

Experiences on developing Diploma Supplements for Lifelong eLearning Qualifications based upon Europass models: “Tutor online” Diploma, University of Salamanca

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This paper is devoted to explain the main issues included in an experimental Diploma Supplement, based upon the different Europass portfolio documents available, and developed for the University of Salamanca “Tutor online” Lifelong Learning Diploma. This Supplement is offered as a model for L3 (Life Long Learning) courses and initiatives, because of its capability to clearly and simply express skills, competences and quantitative results obtained by the holder of the qualification this Supplement is attached too.

El propósito de este artículo consiste en ilustrar los principales elementos incluidos en un Suplemento al Título de carácter experimental, basado en los diferentes documentos del portfolio Europass disponibles, desarrollado en el seno del Diploma de Formación Continua “Tutor online” de la Universidad de Salamanca. Este Suplemento se postula como un modelo para todo tipo de iniciativas y cursos L3 (Life Long Learning o Formación continua), puesto que posee la virtualidad de poner de manifiesto, de manera clara y simple tanto las competencias y las destrezas como los resultados cuantitativos obtenidos a lo largo de la iniciativa por parte del poseedor de la cualificación a la que se adjunta este Suplemento.

Keywords Lifelong Learning; accreditation; Diploma Supplement; Europass Portfolio Documents; Quality in eLearning; certification of skills and competences; qualitative evaluation process

1. Introduction

The incorporation of our Higher Education systems to the European Higher Education Learning Space (commonly known as “Bologna Process”), suppose a real challenge for our institutions, not only because they will need to adopt new ways to develop teaching-to-learning processes (and this will imply significant consequences in terms of infrastructures, teaching roles, evaluation systems), but also because eLearning will reveal itself as an strategic ally of traditional in-person learning contexts due to its capability to support a tutorial system and to manage practical learning activities impossible to develop otherwise, by one hand; by the other hand, the concept of accreditation and certification and, more specifically, analysis, control and certification of quality issues, will represent a cornerstone for our learning systems in the next few years.

Lifelong Learning is, undoubtedly, one of the learning contexts experiencing a more significant growth and demand regarding to eLearning, so in distance learning contexts as for mixed or blended experiences. However, it is important to admit that, after an initial period of technological fascination “self-learning” whose balance is far from being satisfactory, corporations, public administrations and learning institutions prefer initiatives based upon dynamization and tutoring presence [1, p. 13] because they consider that there are more possibilities to achieve learning success and quality by following this “classical” model.

In the next few pages we will try to explain the concept of “quality” applied to eLearning, and particularly to Lifelong eLearning initiatives. It will be crucial, in order to determine quality for these initiatives, to count on an instrument capable to efficiently certify the skills and competences gained for students in L3 courses. Given the actual framework, we need to own a standard document applicable to

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every L3 initiative, a document that will belong to the Europass Portfolio documents. In absence of such a document, the University of Salamanca “Tutor online” L3 Diploma did develop an experimental model, following Europass styles and models, whose structure and main elements will be shown as a case study to be considered in the process of building an European Europass L3 Supplement, unavailable at the present time.

2. Defining quality in eLearning. Quality and certification in L3 initiatives

One of the main issues regarding to eLearning (but also to every learning experience, as for any product or service), and especially in the actual “Bologna framework” is the notion of “quality”. This concept, in fact, does not belong exclusively to the universe of industry and economics. Academic world is not already strange to the need to measure certain items in order to determine quality in their learning processes.

The concept of *quality*, in so far as it refers to a complex learning context, depends in this case on these five factors: technology, services, evaluation/accreditation, contents, human factor (tutoring) [2]. The ISO (ISO 8402: 1986, 3.1) defines ‘quality’ as follows: “The totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs”. By matching these two ideas, we define quality in eLearning as *the effective acquisition of a suit of skills, knowledge and competences by students, by means of developing appropriate learning contents given with a sum of efficient web tools supported via a net of value-added services, whose process –from content developing to the acquisition of competences and the analysis of the whole intervention- is ensured by an exhaustive and personalized evaluation and certification process, and it is monitored by a human team practising a strong and integral tutorial presence through the whole teaching-to-learning process.*

2.1 The concept of quality applied to Lifelong learning experiences: accreditation and qualification

Quality is much more than the issues that could be certified in a single document. In spite of this obviousness, persists the necessity to certify qualitative aspects from the goals achieved in a learning experience, and this is crucial also for Lifelong learning courses, because these courses must ensure that the owner of the certification is effectively ready to apply the skills and competences acquired, or on the contrary they will not be useful at all.

