

Quality e-learning: Are there universal indicators?

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The quality of online education is a central issue for the sustainable delivery, development and future of technology-supported learning. With the growing availability of educational technologies, educators want to know how to make the best use of them. With the expansion in e-learning adoption by institutions comes the demand for quality and accountability. A significant issue in this regard is that while there is a free and growing market in e-learning, there is also a proliferation of benchmarks and quality guidelines. This paper presents an overview of the multiple meanings of quality and benchmarks. While there may be different agendas at play, there is also consensus emerging as to what constitutes quality in online education.

Introduction

The design, development and implementation of online course materials are all processes that are now part of quality assurance and accreditation for many institutions. Moreover, with the increased diversity of the student population, and packaging of educational courses for specific markets, there is a need to move the focus in quality assurance to more outcomes-based models (Pond, 2002). The traditional model of ensuring a quality learning experience for students is of the personal responsibility of the teacher-scholar “epitomised in the Oxbridge one-on-one tutor-student relationship” (Poole, Harman, & Deden, 1998, p.273). In recent decades, the institutional model of university-level quality assurance and accountability increasingly has overtaken this individual autonomy. Beyond this institutional and self-regulatory model of quality assurance in higher education, current global perspectives on quality in online higher education would appear to have three distinct aspects:

- Accountability perspectives, using the language of “accreditation” and “benchmarks”, which are tied to political and economic agendas;
- International marketing perspectives, which include not only concerns for quality but are also an attempt to capture international market of learners; and
- Pedagogical, consumer-centric perspectives, that aim to define quality as client-centered.

Although consensus appears to be emerging as to what constitutes pedagogical quality, these attributes need to be considered in the light of other global developments in the quality movement.

Accountability

The current operating climate for many institutions is one where rigour, credibility, accountability and transparency in offering courses for clients are of the utmost importance as many universities are benchmarking their distance education capabilities and outputs with those of comparable institutions and some are participating in national and international networks. Management of the quality agenda in recent years has become politically charged as national governments in OECD countries have become “aggressively interventionist in this arena” (Poole et al., 1998, p. 273). This aggression results from the recognition that the real competitive advantage today lies in the well-educated imagination and in the production of “breakthrough ideas that advance the technologies and lead to new products, new initiatives and ultimately a stronger society” (Witherspoon & Johnstone, 2001, pp. 1-2). This strength has an inextricable link to wealth, it is therefore an economic as well as a political issue (Noble, 1998). Educational quality assurance is a matter of accountability and national interest. This pattern is not limited to OECD countries, and accountability perspectives on the quality of online higher education are present in a wide range of countries across the globe providing evidence that all nations and governments have unique perspectives on quality in online higher education (DETYA, 2000; Hayward, 2001).

Benchmarks for online learning

As would be expected, because of its scale of online education, the USA has been the most prolific producer of an array of benchmarks for online and distance education. The driving force for much of this effort is an economic agenda, which seeks to shore up national “market-share” leadership in online education. The result of this, coupled with higher integrity education efforts, produces a vast array of benchmark/framework documents for online policy and quality evaluation created by a number of national-level interest groups. They are also a defence against the more than 30 unaccredited universities in the USA alone offering bogus degrees online (Phillips, 2003, March). Another reason for the benchmarks is that, unlike many countries with central government control over the quality of educational institutions, in the market-capitalism context of the USA, its Department of Education has no such role (Loane, 2001, p.3). Nevertheless, because the federal government provides the bulk of research funding and has major programs of student assistance, through its power to withhold these funds, it is able to exert substantial pressure on universities (DETYA, 2000, p. 70).

The US model is of a voluntary system of national accreditation, with recognised agencies listed in a Department publication. There are now six bodies that grant accreditation in the USA (Carnevale, 2000) and efforts at accreditation tend to be highly prescriptive. More commonly using the term “distance education”, benchmarks are now set by:

- The American Federation of Teachers, listing 14 benchmarks (AFT, 2000);
- The Council for Higher Education Accreditation, offering seven areas of benchmarks, derived from 9 accrediting organisations (CHEA, 2002);
- The Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, listing five areas of “best practices for electronically offered degree and certificate programs” (CRAC, c.2000);

- The National Education Association, listing 24 benchmark “measures of quality in Internet-based distance learning” (NEA, 2001; Phipps & Merisotis, 2000);
- The National Survey of Student Engagement offering five “national benchmarks of effective educational practice” (NSSE, 2000).

