



## Concept and role of Short Learning Programmes in European Higher Education

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## 1. About E-SLP Project

This report is published as part of the E-SLP project: European Short Learning Programmes. The E-SLP project is funded by the Erasmus+ Programme and runs from 1 January 2018 until 31 December 2020.

Short Learning Programmes (SLPs) are a group of courses (units, modules or other learning building blocks) with a common subject focusing on specific needs in society which can be used as stackable elements of larger formal degrees targeting non-traditional and adult learners. The E-SLP project focusses on online, flexible and scalable SLPs in the European context.

This report is part of work package 2.

### 1.1. Partners

- P1 European Association of Distance Teaching Universities
- P2 Fernuniversität in Hagen
- P3 The Open University
- P4 Open Universiteit Nederland
- P5 Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia
- P6 Universitat Oberta de Catalunya
- P7 Hellenic Open University
- P8 Università Telematica Internazionale UNINETTUNO
- P9 Anadolu University
- P10 Universidade Aberta
- P11 Open University of Cyprus
- P12 Open University of the University of Jyväskylä
- P13 Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
- P14 National Association of Distance Education
- P15 Akademia Gorniczo Hutnicza Im. Stanisława Staszica W Krakowie



## 2. Executive Summary

The current socioeconomic developments indicate the relevance of lifelong learning. The mismatch between competences, personal ambition and societal needs of the economy should be resolved. In view of socioeconomic developments, this mismatch creates a challenge for the European Union as well as for higher education institutes (HEIs). Higher education needs to become more flexible by adopting more blended or online settings, that can facilitate lifelong learning and have an impact on degree education as well. Short Learning Programmes (SLPs) could provide an answer to this challenge.

These SLPs consist of individual learning units or building blocks that are combined in a coherent programme that is valuable for both learners and employers. As part of the E-SLP project, the current report aims to review and conceptualise SLPs in higher education, and to describe the possibilities and challenges of developing SLPs in the European context, both in their contributions to lifelong learning and within degree education.

Throughout Europe there is diverse understanding of the concept as well as the availability of different SLPs, all with different characteristics, such as size in the European Credits Transfer System (ECTS) and level according to the European Qualification Framework (EQF). In the current report we focus on programmes with a size of 5 to 30 ECTS and an EQF level 5 to 8 (from foundation to the doctoral level). The most important characteristic of a SLP is that it should consist of coherent learning units leading up to a certificate (ECTS-based certification). Within the E-SLP partner institutions, the name SLP seems suitable for programmes with these characteristics.

Recognition of SLPs by learners, the professional field and other HEIs, can be improved by increasing the offerings and making them more visible. Uniformity in name and characteristics seem paramount to the recognition process and will be aided by a supplement to the certificate with information on size, content and other characteristics. The quality of the programmes is another important aspect in recognition and should be guaranteed by internal/institutional quality assurance mechanisms. External quality assurance such as accreditation could help in this process as well, but as this is often a lengthy process it is advised not to wait with offering a programme. For SLPs there should be a short time to market to ensure a strong connection with topical demands of society. Where an external accreditation of SLPs is needed, it should be organised "ex post", e.g. by a standardised review of the internal quality assurance system for SLPs. This would facilitate the recognition of the programmes.

There seems to be a high potential for SLPs for lifelong learners in higher education, since they are more adapted to their living conditions by a their limited studyload, more flexibility and focus on a specific set of knowledge and skills, meeting assessed needs of the target groups. This type of programmes is often positioned in so-called "Centers for Lifelong Learning" within HEIs. The potential of using SLPs as a modular structure within degree education is less evident due to possible negative effects on study pace and early drop-out of traditional learners. Currently, traditional students are stimulated to complete a programme within a set time period. Facilitating learning breaks could also facilitate procrastination or setting other priorities. On the other hand, electives consisting of SLPs could boost the flexibility and

stimulate (virtual) mobility. Both for lifelong learners in higher education as well as the more traditional learners in degree education, the potential of SLPs depends on the recognition of the programmes and how this is facilitated by HEIs as well as the national and European governments.

SLPs are believed to enable a fast response to mismatches of competences within the current context of rapid societal developments and additionally they could enable self-directed education and more (international) mobility, in particular for lifelong learners in higher education.

## 2.1. Highlights

- There is a high demand for shorter programmes, focussing on specific and topical knowledge and skills;
- SLPs can provide an answer to rapid developments of current society that demand new or updated knowledge and skills;
- SLPs are best suited for lifelong learners in higher education, who are the first target group;
- Uniformity in the concept and characteristics of SLPs are paramount for recognition;
- The acronym SLP should be used for programmes of 5 to 30 ECTS;
- To facilitate the recognition process of SLP, HEIs should provide a supplement to the certificate with its characteristics;
- To guarantee the quality of SLPs, institutions should provide internal/institutional quality assurance mechanisms;
- Where accreditation is needed, it should be ex post, e.g. by an external review of the internal quality assurance system of an institution;
- In degree education, a full modular programme based on SLPs seems to have less potential, but electives consisting of SLPs could provide more self-directed education and stimulate mobility;
- The stackability of SLPs could benefit international collaborations.

## 2.2. Content

The current report aims at addressing the first objective of the E-SLP project: reviewing and conceptualising SLPs and describing the possibilities and limitations of developing SLPs in the European context.

This report is composed of six paragraphs. Starting with an introduction, it provides an outline of the current challenges related to lifelong learning in the European Higher Education Area, as well as a short description of the E-SLP project. The second paragraph describes the current needs of learners and employers, as well as current developments in society and the economy. The third paragraph describes the concept of SLP and its characteristics, the aspects related to recognition and accreditation, and current SLP initiatives. Paragraph four focuses on the current legal and policy framework related to SLP. The fifth and final paragraph reflects on the potential of SLPs on the future of European higher education and concludes with a set of recommendations.

The country-specific information in this report was provided by representatives of each partner institution. These representatives were asked, among other things, to describe the needs of learners in their region or country, and how the offering in their institute relates to the characteristics of SLPs as defined in the E-SLP project. Additional information was gathered based on international and national literature.

### 2.3. Terminology

As the sources used in the current report indicate that there is no uniformity in the understanding of the terminology used in relation to SLPs, in the current paragraph an overview of the most significant terms used in this report is provided.

In practice, the terms *Lifelong Learning*, *continuing education* and *continuing professional development* are often used interchangeably. However, it should be noted that these concepts are not synonyms.

Lifelong learning is the lifelong, voluntary and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for personal or professional reasons, improving knowledge, skills and competences (Glossary:Lifelong learning, 2019).

Continuing professional development and continuing education are considered as part of lifelong learning but only focus on the post-secondary learning activities within formal and non-formal education.

Continuing education may encompass any kind of education after initial education or after entry into working life (general, specialised or vocational, formal or non-formal, etc.). It is crucial for the employability of individuals.

Continuing professional development (CPD) describes the skills, knowledge and experience that an individual gain formally and informally in their work and which builds on their basic qualifications and training. Increasingly in professional and vocational careers there is a formal requirement to continue to learn and develop knowledge, skills, attitudes and competences throughout careers to keep up to date and be able to work safely, legally and effectively. Formal CPD which is a professional requirement is validated and documented. Increasingly employers expect to have a formal authenticated record of an individual's CPD and it consequently has become an important element in the curriculum.

The current report uses the term *continuing education*, as it is the most commonly used term in general and within documents issued by the European Commission in particular.

In this report, the term degree education is used as a synonym for university education with formal certification or qualification as adopted in the European Qualification Framework such as bachelor, master and PhD degrees.

A clear definition of the word *programme* is important as different partners give a different meaning to it. Within this project, the term programme defines: "A sequenced set of courses or modules representing a student's total study requirement and usually leading to an award on successful completion" (EMPOWER glossary). In the current project, a course is defined as

a separate and coherent self-contained block of learning, organised around consistent learning outcomes (course, seminar, visit to a workplace, etc.) and leading to an exam or qualification awarded with ECTS (for more info check this glossary: <https://empower.eadtu.eu/glossary>).

