

## Exchange on Quality Standards in the Offer of Postgraduate Virtual Academic Courses in the European Union and Latin America and Caribbean

Report of a Virtual Meeting held on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021



This document is based on a virtual meeting of Higher Education and Postgraduate Institutions from the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean entitled “Exchange on quality standards in the offer of virtual postgraduate academic courses in the European Union (EU), Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC)”, co-organised by the EU-LAC Foundation and the Ibero-American General Secretariat (SEGIB), on 8<sup>th</sup> April 2021, in the framework of the preparation of the XXVII Ibero-American Summit.

The objective of this meeting, held with representatives of universities, higher education associations, quality assurance networks and other relevant actors in the field of accreditation, was to address the question of how to ensure recognised quality standards in online master’s and PhD programmes offered by European, Latin American and Caribbean universities. The dialogue focussed on the following questions:

- the most important challenges that the participating entities have been experiencing in your efforts to guarantee the quality of investigation and virtual teaching in the context of the pandemic;
- the methodologies and tools that have recently been established or updated in the EU and LAC regions in order to safeguard the quality standards of distance education and online courses;
- the need to converge around a common reference framework of (minimum) quality standards for distance education and the next steps of a roadmap towards such a framework;
- the construction of an international quality assurance regime.

Interventions during the meeting were made by Dr Adrián Bonilla (EU-LAC Foundation) – opening remarks, and Dr Rebeca Grynspan (Ibero-American General Secretariat – SEGIB) – closing remarks, Dr Ricardo Mairal (European Association of Distance Teaching Universities – EADTU), Dr Hugo Juri (National University of Córdoba), Dr Miguel Ángel Castro (Ibero-American Postgraduate University Association – AUIP), Dr Antonio López (University of Santiago de Compostela), Dr Stephan Gift (The University of the West Indies - UWI), Dr Josep Planell (Interuniversity Development Centre – CINDA), Dr Melchor Sánchez Mendiola (National Autonomous University of Mexico – UNAM), Dr Alexander Hasgall (European University Association – EUA), Dr Néstor Pan (Ibero-American System for Quality Assurance of Higher Education – SIACES), Dr María Pilar Delgado Hito (University of Barcelona) and Dr Antonio Serrano González (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education – ENQA). The meeting was also attended by Dr María Lurdes Correia Fernandes (University of Porto) and Dr Carmen Vargas Macias (University of Seville).

The meeting was moderated by Dr Félix García Lausín (Ibero-American General Secretariat - SEGIB) and Dr Anna Barrera Vivero (EU-LAC Foundation).

## Opening remarks

### **Dr Adrián Bonilla, Executive Director of the EU-LAC Foundation**

Dr Adrián Bonilla opened the dialogue by commenting that the idea of this meeting was to share experiences in the context not only of the cooperation between the Ibero-American General Secretariat and the EU-LAC Foundation in the field of higher education, but also in view of the approaching XXVII Ibero-American Summit.

As part of its mandate, for EU-LAC Foundation strives to link the societies of the two regions around criteria of inclusion, relevance, democracy, and in terms of education, and - at least at postgraduate level - and to promote research, science and innovation in terms of relevance and quality; especially because, given the current times, online education will probably constitute the education of the future, even after the pandemic.

Dr Bonilla emphasised to see postgraduate education within a global perspective and, at the same time, to put forward some elements to understand it in a better way:

- the intensity of the latest technological changes and innovations;
- the immediate needs of our societies;
- sustainable development and the SDGs of the United Nations.

At the same time, there are also some issues that we have to address through science, as well as the production and dissemination of science, for example: climate change or the worsening and widening of the economic gaps in our societies.

To conclude his speech, Dr Bonilla argued that postgraduate education and online education need to guarantee their quality by recognising the capacity of scientific knowledge to have an impact on the environment through its production in universities and research centres. The idea of quality cannot be dissociated from the impact on the environment and the capacity of this knowledge to transform societies and become useful for the needs of human beings.

## Presentations & Interventions

### Dr Ricardo Mairal, European Association of Distance Teaching Universities - EADTU

Dr Ricardo Mairal began his presentation by stating that quality must be a constant in all institutions, especially at present time. Society, now more than ever, has looked at universities not only as sources of training but also as sources of security, as research is key to the development and advancement of vaccines. Science in this context must be driven by quality.

