QUALITY ASSURANCE ISSUES
OF BLENDED LEARNING COURSES

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ABSTRACT
The quality assurance systems of higher education institutions are based on the ESG 2015 standards. The aim of the standards is to provide the appropriate system that fits to institutional specialities supporting decision-making and giving adequate feedback. The rigidity of the legal environment makes it difficult to implement these processes in many cases. Moreover, both the higher education environment and its strategic planning side require the expansion of digital learning opportunities. Therefore, higher education institutions that expand their portfolio with blended learning type courses have to adapt their quality assurance systems to the needs of the new training forms. The study seeks to answer the question of how the quality assurance system can support the development of blended learning courses within the legal framework, and which are the points of this type of courses that require different intervention and measurement tools.

KEYWORDS
quality assurance, blended learning courses, higher education, ESG 2015, legal framework

INTRODUCTION

The quality assurance system of higher education institutions links external and internal stakeholders, follows the life cycle of students and supports the development of programmes. It covers education and research as well as the work of the departments coordinating these processes. Higher education institutions need to apply this complex system to operate.
The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015) [1] provide recommendations for higher education institutions. These areas are interlinked and affect all phases of the programmes. Both the quality assurance and the education development activities of an institution imply complex processes where accurate planning is as important as a system of measurement and monitoring to ensure the visibility of results the needs for further development.
The programme development work of higher education institutions is comprehensive and embedded in the educational-research process. Knowing details of this complexity and conscious planning is only possible using information from a properly functioning quality assurance system. Therefore, to design and develop quality assurance systems of higher education systems, particular attention should be taken to provide substantive support for education processes.

Legal framework
The legal framework of higher education is comprehensive in the case of conventional contact education. Therefore, when introducing a new, non-conventional type of training, the higher education institution must, within the possibilities offered by the legal environment, reconsider its own regulatory system and make the fine adjustments that will provide precise guide-

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lines for the new type of education. The higher education legal framework defines full-time, part-time (i.e. evening and correspondence), and distance education programmes.[2] [2] Blended training is a blend of correspondence and distance education courses.

Annex No.5 of Government Decree No.87/2015 (IV.9.) on the implementation of certain provisions of Act CCIV of 2011 on National Higher Education defines the requirements for the launch of Bachelor and Master programmes. [3] Guidelines for the launch of programmes of the Hungarian Higher Education Accreditation Committee (HAC) set out the requirements for the form and content for each type of education. These guidelines set the same conditions for full-time and part-time courses as for traditional forms of training. However, for distance educazion courses, they also specifically cover digital learning packages, the solutions and techniques used for assessment, in particular for student self-assessment, and the teaching and learning support methods used in the consultative system. The guidelines does not cover blended learning.[4] The legal gap of legal framework is inevitable.

This legal gap is also highlighted in Hungary's Digital Education Strategy, when it states that "The national and institutional accreditation of domestic and international online programmes ... is hampered by the training outcome requirements and the MAB programme accreditation procedure." [5]

Digital needs

Conventional forms of education and legislative gaps have been overtaken by the Covid-19 pandemic, when the need for digital education solutions in higher education has become obvious and visible. Since the spring semester 2019/2020, all higher education institutions have gained significant experience in online education, which was not so widespread in Hungary before.

All these experiences provide great support in the development of blended learning programmes, as institutions have made significant innovations not only in terms of teaching methodology but also in terms of educational administration. Educational administration of higher education institutions serves all levels and types of education at the same time, supports student administration, educational administration and administrative management. Their tripartite role is well adapted to the types of programmes defined in the Act CCIV of 2011 on National Higher Education. However, blended training requires a much greater degree of flexibility and accessibility, as students spend only a few days in the buildings of the university or college in every semester. Thanks to the online technologies of the 21st century, the administration process can also be personalised in the online space, as the Neptun system used by most higher education institutions is suitable for this task. However, the system has serious limits as other software or online education platforms used by higher education institution are not able to link with Neptun. For this reason, due to the fragmentation of systems,

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[2] Article 17 of Act CCIV of 2011 on National Higher Education

(1) In accordance with the programme and outcome requirements, tertiary programmes may be offered as full-time, part-time or distance education programmes. Full-time programmes shall comprise at least two hundred contact hours per semester.

(2) Full-time programmes shall be delivered through full-time daytime delivery, based on a five-day working week, on working days. Derogation from this provision is possible with the consent of the students' union of the higher education institution. Full-time programmes may also be organised as dual study programmes.

(3) Part-time programmes may use the evening or correspondence delivery mode. With the exception of postgraduate specialisation programmes, the number of contact hours comprised by part-time programmes shall be not less than thirty percent and not more than fifty percent of that of full-time programmes. The number of contact hours comprised by postgraduate specialisation programmes shall be not less than twenty percent and not more than fifty percent of that of full-time programmes.

students need to have multiple usernames and passwords to take full advantage of the full online service space offered by an institution.