Paradoxically, the exigency of a quality certification can be satisfied with much effectiveness in online courses than in “traditional” in-person learning experiences. In fact, the achievement of knowledge, skills and competences in a context based upon collaborative learning, problem solving methodology and social knowledge building (common issues present in every quality network learning experience), could be ensured due to student participation, clearly registered in the virtual learning environments. This interaction is so important (even more, frequently) as the fulfilment of individual or grouping activities.

Moreover, web learning courses are frequently considered as “deceptive” and, unfortunately, eLearning did acquire a reputation of non-quality, as if quality itself were inherent (or not) to a learning modality. This is another important reason to develop certification and accreditation systems for the goals obtained, this is to say, quality indicators for this qualifications.

In an European context (Bologna Process), the accreditation of quality must follow the lines indicated for the official documents coming from the European Learning Space framework. There are five documents in order to certify qualifications in this moment, that is to say, the actual “Europass Portfolio” consist of five documents (<http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/>). There are two “personal” documents, the Europass *Curriculum Vitae* (CV)² and the Europass Language Passport (LP)³, auto-certified by the owner of these

² Council Decision n° 2241/2004/EC, art. 5 and annex II.

³ Council Decision n° 2241/2004/EC, art. 8 and annex V.

documents. The institutions responsible of the learning initiative issue the other three documents: Europass Mobility⁴, Europass Certificate Supplement (CS)⁵ and Europass Diploma Supplement (DS)⁶. It is not possible to analyze the documents in these few pages, but it is certain that Europass Portfolio is incomplete without a document capable to certify the Lifelong learning experiences developed by a citizen. This hypothetical document could certify every single learning experience separately (as the CS or the DS) or could be auto-certificated by the owner, as shown in the Language Passport. Anyway, European Council Decisions consider the possibility to create new documents to insert them on the Europass Portfolio (Council Decision n° 2241/2004/EC, art. 2c and Annex I) [3], and the European Commission expressed the necessity to extend this Portfolio to include Lifelong learning (Commission Staff Working Document, 2005, pp. 30-31) [4]. Finally, it is known that Lifelong learning is one of the strategic policy areas of the European Union, as so as to create a “New generation programs”, consisting on a sum of interventions within the Sectorial Programs (Comenius, Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci and Gruntvig), aimed to Lifelong learning (http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/newprog/index_en.html) with a budget of 13.720 million € between 2007 and 2013.

According to this context it is clear that, as well as being important to seek the quality of the whole issues involved in eLearning, it is crucial for Lifelong learning to count on a Supplement ready to add to the Europass Portfolio (hypothetically called L3S here). But, before creating and promoting an official document for a so complex context as Lifelong learning (this is probably why L3S were not developed among with the other five “first generation” Europass Documents), it is important to essay experimental models in order to test their functionality and acceptance in the labour market.

3. Experimental development of a LifeLong Learning Supplement (L3S) for the Europass Portfolio: University of Salamanca “Tutor online”

The University of Salamanca (Spain) holds, since 2004, an L3 Programme to train tutors online for eLearning courses and activities (“Tecnologías y Métodos de Formación en Red: Tutor online”, <http://www.tutoron-line.info>), with remarkable success and more than a hundred professionals qualified on its first five editions. It is a fully eLearning activity, planned according to the principles of the European Higher Education Space, certified in ECTS and with a structure based upon the acquisition of skills and competences, with a very practical approach. According to the results, the Diploma obtained a noticeable reception in the labour market and public institutions, not only in Spain but also in many countries of Latin America.

To complete the insertion of the Diploma “de facto” on the European Higher Education Space, the most important requirement was to develop a Diploma Supplement whose structure followed the Europass portfolio documents, as seen in chapter 2. Obviously, none of the actual documents could be applied to an L3 activity and, on the other hand, none of the actual documents were suitable for the special characteristics of this diploma.

