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Abstract

The aim of this desk research was to examine the topic of quality with a special reference to any relevant findings in relation to mobility and the use of ICT and e-learning. To do so we firstly concentrate on the issues of quality and mobility separately. Then we will comment on previous and present projects that deal with Quality in e-Learning, especially mentioning those developed in the geographical area of the partners involved in this desk research: Finland, UK and Spain; they would serve as examples of different actions in the European framework.

Finally, we will identify the main areas to be distinguished as regards quality and students mobility: quality in support, quality in infrastructure and quality in e-learning activities. Looking at all these from the perspective of previous research we conclude that there is a lack of reference to mobility and quality in relation to ICT and e-learning. Therefore, the research to be carried out by the VICTORIOUS partners focusing on these topics is more than a desirable outcome.

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1. Introduction

Quality issues have become central in education due to the Lisbon strategy and the Bologna process in which higher education institutions are involved since 2000. As we know one of the three “strategic objectives” of the Lisbon process in the field of education and training concerns quality and effectiveness of education and training systems. Also, among the 10 action lines proposed in the Bologna process [1] in different moments, one of the most relevant is the “promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance”, which is considered necessary for the convergence of the EHEA (European Higher Education Area).

According to a stocktaking report [2] prepared by the Bologna Follow-up Group, quality assurance is making advances in a reasonable way as the great majority of countries fall within the categories of ‘excellent performance’ or ‘very good performance’. Taking into account these results, the board of European ministers [3] encouraged higher education institutions to continue their efforts to enhance the quality of their activities through the introduction of internal mechanisms and their correlation to external quality assurance. Another significant decision was the adoption of the standards and guidelines for quality assurance [4] in the EHEA as proposed by ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in HE). And they also committed to introducing a model for peer review of quality assurance agencies.

We should observe that there is no particular reference to Quality and e-Learning in any of those documents. This can be taken as an omission or as an “invitation” to review Quality in e-Learning under the same standards and guidelines applicable to traditional learning activities. Obviously this is advisable, but it is also reasonable that to assess quality in e-learning we need to define specific framework and criteria and be specific about aspects such as design, usability or e-learning methodology.

The other important target in the Lisbon strategy and the Bologna process relevant for our research is the “promotion of mobility”. According with the “Commission report on the progress towards the Lisbon objectives”, there is still a lot to do in this field. The present situation is that “even though mobility within the Erasmus programme continues to increase – by 6.3% between the academic years ending 2004 and 2005 – Erasmus mobility would have to increase more than double to reach the target of affecting 10% of the student population.” [5]. Legal and administrative barriers as well as lack of funding are the main causes of obstruction to mobility programmes. Disseminating good practices could be of help for countries where these problems are major.

Quality assurance is also an issue in relation to mobility. In this sense the European Commission has submitted a proposal for a European Mobility Quality Charter in September 2005. Its objective: “to lay down a common statement of principles whose use will lead to greater efficiency and effectiveness in all types of organised mobility for learning purposes”. [6] Evidently, none of those principles deals with the use of e-learning or ICT, but their significance can be transferred to those areas of education as well. Here we can also refer to a document that reflects what the evolution of the Erasmus programme has been till present; this is the report on “External evaluation of Erasmus institutional and national impact”. [7] This evaluation investigates the impact of Erasmus on higher education institutions. It focuses on the impact of the second generation of European Policy Statements (EPSs) included in Erasmus institutional contracts (IC) from the academic year 2000/2001 onwards. There is no reference to e-learning in this evaluation either, although *distance education* and *ICT* appears as a possible instrument to be mentioned in the EPS.

2. Research on Quality and e-learning in the European framework

In this chapter we will make a brief description of the aims and results of some relevant European projects dealing with quality in e-learning. These will give us an idea of the different approaches to quality depending on the purpose, context and users of e-learning.

SEEQUEL - Sustainable Environment for the Evaluation of Quality in E-learning

<http://www.education-observatories.net/seequel>

This project produced two categories of outputs:

1. A set of long-term core results with the mission of responding to the quality-related research needs of the e-learning community and 2. a set of tools, deriving from the first category of results.