This "disease" of higher education was also highlighted in the document "Gradual Change in Higher Education - Medium-Term Policy Strategy 2016", adopted by Government Declaration 1785/2016 (16.12.). Among its education and training objectives, it specifically emphasised the role of supporting the development of e-learning materials, and their adaptation in training and the development of related digital content and learning tools. [6] [7] To achieving this goal, the Digital Education Strategy defines the obstacle in the slow and isolated development of digital education, noting teachers' inadequate methodological readiness for digital education. [5]

Due to the isolated development, general digital developments covering the whole higher education or a specific field, level or type of education have not been implemented. Institutions have developed their e-learning materials and digital education services by their own teaching capacity and the experience of their teachers. In the field of student services, institutions have continuously switched to e-administration, gradually expanding the range of e-services. They did that especially in the field of academic administration, as student satisfaction and its marketing value have become an important market acquisition factor in the increasingly shrinking domestic higher education market. The development of the Neptun administration system has also supported the process of digitalisation of administration. This process is fully in line with the Digital Education Strategy's call for the digitalisation of higher education.

However, in some cases the legal environment does not support, or even explicitly prohibits, the full digitalisation of services. Article 39(3) of Act CCIV of 2011 on National Higher Education states that "Student status shall be acquired on the basis of a decision on admission or transfer, upon enrolment." Article 38(1) of Government Decree No.87/2015 (IV.9.) on the implementation of certain provisions of Act CCIV of 2011 on National Higher Education declares that "Enrolment can be initiated by filling in and signing the enrolment form".

Nevertheless, Article 39/A allows only for non-Hungarian nationality students commencing their studies by distance education to send the enrolment form electronically to the higher education institution. In addition, Article 12 (5) of Government Decree 423/2012 (XII. 29.) on the higher education admission procedure oblige students admitted in the central higher education admission procedure, to present the original documents submitted as copy during the procedure at the time of enrolment. Paragraph (5a) allows only distance education students to present these documents at the first consultation at the higher education institution. [8]

Nevertheless, despite the legal constraints, the pandemic has led to major developments in higher education, notably in the software used in education, the knowledge of software and the in the field of pedagogical methods used in digital environment. This has created the basis for a digital higher education culture that will allow further developments and the achievement of the goals set for higher education.

The introduction of distance learning as a result of the pandemic has led to forced development solutions that have significantly improved the access for non full time students to use the systems on a daily basis, which were previously required attendance, and therefore more limited. Institutions that have been offering distance learning or blended learning adult learning programmes for a long time, have naturally been ahead of the curve.

However, during the pandemic, institutions lagging behind in digital development have, by necessity, significantly improved their digital services, which will lead to strong competition in the Hungarian higher education market for courses that exploit the potential of online space. Competition is reinforced by the fact that the share of part-time and distance learning programmes in the higher education market is significantly lower than full-time, meaning that the large number of providers has to compete in a smaller market segment.
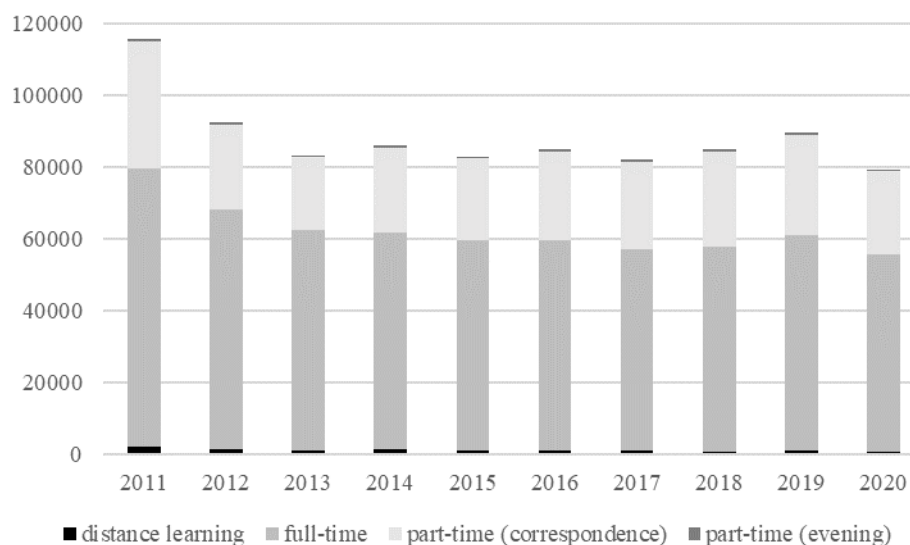
Figure 1 Percentage of admissions by programme types [9]

QA system

The quality assurance system must establish feedback and monitoring mechanisms that take into account the specific characteristics of the higher education institution and are suitable for measuring the effectiveness of strategic developments and, through this, for determining the direction of programme developments.

