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EVIDENCE FOR POLICY-MAKING EXECUTIVE REPORT - JULY 2020

HOW TO IMPROVE COMPLETION AND ASSESSMENT IN SCALABLE ONLINE COURSES FOR TEACHERS

THE FINDINGS FROM THE TEACHUP POLICY EXPERIMENTATION

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Reports to be consulted for more details.

All reports can be downloaded from the TeachUP website at teachup.eun.org.

- [TeachUP Evaluation Report](#)
- [Implementing Personalised Support in Scalable Online Courses](#)
- [Peer Versus Expert Assessment. How to Make Assessment in Online Teacher Training Work](#)

The three above mentioned reports contained detailed glossaries and bibliographies.

- [Cross-Country Dialogue Lab report](#)
- [The Changing Role and Competences of Teachers: Gaps in Teacher Education Provision](#) (consultation survey and literature review)

POLICY CONCERNS

Teaching students to navigate with confidence through an increasingly complex and uncertain world requires teachers to fundamentally adjust their competences and transform their practices. Large numbers of educators would welcome training that helps them create the kind of learning environment needed by today's students. This is one of the main *raison d'être* of continuous professional development (CPD), and an imperative for initial teacher education (ITE) to lay a strong foundation from the entry into the profession. Research reveals that impactful teacher training frequently involves collaborative approaches and active learning. It also finds that schedule conflicts and participation costs are two important obstacles to CPD participation (TALIS 2018). For those reasons, the provision of online courses offering large scale access to CPD like Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), involving collaborative and active learning, at reasonable cost and in a flexible manner, has been attracting the attention of policy makers for several years.

The provision of such scalable online training environment faces a constant issue however, limiting its widespread adoption: low completion rates. Two reasons are that online training requires at

least a basic level of digital competence to navigate an online learning environment, and the competence to self-regulate one's learning neither of which can be taken for granted. The assessment model implemented to measure the learning of the participants is a further challenge faced by scalable online courses for teachers.

The TeachUP policy experimentation aimed to address the issue of low online courses completion by testing a support model in scalable online learning environments, which offered a personalised support mechanism that can operate at scale, designed to help teachers and student teachers with low levels of digital and self-regulated learning competence to benefit from the training offered.

The TeachUP policy experimentation also aimed to understand better the differences between peer and expert assessment outcomes, and the way they are perceived and valued by teachers and student teachers.

KEY FINDINGS

PARTICIPATION AND COMPLETION

The personalised support mechanism implemented in TeachUP had a sizable and positive impact on enrolled professional teachers from the participating EU Member states. Course participants targeted by such support showed a probability of 42% to complete a course, compared to 32% for those to whom such support was not offered.

However, the same personalised support mechanism had no impact on professional teachers in Turkey.

It had an impact on student teachers having prior experience of online learning (i.e. those who completed at least 1 course per

year in the past three years); and an indirect impact (also observed for teachers) in regard to a slightly reduced propensity to ask others to solve problems during the courses.

The personalised support mechanism implemented in TeachUP had an indirect positive effect on teachers' self-regulated learning online competence (SRLO). The more courses a teacher completed within the TeachUP policy experimentation, the higher their ability to set their learning goals and lower their propensity to seek others' help to solve problems encountered during the online course, i.e. they became more independent learners.

PEER VERSUS EXPERT ASSESSMENT APPROACH

There is consistency between peer raters' and experts' scores, while peers on average gave slightly higher scores than experts.

Assessments provided by peers on the same teacher's lesson plan were generally consistent, even if there was some variability.

Peer feedback on teachers' end of course assignment was typically less detailed, providing fewer suggestions for improvement and was slightly more positive than feedback provided by experts.

Teachers valued equally with the assessment received from peers as well as the experts and found both of them fair and useful, in a way complementary.

EXPERIMENTAL SET UP AND RESULTS

In 2017, 17 partners representing public authorities, initial and continuous teacher training providers and an evaluation research organisation, launched the TeachUP policy experimentation, selected and co-funded by the European Commission under the Key Action 3 Policy Experimentation of the Erasmus+ programme.

