

# Improving effectiveness of humanitarian actors at scale: a study of two eLearning courses available on the Kaya learning platform

## 1. Introduction

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This case study explores two eLearning courses available on the Kaya network: 'Sphere Handbook in Action' and the 'Introduction to the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS)'. The two courses aim to improve the application of humanitarian standards.

The eLearning courses use a self-directed learning (SDL) approach. In SDL, participants take responsibility for managing their own training by selecting content, timing and delivery. The self-directed learner 'takes the initiative to understand his/her individual learning needs and seeks out satisfying resources and methods'.<sup>1</sup> The creation of online SDL courses for the humanitarian standards was highly anticipated and welcomed by aid agencies worldwide.<sup>2</sup>

The courses use scenario-based learning methods to teach participants how to apply minimum standards and principles in real life situations. The scenarios are designed to help learners think through different issues and select the best answer from multiple choices. There are no right or wrong answers and feedback is provided on each question to encourage further reflection or study.<sup>3</sup> The quizzes consolidate the key learning messages from the narrative topics and are designed to help the learner assess his or her own confidence and competence against the application of these messages.<sup>4</sup> Both courses encourage learners to reflect and note down their thoughts.

This case study explores the use of eLearning as an approach to providing free, high quality and structured training in different languages and at scale.

## 2. Methodology

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This case study uses a mixed methods approach including:

1. Desk review of secondary data sources including publicly available strategic plans and course evaluations as well as course design documents provided by Walkgrove. Primary data sources, such as feedback sheets have also been considered.
2. Review of the online course to understand the learner journey.
3. Semi-structured interviews with:
  - a) Course creators at Sphere and CHS
  - b) Course learners/beneficiaries
  - c) Digital Planning Manager at Kaya, Humanitarian Leadership Academy

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<sup>1</sup> Gibbons, M. (2002). *The self-directed learning handbook: Challenging adolescent student to excel*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers, p.2.

<sup>2</sup> Walkgrove (2015), 'Project Initiation document: The development of a bespoke e-learning programme for the Sphere project.'

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 8

<sup>4</sup> Interviews with Cecilia Furtade, Sphere and David Loquercio, CHS, 2016.

### 3. Course design

This section outlines the course design for the Sphere Handbook in Action and Introduction to the CHS.

#### 3.1 Sphere Handbook in Action

The Sphere Handbook in Action (which incorporates the CHS) is available in Arabic and English, with some of its modules translated into French and Spanish. It is available on 12 e-learning platforms (including Kaya) and was developed specifically to support humanitarian professionals working with the Sphere Standards. The Handbook was edited in 2011, taking into account developments in the humanitarian sector. The update included a greater emphasis on local and national responses, accountability, climate change, urban contexts, cash transfers, DRR, early recovery, civil-military relations and involvement of the private sector.

The full module takes 15 hours to complete (see Figure 1) and complements the Sphere project's suite of classroom-based trainings. It brings the Handbook to life through the use of scenarios that help the learner to understand how to use the standards.

Key themes are:

- accountability to affected populations,
- needs assessments,
- response coordination,
- impartiality and non-discrimination,
- keeping populations safe from harm,
- 'building back safer', and
- looking after oneself as a humanitarian worker.

