

# Components of quality in distance education

## *Distance education guidelines from different countries*

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**Abstract:** As distance education has become popular with students, educational institutions have seen it as a chance to increase their quality/quantity trade-off. This gives rise to the potential for 'digital diploma mills'. However, distance education students have the freedom to move and will if the quality, in their eyes, deteriorates. Potential students therefore need a reliable indicator of quality that enables them to navigate the huge number of distance education courses available.

This paper reviews how some distance education providers and accrediting bodies regard quality by looking at the guidelines that they have developed. It proposes the main components of guidelines that could be used to determine a quality distance education course from the viewpoint of the educational institution and the student.

**Key words:** distance education, quality, and guidelines

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 What is Quality?

To identify the components of quality in distance education firstly a definitive understanding of quality is needed. The Penguin Dictionary defines quality as 'a degree of excellence, superiority in kind' (Penguin, 2001, p. 1141). Trentin goes further and defines quality, with reference to an educational context, as 'the effort to bridge the gap between the actual effect of an education process and what is expected by the course provider as well as the recipients' (Trentin, 2000, p. 26). Therefore, a quality distance

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education course should meet the expectations of both the students and the educational institution.

## 1.2 The need for quality guidelines

The review of new courses within education institutions is an ongoing activity central to the management of academic standards and quality. Also there is the need for educational institutions to satisfy quality agencies that a quality course is being produced.

For distance education to maintain its credibility there is therefore a need for guidelines to ensure quality courses are developed and appropriately monitored.

## 2. FOUR DISTANCE EDUCATION GUIDELINES

The following are four of the guidelines that have been specifically developed for distance education by educational institutions.

### 2.1 Canada

The Canadian Association for Community Education (Barker, 1999) sponsored a project for FuturEd to develop quality guidelines for on-line education in Canada. The following guidelines were developed from a workbook sent to: teachers, instructional designers, students and educational administrators.

- *Quality outcomes* including acquired content skills and knowledge, necessary learning skills, a recognised qualification, return on student's investment.
- *Quality processes and practices* including
  - Student management processes e.g. registration, prior learning.
  - Learning management processes e.g. teaching processes, approaches to learning, scheduling and timetabling, assessment of learning.
  - Appropriate technologies e.g. user friendly, efficient.
  - Communications e.g. student/teacher interactivity.
  - Human resources management e.g. recruitment of appropriate staff.
  - Programme management e.g. financial viability.
- *Quality inputs and resources* including intended learning outcomes, curriculum content, teaching and learning materials and learning packages.

These guidelines are very comprehensive and address perspectives from a student and educational institution's viewpoint thereby encompassing Trentin's (2000) definition of quality, but were developed too recently to have been assessed for their 'success' in producing quality courses.

## 2.2 United Kingdom

The Quality Assurance Agency has distance learning guidelines (QAA, 2002), which are structured under six headings:

- *System design* and in particular the development of an integrated approach.
- *Academic standards and quality* in course design, approval and review.
- *Course delivery* and the assurance of quality and standards in the management of that delivery.
- *Student development and support* including the extent to which vocational information will be provided.
- *Student communication and representation* providing students with complete information about the course expectations.
- *Student assessment* ensuring that summative assessment procedures are appropriate for the mode of study.

These guidelines are particularly focused on the educational institution's perspective. Some student perspective has been taken into account by ensuring that students enrol in the appropriate course.

## 2.3 United States of America

In the United States numerous organisations have developed guidelines for distance education courses, including:

### 2.6.1 The Institute for Higher Education Policy

The Institute for Higher Education Policy has developed benchmarks for the success of Internet based distance education. They identified seven benchmarks of quality (IHEP, 2000) they considered essential to ensuring excellence in Internet-based distance learning:

- *Institutional Support* together with electronic security measures and reliability of the technology.
- *Course Development*, which includes a review of instructional materials.
- *A Teaching/Learning environment* that ensures student interaction is constructive and timely.
- *A Course Structure*, which ensures students have sufficient resources.
- *Student support* that includes students receiving adequate course information.

- *Faculty support* that ensures technical assistance is available to staff.
- *Evaluation and Assessment* data on enrolment, which is used to evaluate course effectiveness.

These are excellent guidelines but like other guidelines are too ‘new’ so have not yet been assessed for their success in producing quality distance courses.

### **2.6.2 The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education**

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education has developed a set of guidelines (WICHE, 2002) for accrediting degree programmes offered electronically that summarises a quality system into five components:

- *Institutional context*: The course should relate to the institution’s strategic plan and look at the impact on the institution’s infrastructure e.g. buildings.
- *Curriculum and instruction*: Learning outcomes should be appropriate to the course and academically qualified persons participate in the course.
- *Faculty support*: That there should be appropriate support for those responsible for preparing courses.
- *Student support*: Ensures that students have services, which are appropriate for their needs.
- *Evaluation and assessment*: How the educational institution reviews the effectiveness of its distance education programme.