TeachUP developed a personalised support mechanism consisting of emails with personalised guidance and an offer of support, to be activated depending on course participants' past experience and behavior during the course. As the support was designed for a scalable environment, it was offered in a very targeted fashion only to those likely to be most in need, rather than as a general offer to all course participants.

The mechanism was implemented on online courses addressing four teaching competence areas associated with the changing role of the teacher and students: formative assessment, personalised learning, collaborative learning and creativity. The topics were identified on the basis of a survey of initial teacher education and continuous professional

development organisations on topics of interest for online coursework, as well as a literature review related to the changing role of teachers in the identified topics.

Each course ran for three-and-a-half weeks and provided an introduction to a specific pedagogical concept and its underlying theory, followed by examples and ideas for the practical implementation of this approach. At the end of each course, participants developed a lesson plan, related to their own teaching context, and incorporating ideas gathered during the course.

The four courses were available in all ten TeachUP countries' languages. The instructional design of the courses focused on practice, individual and shared reflection, knowledge construction, collaboration, as well as networking and discussion in combination with more instructive content. The course content was made up of different types of materials including classroom observation videos, teacher and student interviews, screencasts and short practice-focused researcher presentations.



FIGURE 1: THE TEACHUP COURSE SERIES

The impact of personalised support mechanism was tested in field trials involving over 4000 randomly sampled teachers and student teachers divided in a test and a control group. The field trials were run in 10 countries (Austria, Hungary, Greece, Estonia, Malta, Lithuania, Portugal, Spain, Slovakia, Turkey) between October 2018 and May 2019.

To address whether peer assessment is a valid form of assessment in online courses,

TeachUP compared the peer and expert assessments of 106 randomly selected pieces of coursework from the third TeachUP course, and their authors were asked to fill in a short survey.

Data for the analysis came from surveys and the course platform itself. To enrich the quantitative analysis, qualitative feedback was collected from key stakeholders and in focus group sessions during three workshops – ‘Country Dialogue Labs’ – in each field trial country.

INCREASING PARTICIPATION AND COMPLETION

PERSONALISED SUPPORT MECHANISM TESTED

The aim of the personalised support implemented on TeachUP courses was to support those participants most in need and at a higher risk of dropping out – in order to increase course participation and completion rates. However, as the support was to be offered in a scalable environment, it was only to be offered in a very targeted fashion and not to all course participants. Accordingly, participant profiles and platform data about course progression was used to identify those considered most in need and therefore eligible for the personalised support. The following image illustrates the approach used:



FIGURE 2: SCALABLE PERSONALISED SUPPORT

To measure the impact of the personalised support on course participation, TeachUP compared a group receiving it (the test group), and a group not receiving it (the control group).

The personalised support mechanism was organised around a concept of interventions consisting of triggers determining which course participants were eligible for the personalised support (for example a lack of online learning experience) associated with actions addressing the specific characteristics of the trigger (for example, an email highlighting resources that can help to succeed in online learning and an offer of a one-to-one video call to conduct a “walk-through” of the course interface).

Messages were supposed to be adapted taking into account the profile and progress of the participant. Triggers and actions were determined by the aim of an

intervention which focussed on either getting participants to start a course, complete a course, or improve their satisfaction with the course.

Actions were implemented by personalised support agents (experienced

teachers or teacher trainers) who each had a course cohort of a maximum of 100 participants assigned to them. Support agents conducted spot checks at specific times before and during each course to see which participants of their cohort were eligible for the support offer. The

tool also allowed support agents to see the whole set of a participant's responses to the baseline survey, offering a detailed overview of the participant's profile, beliefs, and confidence levels.

A total of nine interventions were created for the experiment. These interventions were based on research showing which characteristics or actions of course participants have an impact on the likelihood of course completion. Furthermore, interventions addressed key elements of the instructional design and

course timeline which were more complex and potentially problematic for learners, such as the competence to self-regulate learning.