Among its results we can point out the “Quality Framework” [8] which constitutes an integrated set of quality criteria combining different sectors, roles and visions of the world. And among the tools: the *eLearners Quality Guide* [9]: a collection of guidelines and hints able to guide the novice as well as the expert eLearner in any decision process about e-learning; the *Quality guide to the non-formal and informal learning processes* [10], conceived to encourage the adoption of quality approaches within less structured and more informal learning environments.

EQO - European Quality Observatory

<http://www.eqo.info/>

This project developed and still improves a conceptual framework for the description and harmonization of quality approaches. They wanted to show how a European or global quality standard based on consensus processes in a community can lead to a harmonized model [11].

Besides, the EQO Quality Portal contains a collection of strategies to support quality in e-learning. It enables collaboration among users and experts and provides services to support the exchange of quality approaches.

SEEL (Supporting Excellence in E-Learning)

<http://www.eife-l.org/activities/projects/past/seel>

It constituted a consortium dedicated to the study of the impact of quality policies in e-learning at local and regional levels in order to measure their influence on local and regional development – employment, innovation, competence development, etc. – and to provide recommendations on quality assurance policies to the different stakeholders, and particularly to policy makers.

QUAL-E-LEARNING

<http://www.qual-elearning.net/>

This project produced a handbook of best practices [12] in the area of distance education and e-learning that it is intended as a tool for all e-learning actors (teachers, producer-users, customers or users) to aid them in measuring the effectiveness and impact of e-learning training.

MECA-ODL- Methodology for the Analysis of Quality in ODL through Internet

<http://www.adeit.uv.es/mecaodl/>

The aim of the project was to develop a methodology to analyse the quality of ODL training projects in all its phases: from the conception to the evaluation. As a result, they built an online tool to apply the predefined criteria so that anyone can test learning courses or units in a highly accessible way. Apart from the online tool, other useful outcomes of the projects were:

- a methodological guide for the analysis of quality in open and distance learning delivered via internet in five languages; [13]
- a compendium of reference materials on quality in open and distance learning delivered via internet;

EFQUEL - European Foundation for Quality in e-Learning.

<http://www.qualityfoundation.org>

This is the most recent quality initiative in the European framework; it was initiated by the Triangle project, which was based on work previously done in the frame of the three European e-learning quality projects mentioned before: SEEL, EQO and SEEQUEL. The purpose of the Foundation is to involve actors into a European community of users and experts in order to share experiences on how e-learning can be used to strengthen individual, organisational, local and regional development, digital and learning literacy, and promote social cohesion and personal development. One of the first issues addressed by the EFQUEL will be to set up a *European e-Learning Quality Mark* based on a conceptual framework of quality; it will address all educational sectors and will be

capable of integrating existing quality marks to assure interoperability for already accredited organisations.

MASSIVE - Modelling Advice and Support Services to Integrate the Virtual component in higher Education

<http://www.massive-project.org>

This e-learning project is being implemented currently. The core of MASSIVE is also quality in e-learning in higher education. Its aim is to design a model of necessary support services for European traditional Universities to successfully implement e-learning services. It will develop a peer review methodology considering all areas involved in the process: strategies, libraries, design of online courses, IPR issues, students' and teachers' support.

E-Quality - Experience-based Quality in European ODL

<http://www.e-quality-eu.org/home.html>

The main objectives of the e-Quality project were :

- production of methodologies, tools and training packages;
- 5 selected teams of actors trained in 5 pilot tests, one in each participating countries;
- evaluation of the applicability of these methods and tools in real life;
- delivering of all products, training packages, tools to a broad audience.

E-xcellence – Creating a standard of excellence for e-learning

<http://www.eadtu.nl/e-xcellence>

The main objective of the E-xcellence project was to contribute to the Bologna process by creating standards of excellence in e-learning as:

- Assessment tool (programme and institutional level)
- Improvement tool (internal quality care system)
- Tool for accreditation for excellence

eHistory Learning Environment and Evaluation

<http://ehlee.utu.fi>

The prime objective of eHLEE is to enhance the uses of virtual teaching of history in Europe and develop a set of best practices in e-history learning and teaching. The project will experiment in practice European collaboration and comparability of curriculum as suggested in the Bologna process. In addition, the project will support higher education mobility in Europe in its pursuit of sharing best practices and creating a practical network of e-history learning.