The authors of this paper developed an experimental Diploma Supplement, based upon the different Europass portfolio documents available, that suits the needs of qualification inherent to L3 courses and express the assessment, in terms of skills, competences and quantitative results gained by the holder of the qualification.

The experimental supplement is delivered within the official Lifelong learning Diploma issued by the University of Salamanca. It is a double-faced DIN-A4 document, signed by the academic director and the Lifelong learning agency director, with the stamp of the University.

It is made up of seven sections, all of them present in some of the Europass Portfolio Documents. It looks like the Europass Certificate Supplement (CS) in a quick view but, unlike this, the L3S include the

⁴ Council Decision n° 2241/2004/EC, art. 6 and annex III.

⁵ Council Decision n° 2241/2004/EC, art. 9 and annex VI.

⁶ Council Decision n° 2241/2004/EC, art. 7 and annex IV.

personal information of the owner and more qualitative assessment issues, exclusive from the Diploma Supplement for Grade and Master degrees. The L3S is printed in Spanish and English and, optionally, could be delivered in any EU official language.

- Section 1 shows personal information of the student.
- Section 2 gives information about the Lifelong learning course: Title, type of certificate, main fields of study for the qualification, contact hours and ECTS, modality (in-person, online, blended...).
- Section 3 is devoted to explain the profile of skills and competences. By one hand, general competences obtained for all students are developed. By the other hand, it shows the more specific skills and competences related to the course certificated. Then, the supplement adds an explanatory note identifying the legal status of the certification and, obviously, due to the experimental nature of this supplement, it is explained the absence of legal validity. This absence of legal validity is not exclusive from this experimental supplement. In fact, the documents of the Europass Certificate Supplement show the same explanatory note, although they are issued by an academic (national or regional) administration. Moreover, none of the Europass Portfolio Documents could substitute the original certificate and there is no guarantee of automatic recognition outside the original country of expedition.
- Section 4 informs about the contents of the learning activity and the results gained: ECTS for each module; title, number of ECTS and grade of each subject obtained by the owner (with a grading scheme and a grade distribution guidance), as so as the overall classification of the qualification, with the explanatory note in order to understand how this overall classification were calculated.
- Section 5 declares the legal basis of the qualification; this is to say, the institution that grants the diploma, the signing authority and the legal basis that validate the certificate.
- Section 6 offers additional information, basically with regard to web links addressed to information sites, so for the diploma as for the Lifelong learning section on the University of Salamanca.
- Finally, section 7 certifies the present supplement, by the date and original signatures both of academic and Lifelong learning section directors, and the stamp of the University.

4. Conclusions

The concept and nature of “quality” applied to learning activities and, particularly, to eLearning courses, is a really complex issue. Quality definition implies much more than quantitative measurement, but the estimation of such parameters is very difficult because of their “unobjectivity”. In fact, to measure the quality of a manufactured product in terms of material strength is naturally easier than determining the qualification of a tutoring activity in a certain learning context, or the opportunity of a concrete learning material in a certain subject. In eLearning, it is relatively simple to determine the quality of the access to a learning environment, the usability, the time to answer doubts explained by students, etc., but when a student is looking for a “quality eLearning experience” is much more than this.

One of the most important qualitative challenges of the Bologna process is the development of a transparency and recognition system for Diplomas, Certificates and Qualifications. In order to do so, it is crucial to create a catalogue of skills and competences, as so as a standard framework for these competences.

Obviously, the development of such a standard framework is not the only issue to achieve the desired quality for eLearning initiatives. However, the most of the quality issues for eLearning are not different from those present in every learning activity, never mind if it is a Lifelong learning activity or any other learning initiative.

The actual status and future growth of Lifelong learning, with important investments (so legal as economical) in the next few years, make necessary to develop a common qualification framework for Lifelong learning. Due to the heterogeneously of this learning modality and the variety of actors implied, it is

especialmente relevante para crear sistemas de cualificación y certificación con el fin de detectar los principales indicadores necesarios, para constituir un excelente sistema de acreditación que permita la necesaria agilidad y la aceptación de un mercado laboral dinámico, orientado al aprendizaje permanente de los ciudadanos. La piedra angular es, consecuentemente, el desarrollo de un Portafolio como el núcleo de un excelente sistema de calidad y cualificación.

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