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Universities' Strategies and Approaches towards Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Examples from across Europe

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Universities' Strategies
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**Diversity, Equity and
Inclusion**

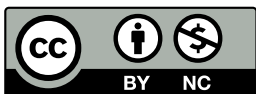
Examples from across Europe

Edited by Anna-Lena Claeys-Kulik
and Thomas Ekman Jørgensen

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eLearning to Promote Quality Education for All at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya³⁰

By Gemma Xarles, Director, Globalisation and Cooperation, and Nadja Gmelch, Head of Projects, Globalisation and Cooperation, and Pastora Martínez Samper, Vice-President for Globalisation and Cooperation, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), Spain

Type of institution: university delivering online education

Number of students: 54,059 (academic year 2015-2016)

Number of staff: 945 (faculty and administrative staff; academic year 2015-2016)

SUMMARY

The Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) is an innovative university, based in Catalonia and open to the world, which was created in 1995. The mission of the UOC is to train people throughout their lives, contributing to their progress and to the progress of society, while carrying out research related to the knowledge society.

In 2015 the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development³¹, an action plan that seeks to address major global challenges and contribute to building a sustainable future. Among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), SDG 4 seeks to guarantee inclusive, equitable and quality education for all, including university education. At UOC, we are convinced that one of the most effective and efficient ways to contribute to SDG 4 is through quality e-learning. There are several targets linked to SDG 4. For the purposes of this paper we will focus on the one that refers to the commitment to guarantee equitable access to a quality higher education without any discrimination and that mentions the commitment to put in place mechanisms for positive discrimination to certain collectives through scholarship systems:

Target 4.5: By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations

Target 4.7.: By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture's contribution to sustainable development.

Target 4.B: By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries [...] for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries."³²

³⁰ This article has been first presented in a slightly adapted version in Spanish in the framework of the international conference "Universidad 2018 - 11no Congreso Internacional de Educación Superior" which took place in La Habana, Cuba, from 12 to 16 February 2018.

³¹ United Nations, 2015. A/RES/70/1 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'

³² United Nations, 2015, 'SDG 4 Targets and Indicators'. Retrieved on 23 April 2018 from Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg4>

Online education offers a great opportunity to attain these high ambitions. The UOC's own experience is proof of this. The profile of the students of the UOC in Catalonia is that of professionals who require elements of flexibility – for different reasons – that traditional universities have difficulties to provide. Likewise, the role of the UOC to meet the demand of people with functional diversity is significant. In addition, specific projects for refugees or asylum seekers, or for professionals working in remote areas around the world, are very difficult proposals to fulfil if it is not through the intensive use of technologies to accompany the learning processes.

The experience of the UOC can be replicated in other contexts to expand access and coverage of quality higher education. The UOC has been accompanying educational institutions and governments in the implementation of their online education proposals. Its educational model is based on the personalisation and the accompaniment of the student through e-learning.

The UOC was created in Catalonia to complement the Catalan university system, composed in the 1990s exclusively of primarily face-to-face universities. During these years, the UOC has given the possibility of accessing a quality higher education to people who for various reasons had been excluded from the university system until then. More than 58 500 people have benefited during these years from the training of the UOC, people in age groups that are far from the age composition of the students of other universities in the system (see figure 1).