Some interventions offered the qualifying participant the opportunity to book a 1:1 video call while others simply provided further guidance or, in some cases, some feedback. All interventions were implemented proactively and incorporated an offer to the participant to reach further in case of questions to the support agent.

INTERVENTION	BASIS OF TRIGGERS	AIM	OCCURRENCES
1-4	Information in course profile	Course Completion	3532
5	Behaviour on course platform - not starting a module 5 days after start	Course Start	3692
6-9	Behaviour on course platform	Completion and Satisfaction	718

TABLE 1: NUMBERS OF INTERVENTIONS ACTIVATED DURING THE FIELD TRIALS

Overall, interventions based on a participants' profile and on participants not having started a module five days after launch, made up 91% of all interventions, showing that the passage between enrolment and course start is critical

in the population studied and requires special attention in scalable online course environments.

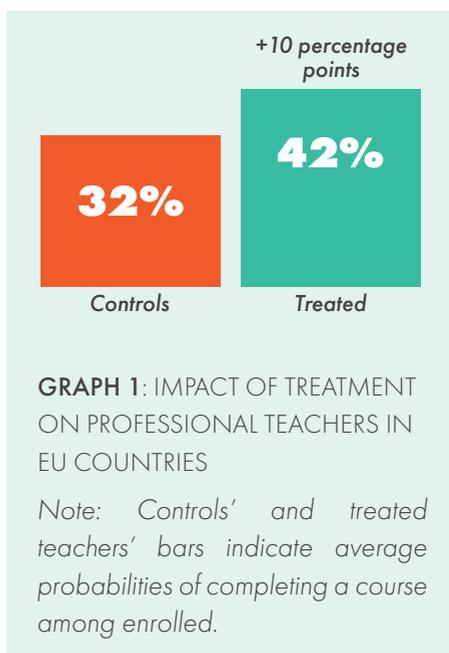
A substantial proportion of participants turned out to be identified as "at risk"

of not completing the courses because of a mix of limited past experience in online learning, low digital competence or low self-regulated learning online competence.

Of all the interventions made by the support agents only 6% resulted in some kind of response from the participant contacted (there was no requirement to respond). The limited take-up of the offer of support might be partly explained by an imprecise targeting of those most in need, nonetheless adjusted during the field trial with the successful introduction of an additional intervention using the data from the three first courses to better identify those with a high likelihood of dropping out.

IMPACT EVALUATION RESULTS

The personalised support system implemented in TeachUP had a sizable and positive impact on enrolled teachers from EU Members states. Course participants who were offered personalised support showed a probability of 42% to complete a course, compared to 32% for the control group.



This overall impact was based on two different mechanisms:

- Interventions based on participant profiles (e.g. low digital competence, no prior experience with online courses, low expectation to complete the course) that impacted on course completion among started,
- interventions based on participants' behaviour on the course platform (notably the intervention addressing non-starters) that had an impact on course start.

Qualitative evidence from focus groups and follow-up workshops with course participants, support agents, teacher

trainers, and other stakeholders suggests that a set of dynamics were at play, working in combination and affecting different users to different extents:

- A sense of “control” – The tailored messages participants received resulted in a feeling of being monitored, what motivated some participants for continuing on the course because their progress or lack thereof was checked upon by someone; but possibly had an opposite impact on other participants.
- A sense of “not being alone” – The feeling of being monitored perceived as someone being there to help and guide, which motivated participants to continue.
- The personalised offer of support as a “prompt” – Acting as a reminder and prompt to do certain things which the participant had forgotten about.
- The personalised offer of support as “guidance” – Addressing questions and needs of those contacted, especially for those who responded with particular questions or concerns (e.g. where and when to submit work on the course).