He went on outlining the most important challenges and problems faced in the aftermath of the pandemic:

- to respond to an unexpected scenario and to change the academic agenda of all universities towards an exclusively online format without losing quality;
- to respond to face-to-face exams by developing a technology for student assessment without losing quality, rigour, and reliability and without losing sight of those students who for one reason or another cannot access an online assessment system.

On the other hand, he referred to the methodologies, tools and sets of criteria that have been put in place, giving the example of the **European Maturity Model For Blended Education (EMBED)**<sup>1</sup> project, which is a project in which several leading European distance universities participate and whose objective is precisely the control of quality and innovation in higher education through the implementation of blended learning.

In his final reflection, Dr Mairal agreed with the need to converge around a framework of reference of common standards for higher education. According to Dr Mairal, it is absolutely necessary for quality higher education, and especially postgraduate education, to be recognised across national borders, both for face-to-face and distance education. He advocated for a union **between universities that would allow quality standards to be set to regulate postgraduate programmes and, above all, for the excellence of knowledge.**

### Dr Hugo Juri, National University of Córdoba

Dr Hugo Juri began his speech by referring to the current pandemic situation in Latin America, which has highlighted the importance of public education and research. According to Dr Juri, after this crisis many more hybrid or mixed educational models will be in place<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, it is important to include a greater degree of virtuality as a fundamental part of higher education, otherwise this will be done by companies that offer online services such as Google.

Universities should also **seek to establish other models of higher education** that are not necessarily “degrees” and “postgraduate courses”, but rather smaller, more specific packages of knowledge that each professional or worker needs to update and to increase

---

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://embed.eadtu.eu/>

<sup>2</sup> Such models combine the advantages of face-to-face educational formats with the advantages of online educational formats.

their knowledge in a specific field. In addition, he indicated that it is essential to work together on the educational side, especially virtually, to resolve **terminological differences** and to converge around a **seal of quality**.

Finally, with reference to mobility, he argued that only 2% of Latin American students enjoy mobility, especially to Europe. Therefore, we have to think about virtual mobility. The world is globalised, which implies both great challenges and opportunities at the same time.

### **Dr Miguel Ángel Castro, Ibero-American Postgraduate University Association – AUIP**

Dr Miguel Ángel Castro began his presentation by defining universities, like other institutions, as entities that are subject to a natural evolution and will therefore know how to adapt better to any emerging environment. **Facing the current pandemic, the evolution of universities must obviously be adapted to reality, and digitalisation must be considered as the fundamental tool to achieve this.** Digitalisation must be sustainable and inclusive, i.e. it must allow everyone to participate in this evolution with equal opportunities.

He highlighted three key elements to take into account:

1. **Considerable public investment** is required; therefore, the Member States of these two regions (LAC and EU) should be convinced that the digitisation strategy should be tackled following a pact that is as broad as possible, a global pact.
2. **A structure, organised from cells to tissues, should be strengthened, without losing university autonomy.** University partnerships are therefore essential to address this issue jointly.
3. To ensure the quality of renewed forms of education, **internationally recognised networks should be created or strengthened.**

In this sense, according to Dr. Castro, the **II EU-CELAC Academic and Knowledge Summit**, which was postponed to 2022 and which will be held in Santiago de Compostela, should take a step forward, and an effort should be made to ensure that the Heads of State of both regions understand that it is necessary to invest in order to generate development and the well-being of the future.

To conclude his speech, he indicated two key aspects for making progress on the issue of quality assurance:

- **Recognising postgraduate degrees with different accreditation agencies in the different countries** and in accordance with the respective legislation of each country;
- **Establishing more joint degrees** between universities in both regions.

### **Dr Antonio López, University of Santiago de Compostela**

Dr Antonio López opened his speech by emphasising four fundamental pillars:

- **Teaching,**
- **Research,**
- **Knowledge transfer,**
- **Dissemination of culture.**

According to Dr López, **solutions that combine face-to-face and virtual teaching should be sought for**, because face-to-face attendance continues to bring important value added, if considering that personal encounters constitute an essential part in for people's education. Through face-to-face attendance students acquire transversal and social skills and competences that are fundamental also after concluding their educational path.