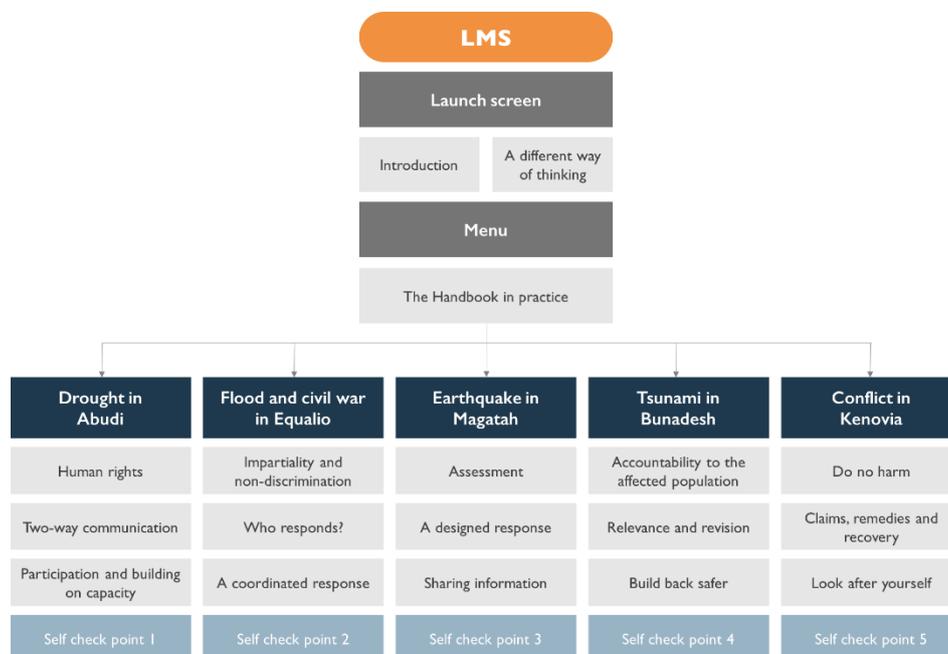


Figure 1. Sphere Learner Journey (adapted from Walkgrove 2015)

### 3.2 Introduction to the CHS

The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) is the result of consultations with humanitarian workers, communities and people affected by crises, a number of NGOs, governments, United Nations and Donor agencies and academics in the sector. The online course was developed through a collaborative process with the Academy, the CHS Alliance, Groupe URD, IECAH and the Sphere Project. It is available on the Kaya Network in English and French, with Arabic and Spanish versions in the pipeline.

The eLearning module outlines the Nine Commitments contained within the CHS, including key actions and organisational responsibilities ("what you should be doing") and indicators ("are you doing it right?"). It is based on four scenarios and covers the history of the CHS, its structure and scope, and the Principles underpinning the Commitments. The design is similar to the Sphere course design (see figure 1) but only takes 1-2 hours to complete. CHS learning objectives are:

- To understand the importance of Accountability
- To be able to apply the principles of the CHS in specific roles
- To understand the value of coordinated and collaborative work

## 4. Scale and access

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Online learning courses typically achieve broad reach but low completion rates. This section addresses enrolment, access and the geographical spread of participants.

### 4.1 Target audiences

Both courses are designed for humanitarian actors at all levels. The target audience is made up of a wide range of ages, cultures, career levels, abilities and learning styles. This audience represents international, national and local actors, including the Red Cross Red Crescent Movements and non-traditional humanitarian respondents. The original course design targeted learners already established in their careers (i.e. managers), but the decision was later made to target a wider audience. The scenarios were then designed to be relevant to a wide range of actors.<sup>5</sup>

In order to create tangible demographics, Walkgrove used the following categories when designing the Sphere Standards in Action course:

#### Primary target audience

- New humanitarians with little or no field experience and with limited or no previous exposure to Sphere
- Humanitarians with limited or no previous exposure to Sphere
- Humanitarians with a basic or advanced understanding of the philosophy of Sphere and its Handbook contents

#### Secondary target audience

- Beneficiaries, local community organisations and Government responders
- Non-traditional players in the humanitarian sector
- Students of BA and MA programmes and other academic initiatives
- Institutional donors

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<sup>5</sup> Furtade 2016.

The courses are promoted on social media and by local focal points (Sphere Focal Points & CHS Alliance Accountability Focal Points). Furthermore, Sphere has approximately 40,000 people in its international networks.<sup>6</sup> Data collected from the Kaya platform suggests that the majority of learners are currently programmatic staff (see figure 2).