However, the same personalised support mechanism had no impact on professional teachers in Turkey. The different profile of

participating Turkish teachers compared to their colleagues in other TeachUP countries might explain that result; for example, Turkish teachers had less experience with online courses, were more likely to expect a formal recognition on completing the TeachUP course, less likely to have a master’s degree, were younger on average and more likely to be male. Moreover, differences in how the courses were delivered in Turkey – e.g. the course moderator was particularly active and experienced - might have reduced the impact of the personalised support.

The personalised support mechanism had an impact only on those student teachers (from all the participating countries), who had prior experience of online learning (i.e. those who completed at least one course a year in the past three years); and an indirect impact (also observed on teachers) in regard to a slightly reduced propensity to seek for others’ help during the courses. This finding suggests that having at least a minimal past experience in online training is a precondition for student teachers to benefit from the personalised support offered in TeachUP for those without prior experience.

The personalised support mechanism applied in TeachUP had an indirect positive effect on teachers’ self-regulated learning online competence. The more courses a teacher completed during the

TeachUP policy experimentation, the higher their ability in setting their learning goals and the lower their propensity to seek others' help to solve problems encountered during the online course, i.e. in becoming a more independent learner.

Surprisingly, of all the interventions offering support made by the agents, only 6% resulted in some kind of response from the participant contacted. This very limited take-up of the support offer might be partly explained by an imprecise targeting of those most in need. This was somewhat the case in the first three courses where targeting identified many participants who, based on a comparison to equivalent profiles in the control group, were in fact not in need of the support offered (i.e. they did not have a high likelihood of non-completion). This was addressed in the last course with the introduction of an additional intervention

using the data from the previous courses to identify those with a high likelihood of dropping out. While in the first three courses those identified as in need had a lower but not significant completion rate than those identified as not in need, the lower completion rate of those identified as in need becomes significant in the last course, suggesting that targeting was more precise. Discussions during the focus groups and feedback from the support agents highlighted some other reasons that might account for the limited uptake of the support offered, for example the lack of personalisation of messages sent by support agents, the limits of using emails to reach out to participants, and the lack of familiarity with online environments and/or with a one-to-one session by participants.

PEER VERSUS EXPERT ASSESSMENT

EVALUATION APPROACH

To investigate whether peer assessment is a viable approach to assess learning achievements in scalable online courses for teachers - and an appropriate alternative to expert assessment - the outcomes of peers' and experts' assessment of final course assignments were compared.

A short survey also asked the authors of the randomly selected lesson plans how they valued their learning in the course in general, and the fairness and usefulness of the different types of assessment used in the course: self-assessment (optional), peer assessment and expert assessment. 71 Lesson plan authors replied to the survey.

In addition, online interviews were conducted with the expert assessors from Estonia, Hungary, Spain and Portugal about their views on the lesson plans as well as the assessment process.

COMPARING PEER AND EXPERT ASSESSMENT OUTCOMES

The peer and expert assessments of 106 randomly selected lesson plans were compared. Those lesson plans were submitted by course participants as their final work in the TeachUP course on collaborative learning (February-March 2019). Both peers and experts did use the

same assessment rubric and templates, and provided numerical scores according to eight assessment categories, as well as a qualitative feedback.

ASSESSMENT RUBRIC USED BY PEERS AND EXPERTS

The rubric included eight categories of high quality lesson plans:

1. Classroom cultures for collaboration
2. Methods to foster students' agency
3. Effective elements of collaboration
4. Assessment of collaborative learning
5. Tools for collaborative learning
6. Alignment to learning objectives
7. Diversity of activities
8. Balance between individual and group work

For each category, the score ranges from 1 (*"the lesson plan requires a lot of work in that area"*) to 4 (*"the lesson plan is excellent in that area"*); a description for each level was provided.

A good practice example of qualitative feed-back was also provided.

The comparison aimed at evaluating the reliability of the scores - i.e. whether final scores given by experts and peers (each lesson plan was assessed by up to three peers) were consistent between and

among the expert and peer raters -, and the quality and usefulness of the feedback.

A statistical analysis compared both the assessment scores and the qualitative feedback from experts and peers.