### 3. Introduction

#### 3.1. The need for innovation and the challenges for higher education

Higher education in Europe has encountered, on one hand, a variety of challenges during the last years, such as the continuing economic and social crisis with dramatic levels of unemployment still tangible in large parts of Europe. On the other hand, there has been a rapid development of knowledge and technology that has had a high impact on the educational system. Also, internationalisation plays a more prominent role due to the increase of the mobility of learners and more international working environments (EHEA, 2015). The challenges in society as well as an increase in demand for just the necessary knowledge at just the right time due to the changing labour market, demographic shifts and the evolving characteristics and needs of learners and stakeholders, lead to a higher demand of flexibility for the educational system. The scalability of education is particularly important in terms of development costs and competitive forces in an increasingly global market. For higher education institutions (HEIs), this means an opportunity as well as a societal duty to adapt to, or even better, to anticipate, these socio-economic developments, both in their contributions to lifelong learning and within their degree education (formal certification or qualification).

The Envisioning Report for Empowering Universities underlines that HEIs have a mission of promoting knowledge and educating generations (EADTU, 2018). Universities should contribute to society through the modernization of education and excellence in research, acting as drivers for innovation and growth (Ernst & Young, 2012). During the Ministerial Conference of the European Higher Education Area of Yerevan (EHEA, 2015), the ministers already complied with supporting HEIs by strengthening their dialogue with employers, implementing programmes with both theoretical and practical components, fostering entrepreneurship, innovation of skills or competences and following career developments. And by doing so, underlining the mission of HEIs, acknowledging education and training to be important fields to tackle problems that accompany these socioeconomic trends. This is reaffirmed by the European Commission in the New Skills Agenda 2016 where it is stated that it is crucial to focus on those aspects of education and training that are able to drive innovation, entrepreneurship and creativity, shape sectors, create jobs and new markets, empower people (including the most vulnerable), enrich democratic life, and develop engaged, talented and active citizens. HEIs have a responsibility to work towards this focus and prepare learners for a working environment and society that is evolving rapidly, both with a high complexity and a lot of uncertainty (European Commission, 2016). The New Skills Agenda describes a number of actions to ensure the attainment objectives such as the support, training and the development of skills, are being met and are available to people in the European Union (European Commission, 2016). The EU attainment objectives, such as a review of the European Qualifications Framework and for example the review of the Recommendation on Key

Competences, stress the importance of lifelong learning, continuing education and professional development within society (Laal, Laal, & Aliramaei, 2014).

### **3.2. Initiatives to deal with current socioeconomic challenges**

To achieve the EU attainment objectives on lifelong learning, several European initiatives have been deployed. The Rethinking Education initiative that was set up in 2012 was aimed at improving socio-economic outcomes per country by investing in skills (European Commission, 2012). The Grand Coalition for Digital Jobs (European Commission, 2013), introduced in 2013, mainly focussed on the lack of ICT skills as well as the high number of ICT vacancies which needed to be resolved. The entrepreneurship action plan (European Commission, 2013) was introduced in 2013 to promote entrepreneurship, improve entrepreneurial education, remove administrative barriers and strengthen the culture of entrepreneurship.

To follow up, the key competences for lifelong learning - originally adopted in 2016 (European Commission, 2018) - were renewed in 2018. The recommendations define the competences and skills necessary for personal and professional development, inviting the Member States to possibly revise their educational offering. The European Reference Framework of Key Competences for lifelong learning proposes the following competences (European Commission, 2018):

- literacy;
- multilingual;
- In mathematic, science, technology and engineering;
- digital;
- personal, social and learning to learn;
- citizenship;
- entrepreneurship;
- cultural awareness and expression.

A broadening of the concept of lifelong learning was produced by the Taskforce Short Learning Programmes that was started by ten members of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) in 2016. This taskforce pointed to the relevance of Short Learning Programmes (SLPs) as part of the solution for the current lack of skills or competences in the European labour population, as these programmes are focussed on specialised skills or competences with a limited study load. SLPs can be particularly relevant for adult students in LLL or part-time students in degree education. The taskforce also stated that although SLPs can also be interesting for traditional students, they should not be the main target group.

The members in the taskforce came from several countries, represented both traditional campus universities as well as distance universities and pooled their experience of both bachelor/master programmes as well as SLPs or comparable programmes.

The SLP taskforce (Annex 1) took the initiative to:

- increase the European visibility for already existing SLPs at member institutions by making an initial inventory;
- formulate initial (quality) criteria for SLPs;
- discuss how the quality assurance and accreditation of SLPs could be brought one or several steps forward;
- suggest themes for further cooperative work between several members (for example: SLPs for teacher training on ICT and SLPs for health-related jobs);
- formulate a proposal for a new project that aims at exploring the possibilities of SLPs in a European context (E-SLP) and provide a starting point for working towards development (EADTU, 2015).

### **3.3. E-SLP: an initiative to take Lifelong Learning one step further**

The proposal for the current E-SLP project that evolved out of the SLP taskforce was rewarded with an Erasmus+ subsidy. The project consists of multiple Work Packages each focussing on different objectives. E-SLP must be seen as a project creating instruments to boost lifelong learning in Europe. The project is managed by the EADTU and has multiple objectives. The current report focusses on defining the concept and position of SLPs as part of higher education-systems and of policies for continuing professional development and lifelong learning, responding to needs of the economy and personal development. Subsequent reports of the project will address the following objectives:

1. developing institutional policies, strategies and frameworks for the development and delivery of flexible and scalable SLPs in Europe, keeping pace with the size and diversity of needs of employers and employees and as an opportunity for learners to fit study programmes to their time horizon;
2. empowering university leadership and staff for curriculum and course design, quality assurance and recognition for SLPs complying with the European Qualification Framework (EQF);
3. developing guidelines for collaborative SLPs and related (virtual) mobility, enriching the content and quality of SLPs and raising their European outreach, scale and cost-effectiveness;
4. designing next steps for change towards systemic and sustainable institutional, national and EU policies and strategies for continuing education, mainstreaming SLPs as a specific area of university provision, next to degree education and open education.

## 4. Context: needs and developments in society and in higher education

### 4.1. Increased demand for short programmes in a changing society

In recent years, there have been rapid developments of knowledge and technology that have had a high impact on the educational system as well as on organisations and professions. The development of digital technologies opens up the perspective of replacing people in their professional activities while at the same time creating new professions (European Commission, 2018). In response to this, HEIs need to determine how to react to these rapid developments by delivering a new kind of education that fits the need of lifelong learners (Chatlani, 2018). There is an increased demand for additional and stackable education, accessible within a short period of time, to which the various institutes and platforms are already responding. These institutes and platforms are mainly focussing on post-secondary learning activities (adult education) and to a lesser extent on degree education. According to *'Trends 2018'* most HEIs do not engage in short programmes, but they are however interested in providing more flexible ways of learning (Gaebel, Zhang, Bunescu, & Stoeber, 2018).

In order to enable the development of educational programmes that are more market-driven than traditional education, it will be important to take into consideration the demands of the most important stakeholders. These stakeholders, of course, include the learners, but also the employers, who need to be involved as they are often the ones enabling the learners by providing time and money for such an educational programme.

### 4.2. Needs analysis for lifelong learners in higher education

In EU member states the lifelong learning participation rate varies from less than 3% to more than 25%, indicating that there are significant gains to be made (Eurostat, 2018). Current socio-economic trends demand both the reskilling and upskilling of workers and a continuous update of knowledge during their working lives. Mainly due to the technological developments and globalization, higher demands are placed on the skills of workers. Additionally, new competences are requested by today's and tomorrow's jobs. It is crucial that lifelong learners in higher education have the opportunities, incentives and motivation to develop their own skills alleviating the possible mismatch between skills and position or function. An important development that also might affect the motivation of learners is increased career mobility: people tend to switch more easily between jobs and between organisations. This can be at least partly explained by the fact that a significant number of people do not feel engaged with their work (European Commission, 2018).

The needs for education and training in the 27 EU countries are immense and the levels of participation in education and continuing education across the EU vary greatly. An example of this level of participation in continuing education can be given by Poland, where 72% of the employed learners indicated that they were motivated to start a learning programme, as they saw the need to increase skills that are necessary for their current job (Polska Agencja Rozwoju Przedsiębiorczości, 2019). From this 72%, 31% were employed learners required to update their skills by their employer, 29% wanted to develop their own personal interests and 22% pursue a diploma or certificate. Other motivations were less prominent and focussed more on

personal, academic or cultural interests. As the example of Poland illustrates, there are a number of people focused on obtaining a diploma or certificate, which could be a necessity for the next step in their career. For instance, in Catalonia 56% of the employed learners consider that having a professional certificate has increased their employability (Randstad Research, 2017). Certification validates the competences of a learner.