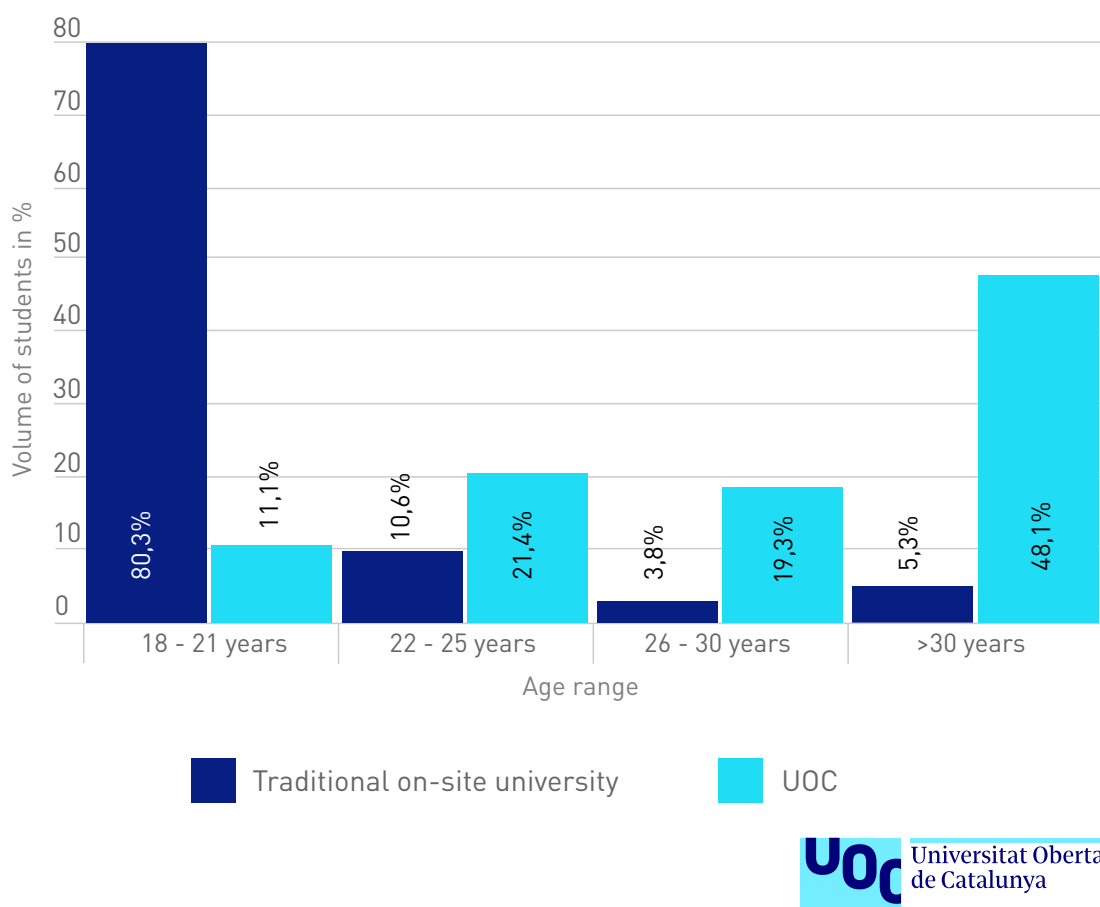


Figure 3: Newly enrolled students in the Catalan higher education system (by age)

Source: own elaboration, academic year 2016-2017 including official Bachelor's and Master's degrees

This commitment to being an inclusive university explains why in the 2015-2016 academic year, out of the 54 059 UOC students, 60% were 30 or more years old and 80% combined their studies with work. This differential fact has led the UOC to be recognized by different institutions, as for example, through the National Alares Award which the UOC received in 2009, recognising its work in favour of the reconciliation of work and family life as well as in favour of the development of services for personal autonomy and care for dependants.³³

ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION TRAINING AND PEOPLE WITH FUNCTIONAL DIVERSITY

The UOC is committed from its origins to the social inclusion of people with functional diversity. To advance its commitment, the UOC launched an accessibility program that, in addition to the economic facilities, has led it to make significant adaptations in the virtual platform. Through the Committee for Curricular Adaptation, individual adaptations are made to the curriculum. They offer, likewise, special accompaniment in reference to work orientation and internships. If required, study support material is available.

The results of these policies are obvious. Students with functional diversity at the UOC have been growing in recent years to represent about 2.5% of all students at the university. It is important to mention at this point that during the 2015-2016 academic year only 8% of the UOC's students with functional diversity requested some type of adaptation of the contents of the subjects by the university (see figure 2).