TO COMPARE THE RELIABILITY OF THE ASSESSMENT SCORES:

- First the average score of the eight assessment categories was computed for each single assessment,
- Then the average of scores that a single lesson plan received from several peers was calculated and
- The overall average scores from all peer and all expert assessment were computed and compared.

TO COMPARE QUALITY AND USEFULNESS OF FEEDBACK COMMENTS, ANALYSIS LOOKED AT:

- Their overall tone,
- Their length,
- How constructive they were (i.e. offering concrete suggestions for improvement).

The general assumption was that a feedback that had a certain length, a positive tone and was constructive (including concrete suggestions for improvement) was likely to be perceived useful by the person receiving it.

FINDINGS

- **There is consistency between and among peer raters' and the experts' scores.**
 - While both were very high, peers' scores were nonetheless systematically higher than experts, both overall for the

entire rubric, and for each of the eight assessment categories. Peers gave an average score of 3.6 and experts 3.2 (out of 4). This finding is supported by previous research findings.

- This small but statistically significant difference is more

- pronounced when experts gave lower scores, and in particular for student teachers lesson plans.
- Possible explanations of the difference are experts' higher expectations because of their deeper knowledge of the topic, peers' lack of assessment culture and confidence in the topic and their wish to be supportive.
- Expert feedback included more concrete suggestions for improvement and was longer, both probably resulting from experts' higher comfort, experience and efficiency in providing assessment as their regular professional activity (plus the fact they were contracted to do it in TeachUP).

• **Peers' feedback was typically less detailed, less constructive and slightly more positive in tone** than feedback provided by experts.

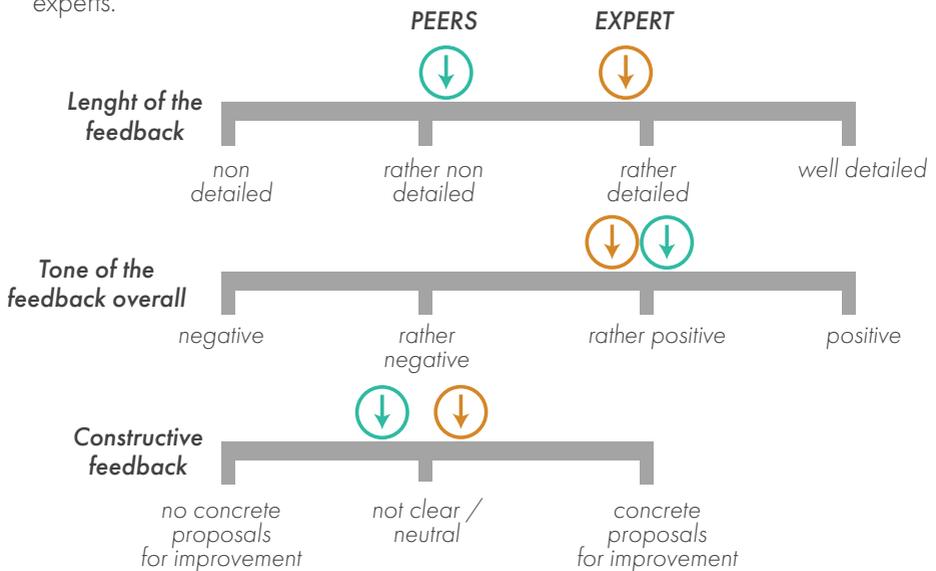
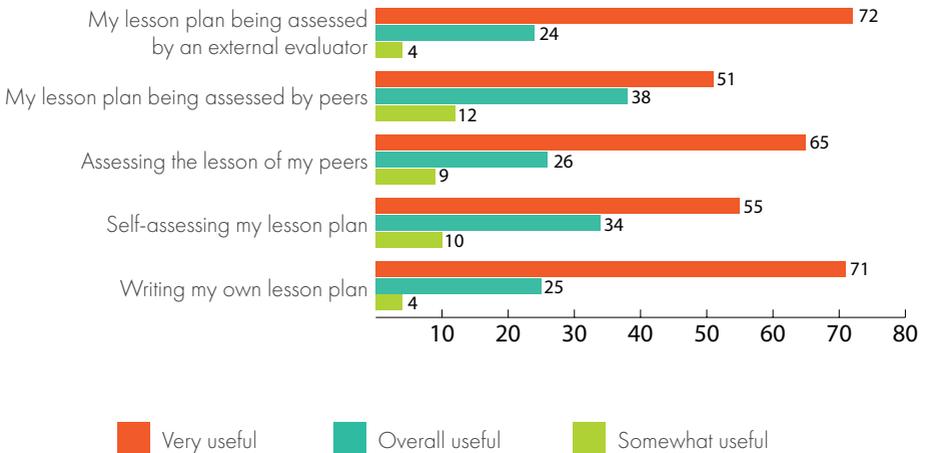