Bradley (Bradley, 2001) felt that these guidelines were vague on some crucial points. For example there were no specifics about how to define ‘academically qualified persons’ and the method in which courses should be evaluated. WICHE guidelines are also mainly concerned with the education institution perspective rather than the student perspective of improving their learning needs.

## **3. PROBLEMS WITH THE GUIDELINES**

Many distance education guidelines appear to be still in the discussion phase at addressing how best to determine quality in distance education courses. The guidelines have not always been assessed for their success in achieving a quality distance education course as the guidelines are too ‘new’ and have not had students graduate for courses developed using the standards. Not all of the guidelines always consider the important quality factors for both students and educational institutions.

What exactly is the purpose of guidelines? If guidelines are seen as answers of how to resolve possible issues or rather a 'how to do' list, the guidelines must be easy to read and disseminate. Academics are not passive recipients and implementers of policy, and for guidelines to be successfully implemented they must be a living 'real life' document. They must not follow the path of several ISO standards where the processes became too prescribed and too rigid which meant that they could consistently produce a poor product or service.

## 4. THE FUTURE

The next phase for distance education must be to develop a comprehensive guideline that incorporates the factors of quality for both students and education institutions. However, at times the goal of students can be quite disparate from education institutions' goals. For example, some students may just want a behaviourist approach where the teacher tells them exactly what to study for the exam. This could lead to a student wanting a qualification with the least amount of work and an educational institution wanting to make the most amount of money from one student.

Also there is a need to develop a rating system for courses, which could clarify for students the quantity vs. quality trade-off so students know exactly what they are paying for. This rating system could be similar to the hotels where a '5\*' hotel has a certain level of service compared to a '2\*' hotel. If students know that the distance education course is a '4\*' it will offer a certain quality of distance education course with a high level of interaction with the teacher and possibly a constructivist approach. If it was a '1\*' course it would have limited interaction with the teacher and a more behaviourist approach.

Listed below are suggested headings for a comprehensive guideline that is written in terms of a student's progress through an education institution:

- **Preview:** what is needed to ensure that only appropriate students and resources are allowed,
- **Processes:** where the student is enrolled and attempting to participate in learning activities, and
- **Outcomes:** where the student has completed the course.

### 4.1 Preview

For distance education both the educational institution and the student would need to be 'assessed'. The student should be evaluated as to whether they are appropriate to the course. Good teaching does require that students

take on more of the effort and responsibility in learning, so a quality developed course may not succeed without committed students. Educational institutions would assess the course in terms of their goals and if their infrastructure is capable of supporting this course. Preview components that need to ensure a quality process could include:

- *Registration*: Only those students who meet the academic requirements and would have the determination and commitment to cope with distance education should be registered. Sufficient information on the course and support available must be supplied to students.
- *Learning outcomes*: These must be clear and appropriate to the course.
- *Learning package*: This should be appropriate with reference to the presentation and content e.g. up to date, accurate, clear. Also materials in the package must provide academic challenge to engage students.
- *Learning technology*: That is usable for the appropriate level of student ability. The course delivery system should also enable interaction between student-student and student-staff with appropriate security measures.
- *Personnel*: Appropriate qualified personnel, both teaching and technical, must be available to support the course.
- *Learning resources*: The library should have access to both hard and soft resources
- *Programme plans*: Distance education courses should be consistent with the educational institution's mission statement and strategic plan. There also must be adequate infrastructure to run this course

## 4.2 Processes

For a student this could mean ensuring necessary support is given but to an education institution the emphasis would be on efficient usage of their resources. The processes required to ensure the student and the institution needs are being addressed include:

- *Student management*: Students should be provided with administrative, financial and technical support. Training in accessing and using learning resources should also be available.
- *Learning management*: Approaches to learning should encourage active learning. Assessment should be appropriate to the different student learning styles.
- *Appropriate technology*: Students must have technology that enables them to improve their ability to solve complex problems and enable active construction of knowledge.
- *Communication*: Feedback on assessments and questions should be constructive and timely.

- *Human resources management*: Technical support must be available to those responsible for preparing courses. Also appropriate training programmes should be available for staff.

### 4.3 Outcomes

Finally the ‘outcomes’ are where the results are looked at from a student and education institution viewpoint. From both viewpoints the success, or otherwise, of their goals should be evaluated and appropriate changes to the preview and process stages made. Outcomes could include:

- *Acquired content skills and knowledge*: These must link to what the course was intended to achieve to ensure student expectations have been met.
- *Necessary learning skills*: The development of lifelong learning skills by the students.
- *Credits*: The course must be recognised by professional accreditation bodies and employers.
- *Return on investment*: Students consider they have a return on their investment in time, finances and energies. Educational institutions consider the course has met their objectives.

## 5. THE FUTURE

Milne (2002) premised that ‘quality, like beauty, can be seen to be in the eye of the beholder and therefore, any attempt to construct an objective measure at an individual’s level is possibly destined to failure’ (p. 73). As students become more aware of the importance of a quality learning experience in their quest for knowledge and the resulting increase in their employability, this could place more emphasis on the quality of the distance education course being offered. As a result, ‘2\*’ distance courses, may not prove viable, due to a lack of student numbers.

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