

EADTU TASK FORCE SHORT LEARNING PROGRAMS FINAL REPORT

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This document is the final report of the EADTU Task Force Short Learning Programs, headed by Theo Bastiaens, Vice-President for Digitalisation and International Affairs, FernUniversität in Hagen (Germany). The Task Force was founded in late 2016 and active throughout 2017. Short Learning Programs (SLPs) are learning units of variable ECTS sizes but considerably shorter than the Bologna cycles of Bachelor and Master degrees. Successful completion of a SLP is usually awarded with a certificate and recognized in larger Bologna Bachelor or Master program structures. The report provides a brief contextualization of Short Learning Programs in the face of recent developments in online and distance education. The work of the Task Force continues in the three-year Erasmus+ Project “E-SLP”, which is coordinated by EADTU and starts on 1 January 2018.

November 2017

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1. Continuities and Beginnings: Open Education and Short Learning Programs

It is undebated that online learning has sparked far-reaching changes, innovations, or “disruptions” (Pappano and many others) in (higher) education over roughly the last ten years. The very broad field known as Open Education has in its focus on access to (higher) education produced new digital and blended learning formats. Open Education has also started debates on qualification, certification, and the value of higher education for an audience broader than the traditional college student. Originating in Western academic communities and their concomitant epistemologies, the most prominent formats Open Educational Resources (OER) and the US-based hype Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have since traveled all over the world and been spread over various education sectors. While analyses on the impact of MOOCs as a format of its own are multi-faceted and controversial –from disappointing expectations to “destroying traditional universities” (Havergal) to innovating continuing and professional education– the widely differing responses to MOOCs also reflect the national contexts of higher education financing and educational systems in which MOOCs may (or may not) play considerably differing roles. Whether their impact is considered lower or less insignificant than projected or whether they are still in the center of the higher education debate, MOOCs have undoubtedly reduced the negative image of technology in higher education (cf. *The Changing Pedagogical Landscape*), as well as triggered and continue to impact the restructuring and “unbundling” processes observed in higher educations all over the world (on unbundling higher education, see Brown). Initially appearing on the market as free-floating, freely accessible learning units consisting of recordings of conventional face-to-face classroom settings, the most popular MOOCs today are now making innovative use of digital media. In their positioning in education, MOOCs are not necessarily inherently of strictly academic nature and are not directly associated with existing higher education structures (see, for example, the TOP 50 MOOCs on *Class Central*). As of late 2017, most MOOC platforms continue to offer MOOCs as free learning units, while their certification is fee-based and sometimes integrated in programs smaller than the conventional Bachelor/Master structure. Therefore, MOOCs have opened up the debate for a broader discussion of lifelong learning in today’s economies by using digital media.

As a representative of single and blended universities and national consortiums, the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) has been promoting and innovating online and distance higher education institutions since the late 1980s. In its function as an institutional network with its consortium of European national open and distance education universities at its core, EADTU has been intensely involved in these developments. By translating them into the European context, by, for example, creating its own MOOC platform “OpenupEd” in 2013, EADTU has made visible the online education formats already existing among its members. EADTU’s approach to higher education thus has always been shaped by the needs of its member institutions, seeking to marry European policy goals and market demands with the structures inherent in established European distance higher education institutions shaped by their national

stakeholders, business models, and their focus on non-traditional lifelong learning students.

In 2015 and 2016, EADTU was intensely involved in assessing the current state of online higher education and the use of digital media in educational contexts after the impact of MOOCs and Open Education. The study *The Changing Pedagogical Landscape*, co-authored by EADTU and commissioned by the European Commission, assesses the relationship of structured, institutionalized education and its regulatory frameworks with the use of technology in education and educational innovation, identifying obstacles and hindrances to accessibility, flexibility, and support structures within the system. The document observes few changes in pedagogy, concluding that innovation still forms a small fraction of higher education provision. The aforementioned field of Open Education is perceived as a separate field of “experimentation” whose impact on higher education can be described as “substantial modification” (9).

Concurrently, the European Commission formulated key issues for the future developments in the European Higher Education Area. Already in 2011 (and recently revised in 2017), the European Commission expects higher education to broaden their portfolio of study offerings in *EU’s Modernization Agenda for Higher Education*. Also, in *A New Skills Agenda for Europe*, higher education needs to focus on skills that drive creativity and innovation and “that need to be strengthened throughout life, and allow people to thrive in fast-evolving workplaces and society, and to cope with complexity and uncertainty” (5). In *The Yerevan Communiqué* (2015), the focus post-Bologna is on employability of graduates throughout their current working lives in rapidly changing markets by, among others, including short cycle qualifications in the overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) (see 4). In the *2017 Renewed Agenda for Higher Education*, the European Commission notices, among others, “a mismatch between the skills Europe needs and the skills it has” and an “innovation gap”, asking European higher education institutions for more engaged contributions (3).