3. Some examples of national development in quality on eLearning

3.1 Finnish context in quality on eLearning

In Finland e-learning activities in universities has been coordinated by the Finnish Virtual University (FVU) [14]. It is a partnership of all 21 Finnish universities. It is based on collaboration, division of labour, shared knowledge and the expertise of these member universities. It promotes online learning and teaching and develops compatible information infrastructures. It is not a new university in itself and it does not provide university education. However, it provides a possibility for all students studying in Finnish universities to enrol in virtual studies organized by the member universities.

The Finnish Virtual University is funded by the Ministry of Education. Roughly 50 % of the resources is allocated for each university for its own development in e-learning. The other 50 % is for national thematic networks. There are about 30 such networks, which provide courses (blended, online), e.g. history, literature, psychology, music education, software engineering. From 2007 the national funding of these networks is more indirect.

3.1.1. The issue of quality in e-learning in Finland

In Berlin Conference 2003 the Ministers of Education agreed that “by 2005 national quality assurance systems should include a system of accreditation, certification or

comparable procedures.” Finland has chosen the way of these “comparable procedures”. As a part of the Bologna process also Finnish universities have intensified the development of quality assurance mechanisms. In national level the work has been coordinated by The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) [15]. It is an independent expert body assisting universities, polytechnics and the Ministry of Education in matters relating to evaluation. From the beginning (1995) FINHEEC’s approach has been development oriented evaluation. Also during Bologna process this is the case. The main elements of the Finnish quality assurance system are audits organised by the FINHEEC [16]. The aim is that enhancement-led audits conducted by FINHEEC can be used by the auditees as part of their own quality assurance and that they cause as little extra work as possible for the auditees.

In national level there is a large national public sector project “Quality to the Web” [17]. The project has produced “Quality criteria”. The quality criteria are intended to act as a tool for assessing and developing public web services. The Finnish Virtual University has been an active partner in developing those criteria.

The quality of e-learning has mainly been seen as an integrated part of the quality assurance of teaching and learning. However, there have also been national projects which have especially concentrated in the quality of e-learning.

The project Quality Management in Web-based Learning (VOPLA) [18] is a Finnish Virtual University project and a joint venture of three Finnish universities (Helsinki, Kuopio and Lappeenranta). The aim of the project is to create national “quality criteria” and “standards” for e-learning to be utilized in all Finnish universities. The project aims to support and enhance quality management in e-learning, and to develop quality consciousness and expertise among university personnel and to secure their commitment to quality management. The main focus of the project is in the quality of learning and teaching, the quality of learning materials, and the quality of support services. The project produces matrices and questions of each of those areas. They will help to describe the current state of affairs, selection process between different possibilities, and the implementation and development.

Finnish Virtual University and Finnish Virtual Polytechnics have in cooperation produced a quality criteria checklist for the evaluation and development of teaching and

support materials that will be published in their portals. It is meant for the materials that are produced in cooperation projects. Criteria consists on statements of the use of material (e.g. accessibility of material), content (e.g. reliability), production, and advantages. Every criterion and item has clarifying examples and comments. The criteria can be used in self-evaluation or by external evaluators. When it is used in self-evaluation together with different actors in the same organisation, it raises the mutual awareness of the practices inside the organization.

Project TieVie (On the road) [19] is one of the national virtual university projects. It has for 6 years trained Finnish university personnel in educational use of ICT (8 ECTS course for teachers and 15 ECTS course for support personnel and other experts). There have been more than 1300 participants in those programmes. An important theme in those training programmes has been quality assurance.

An important part of the “enabling quality work” is the Finnish Higher Education Information Specifications –project. It has meant large national ”standardization” on curriculum format, vocabulary and course definitions, which enables electronic curricula that can be connected with different systems locally and nationwide, nationwide access to course data-bases, and electronic credit transfer between universities. The work has been divided into three subprojects. *Degree, Study Module and Course Unit Specification* (M1) [20] specifies the general vocabulary and data structure to be used as the basis for the further development of data systems in Finnish universities in order to better accommodate the needs occasioned by the Bologna process and flexible student mobility. *The Course Unit Realisation Data specification* (M2) [21] creates preconditions for the development of intra- and inter-university data systems so that they could better attain a level necessitated by the planning of studies (electronic personal study plans, ‘eHOPS’) and flexible student mobility. Its main purposes are to standardize the description of course unit realizations and to facilitate the transfer of course unit realisation data. *The Credits Data* (M3) [22] specification creates preconditions for the development of inter-university information exchange services in order to better accommodate the needs occasioned by the student mobility. The more concrete uses of specification include 1) credit transfer from the target university to one’s home institution as a part of JOO (‘flexible study right’) studies, 2) credit transfer from the open university to the university the degree is taken in, and 3)

credit transfer between institutions in case of transferring from one university to another.

