - of course - with the processes related to the teaching and learning dimensions and not to the institutional dimensions of quality measurement).

Only after these further levels of analysis it will be appropriate to start the investigation of the connections between the mapping of quality variables and cultural differences, adopting the interpretation of culture indicated in the first chapter of this article: a cross-cultural interface composed of four elements or "cultures": ethnic culture, local culture, academic culture, disciplinary culture.

7. Conclusion

In the current scenario, characterized by an increasing number of virtual mobility experiences – from teachers' as well from students' point of view - and by a rhetoric of a 'borderless education', it is relevant to turn this phenomenon into a crucial issue to investigate and reveal the existence of potential cultural differences. By simply recognizing these differences, educational actors will be able to face them and consequently to optimize their teaching and learning practices.

Through this paper we have proposed a review of the current literature on quality issues in online European education and also on the impact of cultural differences in online teaching and learning practices. We also tried to shift the attention from students' to teachers' point of view to reveal potential cultural differences in the perception of the quality of an online course.

We focused our attention on the notion of quality because we strongly believe that it could be a litmus paper of some 'removed' or implicit or tacit assumptions able to influence the results of a teaching and learning experience within a context of virtual mobility.

The next steps of this research will be the validation of our research methodology that should enable us to identify the eventual impact of cultural differences on the development of online courses starting from concrete studies on projects integrating ICT in higher education in the European context.

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