Learning analytics and data ethics in performance data management: a benchlearning exercise involving six European universities

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Learning analytics (LA) has been defined as "the measurement, collection, analysis and reporting of data about the progress of learners and the contexts in which learning takes place" (Sclater et al., 2016, 4). In recent years it has attracted a great deal of attention as a way of informing the development of learning and teaching practice in higher education, contributing to improve students' learning. Moreover, LA may play an important role in supporting quality enhancement, as a source of the accurate, up-to-date data that is essential to set up sound quality management systems. However, this collection of students' data for gaining insights about their future performance entails ethical and legal issues that need to be seriously taken into account.

This study explores how learning analytics is implemented at a set of six European universities in the context of their performance data management models, including its multiple functions and ethical issues. It further identifies possible good practice and policy recommendations at decision-making level. The data was collected as part of the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership Sustainable Quality Enhancement in Higher Education Learning and Teaching (SQELT) project.

Results show that LA is present to a certain extent in all six institutions, although mostly based on traditional data and still lacking predictive capacity concerning students' performance. LA is viewed as useful in providing more accurate personal data on students' learning, contributing to the establishment of more sophisticated quality management systems. Overall, and as reflected in the abstracted SWOT analysis (Figure 1), LA entails both opportunities and threats. The possibilities of a LA approach deserve further attention within universities and quality assurance agencies.

Reference

Sclater, N., Peasgood, A. & Mullan, J., 2016, 'Learning analytics in higher education. A review of UK and international practice'. Effective Learning Analytics – Using data and analytics to support students, (London, JISC). Available at https://www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/learninganalytics-in-higher-education (accessed 10 March 2021).

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FIGURE 1
Abstracted SWOT analysis of learning analytics developed from the six individual SWOT analyses. It intends to subsume the main strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats encountered in the SQELT case-study universities.