The debates in EADTU meetings showed members agree that national stakeholders and members’ adult student clientele are asking for shorter formats beyond and at the same time within current Bologna degree programs. Members also report that these offerings, some of which may already exist albeit are not named as such, need to be made more visible, particularly to national stakeholders.

As a response to both members’ needs and the European Commission’s expectations, EADTU set up the *EADTU Memorandum of Understanding on Short Learning Programs* in April 2016. As a kick-off document, it places the new format Short Learning Programs within the European Qualifications Framework (4 to 8), thus allocating it within the existing higher education framework and its ECTS measurements (from foundation to Masters degree). The *EADTU Memorandum of Understanding on Short Learning Programs* aims at establishing an EADTU consortium for SLPs with the EADTU office as its head office. To assess members’ interests and motivations, EADTU founded the one-year Task Force Short Learning Program with Theo Bastiaens, FernUniversität in Hagen, as chair. Its

members were Open Universiteit Nederland (OUNL), The Open University (OUUK), Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED), Universidade Aberta (UAb), Hellenic Open University (HOU), The Open University of the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, and Università Telematica Internazionale (UNINETTUNO). In a conference workshop at the EADTU Conference in Rome in 2016 followed by three sessions over the course of 2017, members gained an overview of existing and desired SLP formats, discussed central issues and challenges, and prepared an application for future Erasmus+-funding. With this initiative, EADTU claims leadership in the restructuring of the Bologna process for lifelong learners by seeking to integrate SLPs.

Short Learning Programs (SLPs) are short learning units of variable sizes that are primarily offered in online and distance education. Successful completion is usually awarded with a certificate and recognized in larger Bologna degree program structures. In the *EADTU Memorandum of Understanding*, SLPs are allocated in the European Qualifications Framework in the higher education setting as providing academic skills. In contrast to MOOCs, SLPs are double-bound or inbetween: They are designed as learning units that can be completed by themselves; at the same time, SLPs are integrated in academic degree programs that offer consecutive learning pathways to the learner.

With this positioning inside and outside the traditional higher education structure, SLPs as “substantial modifications” call for a reorganization of the Bologna degree structure, while bringing lifelong learning to the forefront of discussions about the future of higher education. With their focus on non-traditional learners in distance and online higher education, EADTU members are ideally suited for establishing SLPs in European higher education. In return, SLPs also offer participating institutions opportunities to broaden the portfolio of their study offerings

Whereas Short Learning Programs are defined by their digital formats, the EADTU initiative is primarily tailored to non-traditional adult students, the target group of EADTU member institutions. In the EADTU framework, institutional structures and integration into the existing academic system is taken into account. The (temporary) turbulence MOOCs have caused in the academic sector has paved the way for the more integrative approach EADTU pursues with the Short Learning Programs initiative. MOOCs have appeared on the scene without any structural integration. Their genesis can be traced to a perceived (or real) need in the US that access to higher education content needs to be made more openly available. SLPs are thus both “continuities” of the developments in recent years and a new, distinctively European approach, a “beginning” to reforming and revising the Bologna structure, identifying aspects of its structure as rigid, as well as providing integrated options to and expansions of the known three Bologna cycles.

It seems that the integration into degree programs is the future direction for online learning. Quite similar developments are happening in the MOOC scene: On The Open University UK's platform *FutureLearn*, the Australian partner Deakin University offers complete Master degrees via MOOCs; Class Central reports that a host of universities all over the world are starting to provide online degrees (in most cases, Master programs;

“MoocWatch#16: MOOC Providers Target Degrees”). In the US, at Georgia Tech and MIT, on-campus students in selected programs can get credits by enrolling for a MOOC (Shaw). The German-based initiative Kiron has established a number of partnerships with universities that recognize MOOCs as entry courses for the respective university’s degree programs (among them, RWTH Aachen and a host of German universities and universities of applied sciences as well as few international higher education institutions from Switzerland, Turkey etc.). The Erasmus+ “Moonlite Project”, in which EADTU participates, aims at integrating MOOCs in degree program structures.

2. Between Structure and Demand: The Challenges and Opportunities of Short Learning Programs

The discussions in the Task Force over the course of 2017 were focused on this double bind, on satisfying both institutional structure and market demand. A number of issues emerged that are relevant to the majority of the Task Force members. They serve to provide a first outline for demarcating the short learning program initiative EADTU and its members want to place as a European brand on the global market. They may also contribute to the juggling process inside EADTU which is at the heart of the organization's success: The Short Learning Program initiative meanders back and forth between a politics of openness and inclusion, between a broad definition that allows many EADTU members to participate in the initiative and the necessity to provide a framework for the concepts and projects EADTU stands for and that may also serve as European guidelines for its members. Thus, the goal of the EADTU Short Learning Programs initiative can only be to find a compromise between these two poles.

