



Students' guide to e-learning

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Introduction

This guide is aimed at students interested in e-learning, regardless of their level (e.g. bachelor or master) and experience with e-learning. It will help to understand:

- What e-learning is in general;
- How to select an online course;
- Recognition of e-learning;
- The role of student boards.

What is e-learning?

E-learning is learning that takes place with on-line or virtual learning environments.

E-learning takes many forms: it can be part of formal education, offered by an accredited higher education institution (HEI) such as a university in the form of open or blended learning.* It is also offered as short 'stand-alone' courses, such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses)**, that can sometimes be combined or stacked into larger units (e.g. Micromasters). Increasingly, e-learning is offered by informal education providers, such as professional training institutes or online platforms such as LinkedIn.

As a result of this diversity, the quality and the purpose of e-learning differ greatly.

*Blended learning:

A style of education in which students learn via electronic and online media as well as traditional face-to-face teaching.

**Massive Open Online Course (MOOC):

An online course that has open access and interactive participation by means of the Web. MOOCs provide participants with course materials that are normally used in a conventional education setting, such as lectures, videos, study materials and problem sets.

How to select an online course?

Selecting an online course is not easy as there are many providers. Firstly, you need to ask yourself why you seek the online course.

- Is it for personal enrichment?
- Do you need the knowledge/skills for a future employer?
- Do you need the course to help you access or continue in higher education?

This first step is a very important one. If you are looking for a course to help you access or continue in higher education, the information in this student guide will be of help.

It is also important to be aware that the cost of online courses vary widely from free offerings to expensive courses.

Lastly it is important to know what type of learning best suits you. There are online courses which give you full flexibility to decide when you study and when you will be examined. There are courses in which you have no contact or discussion platforms with a teacher or other students. By contrast, there are courses with regular contact and predetermined testing/examinations.

Recognition of e-learning

What is academic recognition and when is it important?

As explained above, as a student you may have different reasons to enrol in a course: for personal enrichment, for professional development or for academic advancement. When you opt for the latter, your qualification should be recognized by an accredited HEI.

Academic recognition is the official approval by an accredited HEI of courses, qualifications or diplomas, that have been taken or obtained elsewhere.

Academic recognition of e-learning is important if you:

- Take an online course to improve your chances of admission to a study programme at an accredited HEI;
- Take an online course to be exempted from parts of a study programme at an accredited HEI.

What's the problem?

When e-learning is part of a formal study programme, offered by an accredited HEI, academic recognition should not be a problem. However, recognition can be more problematic when :

- you select an online course that is offered by an informal education provider;
- the course is offered by an accredited HEI, but not as part of a formal study programme.

Currently most MOOCs that are offered on established platforms such as EdX and Coursera fall within the second category. As a result, only a limited number of MOOCs are academically recognized. There are various reasons why this is the case. First, as e-learning is still relatively new, HEIs do not always have procedures in place to assess e-learning certificates. Second, there are specific challenges to recognition of e-learning. For example: it is not always possible to establish the quality of online courses and it is often difficult to know if students have been properly examined before receiving a course certificate.

How to improve your chances?

1. **Check beforehand if an online course can be recognized for admission or exemption to the study programme of your choice.** HEIs increasingly make use of e-learning to prepare students for enrolment or during their studies. They may be able to point you in the right direction if you are interested in taking a MOOC for academic development.

If you do not know yet where to enrol, you can improve your chances by:

2. Choosing a MOOC that is offered by an **accredited HEI**.
3. Choosing a MOOC that offers credit points (e.g. ECTS). Sometimes MOOCs are offered for free, with an option to receive credit points after completing a paid exam. If you seek academic recognition, it is recommended that you take the exam, even though there is no guarantee that your course will be recognized.
4. MOOC certificates often contain little information and online information about MOOCs tends to disappear when the MOOC is no longer offered. Make sure to **keep a record** with:
 - A description of the course content and the expected learning outcomes;
 - An overview of the way study results have been tested. *Note: to be sure that the intended learning outcomes have actually been achieved, HEIs may ask for evidence showing that an oral or written exam has been taken. Sometimes an online exam may suffice (depending on the technology used and the test form), but an on-site exam is even better. Examination on the basis of peer review or an online multiple-choice test is often insufficient;*
 - ID requirements of the course/platform. *Note: in order to be sure that the e-learning certificate is really yours, HEIs may request information regarding the ID requirements for enrolling on the course and receiving the final certificate.*

The role of student boards

Student boards promote the interests of students within HEI. If you have trouble getting your e-learning certificate recognized, you may go to the student board of the HEI. They may be able to refer you to the right department or person within their HEI. In addition, they may bring this topic to the attention of the HEI boards and argue for the inclusion of e-learning in the HEI's recognition procedures.

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