To provide the right opportunities for lifelong learners in higher education, a good balance between study load and, their professional and social life, is essential. The time available for study is limited for people in employment and a bachelor or master's degree can be too extensive. Shorter programmes, high in flexibility might minimise dropout rate. Preferably learners should be able to choose the learning building blocks that they are interested in and design their own learning path. Dispensation for previously obtained skills and competences will further support learning efficiency. The need for flexibility does not only apply to a selection of building blocks but also to organisational aspects. If learners are able to decide for themselves where and when they have an opportunity to study, it will be easier for them to fit their educational activities into their lives. Offering online or blended programmes and limiting the amount of pre-structured events within a programme will support this demand for flexibility.

A barrier for lifelong learners in higher education is time availability. This can indeed change in relation to personal or professional commitments. To overcome this barrier, lifelong learners should be able to take learning breaks and resume their activities later on, when they have more time available. In this way the impact on their personal and professional lives could be minimized. Learning breaks could be facilitated by means of certification of completed learning building blocks. Within formal education this type of certification of each learning building block could lead to both acceleration or deceleration of the study pace of the student. On the one hand, it could be a motivator for the student to speed up and get to the next milestone. On the other hand, it could enable students to set other priorities leading to more procrastination. This could indicate that within degree education, the potential of SLPs is perhaps limited. However, it supports the relevance of activities focussed on lifelong learning and more flexible opportunities within degree education.

### **4.3. Needs analysis for employers**

The primary responsibility for lifelong learning lies on the government, but they need the support of both (1) enterprises and employers who can provide valuable insight on the skills and knowledge gap, and (2) institutions and platforms that are willing to adapt and adopt their programmes (Davies & Longworth, 2017). There is a need for the further development of learning programmes providing the knowledge and skills required by both the more traditional and the new, upcoming firms and enterprises. A more qualified active labour population is required, due to an economic system that is becoming increasingly knowledge-based. To be able to keep up with the societal changes and possible competitors, employers are better off with skilled and well-motivated employees who are well-trained for the job they are carrying out. In general, current offerings seem to be insufficiently market-driven. Various HEIs conducted market research, investigating the market potential of certain programmes and

responded by offering market-based programmes. These programmes explore the potential of the programme rather than the exact skills desired, leading to a mismatch within the current offerings and needs (European Centre for Development of Vocational Training, 2018). A more market-driven approach would be desired, investigating the actual demand for skills and knowledge.

Current socio-economic developments can offer both challenges and opportunities for companies. Resilience and flexibility to respond to these developments is paramount. The companies need to be able to rapidly develop new skills and knowledge for their employees. Hence, spending one or more years on a degree programme is often not acceptable and interference of time spent studying with the current job of the employee need to be as limited as possible as that time needs to be compensated for. For companies with less personnel or less budget it will be more challenging to compensate this time spent studying. Hence, for all - but in particular the village level and small to medium enterprises - a high efficiency and a limited study load is essential.

While certification is an important motivator for lifelong learners in higher education, this might be of lesser importance to the employers. Employers focus more on having an employee with the right skills and knowledge for the job and are often less worried about formal evidence, such as a diploma. Only in the case of a need for external quality assurance might this be relevant to them. For instance, in certain HEIs a PhD or master's degree is needed to become a teacher.

The potential for lifelong learning seems to be evident for certain sectors where, due to shortages, this provides a way to retrain or reskill learners in employment and lifelong learners. According to the European Centre for Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), the top five skill shortage occupations across the EU are ICT professionals; medical doctors; science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) professionals; nurses and midwives and teachers (European Centre for Development of Vocational Training, 2016). Recent surveys in Spain (Adecco, 2016) and the Netherlands (UWV, 2019) confirmed these outcomes.

What exact skills or knowledge are needed per sector and how learning programmes can develop the adequate sector-specific designs, was further explored in the document *Skills for Jobs* (OECD 2018). It was also stated in the document that the strong demand for high-level cognitive skills will continue, posing important policy challenges as to how to equip all workers with the skills needed (OECD, 2018). Therefore, it is important to better identify and manage the availability of required skills, competences, and qualifications, and to help prevent skills gaps and mismatches. Effective communication with all stakeholders is essential to enable a correct match between education and the needs of employers as well as learners. Additionally, employers can contribute as well by making better use of continuing education and acknowledging SLPs in the policies and practices of their companies (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2018). Further exploration and research on curriculum and course design meeting the needs of employers will be part of a subsequent report (Work Package 4 of E-SLP). Further exploration and research on empowering universities and strengthening the

dialogue between HEIs and employers will be part of a subsequent report (Work Package 7 of E-SLP).

#### **4.4. Current developments of the higher education systems**

There are several developments in higher education that could influence the evolution of SLPs. The European Universities Initiative might be one of the most relevant developments for which universities throughout Europe are strengthening their strategic partnerships and are facilitating international educational flexibility for learners (European Commission, 2019). The Bologna agreement describes the concepts of degree education with a focus on traditional face-to-face education leading to a degree such as a Bachelor or Master's degree for which the levels have been described in the EQF (please see Annex 1). However, with certification of smaller learning units, learners will be able to obtain more flexibility and mobility within their study path - in particular when learning units are stackable towards a degree at a European University.

Another development is that HEIs are more and more influenced by online and blended learning (also within degree education), leading to more flexible and scalable learning programmes. Open education has also experienced developments in the form of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). These online courses are designed for large numbers of participants that can be accessed anywhere, by anyone, as long as they have an internet connection. MOOCs are open to everyone without entry qualifications and offer an online course experience for free, often with the possibility to obtain a certificate against payment (Openuped, 2015). MOOCs have been around for a few years and have experienced an increase in popularity over time (Pappano, 2012). Class Central (2019) reported on the still increasing growth: in 2018, 101 million new students registered for courses developed by over 900 universities. In 2017, 81 million students registered for over 9,400 courses developed by over 800 universities (Class Central, 2018). Since MOOCs as single courses are, generally, free of charge, platforms look for new business models appropriate for the labour market and longer careers. Therefore, MOOCs are being assembled into SLPs and even degree programmes. Awarding a certificate requires strict assessments and therefore these programmes are fee paying. It is not yet certain whether they are really lucrative to either universities or platforms, but they currently fulfil a specific role in continuing education, meeting needs of the labour market (Class Central, 2018) (Reda & Kerr, 2018). As a result, the number of credit-bearing online courses has increased, with an emphasis on postgraduate education (Reda & Kerr, 2018). Please see figure 1, in which these developments have been visualised.

