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## **A QUALITY SCORECARD FOR THE ADMINISTRATION OF ONLINE LEARNING PROGRAMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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### **Introduction and background**

The development of the Internet has forever changed higher education and distance learning programs throughout the world. Prior to its arrival, distance education, also called distance learning or distributed education, used varied methods for course delivery such as mail correspondence, telecourses, or satellite delivery, and was clearly on the periphery of higher education. When course delivery using the Internet became an option – creating the new phrase *online education* – it wasn't long before enrolments began to rapidly increase and online education became firmly entrenched within higher education, especially in the US. In fact, numerous studies cite tremendous growth in online education, which has outpaced that of traditional higher education with the majority of accredited institutions in the United States offering online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014; Parsad & Lewis, 2008).

While some institutions willingly responded to the increased student demands for flexibility and convenience, others grudgingly acquiesced because of the increased competition for student enrolment. However, after experiencing success with a few online courses, many institutions developed full degree programs to be offered completely online. While the online programs were expected to increase student access and increase enrolment, both administrators and faculty expressed concern regarding quality (Benson, 2003; Shelton, 2010) such as how to measure it and what evaluation methods should be used for continuous improvement strategies and accreditation requirements.

Interestingly, many institutions advertise using the word “quality” with online education programs because they believe it creates public interest and market advantage. However, quality online education is still difficult to define (Meyer, 2002), which leads to a need for a more comprehensive system for evaluation (Lockhart & Lacy, 2002). Unlike industry recognized quality stamps for corporations, such as the Total Quality Management (TQM) criteria for excellence or the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, an instrument did not exist in the US for online education for measuring quality programs, and facilitating strategic planning and program improvement. This paper focuses on the Quality Scorecard for the Administration of Online Programs (Appendix A). While it was originally developed as the instrument for quality evaluation of online programs in the US, the basic foundations of quality should apply beyond those programs in the US.

## **Literature review**

Onay (2002) recognized that maintaining academic standards for online courses and programs is a concern for many institutions. Thompson and Irele (2007) surmised that while online education evaluation does occur, it is “often poorly designed and/or underfunded; it is more of an afterthought rather than an integral part of planning and implementation” (p.419). Moreover, Stella and Gnanam (2004) believed that quality indicators for traditional education may be clearly defined but applicable standards are needed for benchmarking quality assurance in distance education. They recommended that a group of experts in distance learning be involved in the evaluation process. Furthermore, Lesht, Montague, Page, Shaik and Smith (2006) recommended that “a common set of metrics on key issues and program indicators” (p.103) should be identified to allow for inter-program research comparisons and benchmarking. After a thorough review of the literature, it was clear that a standardized, industry recognized instrument that identifies quality in online education programs in higher education did not yet exist.

## **Quality scorecard research methodology**

Because quality is difficult to define, the Delphi methodology (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963) was selected for the study, because “it replaces direct confrontation and debate [with] a carefully planned, anonymous, orderly program of sequential individual interrogations” (Brown, Cochran & Dalkey, 1969, p.1). The Quality Scorecard (QSC) was needed for the purpose of measuring and quantifying elements of quality within online education programs in higher education. Seventy-six experienced online education administrators were invited to participate and forty-three agreed to be part of the study. More than 83% of the panel members had nine or more years of experience, which further strengthened the validity of the study. The six-month long research process produced a fully developed instrument for online administrators to use for program evaluation and may be used at the program, college, or system level.

## **Results**

The Quality Scorecard is organized by the nine categories determined by a panel of experts: Institutional Support; Technology Support, Course Development and Instructional Design; Course Structure; Teaching and Learning; Faculty Support; Student Support; and Evaluation and Assessment. A total of 75 quality indicators, each category is divided into a list of quality statement indicators that administrators can use to determine strengths and weaknesses of their program. The scorecard may be used to demonstrate to elements of quality within the program as well as an overall level of quality. In addition, weaknesses are identified that can be used to support program improvement and strategic planning initiatives.

Each of the 75 quality indicators is worth one, two, or three points and corresponds to a provided rubric. The administrator will determine at what level their program meets the intent of the quality indicator after examining all procedures and processes. The following guidelines are provided as part of the coversheet for the scorecard:

- 0 points = Deficient. The administrator does not observe any indications of the quality standard in place.
- 1 point = Developing. The administrator has found a slight existence of the quality standard but difficult to substantiate. Much improvement is still needed in this area.
- 2 points = Accomplished. The administrator has found there to be moderate use and can substantiate the use of the quality standard. Some improvement is still needed in this area.
- 3 points = Exemplary. The administrator has found that the quality standard is being fully implemented, can be fully substantiated, and there is little to no need for improvement in this area.