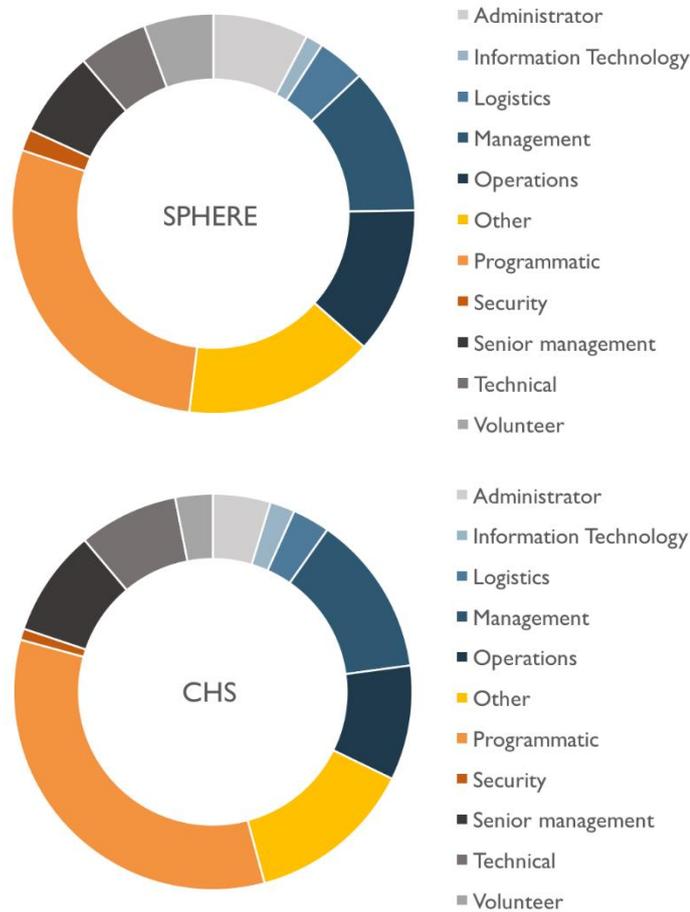


Figure 2. Learner profiles on Kaya platform<sup>7</sup> note: position is not a mandatory field and many learners have used the 'other' category to define their position.

## 4.2 Barriers for local actors

Local actors often experience barriers to training activities, including language barriers and the cost of training. eLearning can mitigate for this through provision of free access to high quality and structured e-learning courses.

Both courses have relatively high levels of uptake in Jordan (CHS: 98 / Sphere: 43), Kenya (CHS: 46 / Sphere: 30) and the Philippines (CHS: 36 / Sphere: 20), (completed courses May-Dec 2016, see figure 3 and 4). This reflects a more general trend on the Kaya learning platform. While online marketing activities occur globally, the countries with Academies have additional reach.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, it is not possible to establish whether the participants in each location are international or local actors. Kenya and Jordan, in particular, are hubs for humanitarians involved in regional responses (in Syria, South Sudan and Somalia).

<sup>6</sup> Loquercio, 2016

<sup>7</sup> Source: Humanitarian Leadership Academy

<sup>8</sup> Sanford, 2017.