The most relevant aspect in defining what Short Learning Programs could be is to discuss the types of study offerings that are included and their respective target groups. As mentioned earlier, both European and national interest groups have expressed strong interest to EADTU members to provide SLPs to lifelong learners. SLPs are thus expected to be placed both on national level and in a broader, more international context, preferably in English, the lingua franca of most academic disciplines. Therefore, two activity strands were pursued during 2017:

- a) The Task Force compiled a list of already existing offerings among members that can be labeled as short learning programs. The list of currently existing programs is attached to this report.
- b) The Task Force identified topics that are of relevance transnationally and set out to form working groups which collaboratively develop new short learning programs that cover these topics. Topics identified throughout the Task Force are teacher training + ICT, ICT classroom, climate change, big data, business and finances, cybersecurity and social health care.

The selected topics are geared to fulfill both aspects a) integration into an academic program, thus reflecting the competences of EADTU members to provide training for academic skills and competences; and b) joint initiatives based on national assessments of demand from the labor market/the industry. The fee structure will be based on the members' respective regulations; some may also be free of charge.

The Task Force is clear that SLPs are designed to be part of the Bologna cycle and be fully recognized within the Bologna process as an entity of its own. To promote SLPs and start the dialogue about the European Qualifications Framework, the EADTU office organized together with the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) a related Peer Learning Activity on quality assurance of blended and online programs in Brussels on 21 and 22 September 2017. EADTU intends to get online education included

in the Bologna process rather than to assess it separately. EADTU actively pushes for this integration process in collaboration with other organizations.

A central concern among EADTU members is quality assurance and quality management. All members agreed that SLPs identified with EADTU fulfill the quality criteria as stated in table1.

TABLE 1
QUALITY CRITERIA FOR SLP's

The focus of EADTU SLPs is on academic skills/programs/competence.

Short Learning Programs are in the range between 5 to 30 ECTS, on average: 10-20 ECTS.

EADTU SLPs are offered mainly online; face-to-face is only optional or if it is an intrinsic part of the program.

Exams are taken by offering universities (students do not need to travel for taking exams.

Practical elements/professionally oriented elements as learning assignments are included if the focus is on the industry.

SLPs must be accredited within the Bologna structure (Bachelor/Master level).

EADTU members prefer that EADTU develops its own certificate or label and that this label is only awarded for SLPs that fulfill the outlined quality criteria.

3. Moving Further in Europe: Expanding the European Distance Higher Education Portfolio and Restructuring the Bologna Process

Throughout the discussions in 2017, it became obvious that the format of Short Learning Programs in their positioning between demand-driven offerings and integration into existing Bologna structures are not designed to “disrupt” or “unbundle” European higher education; instead, they reform the Bologna Process to include and be adapted to the needs of lifelong learners in Europe today. The “unbundled” format of Short Learning Programs is re-bundled in existing degree program structures. In coming to this conclusion, the task force has brought the format Short Learning Programs to the forefront of its members, recruited interested members, and managed to achieve a sense of commitment at EADTU and its participating members to offering, further developing, and positioning SLPs nationally and on European level. EADTU as the umbrella organization provides the ideal platform to jointly further develop European distance higher education as a provider for lifelong learning. Distance higher education institutions act as national institutions due to their mission to serve a national (language) community. For this reason, they are often shaped (and maybe also limited) by national funding and national legal regulations. EADTU offers the European platform for bringing together national interests and appreciating the diversity of its membership while seeking to find common ground for individual institutional development.

The Task Force is delighted to have provided the groundwork for the three-year EADTU Erasmus+ project “E-SLP” that starts on 1 January 2018. The Task Force will continue its work there and welcomes new members Anadolu University, Turkey; Open University of Cyprus (OUC); Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium; Akademia Górniczo-Hutnicza (AGH), Poland; and Lithuanian National Distance Education Association (NADE), Lithuania. The future goal for the coming three years is to establish short learning programs as quality-assured, recognized units within the European Bologna process that are awarded with an EADTU certificate. In 12 work packages, members further explore and specify issues of recognition, design a European SLP web portal, invite stakeholder groups to discuss the functions and roles SLPs need to play in society and economy, and develop collaborative Short Learning Programs on climate change, online/blended course design, health care, and the arts. In addition, curriculum and course design as well as the relationship between the role of European SLPs in Higher Education and Institutional Policies will be explored. The above mentioned EADTU Task Force quality criteria serve as guideposts for the project.

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