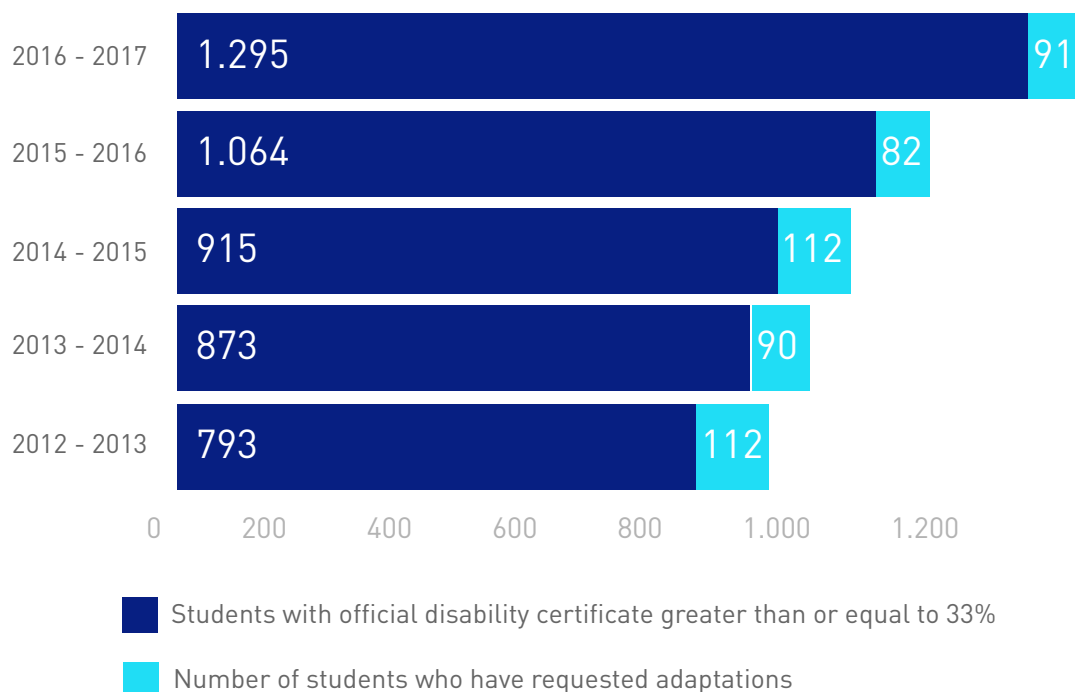


Figure 4: UOC students with functional diversity

Source: own elaboration

33 Fundación Alares, 2009, 'Galardonados Premios Nacionales Alares 2009'. Retrieved on 23 April 2018 from http://www.fundacionalares.es/index.php/fundacion_ alares/premios_nacionales_ alares_r/premios_nacionales_ alares_r_2009_1/galardonados_premios_nacionales_ alares_2009

In Catalonia the number of students with disabilities amounted to 2 854 in 2017. The UOC is the first Catalan university in number of students with functional diversity: around 40% of them study at the UOC, the remaining 60% (1 064 students) are distributed among the other 11 universities of the Catalan university system (see table 1). According to the census of students with disabilities enrolled in 2017 in Spanish universities, 20 793 people with functional diversity represented 1.4% of the total of university students.³⁴ The UOC is the third Spanish university in number of students with functional diversity, behind the National Distance Education University (UNED) (6 793 students) and almost equal with the University of Valencia (1 076 students).

	2015	2016	2017
Universidad Abat Oliva CEU	4	10	10
Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona (UAB)	140	320	311
Universidad de Barcelona (UB)	654	722	730
Universidad de Girona	140	135	104
Universidad de Lleida	52	57	62
Universidad de Vic	10	12	17
Universidad Internacional de Catalunya (UIC)	13	13	10
Universidad Oberta de Catalunya (UOC)	793	873	793
Universidad Politécnica de Catalunya (UPC)	150	162	174
Universidad Pompeu Fabra (UPF)	85	85	108
FPCEE Blanquerna, Universidad Ramon Llull	33	33	29
Universidad Rovira i Virgili	105	105	155
	2.179	2.527	2.503

Table 1: Census of students with disabilities enrolled in the universities of Catalonia