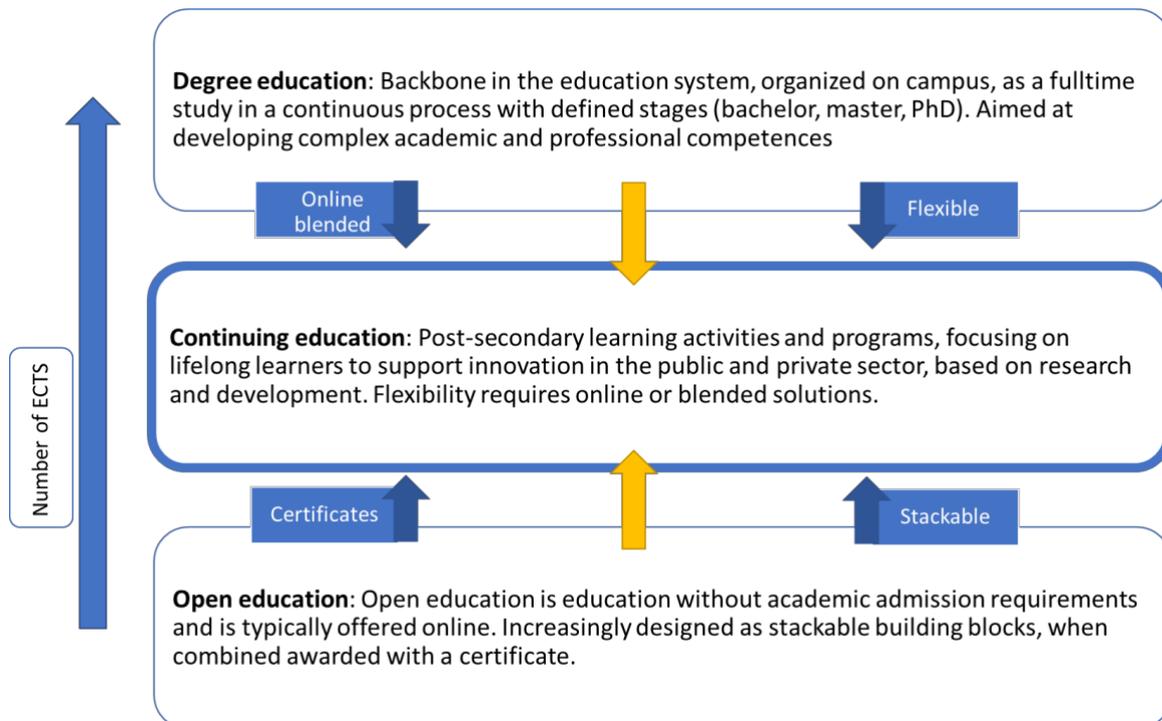


Figure 1. The spectrum of educational developments with a convergence of open education towards shorter degrees and degree education towards short learning programmes. In open education, Massive Open Online Courses become more and more stackable leading up to a certificate or short degrees. Degree education has increased influences of online and blended learning, leading to more flexible programmes that are better scalable. Figure adopted from The Changing Pedagogical Landscape (EADTU, 2018).

#### 4.5. Postgraduate education and MOOC-based online degrees

There is a market for postgraduate education and short online degrees which is partially filled up by MOOCs as previously described. MOOCs differ from SLPs, as the latter provides a pathway for the students that leads to study credits, where a MOOC is often considered a single learning unit (EADTU, 2015). However, it should be noted that in some cases online courses can be used as stackable learning unit within a SLP or formal programme (Class Central, 2018).

Many global platforms - originally MOOC platforms - tend to develop more in the direction of short online degree programmes (MOOC-based short learning micro-credential programmes or even sometimes degrees). Currently also short degrees in the form of micro-master's (which could be considered a SLP consisting of multiple MOOCs (Smets, 2017)), nano-degrees (also considered SLPs) and professional certificates are claiming a position in the market of in particular postgraduate education and short online degrees (Smets, 2017). Therefore, examinations (for which students have to pay a fee) become more and more part of their business model. A few of these platforms that are well-known are FutureLearn, Miriadax, France Université Numérique (FUN), EduOpen, edX, Coursera, Udacity and Kadenze. These platforms show a variety in type, features, number of offerings, number of courses and course duration. Several HEIs (for example Delft University of Technology, participant in edX) also invest a lot of time and effort to be able to implement some of these short programmes in their formal degree education (bachelor, master's and postgraduate curricula).

Postgraduate education and MOOC-based online degrees have been successful due to characteristics such as online offering and scalability, resulting in large numbers of participants and a global reach. These characteristics of short online degrees are strongly related to the characteristics of SLPs as described earlier. However, in most European countries the teaching language is a barrier for international delivery, as described in the study 'The Changing Pedagogical Landscape' (EADTU, 2018). There seems to be inadequate regulation, support and incentives for universities to reach the full potential of MOOCs. It is also obvious that the incorporation of open education as an integral part of universities policy has proved complex for organizational as well as financial reasons (Schophuizen, Kreijns, Stoyanova, & Kalz, 2018) (Reda & Kerr, 2018). The Changing Pedagogical Landscape (EADTU, 2018) also shows that new digital technologies and the increased digital skills-level of both students and teachers lead to innovation in higher education. New pedagogies are developed in the sphere of blended and online teaching and learning at bachelor and master's level. These technologies also have an impact on continuing education/professional development and the development of SLPs as flexible and personalised solutions for educational needs along with changes on the labour market and longer careers of employees. This will increase the impact and scalability of lifelong learning within the European Higher Education Area. Open education can be seen as a promising field for universities for an increased educational offering for lifelong learners (please see figure 1, p.15).

In many countries, the implementation of online and blended education is still hindered by conflicting regulations (related to funding, quality assurance, privacy, performance agreements, etc.). An important role for governments is thus to create a favourable framework resolving the unequal status between on-campus and online provision and between formal and non-formal degrees within some countries. Changing this status could be beneficial for universities, as they would be able to increase their student numbers and address the needs of non-traditional learners. But this could also have added value for the students, as it could lead to an increase in quality and recognition.

An important development was the introduction of Microcredentials for small units of education. The idea is to facilitate better stackability for smaller learning units such as MOOCs towards formal education. The European MOOC Consortium (EMC, 2019) made suggestions for a Common Microcredential Framework (CMF) for learning units at level 5 or 7 of the EQF with a study load between 100 and 150 hours, corresponding to 5 or 6 ECTS per Microcredential unit. Additionally, this concept can be a strong promotor for the flexibility of both shorter and longer learning programmes, if students can construct the programme they are interested in, take a learning break or perhaps combine Microcredentials of different universities or different countries.

## 5. The concept of SLPs in higher education systems

### 5.1. Characteristics of Short Learning Programmes and how they can relate to the European Qualification Framework.

A SLP is a combination of learning building blocks (e.g. courses, MOOCs or microcredentials) that are integrated into a coherent programme around consistent learning outcomes or competences, leading to a qualification. SLPs are organised in the sphere of continuing higher education at EQF levels 5 to 8.

SLPs should not be too long to make them attractive to potential learners in employment. The period spent studying for a SLP, also referred to as lead time, is an important aspect. This of course depends strongly on the efficiency of the learner and the study load of the programme. It is uncommon to address the study load in years or in months as this strongly depends on the intensity of the programme. Therefore, study load is often expressed in ECTS (European Credit Transfer System), keeping in mind that each ECTS corresponds to 25 to 30 hours. Degree studies, taking at least 1650 hours (60 ECTS or one year of full-time study) would be too long and intensive for most adult learners, even for part-time study. The project did consider to include also programmes with a high workload, e.g. 60 ECTS. However, in some countries there are Masters programmes with a workload of 60 ECTS, which might lead to confusion. For these reasons, the workload of a SLP was defined between 5 to 30 ECTS.

SLPs in a sphere of continuing education focus on current needs in society and the economy. They can relate to general topics such as climate change or specific domains like artificial intelligence or teacher training. In the case of a professional orientation, cooperation with stakeholders is recommended in order to make the content relevant to both learners and employers and suitable for up-skilling and re-skilling.

In contrast to most undergraduate and postgraduate continuing education programmes at universities, SLPs as conceived in this project are at least partly but often entirely online to make them fully accessible and flexible for learners at work. For most learners in employment, attendance to on campus education is a significant barrier. When programmes are mainly online, learners can decide on the time and place of learning, even on the workplace, making it easier to adjust education to their lives.

The online component of the SLPs enable their scalability, which is an important feature to institutions in the perspective of their (even borderless) outreach strategies for lifelong learning. Scalability impacts also on the cost-effectiveness of these programmes, spreading the development cost over larger groups of learners.

As they are organised by higher education institutions, SLPs should be situated at levels 5-8 of the European Qualification Framework, encompassing a higher education foundation level and the bachelor, master and doctoral level. Learning outcomes/competences to be reached by a SLP should unambiguously related to one of these EQF levels.

As SLPs in principle are stackable, a degree programme could consist of two or more SLPs (please see figure 2). Stackability is important as it contributes to the structure and cohesion

of a programme. Online SLPs can be exchangeable between a variety of programmes at the bachelor or master level, but also at the doctoral level, e.g. on research methodologies in particular domains. Because they are exchangeable, they are also suitable for mobility schemes in networked or joint degree programmes.