FIGURE 3: CHARACTERISTICS OF PEERS' AND EXPERTS' QUALITATIVE FEEDBACK ON TEACHERS' LESSON PLANS

- The **assessments provided by peers on the same teacher’s plan were generally consistent**, even if there was some variability.
- **Assessments by both experts and peers were generally perceived as useful and fair**, with higher agreement rates on the fairness of peer assessment.
- Responses to questions about usefulness in general and in case of likelihood of participation in future courses did not reveal any clear preference for either expert or peer assessment.
- However, when asked about the usefulness of the individual assessment activities for their learning in TeachUP, 72% found expert assessment very useful, compared to only 51% who found the assessment of their peers very useful. Interestingly, 65% considered assessing the lesson plan of their peers as very useful.



GRAPH 2: PERCENTAGE OF TEACHERS FINDING THE RECEIVED OVERALL ASSESSMENT AS USEFUL FOR THEIR LEARNING

POLICY LESSONS

The TeachUP experimentation has demonstrated that it is possible to improve participation and completion rates in scalable online courses for teachers by means of a support infrastructure that offers learners personalised assistance in a way that can be taken to scale for large numbers of course participants. This finding opens up five areas for supportive policy options¹.

1. Gathering specific data on the participants as individuals to tailor the support provided.

In the TeachUP experiment there were at least two sources of data and they are reasonably easy to replicate: an obligatory survey as condition for enrolment, and platform data providing information about progression through the course modules. Data use such as this implies that data should not be anonymous, bringing data privacy into play.

Without further investigation, it is difficult to suggest precisely which data to be obtained for subsequent

use in a targeted and precise fashion. The use of data collected in TeachUP about self-regulated learning competence or beliefs about online learning which are identified in the literature as determinants of non-completion did not prove conclusive, for example.

2. Reaching out to non-starters.

The mechanism for reaching out to non-starters in TeachUP proved to have a significant impact on participation. It is therefore worth finding and using ways to make contact with those who do not start a course.

3. Reaching out to new online learners

Support to newcomers – identified in the research literature as a predictor of non-completion – had a positive impact in TeachUP. Reaching out to new online learners therefore promises high returns in regard to both participation and completion.

¹ More details and discussion concerning this part of the results, and particular concerning scalability and cost-effectiveness of the personalized support implemented in TeachUP, can be found in the [Implementing Personalised Support in Scalable Online Courses](#) report.

4. Generate a feeling of being observed

The feeling of being observed in the experiment resulted in, on the one hand, a sense of being controlled, and, on the other, a feeling of not being alone. It is likely that these two dynamics, replicating those of social control and support in face-to-face settings, at least partly explain the impact observed in the experiment. Using pro-active personalised messages was the means by which such feeling of being monitored was generated in the TeachUP experiment, but other ways to reproduce a sense of social control and support might be equally effective in this regard. To avoid negative reactions however, the use of personal data needs to be carefully balanced with regard to data privacy concerns.