The cooperation between universities requires cross-organisational electronic authentication and authorisation. Development work on this sector has been made in HAKA-project [23], which is the identity federation of the Finnish universities, polytechnics and research institutions.

3.1.2 The issue of quality assurance of virtual mobility

International virtual mobility as such has been tackled very little or not at all in Finnish projects. It has seen as a part “normal” virtual teaching and learning.

In 2005 the Finnish Virtual University founded 5 national interest groups, where every university can have members. One of these groups is dedicated for the integration of Finnish virtual university activities to European Higher Education Area and international cooperation. This interest group is a forum of cooperation. Quality assurance of international cooperation is one of the key topics of the interest group.

3.2 British context in quality on eLearning

Higher education in the UK has made substantial investment in e-learning since the 1980s, and particularly significantly in the past 10 years. This has been in the belief that a modern education had to take advantage of ICT, both for educational enhancement and also for efficiency gains. A tension exists between these that has been largely unresolved. The most high level action has been the UK government’s Department of Education & Science (DfES) development of an e-learning strategy for education to guide the process more explicitly [24].

The funding that has fuelled the enormous uptake in e-learning in higher education has been from dual sources – from the government (mainly indirectly) and from the universities. Much of that from governmental agencies can be quantified as it is part of an open investment programme that has dialogue with the HE community. The

investment by universities and colleges is certainly much greater but cannot be easily quantified.

Major governmentally-funded programmes have included the Joint Information Services Committee (JISC) [25]; the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) [26] ; Centres for Excellence in Teaching & Learning (CETLs - not purely e-learning but it is a strong strand in them); Technology in Learning and Teaching Programme (TLTP) [27], the first two phases of which aimed to develop computer based materials for teaching and learning in Higher Education and a third phase focussed on the embedding of the products of the earlier phases into teaching practice, and into the learning experience of students; the Computers in Teaching Initiative (CTIs) established centres to support the use of learning technologies in all of the major academic areas in Higher Education; the CTIs were succeeded by the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) [28] which itself has now become part of the Higher Education Academy. The Institute of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (ILT) was launched as a result of the Dearing Report in 1997 [29] and the JISC funded Plagiarism Advisory Service was established in 2002 [30] JISCinfoNET became operational in 2003 [31]. In Scotland, the Funding Council recently created a series of “transformation” projects which are seeking to produce deep change in higher education through the use of e-learning [32]

On the university side, one cannot easily quantify investment but the scale of it can be discerned in outcomes of national surveys, such as the VLE surveys of the Universities & Colleges Information Services Association (UCISA) which show that 95% of universities have VLEs, and presumably they do not install these in the absence of further investment to make them deliver value for money. For most large universities with c15-20,000 first degree students, a reasonable, albeit conservative, estimate of total expenditure on e-learning in hardware, software and support staff (i.e. excluding academic or teaching staff) would be around €2M per annum. The UK has the equivalent of 100 such universities, and so expenditure could be of the order of €200M per annum.

Most of the effort invested in developing e-learning in higher education is directed towards UK students, but, clearly, those who visit from whatever origins, including

Erasmus students, will benefit alongside them. Equally, UK students who go to other universities on exchange programmes and who wish to link digitally back into their home universities will benefit where off-campus access is provided and supported. Many UK universities are investing in distance education via e-learning, mostly at M (Masters) and post-degree/post-experience levels, but not solely as some are interested in distance education for first degree students. The largest attempt to develop e-learning-based distance education at the national UK level was the €120M eUniversity in 2001. It failed to develop enough interest amongst universities or learners, and was closed down. Finally, the UK's largest distance education provider in HE is the UK's Open University (OU), which uses increasing amounts of e-learning in its programmes, analogously to traditional universities. It recently adopted a new VLE for its courses, the Australian open source system Moodle.