He pointed out that virtual education, in addition to issues of connectivity and access from anywhere to technical resources, faces a great challenge of guaranteeing equal opportunities. **Classrooms are great equalisers** for all students when they attend face-to-face, as they have access to the same resources and spaces.

Another challenge refer to the **methodological changes** involved, as not only equipment and technologies that allow remote teaching have to be introduced, but also substantial methodological adjustments in teaching and learning up to assessment have to be made.

Another important challenge, given the speed at which events are evolving, is to reflect on the **architecture of degrees and training** so that university degrees, i.e. knowledge, can be more regularly renewed and regenerated.

Finally, on the subject of quality as a key issue, López argued that **we should choose models that accredit the quality not only of the programmes, but also of the institutions that offer them**. Institutions should be evaluated according to the resources they have at their disposal and the processes they put in place, because it is the entire set of measures that ensures the quality of the degrees.

### **Dr Stephan Gift, The University of the West Indies**

In his introductory remarks, Dr Stephan Gift described how his university adapted quickly to the circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 situation. Prior to the pandemic, UWI already had pre-established relations with some Chinese universities and therefore received information about the development of the virus at a very early stage. UWI immediately established a working group on the issue and shared important information with all public institutions, including governments, throughout the Caribbean region, which helped to address the pandemic.

In reaction to the pandemic, UWI had to move very quickly along a line it had always intended to do, which is **to adapt all or most of its programmes to online courses**, to allow them to be accessible to virtually all students.

According to Dr. Gift, the main problems that had to be addressed to guarantee the implementation of online education have been:

- to facilitate the **adoption of new technologies** across campuses and all programmes;
- to **train the academic staff** to be able to teach online;
- to **introduce new regulations** to assure quality in online education;
- to **ensure the integrity of online examinations**;
- to **ensure access to online education for all students**.

In respect to this last point, Dr Gift suggested the intervention of governments to **ensure broadband facilities in the different territories**. In addition, he stressed the importance of **developing strategies to deal with interventions by unauthorised persons ("hackers")** to online meetings and lessons.

In conclusion, he said that the next step the university intends to take is to follow a **blended approach**, where there will be some face-to-face activity and a lot of online interaction. In fact, lessons delivered online would allow the university to reach out to diverse geographic areas and to students who are unable to attend classes for various reasons.

### **Dr Josep Planell, Interuniversity Development Centre - CINDA**

Dr Josep Planell began his presentation with the **question of whether the adaptation of e-learning constitutes a change or rather a metamorphosis for universities**. He argued that the knowledge system is changing profoundly in all its aspects and therefore it is fundamental to think about how we also have to change and **rethink the pedagogical model** to make it work. **This involves not only training teachers, but also the service and management staff** who support academics.

For Dr Planell, universities, as well as clinics, companies, etc., play a new role as **knowledge nodes**, in the sense that, nowadays, universities break down, analyse and bundle all the knowledge about specific, relevant topics. Therefore, alliances between universities - such as those represented by CINDA - are important to become **nodes of knowledge nodes**.

In agreement with other speakers, he also pointed out the importance of **lifelong learning**, as the initial career evolves, and this is where the potential of online teaching has a fundamental role to play. At the same time, it is essential to have **institutional quality systems** that allow institutions to be accredited, and for this reason, it is necessary to establish internal quality standards, as well as external evaluation methods.

Finally, he raised the need for **legislative and regulatory changes to guarantee access to the internet**, taking into account the digital and physical divide. Governments should facilitate access to the internet at reasonable prices for all students, in addition to guaranteeing net neutrality. In addition, it is also important to fight against other non-physical divides, such as the gender divide, the class divide, and the socio-economic divide, among others.

### **Dr. Melchor Sánchez Mendiola, National Autonomous University of Mexico - UNAM**

Dr Melchor Sánchez Mendiola opened his speech by stating that, of the total of aprox. 380,000 students at UNAM, 10% are enrolled in a distance learning programme, but among these, very few are online postgraduate programmes.

Universities, by their nature, are committed to quality and often allocate a considerable amount of financial resources to quality assurance. However, Dr Sanchez was critical of the standardisation and homogenisation of education with reference to the concept of quality and indicated that **there is a conceptual tension between standardisation and the**

**measurement of quality with instruments that have validity and reliability.** He also suggested considering the issue of language in relation to the concept of “minimum” standards.