Hungary, as a member of the European Higher Education Area, integrates initiatives on higher education into its legislation and procedures to ensure that they are transparent, of high quality and in line with European standards. At the Bergen Conference of European Ministers responsible for education policy in 2005, the document Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) was adopted. The ESG 2005 defined the areas of quality assurance in higher education in 7 points, which were expanded to 10 points in the 2015 revision, separating external and internal programme development and including elements of student-centred learning, teaching assessment and external quality assurance.[3] [1]

The Hungarian Higher Education Accreditation Committee (HAC), which carries out the external quality assurance of Hungarian higher education institutions every five years, examines the conformity of these standards in the course of its institutional accreditation procedure according to Section 71/B (1) a)-b) of the Act CCIV of 2011 on National Higher Education. HAC makes recommendations and proposals for the improvement of the quality assurance system of institutions. [2]

A survey of e-learning practices in European higher education institutions highlights that institutions face the problem of integrating e-learning-based systems into external and internal quality assurance systems. The present quality assurance system is always capable of identifying future needs and trends, but new procedures are needed for their internal development. [10]

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[3] ESG 1.1 Policy for quality assurance; ESG 1.2 Design and approval of programmes; ESG 1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment; ESG 1.4 Student admission, progression recognition and certification; ESG 1.5 Teaching staff; ESG 1.6 Learning resources and student support; ESG 1.7 Information management; ESG 1.8 Public information; ESG 1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes; ESG 1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance.

Ní Bheoláin-Harrison also highlights the need for flexibility in quality assurance systems for blended learning, as many of the existing systems are based on contact hours practices, which ignore the specificities of the virtual learning environment. They propose that the analysis of student learning methodologies, the effectiveness of copyright security solutions, and the development of digital competences of teaching and non-teaching staff should be incorporated into institutional quality assurance systems. [11]

Institutional environment

Institutional environment for blended learning programmes should be highlighted under ESG 2015 standard 1.6 Learning support and student services, which expects higher education institutions to develop and operate a service environment that supports student-centred learning and teaching processes and methods (see ESG 1.3), including a student counselling system. It does not make any recommendations on the type of service systems, but considers as a matter of institutional specificity.

In terms of the institutional environment for programme development, the ESG 2015 standards give institutions a free hand, as they only require compliance with specificities. Therefore, higher education institutions need to have an accurate examination of the expectations and service needs of present and future students. Tools can be targeted surveys, regular satisfaction surveys, student forums or information from student representatives. However, a client-centred service environment supporting the educational process should meet the needs of the whole student population in general, while a higher or different quality of service package may be needed to ensure the progression of students of blended learning programmes. However, the range of services for students of blended learning programmes can be extended to a wider range of students, as the involvement in higher level services could itself be attractive for students of other type of programmes.

ESG 1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment focuses on student-centred learning and assessment and calls for the development/transformation of training and assessment systems to support this objective. The guidelines set out in the standard provide a tool for flexible learning pathways and the use of teaching methodologies that support student progression. All this allows students of blended learning programmes to be supported, according to their abilities, and to get methodological support to progress in their studies.

However, the application of a teaching methodology that supports flexible learning pathways and student progression cannot be fully measured by objective methods, as it must be tailored to the specific needs of each student group and course.

The student feedback on the performance of the academic teaching staff and the examination of marks are to some extent suitable for providing feedback. Completion of the student feedback on the performance of the academic teaching staff is not compulsory, so not all the students will provide feedback to the teaching staff, and respondents may be either only the unsatisfied or only the highly satisfied students. The suitability of the methodology used can only be objectively assessed from the full sample. However, in the case of the analysis of marks, it is possible to analyse the whole sample, as all the marks are available in the study system. In addition, the marks allow for a long time series analysis, and the methodology and assessment procedure used can be assigned to each year. This data series can be used for trend analysis and, in an extended study, can be used to compare the academic and competitive performance of groups of students taught according to different methodologies. That kind of analysis points out the strong and week points of applied blended learning teaching methods. By identifying specific methodological elements, changes can be made to the blended learning programme that, through their skill-building effects, increase the number of students performing successfully in programmes.

CONCLUSIONS

However, in the case of the types of teaching and learning described above, the institution needs to reflect further on its own feedback system in the field of quality assurance, as the classical quality assurance measurement in higher education is mainly optimised for contact learning.

In addition to the question of content development, in the case of blended learning programmes learning pathways and student services have to focus on the specificities of the students. These specificities can be mapped by a proper quality assurance system.

The nature of blended learning programmes requires complex institutional thinking in the field of quality assurance as well. Link between student needs and program development should be highlighted. Programme development progress has to take into account that IT competencies of student groups are so different. Therefore, the IT competences of the potential market must be accurately assessed, and the distance learning software and methodology should be selected according to the results of this analysis. Therefore, institutions have to avoid the trap of adapting programmes to the existing software, but find the software for the programme format. Student services should be highlighted and move toward online services, the role of student counselling therefore should be redefined, where counselling should be supplemented by learning methodology and technical methodology (help desk) functions. Applied QA questionnaires also have to be changed as the nature of blended learning programmes differs from general full or part-time ones. In the case of uniform institutional questionnaires, the university's quality assurance regulations allow the inclusion of questions that take into account the specificities of the training, which gives flexibility to the system itself. However, QA analyses measuring the effectiveness of IT solutions have to be advanced respect for copyright or the development of the digital competences.

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