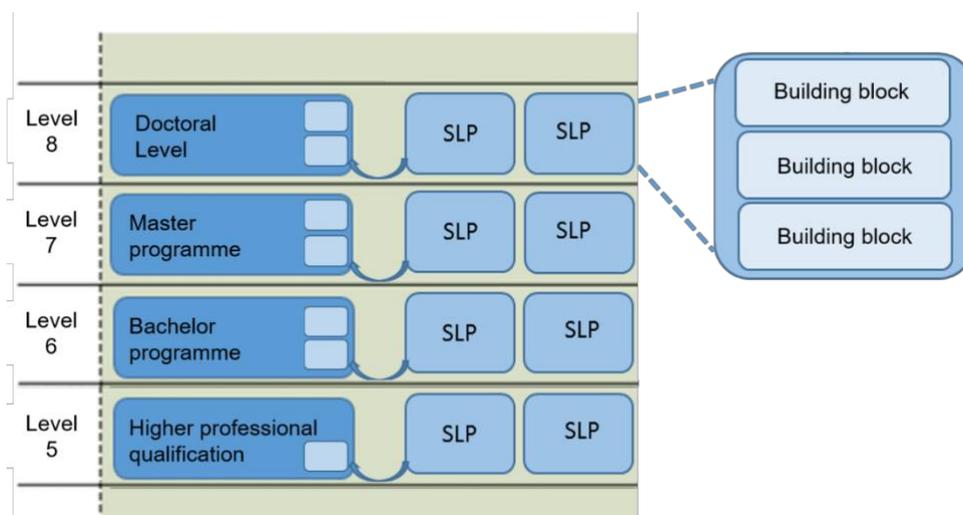


Figure 2. Defining levels in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) with the Short Learning Programmes (SLPs) added at level 5 to 8. The SLP can be an individual programme at these levels or can be part of larger degree programmes.

To enhance the recognition of a SLP to a university (e.g. for exemptions on some subjects; as a stackable learning track in some degree programmes; as a mobility window in some programmes), a SLP qualification should be certified by documenting main features of it. This should include at least the learning outcomes/competences envisaged; the content (subjects, microcredentials being part of it); the EQF level; the number of ECTS; the assessment method and of course student's ID and grades obtained.

SLPs should be quality assured, primarily by institutional standard quality assurance procedures. As other academic programmes, they are a mark of the institution. Most European governments/accreditation agencies don't require an accreditation for SLPs. If required, an *ex-post* accreditation is preferable as SLPs must be able to respond to immediate needs in society and the economy which excludes *ex ante* procedures.

A short overview of the SLP characteristics can be found in figure 3. The main features of SLPs can be summarised as follows:

- SLPs consist of a coherent set of learning building blocks or micro-credentials organised around consistent learning outcomes, leading to an exam or qualification.
- SLPs result in a credit-based certification of 5-30 ECTS, aiming at an academic level mostly combined with complex professional competences (EQF levels 5 to 8);
- SLPs focus on current needs in society and the economy, responding to contemporary problems and aiming at the continuous up-skilling and re-skilling of the European workforce

- SLPS are online or blended, to increase their accessibility and flexibility for learners at work;
- because they have a large online component and are flexible, SLPS are also scalable and therefore can be entirely or partially delivered to large (international) target groups;
- SLPs can be stackable to an academic degree (bachelor, master, doctorates);
- SLP qualifications are accompanied by a certificate supplement with the main characteristics of the programme and the achievements of the student;
- SLPs are quality assured by the internal quality assurance mechanisms of the higher education institution. When needed, SLPs can be subject to an ex-post accreditation by an external accreditation agency.

**SLP:**

- is a short academic program with a sequenced set of learning building blocks (i.e. courses, units, modules);
- with credit-based certification;
- with a common subject focussing on specific needs of society;
- offered by a higher education institute;
- targeting higher education lifelong learners.

**In context of higher education in Europe, SLPs**

- should be offered at 5 to 8 EQF levels (foundation, bachelor, master and doctoral level);
- should have a study load of 5 to 30 ECTS.

**The E-SLP project focusses specifically on**

- online/blended SLPs;
- which are flexible and scalable;
- and have a relation to formal degrees or to HEIs, for example, can be used as stackable components of larger formal degrees.

Figure 3. Short summary of the characteristics of a SLP.

## 5.2. Recognition of Short Learning Programmes

Academic recognition is the recognition of a qualification for admission to a study programme or for exemption from parts of a study programme offered by an accredited higher education institution (Nuffic, 2019; Witthaus, et al., 2016). In this perspective, two recommendations are given by Nuffic for the academic recommendation of stand-alone e-learning courses and programmes. These apply as well for SLPs as defined in this project:

- To facilitate academic recognition, use existing Bologna tools such as EQF, ECTS, and diploma or e-learning certificate supplements to provide additional information about the learning outcomes of a course.
- Make the quality assurance of e-learning part of internal quality assurance procedures at higher education institutions. Make sure that national quality assurance agencies can include stand-alone e-learning in their external review procedures of higher education institutions.

A “practitioners guide for recognition of e-learning” has been developed within the Erasmus+ e-Valuate project (Nuffic, 2019). This guide aims to familiarize recognition professionals with e-learning and helps to make an informed recognition decision within reasonable time limits. The procedure is based on seven criteria:

1. quality of the course;
2. verification of the certificate;
3. level of the course;
4. learning outcomes;
5. workload
6. the way study results are tested;
7. identification of the participants.

These recommendations and procedures are a solid basis for the recognition of SLPs as it provides all information needed for higher education institutions to recognise awards for students wanting to register for a further programme. Note that these criteria match with the features of SLPs as described above (please see paragraph 5.1).

Therefore, it is important that academic providers take the necessary steps to facilitate academic recognition by internal quality assurance and by providing all the information required in a well documented certificate supplement.

All this will contain all information needed to evaluate a SLP qualifications for recognition by employers. This can be strengthened by involving employers or other stakeholders in the design, development and delivery of courses, e.g. through professional or knowledge and innovation networks.

As table 2 shows, within the E-SLP partnership the majority of the HEIs organize an institutional/internal quality assessment for SLPs. And at the end of a SLP, students receive a

credential, which is not a formal degree but an award or certificate issued by the HEI. The certificates are not aligned between HEIs and likewise, the name, level, study duration and other factors vary strongly between or even within countries (please see table 1). This lack of uniformity can lead to confusion and a lack of recognition by employers and other stakeholders.

To promote recognition, it would at least be favourable if all SLPs were developed and credentialised according to the features and tools adopted in the Bologna process (a credit-based certification), with a clear indication of the EQF level for each SLP. A second step would be the further adoption of the of the SLP concept as described (please see paragraph 1.1). For instance, if SLPs standardise the size of reference to 5 or a multiple of 5 ECTS, this will enable HEIs to use SLPs more easily as building blocks for larger programmes. Last but not least, to speed up and uniformise the recognition process, it will be beneficial if each SLP credential or certificate will be accompanied with a diploma supplement that details the characteristics of that specific credential (i.e. title, provider, learning outcomes/competences, content, EQF level, ECTS, assessment info, grade, etc.)

Above all, it is important that SLPs are recognized in the Bologna process as this is a key condition to deploy continuing education and lifelong learning at a European scale. A consensus on the SLP concept and its main features is therefore needed. This will definitely promote the recognition of SLPs by academia and by employers.

Obtaining uniformity in nomenclature, description of SLPs and awards is paramount for the international recognition process and should be one of the key objectives in the implementation of the SLPs. It is debatable whether SLP is the right name for these programmes. For instance, when including programmes of 60 ECTS, it will be difficult to call these programmes short. However, as the upper limit was set to 30 ECTS this argument might be less valid. Alternatively, the term 'short' might not always be considered positively as it could be linked to the perceived value of the learning programme and study loads of less than 5 ECTS. In the current project, alternative terminology was explored focussing on the key characteristics of these programmes, which resulted in the name 'Certified Academic Programme' (CAP) or 'Certified Learning Programme' (CLP). However, for the partners in the current project this name was not unanimously considered as a better description of the value and content of this type of education. Even more, the abbreviations CAP and CLP might lead to confusion as they can also refer to other terminology used throughout Europe. Hence, it was concluded that for programmes of 5 to 30 ECTS the name SLP is suitable. Even more, the partners in this project indicated that this SLP is already overall well accepted and in some cases even commonly applied. Consequently, it is advised to introduce and use the term SLP for learning programmes with characteristics as described in this report.