Challenges include the "hidden curriculum" of postgraduate education, whereby **many students would have little incentive to choose for distance learning postgraduate programmes.** Another challenge is **professors training at postgraduate level** because many of them are not used to it. In addition, there is a **problem of bureaucracy and the administrative burden generated by the quality process.**

He then raised a point concerning the **length approval procedures of curricula in universities.** In fact, for a curriculum to be approved, it typically undergoes a long process of collegial bodies, and the process is even longer for online curricula. According to Dr Sanchez, it is necessary to make the approval of postgraduate programmes more flexible.

Dr Sanchez concluded his intervention by emphasising that, so far, there is little literature on evidence of the impact of online programmes, comparing accredited and non-accredited universities, and he stressed the need for online education to assimilate established educational principles.

#### **Dr Alexander Hasgall, European University Association – EUA**

In his presentation, Dr Alexander Hasgall pointed out that the theme of the meeting was not new, as virtual education and mobility had already been discussed before the pandemic, in connection with climate change issues, the SDGs and the greening of some programmes. The post-pandemic discussion has changed the subject and will undoubtedly become even more relevant after the pandemic. Some of the topics that have been discussed more strongly this year at the EUA level are the internationalisation of education and research, but also the idea of innovating in the creation of a **“global Phd”** consisting of a “patchwork” of student connections with a fixed institution and, at the same time, with professors who are experts in the subject of the doctorates around the world<sup>3</sup>. The latter concept requires further reflection on the role of the university and the role of researchers.

Dr Hasgall pointed out that in some parts of society the perception prevails that online teaching is less expensive, which is not true; rather, **online programmes often involve the investment of more resources.** For example, organising a hybrid event is actually very complex and is equivalent to organising two events in parallel.

In some countries, education at master’s and doctoral level is considered a privilege. During the pandemic, it has become evident that basic research plays a fundamental role in addressing and offering solutions to issues of utmost relevance to humanity. Therefore, **the training of future generations of researchers should continue to be promoted through postgraduate programmes.**

---

<sup>3</sup> See the article by Hans-Joachim Bungartz, Member of EUA-CDE Steering Committee “Towards a global doctorate?” <https://eua-cde.org/the-doctoral-debate/187-towards-a-global-doctorate.html> (last revision on 15th April 2021).

Another issue that has become relevant is the difference in the availability of resources between universities; those universities with greater economic power will continue to be able to facilitate the mobility of their students and researchers and the establishment of connections with others - which is much more difficult for universities with limited resources.

Another issue that has come to the fore in the wake of the pandemic is mental health. According to Hasgall, it is essential to find concepts to address and prevent mental health problems for students. In conclusion, he emphasised the importance of having forums between associations, networks, and universities from different regions to give continuity to the exchange of knowledge and experiences.

### **Dr. Néstor Pan, Ibero-American System for Quality Assurance of Higher Education – SIACES**

Dr Néstor Pan began his presentation by referring to the issue of asymmetries within Latin America. His presentation focused on the **SIACES**, a body created in 2019 following a decision of the Ibero-American Heads of State and Government, which brings together 14 National Agencies for Quality Assurance in Higher Education based in 17 countries that form part of the Ibero-American region.

The launch of the **SIACES Quality Seals** aims to become a reference for the quality assurance of higher education in Ibero-America, through different forms of accreditation:

- **Distance Education Systems:** institutions will be able to obtain the SIACES Quality Seal that certifies the quality of their Distance Education System.
- **Postgraduate Programmes:** institutions may obtain the SIACES Quality Seal that certifies the quality of their Postgraduate Programmes, whether they are taught on-site or online.
- **Automatic awarding:** for programmes or institutions that have been accredited in Agencies with Validated Good Practices.

Therefore, SIACES constitutes an important instrument to advance in the very subject of this Meeting, and particularly to:

- Harmonise and internationalise the quality assurance processes of higher education, and especially of online courses;
- Consolidate National Agencies as strategic actors for quality;
- Contribute to mobility through the recognition of trust systems of good practice.

### **Dra. María Pilar Delgado Hito, University of Barcelona**

Until recently, the *Universitat de Barcelona* worked exclusively by means of face-to-face study programmes. The pandemic therefore posed a considerable challenge. In a very short time, those in charge had to adapt courses to online formats and methodologies, train professors and students. There was a noticeable **digital divide** among the students, i.e. a percentage of students without internet connection and laptops, which required a high financial investment by the university to support its students. Similarly, a lot was invested in **trainings for professors in the application of online methodologies**.