3.2.1 Issue of quality in e-learning in UK

The UK higher education sector has had a strong quality assurance (QA) oversight for over ten years, originally quite intense and requiring much effort and resources, recently moving to a lighter 'touch' [33]. This history influences thinking in the sector about how to measure quality in e-learning. E-learning is probably largely viewed within universities as one part of learning and teaching and hence taken under a quality assurance or enhancement process with the rest of the educational provision, rather than seen as a separate system with its own specific criteria and processes. This makes it difficult to discern how quality is actually being measured. However, in recognition that an increasing number of universities are providing courses by distance education, the QAA produced guidelines for quality assurance in this area [34]. By the nature of the need to cover all types (formats) of distance education at any level of study and in any subject, these guidelines are quite generic and pose questions to be answered rather than offering specific solutions, especially in the use of e-learning.

In Scotland the quality assurance process has been modified recently to one of quality enhancement, in recognition that most university courses were judged to already be of high quality and so repeated measurement of the same aspects was of limited value. It is extremely likely that most universities will use e-learning in some way as part of their evidence for enhancement [35].

This is not to say that all concern about the measurement of quality in e-learning is entirely embedded within learning and teaching generally. The most obvious e-learning quality issues that have come to the fore have been concerned with the accessibility of digital learning materials, both under the influence of web guidelines such as W3C, and also under the increasing impact of current legislation on disability (eg UK SENDA – [36]). The UK HE Funding Councils support a specific centre to offer advice in this area through JISC [37].

In the educational arena there is also concern for using high pedagogical standards when developing e-learning content and process to ensure that the investment in development time is cost effective. Some universities organise voluntary or compulsory courses for staff entering this area for the first time or apply quality checking before online courses are allowed to be offered. Most universities in the UK appear to offer at least guidelines to staff developing e-learning courses, e.g. Portsmouth: [38], York: [39].

Nationally, the UK HE Funding Councils, through their agency, JISC, also provide a central e-learning pedagogical and technological support service to both universities and individual members of teaching and support staff. These services are aimed at ensuring effectiveness and efficiency in the use of e-learning, both aspects of high quality provision. Examples of these services which are directly relevant include: InfoNet [40] Regional Support Centres [41] e-learning programme [42].

Most recently, an organisation named the Higher Education Academy has been established, with a focus solely on the enhancement of quality in all learning and teaching activities, and working primarily with academic and support staff as individuals. A major recent development has been the funding of subject-specific and generic Centres of Excellence in Teaching & Learning, and many CETLs are active in the e-learning area [43].

These national development projects sit alongside the pre-existing Subject Centres [44] which have a remit to disseminate good practice in all aspects of learning and teaching, including e-learning. Thus through these support services, both subject-specific and generic, both pedagogical and technological, staff and universities are able to access expert advice on all aspects of e-learning, that contribute the provision of high quality materials and processes.

The HEA has also introduced a new programme that focuses specifically on quality in e-learning in the form of benchmarking between universities. As part of the development of this to a robust methodology, an invitation was issued to UK universities to participate in pilots, which will be carried out through 2006 [45]. Some of the thinking that lies behind this national benchmarking process can be gleaned from the excellent review by Bacsich [46].

Whilst the majority of this higher education support for quality in e-learning is mainly focussed on students in relatively traditional settings, albeit with a view often to increasing flexibility of time and place of study, it is not without direct significance for the mobile student, either physically or virtually. Anytime-anyplace access for the UK-based student will also serve the non-UK-based student, whether this be one who is away on an exchange or one who wishes to take a course at a distance. Some work is being done on ways to support mobile learning (see for example [47], [48]).

A small amount of the focus has indeed been on distance education, which is increasing in volume in the UK as in all other countries, with offices specifically to develop high quality provision and support being opened in otherwise quite traditional universities [49].

Beyond the formal higher education sector boundaries, several organisations that have some impact on quality in e-learning with a particular emphasis on distance education, which is within the area of virtual mobility. The most directly relevant organisation is the Open and Distance Learning Quality Council [50] which has a substantial body of online materials about QA in distance education, including that offered by e-learning. Another with similar interests is the British Learning Association [51] which offers a “Quality Mark”.