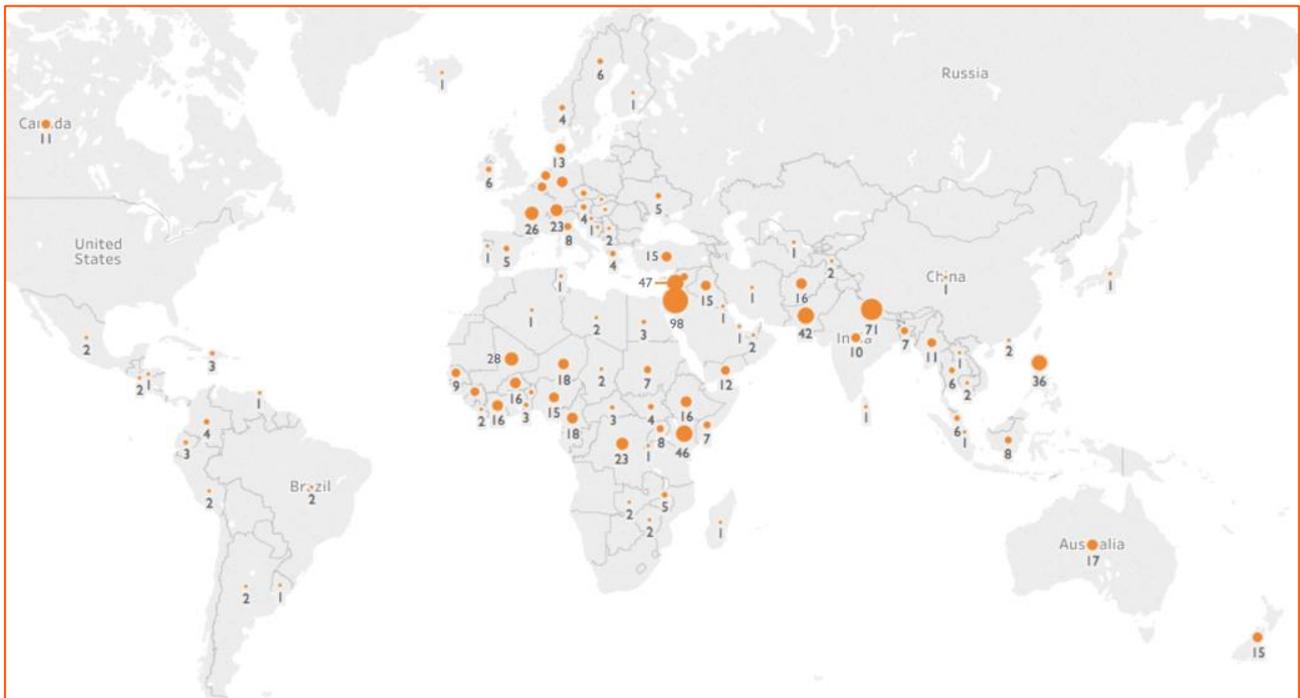


Figure 3. Geographical spread, Sphere<sup>9</sup>

Figure 4. Geographical spread, CHS

While the CHS map tells a comprehensive story of the geographical spread of learners, the Sphere map is available on an additional 11 platforms. This includes the IFRC learning platform, which reaches a high number of national volunteer staff. Between January and September 2015, for

<sup>9</sup> Source: Humanitarian Leadership Academy

example, 259 volunteers (61%) completed the course, mainly from South American countries.<sup>10</sup> It is not known the extent to which Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies are able to make the course available to individuals without access to personal technology.

Nevertheless, learning providers therefore need to support dissemination activities better to be able to reach national actors. Barriers for participants in the Global South include low internet penetration, digital literacy, and linguistic and cultural issues such as learning styles and confidence.<sup>11</sup> A member of the CHS learning team reflected after a field trip to the DRC, that while some local actors report system glitches and seek solutions, others might not be comfortable complaining and will 'just lose hope and give up'.<sup>12</sup>

### 4.3 Completion rates

Participant retention and motivation is the one of the key challenges of self-directed online learning. Since the CHS course is shorter and more manageable, completion rates on the Kaya network are considerably higher for CHS (37%) than Sphere (9%). Enrolment and completion statistics for May to December 2016 are presented in Table 1.

May - Dec 2016	Sphere Handbook in Action	CHS
<b>Completions</b>	37 (27 in English, 8 in Arabic, and 1 each in French and Spanish)	520 (498 in English and 22 in French)
<b>In progress</b>	None	351
<b>Enrolled but not yet started</b>	380	538
<b>Total</b>	417	1,409
<b>Completion rate</b>	9%	37%

Table 1. Enrollement and completion on Kaya Learning Platform <sup>13</sup>

The Sphere Handbook in Action is available on 12 platforms (including Kaya and the IFRC learning platform). According to a 2014 survey, of the 13,200 people enrolled on the Sphere Handbook in Action, over 1,700 people completed, translating to a completion rate of about 13%.<sup>14</sup> Completion rates on the IFRC learning platform are significantly higher, at 29% (386 completions out of 1288 enrolments) between January and September 2015.<sup>15</sup>

Course completion relies on learner motivation, which normally falls into one of three categories:

- 1) Self-initiated personal and professional development
- 2) Organisation enforced requirement for personal development
- 3) Organisation enforced requirement to train other colleagues

When learning is completely self-directed (and not linked to a organisational professional development programme), staying motivated to complete the course can be a challenge. The

<sup>10</sup> Accounts for all volunteer staff, not just local actors in Global South.

<sup>11</sup> Liyanagunawardena, T et al, 2013. *The impact and reach of MOOCs: a developing countries' perspective*. eLearning Papers, no. 33. [www.elearningpapers.eu](http://www.elearningpapers.eu) (accessed 10 December 2016)

<sup>12</sup> Loquercio, 2016

<sup>13</sup> Source: Humanitarian Leadership Academy

<sup>14</sup> Sphere 2014

<sup>15</sup> Information provided by Sphere in personal communication, 19 January 2017.

biggest criticism of Sphere in participant feedback gathered in 2014 was the length of the course, which takes up to 15 hours to complete.<sup>16</sup>

## 5. Evidence of knowledge sharing and learning

The two online courses, have not yet been evaluated, however, there is anecdotal evidence of individual, organisational and system level outcomes as a result of this new learning intervention. This section also includes information gathered from participants about the perceived benefits of scenario-based and reflective learning.