Source: Fundación Universia, 2017, Anexo Territorial p. 2

This work of the UOC of inclusion of people with disabilities has been recognized by various institutions. Highlighted here is the recognition that the National Organization of the Blind in Spain (ONCE) granted to the UOC in 2017 through the Ilunion Prize for its commitment to accessibility,³⁵ as well as that of the Spanish Federation of Rare Diseases (ERDF) with the Prize for Inclusion for Rare Diseases in 2016.³⁶

ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION AND REFUGEES OR ASYLUM SEEKERS

The UOC wants to be an attentive university to its surroundings. Faced with the arrival of thousands of Syrian refugees to Europe fleeing the war that began in their country in 2011, thousands of young Syrians have been forced to cut short their university studies, and with it their dreams and life projects. In Spain, it was expected that 16 000 refugees would arrive in 2015, but by the end of 2017 only 1 200 arrived. From the UOC we decided to launch a project

34 Fundación Universia, 2017, 'Guía de Atención a la Discapacidad en la Universidad 2017'. Anexo Territorial. Retrieved on 23 April 2018 from http://www.fundacionuniversia.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Guia_Atencion_Discapacidad_2017_ACCESIBLE.pdf

35 Ilunion, 2017, 'ILUNION entrega a cerca de 40 instituciones y empresas un diploma que reconoce su compromiso con la accesibilidad'. Retrieved on 23 April 2018 from <http://www.ilunion.com/es/comunicacion/actualidad/04102017/ilunion-entrega-cerca-de-40-instituciones-y-empresas-un-diploma-que>

36 FEDER, 2016, 'Su Majestad la Reina preside el acto oficial del Día Mundial de las ER'. Retrieved on 23 April from <https://enfermedades-raras.org/index.php/slider-home/5581-su-majestad-la-reina-preside-el-acto-oficial-del-d%C3%ADa-mundial-de-las-er?jjj=1500768065002>

that will benefit refugees or asylum seekers not only in Spain but also in other countries, who can access our courses thanks to eLearning. Furthermore, the UOC decided to extend its work to other groups in the same circumstances, who have already been in Spanish territory for some years and have difficulty accessing the standard higher education system. In 2017 the UOC offered these groups 61 scholarships to study languages and specialisations. The beneficiaries are from different countries of origin, especially from Syria and Western Sahara, but also from different countries of sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America (see figure 3). Grantees are living in refugee camps (Greece and Sahara) or are already residing in Europe, mainly in Spain but also in Germany, the Netherlands and Norway (see figure 3).