3.3 Spanish context in quality on eLearning

ICT and e-learning have become one of the important issues in Spanish Higher Education in the last decade. A report [52] carried out by the CRUE in 2004 gives evidence of this, reflecting, among other things, that the budget for ICT services and e-learning have been increased in all universities and the same happened with the staff

involved in those activities. However this increase in resources does not correspond in many cases with a clear strategy or organisational plan that will make it more effective; this lack of strategic plan was already perceived in a report issued by the CRUE previously, in 2000 [53]. On the other hand, all universities offer basic ICT services, but there is still lack of training for the staff and students; this can imply some resistance in using them. All the universities taken part in the research have some kind of VLE, and 3 out of 4 offer studies in which the students have to use some kind of e-learning tools. Another interesting data is that around 40 % of the universities take part in a consortium. In general, still the most habitual e-learning practices support face to face learning; only a short number of universities offer 100% e-learning courses.

3.3.1 Quality in ICT and e-learning in the Spanish Higher Education System

In the last decade, the Spanish higher education system has been involved in an intense process of quality assurance. The National Agency (for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) started out in 1996 as an autonomous decentralised organisation. At present there are also 8 regional agencies. So, as an example of what is taking place, in the region of Andalusia there are the Andalusian Agency in charge of accreditation (AGAE) and a Quality Unit for Andalusian Universities (UCUA). This Unit has promoted projects and initiatives for quality improvement at a regional level, also in the field of e-learning, like the regional project called *Guia Fortic* [54]; its final output has been a *Guide for the Evaluation of Formative Actions Based in Information and Communication Technologies*. The Guide was based on the EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Model) and has become a tool for assessing the quality of e-learning actions in the Andalusian universities.

However, there is still much to do in relation to quality evaluation and assessment in most of the Spanish universities. According to the CRUE report, the existence of an organisation that takes control of quality in the implementation of ICT and e-learning is a typical indicator of those universities more advanced in this sector, but only 40 % of the Spanish universities include that assessment department for ICT and e-learning. On the other hand 90% of the universities accept that they have been evaluated under some quality programmes, though only 15% possess some quality certification.

In all these documents, there is no reference to ICT and mobility programmes, normally students visiting a Spanish university will work under the same conditions, and will also lack some more information and training to take advantage of all the ICT and e-learning offers. However as there is no documentation that can confirm this similar conditions we can not be completely sure that this is the case.

4. Erasmus mobility and quality in e-learning and ICT

Taking into account all we have said in previous chapters, it seems clear that quality in ICT or e-learning is not being considered in relation to mobility. This issue does not even appear in the questionnaires that Erasmus students often have to complete to evaluate different aspects of their experience, such as administrative services, pedagogy, etc. Those questionnaires are often complete by students at the end of their stay and as expected, in them normally there is no reference to the ICT information and conditions during their visit [55].

From the mobility programmes perspective, and considering what services a student can have access to, quality in ICT and e-learning should be addressed at least in the following aspects:

- **Quality in support**, that is, availability of information especially before arriving at the university; help desk research where students can go to ask about their problems and needs; online support to make it easier the access to ICT information and facilities, etc.
- **Quality in infrastructure**, providing students with at least the same facilities local students have. Infrastructure refers to computer facilities, time flexibility, digital library facilities, email, Internet access, wireless, VPN systems, etc.
- **Quality in e-learning activities**, referring to access to online materials, possibility of taking part in virtual courses in the same situation of local students, etc.

Our view is that at least these three aspects should be considered when thinking about assessing e-learning in relation to Erasmus programmes.

5. Conclusion

Quality in e-learning has been an issue not sufficiently faced in most European universities, at least at a strategic and organisational level. The evaluation of e-learning is still an unusual experience when it comes to real practice; though there have been quite a lot of projects devoted to this issue. On the other hand, there is no information about how Erasmus students use ICT and e-learning during the Erasmus experience, and the degree of quality of the services they can use, either in their host or in their home university. E-learning is becoming an aspect that can not be renounced when students are taking part in a mobility programme and therefore, it is important to assure that conditions are at least as good as they are for the local students. In this sense, our future research and piloting experiences will be a helpful contribution.

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