### 5.1 Participant satisfaction

Both Sphere and CHS measure the impact of the online courses through participant responses to end-of-course feedback forms. In July 2014, a short article was published on the Sphere website, which summarised findings from a participant survey. The perception of impact amongst participants was extremely high; of the 300 people surveyed, 98% said they are now better equipped to apply Sphere principles and standards in disaster or conflict situations.<sup>17</sup>

It is noteworthy that the Sphere project itself was evaluated in 2004. The authors concluded that while it was difficult to determine the impact of the project on the quality of humanitarian assistance, 'there is a widespread perception that it has had a beneficial effect'.<sup>18</sup>

### 5.2 Multi-media scenario-driven learning

Audience research, referenced by Walkgrove, has shown that learners respond well to 'multi-media scenario-driven e-learning'<sup>19</sup>. A CHS learner interviewed for this case study agreed that the scenarios are realistic and practical. One scenario, in particular, mirrored a personal experience when international colleagues were kidnapped. Another interviewee, from the Philippines, who has undertaken both CHS and Sphere courses explained that the course challenges critical thinking as the multiple choice answers are very similar to each other, hence making the learner carefully consider all options before selecting an answer.

### 5.3 Reflective learning

Both courses provide participants with substantial time for reflection. In the Sphere course, there is a virtual 'notepad' dedicated for reflection and the learner is asked a number of questions to help them honestly reflect on the work environment. The offline notepad, which is not stored on the system, allows the learner to reflect freely and without fear of judgment. According to the Sphere team, feedback collected from participants reveals this to be the favourite component of the course.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The Sphere team is working with the Academy to edit the course into shorter bite-sized chapters that can be completed independently of each other

<sup>17</sup> Sphere (2014). Three reasons why you should consider taking the e-learning course. <http://www.sphereproject.org/news/three-reasons-why-you-should-take-the-sphere-e-learning-course/?keywords=elearning%20> (Accessed 30 December 2016)

<sup>18</sup> Van Dyke, M & Waldman R. (2004). Sphere Project Evaluation, Colombia University.

<sup>19</sup> Walkgrove 2015: 7.

<sup>20</sup> Furtade, 2016.

While the CHS course does not include a virtual space for reflection, it too is built on a similar foundation. Interviewees were able to describe how the reflective practice shaped their work in Afghanistan and the Philippines, for example:

*Now when we intervene in humanitarian situation, it is a requirement that we consider the CHS. For example, while we were distributing NFIs in Mazar E Sharif, we considered some of the rules of the CHS. In the past, some of our staff were just looking for male beneficiaries but this time we made sure to prepare NFI for women beneficiaries. And also we told the beneficiaries that the aid we are delivering, it is their right, it is not charity. We gave them the opportunity to know about the donations, the process of distribution and also about the right to complain about us if we created problems in their society.<sup>21</sup>*

And:

*The two courses have really reinforced our understanding about human rights. I am working with victims of sexual trafficking caused by the Yolanda and Haiyan typhoons. Through the courses we have realised that we need to consider climate change as one of the push factors of human trafficking. In our 2017-2018 community development work plan, which targets vulnerable sectors of our society, we have now integrated climate change into our planning. It used to be simply about making people aware of anti-trafficking laws and giving them livelihood opportunities. Now it is much more than that.<sup>22</sup>*

## 5.4 Blended and network-driven learning

Blended learning provides a multitude of new opportunities for knowledge acquisition, knowledge sharing and knowledge organisation. It emphasises the use of e-learning in combination with other teaching and learning methods, such as mentoring or simulation.<sup>23</sup>

The Sphere learning team encourages blended learning by suggesting that local focal points incorporate the e-learning courses into their own face-to-face training programmes. For example, one of the focal points in Latin America requests trainees to complete the course as a prerequisite to the face-to-face training. Other trainers use the course as a follow-up to training, or as a means of testing trainees.<sup>24</sup> The CHS course is also available for organisations to incorporate into their own training programmes and is used during official CHS Alliance facilitated Training of Trainers sessions.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, the CHS Alliance is currently exploring the use of network-driven learning and digital communities of practice (CoPs). It has recently initiated several online CoPs that are expected to become more active when two new staff members join the 'Policy, Advocacy and Learning' team.<sup>26</sup> The Sphere team similarly aims to create a network of humanitarian practitioners and organisations.<sup>27</sup> Sphere has recruited a new staff member to expand its network of focal points and its geographical reach in order to amplify training and advocacy.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>21</sup> CHS Learner, Afghanistan

<sup>22</sup> CHS and Sphere learner, Philippines.

