

Recognizing E-Learning Quality in Global Market

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Abstract. The key changes that have taken place in higher education and the working market during the last decades lead to increasing number of institutions that provide e-learning. Issues that are significant for both providers and consumers include the quality assurance (QA) of the e-learning and the recognition of qualification. Generally there are three levels for obtaining QA: institutional, national and international. In the growing globalization and the student exchange schemas, the international QA is becoming extremely important. In that context, the number of bodies and organizations that provide international recognition of e-learning has increased too, and each of them defines its own QA procedures for evaluation and quality recognition. The paper provides an overview of international quality labels and their quality evaluation schemas.

Keywords: e-learning, quality of e-learning, international QA labels.

1 Introduction

The growing availability of educational technologies, expansion in e-learning adoption by institutions, changing of learning paradigm and life-long learning initiatives lead to increasing diversity of student population and offering of e-learning outside higher education institutions or schools [1]. The question of quality is raised and standard quality assurance procedures connected only to national accreditation boards and/or institutional QA bodies are not sufficient. Even more, the growing globalization and establishment of different students' exchange schemas require international recognition of e-learning.

Several surveys are written on quality assurance of e-learning especially that in higher education [2]. One conclusion of these surveys is that QA in e-learning is a non-issue for many, especially for the quality assurance agencies. Some reports even suggest that the same criteria for quality should be applied to e-learning and traditional campus-based education. The accreditation, audit and assurance process of e-learning should be integrated in the national framework and not be evaluated separately. This is especially valid for Western Balkan countries where e-courses or e-programs are not differentiated from standard ones in all national and institutional documents.

Initiatives on QA in e-learning that are running for some years now are still restricted to some interested universities. The QA agencies put QA in e-learning only

recently on their agenda and are searching for the expertise for setting the specific criteria and indicators. The expertise and responsibility for QA in e-learning is however in first instance within the universities.

Numerous international projects were developed to form a comprehensive, yet usable framework for quality assurance. Frameworks and accompanying tools that came as result were related to various extents of e-learning, starting from learning units to institution infrastructure. However, it is indicative that many quality schemes developed through european projects had lack of sustainability and are no longer active, nor applicable.

Specialized organizations have developed their own benchmarking procedures and tools and established labels as brands, well recognized and sustainable. First question raised is whether it is possible to establish a unified QA framework. There are few reasons why it is not very realistic to expect such a scenario. First of all, there is a diversity in quality definition, such as described by Donabedian [3]. Additionally, there is no unified solution among e-learning standards too, but rather we deal with several different specifications (IEEE, IMS, Ariadne...) and that fact scaffold the claim that we cannot expect a QA in e-learning to be unified soon.

The aim of the paper is to provide an overview of currently active international quality labels for e-learning and reveal potential trends for Balkan countries in this area.

2 Quality of E-Learning

To define quality of e-learning and related standards and procedures that assure e-learning quality, we should start with a definition of e-learning itself. Most widely, e-learning is defined as learning using both a computer and the Internet. Under this definition, we can distinguish different forms of products and services, like single courses and/or entire programs, entire courses and/or course units, lessons or components or elements of an e-learning package (LMS).

Going further, there exist several definitions of quality of learning systems [4]. Some of them like that in the ISO/IEC 19796-1:2005 standard [5] are too wide and should be adapted to be applied for assessment of e-learning quality. Generally, the definition of the quality of e-learning depends on its scope, objectives, focus and the methodology of the quality approach. For the purpose of the paper we consider that quality of e-learning is related to all: processes, products and services for learning, education and training supported by the use of information and communication technologies.

3 International Quality Labels and Evaluation Schemas

Table 1 presents the active international schemas for quality of e-learning.

UNIQUE. The UNIQUE evaluation schema consists of criteria which are divided into three areas, each with its own criteria, and sub-criteria [6]. The following list of criteria and sub-criteria are evaluated by the reviewers: learning/institutional context, learning resources and learning processes. Additionally several sub-criteria are considered as to be critical to any quality learning experience. Some of them are: available

evidence that eLearning/TEL is an integral part of the institutional strategy; selection of course delivery methods; employed systemic collaborative working procedures and tools to share knowledge developed with the community; available course design and delivery guidelines; flexible pedagogic and learning delivery models; tools and procedures for evaluation of the outcomes of the learning process; continuous promotion of an optimal learning environment; both formative and summative assessment are used; availability of training services and materials for the staff in charge.

Table 1. International Quality Labels

Label name	Level	Review process	Type	Reviewers
UNIQUE	Universities	Quality grid is online	Quality mark	Internal
E-xcellence[7]	University program	Publicly documented; on-line and on-site (optionally)	Benchmark	Internal
ECBCheck	University program	Documents and accompanying web-site are in construction phase	Quality Mark	Internal
SEVAQ+	Universities, Vocational studies	Supporting documents and web-site are available	Self-evaluation tool	Stakeholders (teachers, students, ...)
Procert [10]	Courseware for IT specialists	Documents are not publicly available	Benchmark	N/A
epprobate	General courseware	Quality grid is public; review conducted on-line	Quality Mark	Internal and external

ECBCheck. ECBCheck[8] evaluates the institution according seven distinct criteria areas: information about and organization of program; target audience orientation; quality of content; program/course design; media design; technology; evaluation and review. Each of these criteria are evaluated according several characteristics. For example, the program or course design the following aspects are evaluated learning design and methodology, students' motivation and participation, learning materials, eTutoring, assignments and learning programs and assessment and tests.

epprobate. To award a courseware with the quality label, epprobate reviewers check the following characteristics [11]: course design (provision of course information, learning objectives and instructional guidance and constructive alignment); learning design (the courseware fulfill the following criteria learner needs, personalization and instructional strategies); media design (media integration, interface, interoperability and technological standards); and content (accuracy and values of content, intellectual property rights, legal compliance). It is important to mention that there is no intention that any single criterion be essential, but rather that a courseware supplier should in their self assessment document indicate to what extent they meet a specific criteria.

SEVAQ+. The SEVAQ+ is based on EFQMTM quality framework and Kirkpatrick evaluation model [9]. The EFQM Excellence Model is used as a basis for self-assessment of organizations. Each organization grades itself against the nine criteria. Through the nine criteria the organization can understand and analyses the cause and effect relationships between what the organization does and the results it achieve. Five of these criteria are denoted as 'Enablers' and four as 'Results'. The 'Enabler'

criteria cover what an organization does and how it does it. The 'Results' criteria cover what an organization achieves. This model is modified in the part of 'Results' using the evaluation model of learning elaborated by Kirkpatrick to be applied in a context of education. The Kirkpatrick model evaluates: the students' reaction or feelings of the students during learning; the learning result, or the increase in the knowledge of the learner by taking part in the course; the impact on the learner's functioning in the workplace, or transfer of new knowledge to skills; and the impact on the business results as a consequence of skilled people.

4 Conclusion

Taking into account that there is a not unified quality standard for e-learning, the paper presents several quality labels for international recognition of e-learning. Labels are distinguished by the context and the scope, objectives, focus, perspective, methodology and metrics. UNIQUE, e-xcellence, ECBCheck and SEVAQ+ are focused on institutional evaluation, while Procet and epprobate are focused on courseware. Finally, although, the labels are focused on different forms of e-learning, most of them as important aspects of quality consider: information about the organization, target group of learners, design of learning, quality of content, media design and technology, and evaluation and assessment.

Acknowledgements. The research for this paper was done in the framework of DL@WEB project (511126-TEMPUS-1-2010-1-RS-TEMPUS-SMGR) funded by the European TEMPUS program.

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