The following scoring guidelines are also provided as a general recommendation for the online education administrator:

- 202-225 points – Exemplary (little improvement is needed);
- 180-201 points – Acceptable (some improvement is recommended);
- 157-179 points – Marginal (significant improvement is needed in multiple areas);
- 134-156 points – Inadequate (many areas of improvement are needed throughout the program);
- 133 points and below – Unacceptable.

The Quality Scorecard was developed to be utilized by an administrator as the researcher believed that the only the administrator would have a large enough perspective and knowledge of all elements of the online program.

## **Discussion**

The Quality Scorecard is organized into nine categories: Institutional Support; Technology Support, Course Development and Instructional Design; Course Structure; Teaching and Learning; Faculty Support; Student Support; and Evaluation and Assessment. The following discussion is presented within each of those categories.

### ***Institutional support***

The Institutional Support category addresses quality indicators that focus on the institutional role in online learning: policy, decision-making, resources, and strategic planning. For example, a process for student authentication must be in place for making sure that students are who they claim to be. In other words, we must verify student identities. An additional policy should clearly articulate who owns course materials that are developed for online courses. The panel of experts believed that an effective and comprehensive governance structure for decision making related to distance learning is needed.

For a quality online program, resources must be provided, both budgetary and human. This should be included in the strategic plan for the program as well as the institution. In addition, the panel recommended that institutions define the strategic value of distance learning and make sure all relevant groups within the institution have received clear communication regarding its value. This indicator may have been suggested because in some institutions, distance learning programs have been left on the periphery of the institution and not given respect or well-deserved resources.

### ***Technology support***

Within the Technology Support category, the expert panel recommended that technology must be considered mission critical by the institution. This category addresses the following areas: a technology plan exists that includes security measures such as password protection; the technology systems used for delivery are highly reliable and being measured for performance; and a centralized system to support the technology infrastructure needed for quality distance learning programs. The technology utilized for the online program should receive equivalent support and a backup system should be in place and maintained for data availability. In addition, on-going technological support should be provided for faculty, students, and staff. It is also recommended that the institution understand the importance of support and the reliability of data retrieval in case of technological failure.

### ***Course development and instructional design***

The Course Development and Instructional Design category contains the quality indicators focused on the development on online course materials. There should be basic minimum standards for course design used, which should be based upon student-centred instruction. There should be consistency in course development for retention and quality and the course materials are to be reviewed periodically to maintain relevance. The panel recommended that the course learning outcomes be measurable, the technologies selected should support the learning outcomes, and appropriate assessments measure the outcomes. In addition, the course design should support faculty and student engagement, technologies are evaluated for online learning; instructional design is provided, and faculty should be in control of the curriculum.

### ***Course structure***

The Course Structure category focuses on the individual course; for example, a comprehensive syllabus that includes objectives, outcomes, evaluation methods, textbook information and transparent course requirements must be provided to students. Online students should be provided access to library and learning resources and student expectations for assessment and faculty response time must be provided in the syllabus. The panel of experts added a four quality indicators that address the following areas: student technical support explained or linked in the course; course materials are accessible and usable; alternative instructional strategies are provided for disabled students; and student-to student collaboration is encouraged with opportunity and available tools. The potential needs for student accessibility,

which is increasingly becoming an important consideration for online education programs, are an important consideration in online course material development. With the tremendous growth of enrolment, the possibility of disabled students needing accessible online course materials increases tremendously.

### ***Teaching and learning***

The Teaching and Learning category recommends strategies for the actual teaching that occurs online. Quality indicators encourage student-to-student and faculty-to-student interaction. Instructor feedback provided on assignments in a timely manner is critical for student success. In addition, effective methods for research and evaluation of online resources should be taught. Moreover, students must have access to library professionals and online resources to assist with research and resources. Many online programs are providing virtual librarian access today by using instant messaging, chat, or virtual classroom programs.

### ***Social and student engagement***

The panel of experts created the Social and Student Engagement category with only one approved quality indicator. Students should be encouraged to form an online learning community and interact with other students. This particular indicator could be considered vague and difficult to identify; however, the intent of the panel was for the program to have made an effort toward providing opportunities for online student to experience community outside the classroom. This could be provided with the use of social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter, blogs, wikis, and discussion forums.