<sup>23</sup> Meir 2016

<sup>24</sup> Furtade, 2016

<sup>25</sup> Loquercio, 2016

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Sphere (2014) 'Sphere 2020 Strategic Plan 2015-2010', p. 3. <http://www.sphereproject.org/silo/files/sphere-2020-english.pdf> (accessed 10 December 2016)

<sup>28</sup> Furtade, 2016

## 6. Lessons learnt

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E-learning has the potential to reach a large number of people in hard-to-access locations. However, it struggles with low completion rates. This section reflects on the lessons learnt from the experiences of Sphere and CHS so far.

### 6.1 Accreditation and assessment

Assessment and accreditation of online learning can help to maintain participant engagement levels and improve completion rates. For the CHS course, it is the learning management system (LMS) provider, rather than CHS team, that decides whether or not to include a certificate of completion. However, for Sphere, a certificate is built into the course. Participants who complete the courses receive a 'certificate of completion' rather than a 'certificate of attainment'. This does not provide any evidence of learning outcomes.<sup>29</sup> To this end, the Academy's work on accreditation at the 'Centre of Excellence' is timely and beneficial.

### 6.2 Overcoming language and cultural barriers

The Sphere Handbook in Action is available in English, French, Spanish and Arabic, while the Introduction to CHS course is currently available in English and French, with Arabic and Spanish versions in the pipeline. Both courses were translated by 'Translators without Borders' and use same scenarios and quizzes as the original English versions.<sup>30</sup>

Arabic is spoken by 420 million native speakers in 22 countries, many of which have experienced, and continue to experience, acute humanitarian crises. The translation of both courses into Arabic is therefore significant. Provision of the courses in the local languages of additional disaster-prone countries should be considered.

Furthermore, the majority of local actors will not be native English, French or Spanish speakers. Interviewees noted that some of the humanitarian terminology in the courses was new to them and that the courses therefore took longer to finish than listed on the course outline. Taking longer than the guided time may depress learners' motivation and prove demoralising for local actors.

### 6.3 Digital literacy

According to course designers, the courses were created with the assumption that participants have a certain level of internet literacy (using web browsers and navigating simple webpages). The audio option on both courses allows inclusion of people with low literacy. However, digital literacy and internet penetration remains a significant challenge for local actors in the South, especially those working in rural areas.<sup>31</sup>

The demographic data does not account for participants' locales (urban/rural; capital city) and hence it is difficult to reach any significant conclusions about the link between completions and internet penetration and/or digital literacy. Research, however, shows that digital literacy is a significant challenge to completion of online learning courses. Blending online courses with face-to-face training (as the case of Sphere focal points) is one way of facilitating completion for those who may require further support.

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<sup>29</sup> Sphere does include a final self-assessment on uses of handbook, however this is not tested.

<sup>30</sup> Furtade, 2016; Loquercio, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Liyanagunawardena, et al. 2013: 2

## 6.4 Importance of evaluation

A thorough impact evaluation of the two e-learning courses is needed. The evaluation should assess the courses' reach with local humanitarian actors, to understand if such courses, in their current form, provide a significant platform for scaling up. Qualitative research into the learning experiences of non-completing Sphere and CHS participants could potentially provide a fuller explanation of the low retention rates and provide solutions on how to improve the learner experience.

Furthermore, a step-change is needed, so that training is evaluated not on participants' assessments of whether or not they enjoyed the training experience, but on objective measures of the extent to which the learning is actually transferred to better organisational and humanitarian outcomes.

A follow-up interview with learners is one way to assess outcomes. The interviews conducted for this case study suggested that participants are keen to learn and proactive in sharing the knowledge they gain. For example, a CHS learner in Afghanistan has trained 25 of his team members, most of whom are unable to take the eLearning course due to technological and linguistic barriers. Similarly, a learner from the Philippines has colleagues and is also planning on integrating the course into the curriculum of a DRR course he teaches at his local high school.

## Annex 1: Key informant interviews

Name	Job Title
Cecilia Furtade	Training and Promotion Officer, The Sphere Project
David Loquercio	Head of Policy, Advocacy and Learning at CHS Alliance
Kat Sanford	Digital Planning Manager, Humanitarian Leadership Academy
CHS learner	Emergency Response Coordinator & Acting Head of Humanitarian Response. BRAC International Afghanistan
CHS and Sphere learner	Advocacy Officer, Visayan Forum Foundation and Volunteer at Dumaguete Social Action DRR programme.