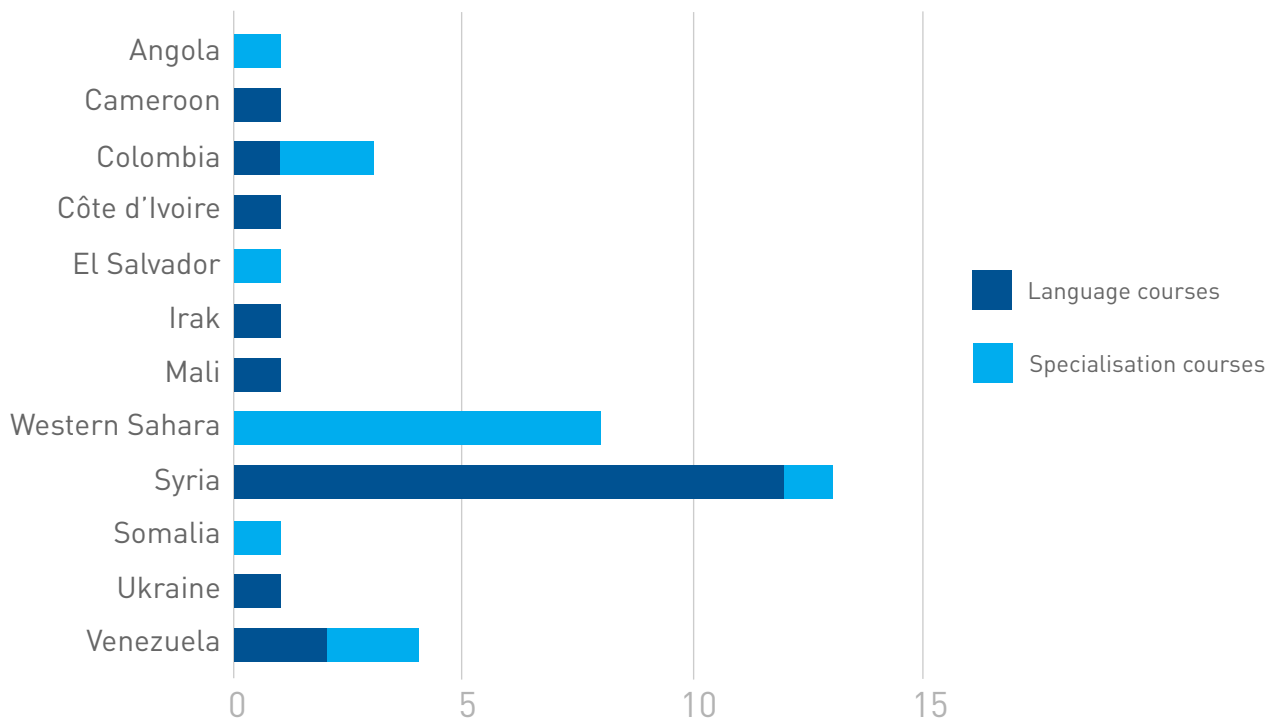


Figure 5: Country of origin: UOC scholarship program for refugees
Source: own elaboration

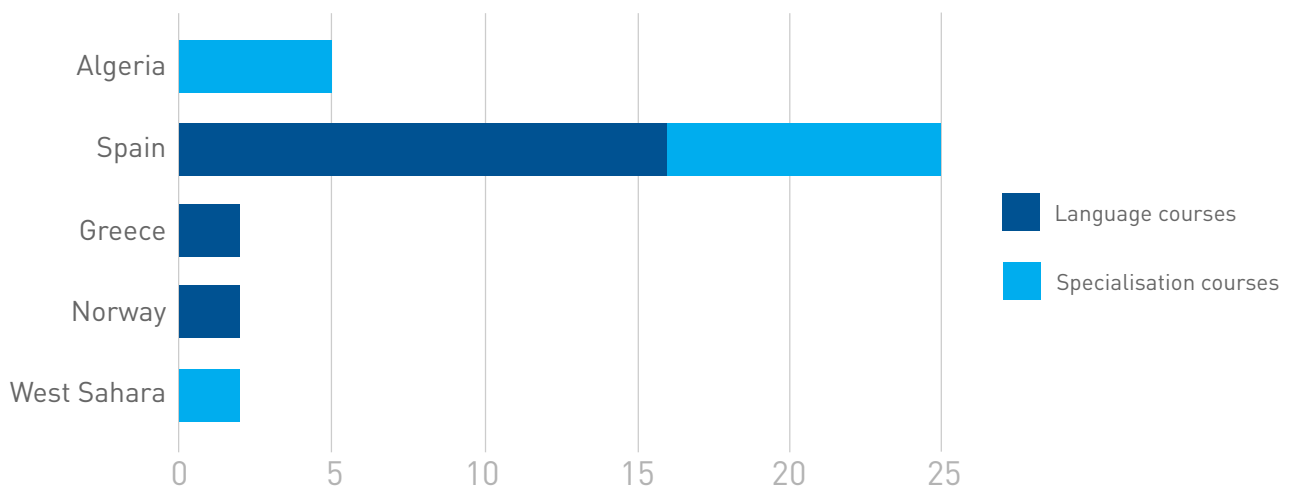


Figure 6: Country of residence: UOC scholarship program for refugees
Source: own elaboration

Some of these people had not been able to access university due to the beginning of conflict in their respective countries when they were very young, and due to the escape process, which made them stop their studies for a few years. Thanks to this programme offered by the UOC, they have been able to undertake new studies, regardless of where they currently reside or where they are going to move to in the coming months.