These are but a representative sample of the national benchmarks. Although many of the benchmarks refer to distance education, they cover several categories of e-learning (Lyall & McNamara, 2000).

Quality approaches in the United Kingdom

While in the USA, the national benchmarks reflect the perspectives of the sponsoring organisations; other nations’ quality mechanisms reflect the perspectives of governments. This is true in the United Kingdom, where the Dearing Report (1997) deemed that the work of government quality assurance was to create benchmarks for national directions in education. The Dearing Report placed more pressure on further research in distance education (Gillham, Buckner, & Butt, 1999), and by 1998 the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education already had set up national guidelines for distance education (QAAHE, 1998). For over a decade, universities in the UK have been the subjects of a high degree of scrutiny by the QAA. Much of this has been at the behest of funding councils, which commissioned the QAA to carry out a broad range of activities. In 2002, this picture was changing, as claimed by the new QAA chief executive, Peter Williams, of the new framework, which...”puts responsibility for quality and standards where it belongs – in the institutions themselves” (MacLeod, 2002). Although the picture may be changing, it is unlikely that the abiding spirit of the Dearing Report will be extinguished in the immediate future.

Quality assurance of online education in Australia

At the end of the last decade, there was a national call for the development of quality standards and frameworks for higher education and for learning with technology in Australia (MCIE, 1998; Moran, Thompson, & Arthur, 1999). In answer was the swift response of the 1999 publication of the 67 benchmarks for Australian higher education (McKinnon, Walker, & Davis, 1999); and in the 2000 publication of “The Australian higher education quality assurance framework” (DETYA, 2000). In 2002, a government occasional paper “Universities online” called for the need for further research on quality as well as other aspects of online education (DEST, 2002, March). Three months later the government published a more substantial issues paper in the areas of online education and quality evaluation (DEST, 2002, June). While not setting actual “benchmarks” for online education, the document provides an excellent framework for developing models of evaluation. Meanwhile, the government has established a quality assurance framework, which accommodates online learning and teaching. National attention also has been devoted to the development of standardised course evaluations using student survey tools. The result of this attention has been the production of the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), which now lays claim to be the “best researched student survey tool in use in Australia” (McInnis, Griffin, James, & Coates, 2001, p. 5). What is most significant here is that the tool recognises the pre-eminent importance of the students in the evaluative process. Even at the smallest state government levels, today there is attention given to the provision of readily available quality assurance “checklists” for the evaluation of online courses. Although a simplistic

listing of criteria, the checklist is clearly for the protection of consumers from commercial courses, now available from anywhere in the world.

International perspectives on quality

The UK Dearing report stated that: “Powerful forces – technological and political – are driving the economies of the world towards greater integration. Competition is increasing from developing economies that have a strong commitment to education and training” (Dearing, 1997, p.3). This globalisation, the massive expansion of educational development and educational opportunities are creating a changed environment for higher education institutions throughout the world. In turn, this exerts pressure on both institutions and governments to develop new approaches to quality assurance. There is increasing evidence of responses to this pressure transcending government jurisdiction and national boundaries. Two examples of this are the Universitas 21 alliance and the Global University Alliance. Universitas 21 commenced in 2000, with 18 member universities from China, Singapore, Australia, the UK and continental Europe, the USA and Canada. Soon after, the Hong Kong-based Global University Alliance was launched, with nine member universities from New Zealand, Australia, Taiwan, the Netherlands, the UK, the USA and Canada. The latter has the stated intent to: “penetrate the Asian education market” (Witherspoon & Johnstone, 2001). Its first courses came online in 2000.