In the same line as several of the other participants at the meeting, Dr Delgado Hito considered it necessary to converge around a framework of reference for a set of minimum standards. Therefore, although a first framework with criteria and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area has been set in place, it would be necessary to broaden its focus and, beyond study programmes, also to look at institutions as such.

From Dr Delgado Hito's perspective, the following aspects should be considered to establish an international quality assurance regime:

- **the policy and strategy of digitisation;**
- **monitoring instruments;**
- **aspects related to the suitability of digital tools;**
- **the development of the structure of online courses;**
- **curriculum design;**
- **digital assessment methods;**
- **data protection issues;**
- **privacy and academic integrity standards;**
- **staff and student support services;**
- **training and personal development;**
- **the building of academic communities and other online communication channels.**

#### **Dr Antonio Serrano González, European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education - ENQA**

Dr Antonio Serrano González referred to the role of ENQA and the impact of the pandemic from the point of view of the agencies that externally guarantee the quality of teaching and the emergency conditions generated, particularly face-to-face universities that have moved to virtual teaching. Therefore, as a consequence of the pandemic, ENQA took on the role of accompanying institutions and universities in relation to the bureaucracy associated with quality processes.

On the other hand, ENQA is concerned that the agencies do their job well, as there are now 55 agencies from 31 countries. There are still six countries in the European Higher Education Area that do not have any agencies registered as members of ENQA, which means that they have not demonstrated compliance with the **European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)**<sup>4</sup>. Dr Serrano González commented that this instrument has shown great validity due to its flexibility in these times of pandemic, as it also serves to measure and guarantee the quality of online teaching.

He referred to the following concepts included in ENQA's new strategic plan:

- **a flexible and dynamic concept of quality** adapted to different contexts;
- **an instrument to support universities**, but adapted to the specific missions of each of them;
- **the involvement of stakeholders;**
- **the connection with innovation** and;

---

<sup>4</sup> See: [https://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/ESG/00/2/ESG\\_2015\\_616002.pdf](https://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/ESG/00/2/ESG_2015_616002.pdf)

- a flexible approach to teaching.

## Closing remarks

### Rebeca Grynspan, Ibero-America General Secretariat – SEGIB

Ms. Rebeca Grynspan reflected on the situation Latin America is currently facing, and she described the reality as the worst in the last 100 years due to the consequences of the pandemic. She noted that the previous progress made in terms of poverty and inequality reduction have come to a halt. At the same time, she emphasised that education is fundamental to achieving a sustainable recovery and the path to a new development paradigm.

According to recent studies that have been carried out in Latin America, secondary education has suffered a high dropout rate and has returned to the levels of inequality that the region had registered in the 1960s. This process will also negatively affect universities. Tertiary education and university education should be on the priority list of political decision-makers to be able to effectively pursue a much more influential and sustainable development.

Referring to the current challenges, she indicated that Latin America has the largest population of young people between the ages of 15 and 29 and that this generation is the one that has reached the highest level of education. It is essential that these young people continue to obtain access to high quality education and that they are given the tools for designing their future, both as citizens and as professionals. For this reason, it is necessary not only to urgently close the digital divide but also to guarantee the standardisation of the quality of the courses provided without losing the richness of our diversity.

She also referred to three important points on which work is being done:

1. Through SIACES, a document of good practices in quality assurance of non face-to-face teaching has been developed.
2. It would be important to develop a specific seal for this mode of teaching.
3. Progress should be made in terms of a pilot experience for the implementation of a supplement to the higher education diploma with a digital approach.

Finally, Ms. Grynspan emphasised the importance of the collaborative effort between universities and scientific institutions between Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean.

*The organisers of this virtual meeting and their representatives, Dr Adrián Bonilla from the EU-LAC Foundation, and Dr Rebeca Grynspan from the Ibero-American General Secretary, thank the participants for their contributions and attendance.*

*Report written and translated by Romolo Giangregorio, intern at the EU-LAC Foundation  
Revision by Dr Anna Barrera Vivero, EU-LAC Foundation, and Félix García Lausín, SEGIB*