It is important to mention that, despite the multiple advantages of online learning, there are still challenges to be overcome, such as access difficulties due to reduced connectivity in refugee camps and, above all, the psychological barriers derived from trauma, loneliness, adaptation to change and low self-esteem of this population group. Aware of these, the UOC has set in motion a reception programme for refugee students that consists of a mentoring service carried out by UOC student volunteers who accompany them virtually during the course (in addition to the teachers and tutors) in order to facilitate the adaptation process and increase the success rate of this group at their newly initiated or reinitiated studies. The aim of the UOC is to extend this initiative in number and scope over the coming years by seeking international alliances.

ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION AND GLOBAL PROFESSIONALS

Online learning not only allows access and coverage of higher education to be extended to people who are excluded from the standard education system. It has multiple other advantages that favour the training of citizens and global professionals in a way that would be very difficult to achieve on a personal level.

During these 20 years of the university's history, global institutions such as the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) have approached the UOC in order to design and implement training programmes for its officials, as well as for specific teams of their institutions in different countries of the world. These programmes respond to the need, among others, for training physically separated professionals who require specific technical knowledge while sharing professional experiences among peers. This is how the Master's in Conflictology (UNITAR-UOC) was created in 2013 for the training of blue helmets of United Nations teams assigned to conflict zones. More than 130 students located in 69 different countries have already obtained that Master's degree. With the same objective, two other training programmes were created in collaboration with UN departments: the Master's programme in Food Security and International Food Governance, which annually forms teams from FAO and helps them to redefine intervention policies in food safety, as well as the course in Specialization Management of Skin Neglected Tropical Diseases that trains health agents in countries of the tropics and north of the Maghreb, in the implementation of WHO protocols for the attention of people who suffer these diseases.

With the aim of extending these opportunities and peer-learning practices to more UOC programmes, the university began in late 2016 a project aimed at achieving massive virtual mobility with other international universities. These virtual mobilities allow many students from other universities to study one or more subjects in the virtual classrooms of the UOC, thus providing them with an international experience without having to travel, in addition to contact with other students located in other parts of the world. The first experience was

carried out with 706 undergraduate students from the UNIMINUTO Colombian university in the second semester of the 2015-2016 academic year. During the 2016-2017 academic year this same initiative has been extended to other higher education organisations in Peru (Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia), Colombia (Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia) and Chile (Duoc UC).

EXTEND THE EXPERIENCE OF THE UOC

Convinced that the UOC's experience, with its lessons learned, can be replicated in other contexts to expand access and coverage of quality higher education and thus contribute to the achievement of SDG 4, the university has been accompanying, on the one hand, national quality agencies and governments in the implementation of mechanisms for the recognition of online degrees and, on the other hand, educational institutions in the complex process of incorporating virtual methodologies into their academic offerings.

For example, the UOC has led the European TEMPUS project "Enhancing Quality of Technology-Enhanced Learning" that called to promote the reform and modernisation of higher education in Jordan through the introduction of a national system of quality assurance for the improved learning in technology.³⁷ UOC also worked with the Council for the Evaluation, Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Higher Education (CEAACES) of Ecuador (2016-2017), the National Accreditation Commission (CNA) of Chile (2017) and the Council for the Accreditation of Higher Education of Mexico (COPAES) (2017-2018).

CONCLUSIONS

Quality online education is an effective and efficient way to contribute to SDG 4. The experiences presented in this article, resulting from the work of more than 20 years of the UOC both as an online higher education institution on its own as well as in collaboration with different types of institutions in other countries and globally, are proof of this. The aim of the UOC is to contribute its experience and knowledge to the improvement of the quality of higher education around the globe. Many of these experiences could well be taken up by all kinds of universities that want to use technology to enhance inclusiveness through blended or distance learning.

³⁷ eQTeL, 2013, TEMPUS project number 544491-TEMPUS-1-2013-1-ES-TEMPUS-SMGR (grant agreement for 2013-4568). <http://eqtel.psut.edu.jo/Home.aspx>