Finally, the current report has aimed at contributing to SLP recognition at institutional, national and European level. Further exploration on the issues and challenges of SLPs recognition are detailed in Work Package 5 of the E-SLP project.

Table 1- Current awards given for SLPs by the project partners.

HEI	Awards	EQF Level and size	Relation to HEIs	Market driven	Target group	Format and Scalability	Flexibility
Fernuniversitaet Hagen (Germany)	Masters degree in continuing education, Bachelor programmes in continuing education	Degree or certificate Level 6-7; ≤120 ECTS	Not all programmes culminate in a Master program but are usually designed in successive study phases.	Programmes usually developed in close interaction with stakeholders from industry, business organisations and politics sectors	Individual learners in employment	100% online/blended and scalable	Successive study phases
The Open University UK	Certificate in higher education, Higher national certificate	Certificate Level 4; 60 ECTS	The certificate of Higher Education is a recognised exit award in the UK framework. It can also be seen as a stepping stone to a formal degree.	Some SLPs are developed in close interaction with key stakeholders.	Open to all, in particular to adult learners and those requiring part-time study.	Online and scalable	Can be used as a building block to a larger degree programme.
Open Universiteit (The Netherlands)	Certified Professional Programmes, Praktijkleergang, Focusprogrammes, Premasters.	Certificate or diploma Level 6-7 Between 5 and 60 ECTS	Can often be added within a bachelor, MBA or provides access to a master	Current offering is not market driven	Lifelong learners	100% online or blended and scalable	Are often considered building blocks.
Universidad Nacional de Educación a distancia (Spain)	Own degrees, Open Teaching, Professional Update, Teaching Training, Professional Expert, Specialization, Modular, University Expert Title, Master's Degree, Distance Vocational Training, Life Long Learning courses, University extension courses	Unofficial certificate, diploma, degree, title. Varying between 5 and 60 ECTS	SLPs can be considered as part to a larger degree. A maximum of 15% of the ECTS obtained in specific SLPs can be used to access higher education, depending on thematic area.	Focus on collaboration agreements with institutions and companies, both public and private, for the joint creation of institutional courses.	Lifelong learners	Mostly Online/blended and scalable	Programmes are normally designed in successive study phases, but not all of them end in a Master.
Fundació per a la Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Spain)	Own degree/ Own training: Master, Postgraduate, Specialisation, seminars, Online vocational Training, Professionalizing courses, Master, specialized diplomas. Non-Official Titles: Expert, university extension, Extended Study	Diploma or certificate Varying between < 1 and 60 ECTS	The system of specializations allows progressive access to the master certificate. Not in other cases.	Focus on collaboration agreements with institutions and companies, both public and private, for the creation of joint institutional courses.	Lifelong learners	100% online and scalable	In the master design process.
Hellenic Open University (Greece)	Lifelong learning Programmes, Short Learning Programmes	Certificate Level 4-7 3-15 ECTS, or no ECTS	Not easy to connect to formal education	Current offering is not market driven	Individual learners in employment	65% online, not scalable	SLPs can not be included in bigger programmes.
Universita Telematica Internazionale Uninnetuno (Italy)	Continuous professional training, Continuous professional development, Post-graduate courses, Advanced courses	Level 6-7 5-60 ECTS Average: 10-40	Programmes are usually structured in modules, each module with specific credit numbers awarded and scientific sector; this allows recognition in formal programs	A good amount of the courses is related to continuous professional development standards for professionals in specific registers (Lawyers, Teachers, etc.).	Professionals; adult learners in employment; lifelong learners	SLPs are 100% online (1 exception); scalability is good, with number of tutors as possible limiting factor.	Can be used as building blocks in other formal programmes. Intakes are flexible, with continuous enrolment.
HEI	Awards	EQF Level and size	Relation to HEIs	Market driven	Target group	Format and Scalability	Flexibility

HEI	Awards	EQF Level and size	Relation to HEIs	Market driven	Target group	Format and Scalability	Flexibility
Anadolu University (Turkey)	E-certificate programmes	Certificate level 4 9-18 ECTS	Not part of formal education	Programmes and modules shaped according to needs of society. Content and structure can be easily adapted.	Lifelong learners	100% online/blended and scalable	N.A.
Universidade Aberta (Portugal)	Post-graduate, Certified modular training routes, Continuous teacher training, Vocational training, Specialized/professional programmes, post-graduate programmes, certified modular training routes, continuous teacher training	Credits (ECTS) and certificate Level 4-7 Varying between 1 and 60 ECTS	Can give access to a bachelor or master degree. In some circumstances can be credited in bachelor degrees	Some programmes are developed in collaboration with different kind of institutions	Lifelong learners	100% online can be scalable, depending on resources for tutoring work	Successive study phase
Open University of Cyprus	Post secondary certificates and diplomas (1 year), short-term educational/training programmes	Certificate or Diploma Level 5-8 10-30 ECTS	The acquired ECTS can be used as a building block to a larger degree programme.	Not directly market-driven	Lifelong learners (employed or unemployed)	N.A.	Are often considered building blocks.
Open University JYVÄSKYLÄ (Finland)	Basic and advanced studies are meeting the project characteristics	Credits and certificates Level 6, 25 or 35 ECTS	Basic/Subject studies or their modules are fully recognised as part of a degree	In co-operation with local stakeholders (municipalities, local employees) in order to match the course design to local needs.	Adult learners	Mainly Online. Scalability is good	A coherent group of courses/modules can be stacked
Katholieke universiteit Leuven (Belgium)	Lifelong learning programmes, credit contracts, Summer Schools	Credits or Certificates 7 to 48 ECTS	Either as continued education on a received degree or as credits for exemption within formal education.	In co-operation with stakeholders to fill in gaps of knowledge of learners.	Lifelong learners or adult learners	Mostly regular teaching method, sometimes online/blended	N.A.
Kaunas Technology University (Lithuania)	SLPs are not available. The result provided here are of 4 pilots.	No credits or certificate issued. Level 6 All 5 ECTS	Currently offered as deficiency programmes. In the future incorporated in formal education and offered as open courses complementing initial study programmes.	These courses were designed according to the needs of learners, but not the employers.	Bachelor degree students	Now blended, however in the future there are plans to make them fully online. Hence good scalability	Fitted to the students' needs
Akademia Gorniczko-Hutnicza IM. Stanisława Staszica W Krakowie (Poland)	Post-master short cycle programmes/Post diploma studies	Diploma Level 6-7 30-60 ECTS	It is a supplementary level. Participants receive post-diploma qualifications.	Sector partners are often involved in the curriculum design and delivery (eg. lecturers, projects with industry, practical training on the site). Also they respond to legal situation eg. in terms of certified training provision.	Lifelong learners with at least bachelor degree or equivalent, Individual learners in employment	In some cases blended. Depends on individual university preferences. Not easily scalable	The programme is coherent but separate blocks of courses can be re-used.

### **5.3. Accreditation of Short Learning Programmes**

Accreditation is about accountability, based on quality assurance reports preferably written by an independent external organisation and/or by internal quality assurance auditors. They comply with the Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) were adopted by the Ministers responsible for higher education following a proposal prepared by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) in co-operation with the European Students' Union (ESU), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the European University Association (EUA).

Formal programme accreditation is often issued by governmental institutions. It entails if a programme can be organised and/or supported by the government or not. There are also other forms of accreditation, for instance accreditation by a professional association. Accreditation by a professional association is not bound to international or governmental standards and often consists of a rather light and often fast procedure.

In most countries, accreditation by a governmental agency is only intended for degree programmes. SLPs can be part of a larger accredited programme leading to a degree, but for other SLPs formal accreditation is not always foreseen (EHEA, 2018) (please see table 2). However, there are a few known exceptions. In Spain and Catalonia there is the possibility of registering degrees and certificates in a national registry, providing a form of accreditation if they fulfil a set of criteria. Only in a few countries, the accreditation of SLPs is possible.

As SLPs are expected to have a short time to market, it is not preferable to have an accreditation process ex-ante, that can take up to several months. Internal quality assurance by an accredited university should suffice. If governments want an accreditation, a procedure ex-post is to be considered.