Some implications of such alliance initiatives are the need for the development of global quality standards for online courses and the assurance of these standards as criteria for membership, as well as the means to capture lucrative market share. The alliance initiatives are not the only global force impacting on the quality of online education. The efforts of groups such as the Global Alliance for Transnational Education and the OECD in developing accreditation systems to ensure the quality of courses offered in international markets will undoubtedly focus increasing attention on online course quality. Such global moves are fraught with potential risks, akin to the risks posed by international online courses: a widening access gap between rich and poor, cultural imperialism, the homogenisation of the curriculum, perhaps even the destruction of public education systems by powerful multinational corporations (Bates, 1996).

Consumer-oriented perspectives: The call for value and good pedagogy

Beyond nations and international perspectives is a universal perspective, increasing in significance: that of the individual student/ consumer. It is now also a common observation that education is becoming a commodity (Witherspoon & Johnstone, 2001, p. 5). A most significant consideration in this is the contemporary knowledge that student satisfaction is “the most important key to continuing learning” (SLOAN Consortium, c.2002). As students pay a greater share of their own educational costs, they expect universities to provide services they demand in the market at large: better service, lower prices, higher quality and a mix of products that satisfy their own sense of a good education (Zemsky, Massy, & Oedel, 1993, p. 56). According to James (2001, p. 8):

Students are well equipped to judge the quality of higher education and we should trust their intuitions on these matters. Generally speaking, students are in a reasonable position to judge the more tangible, short-term components of the experience and to judge aspects of the process of higher education.

As individual consumers, students need to know what they are being offered, rather than being at the mercy of national and global forces. It is only when their

collective and international consumer power is harnessed that they will become a potent universal force in the quality assurance of online higher education. Marshall Smith, former Deputy Secretary for the US Department of Education, believes that the private sector, not government, will establish “consumer-based” means of judging quality. Entrepreneurs are expected in time to produce a distance education version of Amazon.com, which lets buyers read reviews of books the company sells online, or of the auction company eBay, which permits buyers to rate sellers of auctioned items (Carnevale, 2000). Online, various standards are being developed, such as the “*Pedagogical Rating of Online Courses*” (www.syllabus.com) and the IEEE “*Standard for Learning Objects Metadata*”. These are not of the entrepreneurial model suggested by Smith, but they are evidence that online quality standards are emerging where consumers would expect to find them: online. The under 20’s are now described as the “net generation” (by Tapscott, 1998) and they expect not only to study online but also look to the same medium for information about course selection, support, value for money and quality assessment.

Universal attributes of quality online courses

Through international perspectives and debates on e-learning we are beginning to see the emergence of agreed attributes and features of what constitutes a good online experience. Alley & Jansak (2001:4) state that “The instructor’s best strategy is to arm himself (sic) with a few sturdy principles, to be guided by the translation of these principles into practices effective in a web-based environment, and to think creatively while using specific application methods as a point of reference.” In support of this view, the educational research literature points to clear research directions for learner-centric approaches within e-learning. The approaches derive from psychological principles in cognition, motivation, social factors, and individual differences (American Psychological Association, 2001). These guidelines provide teachers and designers with a principled basis for creating online learning environments, closely aligned with instructional goals and utilising the interactive features of online technology (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). From the literature surveyed, there is broad agreement as to what constitutes quality in online learning, and these are now acknowledged to have the status of ‘universal attributes’ (MacLeod, 2002; Alley & Jansak, 2001; NEA, 2001). In summary, these attributes are as follows:

1. Engage students in active, experiential learning.
2. Build and sustain motivation by providing prompt and regular feedback.
3. Make expectations explicit and cultivate self-directed learners.
4. Provide interaction with others which allows negotiation and construction of knowledge.
5. Provide activities that allow for practice of new skills and foster transfer of new knowledge.
6. Allow time and space for reflection on learning.
7. Balance individual and collaborative tasks for learning so that interpersonal and social elements are well integrated.
8. Align assessment processes with learning outcomes.
9. Provide accessible and structured support for student learning.
10. Ensure that teacher-student and student-student interaction are provided.

While these are enduring principles of effective pedagogy, the real challenge that remains for educators is to create dynamic and purposeful learning environments that utilise the unique properties of e-learning, by harnessing its interactive and reflective potential. While access to online education is growing and may be assumed to expand, the value-adding and quality assurance processes must be consciously planned for.

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