5. Consider the use of machine-based support systems

While it is not clear if machine-based systems could replicate some of the dynamics that most likely resulted in the impact observed, there is little doubt that machine-based systems, bots for example, could take over some parts of the implemented processes tested during the experiment. This is particularly the case given the low take-

up of the support offer. Accordingly, a combination of machine-based systems responsible for sending out pro-active and personalised messages to participants, with human support agents in the background picking up any responses from participants and following through with the support offer, could be a very efficient yet effective way to provide a personalised support mechanism.

In addition to the five areas for supportive policy options mentioned above, future experimentations could interestingly investigate the impact of offering diverse support mechanisms on participation and completion in large scale online courses like MOOCs. Indeed, while the content of the personalised support in the TeachUP support mechanism was tested, the process of offering this support was not. A more significant degree of personalisation, taking into account preferences of participants in how support is available to them and to provide them with more choice, might prove to be even more effective. A possible way to do so would be to ask participants prior to starting a course about their preferences from a set of available support mechanisms, and then to personalise any support offered during the course also on that basis.

While not at the core of the policy experimentation and evaluated with a different methodology, the peer assessment approach implemented in TeachUP appears as a viable option in scalable online learning environments targeting teachers and potentially student teachers. Those results call for the following policy options to ensure that supportive conditions are in place:

- **Boosting assessment cultures**

in which assessment is thought of as a full part of an active learning process in which learners (whether teachers or students) share responsibility for the learning and are competent in both making use of assessment received, i.e. reflecting on and evaluating the usefulness of the feed-back and what to keep of it; as well as providing assessment to others, i.e. ensuring the assessment is balanced and formulated in a way that supports learning and motivation for continuous improvement. Understanding multiple forms of assessment (peer-assessment, self-assessment, formative assessment, summative assessment), their purpose and expected gain is part of this culture and can reduce the gap between expert and novice assessors (as is the case for most teachers involved in peer-assessment, who, although experienced in assessing students, are novice assessors of other teachers. In

scalable online learning environments, such culture could be supported by the provision of:

- training and guidance for course participants on how to provide and receive feedback, by providing examples of expert feedback, highlighting key characteristics of effective feedback such as timeliness, constructive remarks, detailed and specific suggestions for concrete changes, tone, etc.
- evidence making explicit the benefits of assessing fellow teachers in online training courses, as well as research findings about giving effective feedback also applicable with students in daily teaching practice.

- **Develop quality frameworks for peer assessment**

in scalable online teacher training courses. For peer assessment to function as a reliable way to validate and possibly certify teachers' progress, , well-designed frameworks are an important factor in creating appropriate and effective assessment processes, tools, and guidance. This should be presented and explained

to course participants for a shared understanding.

- A direct consequence of this would be more reliable peer assessment. The assessments provided by three peers in TeachUP were generally consistent with ratings provided by experts (demonstrating inter-rater reliability). This underlines the importance of providing a well-designed assessment tool, such as a rubric, setting out clear standards and criteria with descriptors and exemplars of work at different performance levels; all aspects to be included in properly designed quality frameworks.
- The validation of progress in scalable online courses using peer assessment depends very much on the design of the peer assessment processes, tools, and guidance provided. Developing quality frameworks would therefore facilitate the accreditation of such courses.

- **Design the assessment approach to take account of the purpose, focus and scale of the courses.** The findings suggest that both peer and expert assessment

may have unique advantages in the eyes of participants and appear as complementary. Online course providers relying only on either peer or expert assessment could accordingly find mechanisms that allow for both types of assessment to work alongside each other.

Peer assessment in the TeachUP context not only served the purpose of validating participants' learning, but also was designed to facilitate community building and professional exchange, and to help participants learn about assessment processes for use in their own practice. Both purposes are more difficult to address with expert assessment. For online courses, however, with a focus on introducing new and complex content or practices, some element of expert assessment might still be useful. Given that integrating expert assessment is difficult and potentially costly in scalable contexts, an optional and paid-for-offer of expert assessment could be offered alongside peer assessment to participants who are looking for more substantive and constructive qualitative feedback on their work.

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