This would enable much more flexibility in the programmes and a shorter time to market. Further exploration and research on the subject recognition and related problems will be part of a subsequent report (Work Package 5 of E-SLP).

### **5.4. Current initiatives on Short Learning Programmes in higher education**

Based on an inventory combining partner contributions, it could be concluded that there is already a high number of lifelong learning programmes meeting the characteristics of a SLP, mostly bachelor or master's level. Some already are named a SLP, but there are also many learning programmes for which another terminology is used. In this project already at least 42 different names for these SLPs can be reported (please see table 1), taking all European universities into account, the variation is expected to be much larger. Furthermore, looking into the platforms FutureLearn, EdX, Coursera, Udacity and Kadenze, we can add another 10 different names (for example: Nanodegrees, Xseries, MasterTrack and Micromasters) (Class Central, 2018). Differences are found within each country and possibly within each institute. Awards for SLPs are not aligned between HEIs and not between countries. Harmonisation in the nomenclature and type of rewarding is of importance.

Table 2- Current recognition and accreditation aspects of project partners based on their own contributions.

Institute	Recognition of SLPs as a separate entity by own institution	Recognition of SLPs as a separate entity by different HEIs	Recognition of SLPs as a separate entity by a NARIC	Recognition of SLPs as a separate entity by employers	Accreditation of SLPs possible as an entity
Fernuniversitaet in Hagen	Yes	Only as a module in a degree program	No	No information available	No
The Open University UK	Yes (for programmes such as a Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE), post graduate Certificate (PGCert) or postgraduate diploma (PGDip))	Yes (for programmes such as a Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE), post graduate Certificate (PGCert) or postgraduate diploma (PGDip))	Yes (for programmes such as a Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE), post graduate Certificate (PGCert) or postgraduate diploma (PGDip))	Yes (for programmes such as a Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE), post graduate Certificate (PGCert) or postgraduate diploma (PGDip))	Accreditation is at institutional level, not on programme level. Professional accreditation can be awarded at programme level.
Open Universiteit	Yes	Not per se. Depends on decision of the HEI.	No, only for larger programmes of formal HEIs	Not per se. Depends on decision of the employers	Yes, the government introduced an experiment on accreditation of shorter programmes (which will be evaluated in 2025)
Universidad Nacional de Educación a distancia	Yes	Marginally (only teacher training or SLPs larger than 15ECTS, but regardless of the titles provided).	Yes	No	Only teacher training programmes can be accredited.
Fundació per a la Universitat Oberta de Catalunya	yes	No	No	No	Only internal accreditation
Hellenic Open University	Yes	No	No	Not per se. Depends on decision of the employers.	Only internal accreditation
Universita Telematica Internazionale Uninnetuno	Yes (based on: ECTS, scientific sector, EQF level)	Yes (based on: ECTS, scientific sector, EQF level and for informal programmes up to 12 ECTS that lead to certain certification).	No	No	Only for certain professional registers accreditation is possible.
Anadolu University	No	No	No	No	No
Universidade Aberta	yes	Not necessarily. Depends on internal regulations of each HEI.	No	Depends on professional areas.	Only internal accreditation and not possible for all programmes.
Open University of Cyprus	Yes	No policy	No	No	Only internal accreditation based on a framework provided by legislation.
Open University of the University Jyväskylä	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Accreditation is on institutional level, not on programme level.
Katholieke universiteit Leuven	Depends on SLP. Some postgraduate programmes are recognized.	Varies per programme.	No	yes	No
Kaunas Technology University	Based on approval of Rector and Senate.	No	No	No	Accreditation is on institutional level, not on programme level.
Akademia Gorniczo-Hutnicza IM. Stanisława Staszica W Krakowie	Based on approval of Rector	Yes	No	No	Accreditation is on institutional level, not on programme level.

## 6. Legal & policy framework

### 6.1. The position of Short Learning Programmes within a legal and policy framework

The development of SLPs is stimulated by the policies, strategies and actions of the European Union - in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, it is stated that the development of quality education on lifelong learning and cooperation between members of the EU on this topic should be stimulated and even more that policy on vocational training should further be developed (European Commission, 2018). The European Commission developed strong policies concerning skills, innovation and entrepreneurship with regards to promoting knowledge and educating generations through the modernization of education. However, for the individual countries there is often no mentioning in legislation of continuing education in general or SLPs in particular.

Often there is a will to promote continuing education, but it seems difficult to get to a system that enables this type of education. This is often due to a lack of prioritisation and a lack of financial means (Nijkamp, Berg, & Damhuis, 2019). In anticipation, in various countries such as Germany (North-Rhine Westphalia), the government is currently in the process of rewriting the higher education law, possibly including formal qualifications for SLPs. In Belgium it is expected that a framework will be put into place in the near future based on the current focus of HEIs on LLL. In the Netherlands, by decree (Dutch Government, 2016) the strict conditions as stated in the current law on higher education, are loosened as part of an experiment on flexibility. In Spain there is no specific legislation on continuous training, and HEIs are quite autonomous in establishing their own SLPs. In Catalonia the law states that Universities even have an obligation to give adequate response to the need for training throughout life and be open to those who, at any age, wish to access their cultural or educational offer. In Poland, the recently introduced Constitution for Science sustains opportunities for courses and post-graduate programmes of 30 or more ECTS at EQF level 5 to 8 (Constitution for Science, 2018). However, activities of continuous learning must comply with certain requirements, drawn up by quality agencies or councils. The same applies for SLPs in England (please see table 3 for a full overview). As a consequence, in some cases there is a promotion for the development of SLPs, but in general there is no mention of lifelong learning measures in the national laws.

Another aspect that might have legal consequences is that the vast majority of funding for higher education is provided from public sources. Higher education institutions manage their offering of learning in a distinct way compared to their offering of degree education (Gaebel, Zhang, Bunescu, & Stoeber, 2018). The HEIs receive funding that is mostly allocated to degree education, e.g. bachelor and master's programmes. When SLPs are positioned outside degree education provision, this can have ramifications for public funding. For 72% of higher education institutions, lifelong learning provision is – at least in parts – financed differently than other learning provisions (Gaebel, Zhang, Bunescu, & Stoeber, 2018). And this, amongst other factors, causes a great diversity in the fees for SLPs.

Recently an important step in this process was taken during the Paris 2018 meeting of the EHEA. The ministers responsible for higher education expressed the ambition to further stimulate lifelong learning that is student-centred and focusses on open education. Potential learners should be able to access and complete higher education throughout their lives and study programmes should provide different learning methods and be flexible enough to enable social mobility and professional development (EHEA, 2018).

A next step would be the development of policy in line with these ambitions at both the national and European level. This would also entail a possible extension of the Bologna structure by integrating short learning programmes to ensure harmonization and readiness. Consequently, also institutional strategies and frameworks need to be revised to further foster the development and implementation of SLPs. This will change policies in some European countries where continuing education is not yet integrated in the higher education system. For example, in the Netherlands the HEIs are not allowed to structurally offer non-formal programmes to avoid distortion of competition with other non-publicly funded organisations that offer educational products. To avoid this distortion of competition in those countries where this is relevant it will only be possible to develop SLPs that are integrated within a bachelor or master's degree. If programmes are developed outside degree education, then at least it must be made clear that no public funding is used. Hence, a strict partition between financial tract will often be necessary and the programmes need to be self-supportive. This will, of course, influence the price and consequently the attractiveness and viability of SLPs. A loosening of these rules and legislation limiting the use of public funding could stimulate the development of these programmes. Further exploration and research on formulating recommendations to national government and the EU on continuing education will be part of a subsequent report (Work Package 9 of E-SLP). The table 3, below, provides an overview of the legal and political situation in the partner countries and gives an indication of relevant aspects related to (public) funding of SLPs.

Table 3- Current legal and funding aspects of project partners based on their own contributions.

