Quality Assurance and Online Higher Education

Edward D. Garten
University of Dayton, USA

Tedi Thompson
American Public University System, USA

INTRODUCTION

For higher education, the assurance of quality to others in what it does is a deeply held value. Yet, marks surrounding quality are not easily identified, clearly understood, or universally accepted. The consumer movement, among other societal factors in recent years, has nudged and in some instances pushed institutions of higher learning toward the specification of meaningful assessment measures and the subsequent reporting out to concerned parties indications of quality relative to institutional infrastructure and resources, institutional processes, and readily understood outcomes measures (Baker, 2002, p. 3).

Technology-enhanced teaching and learning has fundamental implications for quality assurance and accreditation that include:

- The reality that online learning technologies are reshaping some of the most fundamental and pervasive activities of learning and teaching.
- Digital technology will continue to change far faster than any other aspect of the academic infrastructure. Each new generation of technology calls into question fundamental values and practices with quality assurance processes, both externally and internally imposed, having roles to play in deciding what to change and what to regain.
- Computers and networked learning are being employed to broaden participation in higher education, with wider access to information and experiences. In many instances, these unfolding uses of technology are having profound effects on the identity, mission, and character of academic departments, institutions, and systems.
- Technology-enabled learning can trigger dramatic increases in costs with sometimes minimal educational payoff unless providers use careful planning, evaluation, and focused quality assurance processes.

Online higher education in multiple ways has challenged and been challenged by traditional quality assurance and accreditation processes. Online higher education alters the traditional faculty role, and it may alter many of the fundamental intellectual tasks of faculty. Moreover, many online initiatives separate curriculum design from curriculum delivery, replacing curricula designed by individual faculty or faculty teams with standardized course content. Critically, online learning can shift, in the case of some virtual university providers, responsibility for determination of academic standards from faculty to corporate leadership (Eaton, 2002, pp. 8-9). It is clear that the "continued growth of the global demand for distance education and the acceptance of the virtual university as a mainstream institution both drive the need (and also the technological capability) for more effective measurements of human and organizational performance" (Stallings, 2002, p. 53). This article assumes the understanding of online higher education to consist of that broad range of higher learning activities that include corporate training centers, nonprofit and governmental education activities, multi-state and international learning collaborations, and the distance learning efforts of individual institutions of higher learning both for profit and non-profit (Epper & Garn, 2004).

In this article we explore key elements associated with quality control and regulation of online higher education: (1) the learning outcomes movement, (2) national standards and guidelines which better ensure evidences of quality, (3) expectations of regional accreditation agencies for quality online

Copyright © 2005, Idea Group Inc., distributing in print or electronic forms without written permission of IGI is prohibited.

delivery, and (4) institutionally adopted quality processes.

IMPACT OF THE LEARNING OUTCOMES MOVEMENT

Any discussion of quality control of online higher education must necessarily begin with a statement of the critical importance that the learning outcomes and learning assessment movement has had on the wider conversation regarding quality assurance. Multiple and diverse constituencies, legislative agencies, and accrediting bodies today demand improved accountability from institutions of higher learning in both online and traditionally delivered programs. These demands have resulted in a greater emphasis on learning outcomes assessment and learner-centered methodologies. Learning outcomes assessment not only assists an institution in the evaluation of the effectiveness of its programs, it provides the basis for continual quality assurance and improvement (Muirhead, 2002).

Historically, the assessment movement has its origins in the last decade. The 1990s saw a clear trend in which accountability became a critical descriptive term in higher education and, in particular, within the context of the virtual and online university (Stallings, 2002). It has been suggested that future historians of higher education are likely to observe that the latter years of the 20th century will not so much be known for educational problems solved, but rather for the intense national pressure brought by non-educators as well as accrediting and quality assurance agencies to change practice and theory in academe (Sewall, 1996). Increasingly online educators are being asked the same questions as their more traditional counterparts: "Can you provide direct measures of student outcomes? How much are students learning? And are they learning the right things?" (Erwin, 2001).

Given its nature, special consideration must be given to online learning that includes the need to address such questions as:

- What kinds of new learning and assessment opportunities are created through online learning?
- What pedagogies can be employed to support meaningful online assessment?
- What are the losses and gains of this medium for instructors and students?
- How effectively do old models and forms of assessment translate into the online environment? (Dunn, Morgan, O'Reilly & Parry, 2004, p. 39)

Critically, important questions have been raised regarding how learning communities are established and effectively assessed in the virtual higher education environment including, in particular, means through which high-quality interactions among students as well as student to instructor are nurtured (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). In short, assessment, in this context, is a manner of determining what students are acquiring in terms of general knowledge, thinking or performance-based abilities, theoretical and applied understandings, and so forth, and achieving as a result of their educational experience (Allen, 2004). The process begins with clearly articulated, measurable objectives at the institutional, program, and course levels. Those objectives can then be translated into specific goals, which can be measured through a variety of direct and indirect measures. The data collected from these measurements becomes an effective resource for measuring the overall quality of the educational experience and a powerful basis for ongoing improvement.

Whereas earlier assessment tended to focus on teaching, the focus of learning outcomes assessment in the online university increasingly has been on student learning. Prominent among those who have clarified the nuances between the teacher-centered paradigm vs. the learner-centered paradigm have been Huba and Freed (2000). They have emphasized areas of assessment that have increasingly become a focus of concern among online educators in the online university:

1. Students are actively involved in their own learning.
2. Emphasis is on using and communicating knowledge effectively to address enduring and emerging issues and problems in real-life professional contexts.
3. The instructors' role is to coach and facilitate and, together, they evaluate learning.
4. Assessment is used to promote and diagnose learning.

7 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/quality-assurance-online-higher-education/12309

Related Content

Chinese Brush Calligraphy Character Retrieval and Learning
Yueting Zhuang, Xiafen Zhang, Weiming Luand Fei Wu (2007). *International Journal of Distance Education Technologies (pp. 29-39).*
www.irma-international.org/article/chinese-brush-calligraphy-character-retrieval/1701

What Kind of Employee Wants to Use Corporate E-Learning: An Empirical Case Study in the Financial Industry
Tainyi Luor, Hsi-Peng Lu, Judy Chuan-Chuan Linand Hueiju Yu (2014). *International Journal of Distance Education Technologies (pp. 1-12).*
www.irma-international.org/article/what-kind-of-employee-wants-to-use-corporate-e-learning/111224

The Orientation and Disorientation of E-Learners
Bernard Mark Garrettand Richard Francis (2004). *E-Education Applications: Human Factors and Innovative Approaches (pp. 248-274).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/orientation-disorientation-learners/8957

Problem-Based Learning in a Technical Course in Computing: A Case Study
Eduardo Correiaand Ricky Watson (2010). *International Journal of Information and Communication Technology Education (pp. 13-22).*
www.irma-international.org/article/problem-based-learning-technical-course/47018

Instructional Immediacy Online
Sherri Melrose (2009). *Encyclopedia of Distance Learning, Second Edition (pp. 1212-1215).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/instructional-immediacy-online/11900