### ***Faculty support***

The Faculty Support category recommends that faculty will various types of support for teaching online. For example, the provision of technical assistance, technology training, and training about Fair Use, plagiarism, and legal concepts should be provided. Additionally, the panel of experts determined that on-going professional development should be provided, standards should be determined for faculty engagement such as how quickly an instructor should respond to online questions, and workshops for emerging technologies should be offered. The on-going professional development indicator could be satisfied with workshops for emerging technologies being provided; however, the panel of experts believed it was important enough to be a separate indicator. The on-going professional development indicator could include activities such as helping faculty with time management and pedagogical strategies.

### **Student support**

The Student Support category contains 16 student-centred quality indicators, the most in any of the categories. The expert panel recommended that students should be advised about the necessary motivation and commitment it takes to be a successful online student. Students should also be advised about minimal technology requirements and program and support service information should be clearly provided to students. Library use, access to student support services such as advising and tutoring and training should also be provided for students. The student support services provided should address feedback and problems and offer a complaint submission process. Additionally, the panel of experts determined the following indicators were relevant: academic, career, and personal counselling should be offered; minimum technology standards exist; and student support services must be provided such as financial aid, advising, and peer support. Furthermore, online disabled students will require additional support and all online students should have access to course materials including ISBN numbers before the course begins.

### **Evaluation and assessment**

The final category, Evaluation and Assessment, focuses on the data that must be gathered to clearly demonstrate quality. A program evaluation with specific standards should regularly occur as well as a variety of data for evaluation and changes should be used. Eight quality indicators were added by the panel of experts that focused on the following areas: there is an alignment of learning outcomes throughout the curriculum; assessment of faculty and student support services is in place; assessment of retention at the course level occurs; assessment of retention and recruitment at the program level occurs; compliance to disabled student standards is demonstrated; course evaluations are examined in relation to faculty performance; faculty performance is regularly assessed; and course evaluations collect student feedback regarding the content and instruction. This category takes the most time because it requires a multitude of data sources be analysed and reviewed.

### **Conclusion**

Quality is a perception that varies within industries, including that of higher education whose traditional indicators for quality are changing. In fact, Pond (2002) observed,

*It is quite clear that education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century presents challenges to quality assurance that were unimaginable just a quarter century ago. E-learning in particular, with its ability to render time and place irrelevant, requires that we abandon traditional indicators of “quality” such as “contact hours,” “library holdings,” and “physical attendance” among others in favor of more meaningful measures. (para. 11)*

As we abandon the traditional indicators we have used for so long, higher education needs a method to identify and assess quality within online education programs that could provide a way to benchmark and offer a path to improvement. This study provides an industry agreed upon process by creating a scorecard for the administration of quality online education

programs. Higher education needed a method to identify quality within online education programs that could provide a method for benchmarking and a path to improvement. The identification of quality online education programs satisfies a great need in the field and has been requested by many online education administrators as a tool for program improvement. This study provides just such a process, which is now being used throughout the United States, in Latin America after a norming process, and Mexico. The assessment of quality online education has never been more important as fierce competition from for-profit programs as well as many non-profits programs continues to increase and students all over the world are clicking to find a quality online degree program.

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Appendix A – The Quality Scorecard (page one only)

# Quality Scorecard

for the Administration of Online Programs

**0 = Deficient      1 = Developing      2 = Accomplished      3 = Exemplary**

**INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT** (27 POINTS)

**SCORE**

<b>1</b>	The institution has a governance structure to enable clear, effective, and comprehensive decision making related to online education.	
<b>2</b>	The institution has policy and guidelines that confirm a student who registers in an online course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the course or program and receives academic credit. This is done by verifying the identity of a student by using methods such as (a) a secure login and passcode, (b) proctored examinations, or (c) other technologies and practices that are effective in verifying student identity.	
<b>3</b>	The institution has a policy for intellectual property of course materials; it specifically addresses online course materials and is publicly visible online.	
<b>4</b>	The institution has defined the strategic value of online learning to its enterprise and stakeholders.	
<b>5</b>	The organizational structure of the online program supports the institution's mission, values, and strategic plan.	
<b>6</b>	The online program's strategic plan is reviewed for its continuing relevance, and periodically improved and updated.	
<b>7</b>	The institution has a process for planning and allocating resources for the online program, including financial resources, in accordance with strategic planning.	
<b>8</b>	The institution demonstrates sufficient resource allocation, including financial resources, in order to effectively support the mission of online education.	
<b>9</b>	The institution has a governance structure to enable systematic and continuous improvement related to the administration of online education.	

**TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT** (21 POINTS)

**SCORE**

<b>1</b>	A documented technology plan that includes electronic security measures (e.g., password protection, encryption, secure online or proctored exams, etc.) is in place and operational to ensure quality, in accordance with established standards and regulatory requirements.*	
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Note: The order of quality indicators within each category does not signify rank of importance. They are provided in random order.

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