Insitute	Law, regulation and implementation	Public Funding
Fernuniversit ät in Hagen	In Germany, education is the sovereignty of the federal state and there are hardly any nation-wide regulations. The higher education law of 2019 allows to offer certificate programs of 60 ECTS as regular offerings (not continuing education) that serve as learning paths into Bachelor programs. There was no progress for shorter formats. The Higher Education Law also regulates that it's also the responsibility of HEIs to offer continuing education programmes and continuing Master programmes.	Charging fees for continuing education is allowed. HEIs may also enter a civil law contract with students and then be able to make profit. The strict division between regular degree programmes and continuing education is primarily an issue of funding and of tuition fees.
The Open University UK	In the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) there are no conditions that seem to be limiting for SLPs. There is no current legislation on continuing education and training. All institutions with degree awarding powers have the autonomy to develop their own curriculum within a qualification framework.	Further Education colleges receive funding from the government. There is some funding available for bodies to provide non-prescribed learning, for example through Unionlearn
Open Universiteit	The current law on Higher Education describes a strict set of rules limiting the options on flexible higher education. However, by decree conditions are loosened as part of an experiment (expiration date 2025). Publicly funded HEIs are not allowed to offer SLPs structurally for commercial purposes. Implementing SLPs within the current BaMa-(bachelor and master) structure relies on to funding, institutional recognition, etc.	Other forms of academic education than bachelors and masters, such as short educational programmes (including premaster trajectories), are not funded, currently.
Universidad Nacional de Educación a distancia	Universities, in accordance to their function as basic institutions for Lifelong learning and exerting their autonomy, may articulate their teaching provision through different non-official university programmes which are issued as own degrees: masters, postgraduate diplomas, expert or specialist degrees.	SLPs are self-sustainable as all of the SLPs cover their costs with the tuition.
Fundació per a la Universitat Oberta de Catalunya	Organic Law 4/2007 establishes that Universities must give adequate response to the needs of training throughout life and be open to those who, at any age, wish to access their cultural or educational offer. However, there is no specific legislation on continuous training. HEIs are quite autonomous in this regard. They establish their own programmes on continuous training students receive a non-official degree/certificate.	Part of the funding comes from the Catalan government (through a specific contract that is renewed annually).
Hellenic Open University	The new University Law foresees the development of short period training courses (which may start from a few weeks period and may reach up to two years of study) for vocational training. Although there was a debate about the issue of integration of SLPs in traditional and longer study paths, this is not included in the new University Law of 2017. The integration of SLPs in broader academic blocks has not happened yet.	There is no public funding for SLPs in Greece today. The big majority of SLPs (around 90%) is funded by the students themselves. A small number of SLPs is funded by Chambers of Commerce and Working/Syndical Unions.
Università Telematica Internazionale Uninnetuno	Regions have legislative powers in all subject matters that are not expressly covered by State legislation (art. 117 par. 3 of the Constitution) and therefore also in the field of continuing education, lifelong learning and SLPs.	The law recognizes the right of the worker to continuous professional development via training. To allow this type of training, art. 6.4 provided for resources of 15 million euros per year to be allocated to the Regions to allow planning of leave for training and reduction of the hourly quota.
Anadolu University	In Turkey there is no specific regulation on SLPs.	Funding is controlled by the central government, with little flexibility for alternative types of education.
Universidade Aberta	There is no specific regulation on SLPs regarding HEI. HEI have full autonomy to create and propose SLP.	No public funding, participants have to pay tuition fees. In some situations, companies and institutions support fees.
Open University of Cyprus	No specific legislation on continuous training. Universities and other SLP providers are quite autonomous in this regard. They establish their own programmes on continuous education, and participants receive a degree or certificate issued by the university.	
Open University JYVÄSKYLÄ	Based on the constitution, Universities have full autonomy on education and research. Online teaching is integral part of education in Finland. Ministry of Education and Culture does not restrict the new modes of teaching and learning. Based on legislation (Universities Act 558/2009) it is obvious that SLP courses should be part of university education, rather than part of continuing education provided by other actors than HEIs.	Continuing education study fees are typically not public funded. In general, the study fees are higher than those of open universities. Open universities charge students a max of 15€/ECTS. The rest of the expenses are public funded.
Katholieke universiteit Leuven	There are no conditions that seem to be limiting for SLPs. There is no current legislation on continuing education. All institutions with degree awarding powers have the autonomy to develop their own curriculum within a qualification framework.	At the moment there is no public funding specifically focussed on SLPs
Kaunas Technology University	In the Higher Education sector in Lithuania there is no national system in distance education. Proposals for the establishment of new programmes and specializations and programmes for improvement or cancellation of programmes shall be submitted to the Study Service, in agreement with the Faculty Council, and submit these aggregated proposals to the Rector for approval. Study programmes are set up and destroyed by the Senate.	The standard tuition fee helps HEIs fix the tuition fee of fee-paying studies. In cases where a tuition fee fixed by a HEI does not exceed the standard tuition fee, the tuition fee of the HEI is paid with the state budget funds
AGH IM. Stanisława Staszica W Krakowie	It is possible to deliver courses and trainings for both internal and external participants, online (50% of ECTS) and face to face. A proposal together with documents outlining the scope, programme, budget of the course etc. should be accepted by the Rector. The faculties decide independently about the learning outcomes and mode of delivery.	The courses are not free of charge, unless otherwise decided by the course coordinator (eg. faculty).

## 7. Potentials of Short Learning Programmes

Higher continuous education will become a more important sector in higher education, as the demand of learners and employers for shorter programmes will increase.

Current legal and institutional limitations do not seem to be insurmountable. As these limitations are more prevalent in specific countries, the success of SLPs will depend on the early adopters. The more SLPs that are offered, the more the concept will be internationally accepted, and the more other universities and countries will follow. Current offerings need also to be made more visible, particularly to national stakeholders (Thaler & Bastiaens, 2017). Adjustment of institutional strategies and policies will be needed to endorse the development of continuing education and SLPs.

An important parallel step in this development will be the stronger co-operation between all stakeholders such as governments, social partners, educational institutions, implementing organizations and all other parties (Dutch government, 2018).

SLPs have a high potential for lifelong learners in higher education combining work and study. The limited study load, the strong focus on a specific set of skills and knowledge, the accessibility and flexibility of these programmes seem to fit the current demands of society. More higher education institutions are aware of this and are positioning themselves with "Centers for Lifelong Learning" or "Extension Schools", which have a semi-independent status within the HEI and encourage cooperation with society and businesses.

SLPs reach their full potential if they are embedded in institutional strategies and a dedicated structure for continuing education. This will enable a fast response to mismatches of knowledge and skills a rapidly developing society.

Incorporating SLPs in mainstream degree programmes could boost the flexibility of these programmes, stimulate (virtual) mobility and also strengthen collaboration between HEIs both at a national and international level (i.e. such as in the European University Initiative). However, student progress and success in bachelor and master degrees might suffer when students would prematurely leave the university without attaining a full degree in due time.

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## Annex

### 1. Levels in the European Qualifications Framework

Table 1. Defining levels in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) adopted from Descriptors defining levels in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), issued by the European Commission and retrievable via: <https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/content/descriptors-page>.

	Knowledge The learning outcomes relevant to the level are:	Skills The learning outcomes relevant to the level are:	Responsibility and autonomy The learning outcomes relevant to the level are:
Level 1	Basic general knowledge	Basic skills required to carry out simple tasks	Work or study under direct supervision in a structured context
Level 2	Basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study	Basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple rules and tools	Work or study under supervision with some autonomy
Level 3	Knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts, in a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information	Take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study; adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems
Level 4	Factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study	Exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change; supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities
Level 5	Comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge	A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems	Exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change; review and develop performance of self and others
Level 6	Advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles	Advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study	Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts; take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups
Level 7	Highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking and/or research Critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field and at the interface between different fields	Specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields	Manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches; take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams
Level 8	Knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields	The most advanced and specialised skills and techniques, including synthesis and evaluation, required to solve critical problems in research and/or innovation and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice	Demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts including research

## 2. Final report Taskforce E-SLP

# **EADTUTASK FORCE SHORT LEARNING PROGRAMS FINAL REPORT**

Ingrid Thaler & Theo J. Bastiaens

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

Dr. Ingrid Thaler & Prof. Dr.Theo J. Bastiaens, FernUniversität in Hagen, Germany

## 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;

“MoochWatch#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 Programmes**

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.

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TABLE 1- *QUALITY CRITERIA FOR SLP's*

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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).

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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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# European Short Learning Programmes

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