311 Quality assurance parameters evolution in online environment

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Research Domains

Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

Abstract

Higher education nowadays is under a significant transformation, with digitalisation being a part of this change (Tømte et al, 2019). Rapid growth of online-programmes started from 2009 (Blagg, K., 2018) and turned them into a part of university system. A need to provide online-programmes with the same set of tools as traditional ones emerged, for example, with quality assurance models. Existing instruments, however, are hardly suitable for online mode due to a complex nature of quality online (La Rotta et al, 2020). This paper presents results of comparative analysis of quality assurance models for online university programmes. The aim is to trace models' overlapping parameters evolution. Analytical frame consists of apriori parameters, derived from literature review, and aposteriori parameters that emerged during the analysis process. The research question is: How have the criteria of quality evolved over time and how this evolution shapes online quality nature nowadays?

Full paper

Implementation of technology into the field of higher education was a relatively slow process a few decades ago (Plotkin 2010). The situation changed in 2009, when a growth of online-programmes started. The year of 2020, when 220 mln students had to go online at once, was a point when the problems of online mode that already existed were highlighted: issues with technologies, both in terms of digital skills and hardware (Sagheb-Tehrani, 2008), time-management skills (Dyrbye et al, 2009) and difficulties teachers face in the classes (Fawns, 2021). These challenges decrease motivation, create lack of trust in distance education and overall dissatisfaction (Aleshkovski et al, 2021, Conrad et al, 2022). Further to this, online-programmes receive a lot of criticism for being "degree factories" (Smith, 2008). This issue, if not addressed promptly, may lead to reputational damage for universities in the future (Landry et al., 2008).

Present models of quality assurance are either fragmentary with a focus on one of the elements like teaching and technologies (Davis et al, 2011) or identical to traditional quality assurance models (Nikolić et al, 2018). The aim of research is to conduct a comparative analysis of internal quality assurance models for online-programmes, tracing their evolution based on parameters they consist of, which may help to reconstruct the nature of distance education quality.

Research questions:

1. How do the models evolve in 2009-2021 from the standpoint of overlapping parameters?
2. How does the models' evolution from quality phenomenon in online environment?

Methodology and data

Data collection was done via Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Emerald, IEEE Xplore, Wiley Online Library, SAGE Journals Online, Springer Link search. Keywords used to find articles are as follows: "quality assurance model online (in) higher education", "quality assurance (model) in higher education online", "quality assurance in higher education online model". As a result, 35 relevant articles were found. To form the final sampling the following criteria were applied: Q1-Q2 journals (Scopus) (except for Quality Assurance in Education - Q3: thematically-relevant journal, where relevant models were found); not online or open university; internal quality assurance model; online-programme (blended mode excluded); quality assurance of the programme, not the course. Final sampling includes 13 models, 1 model for each year (2009 - 2022). Exceptions: 2015 - no relevant articles found. All models were analysed using a qualitative thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Similar topics in models' description were

taken as basis for overlapping parameters identification. Analytical frame consists of 9 parameters, apriori and aposteriori. Apriori-parameters are technologies, communication, student's support and teaching online, aposteriori - learning environment development, teacher's support, staff support, student-centred design and resource reusability.

Results:

Time frame for models analysis was divided into three periods according to general characteristics of the models:

1. 2009 - 2015 гг
2. 2015 - 2019 гг
3. 2019 - 2022 гг

Period 1 "Trial"

The main aim of quality assurance models is to help the educational process actors adapt to online mode per se. The key overlapping parameters are technologies, teaching online and students' support. It shows that both of the categories needed a gap before they finally accepted online as a part of university environment. In this period study experience of the students is first mentioned. The data for the models is not collected on purpose: they operate with what is already being collected, like digital trace of students in LMS. External standards are being considered, but not integrated with real context.

Period 2 "Transitional"

"Trial period" models become outdated and new are not designed yet. They focus on the indicators like students' satisfaction, motivation and well-being, prioritising the process of study instead of the result. Technologies stop being something novel and become a part of university environment. Study experience of the students grows in importance. The data is being collected on purpose, and the external standards are integrated with real context. The models are becoming more research-oriented.

Period 3

"Modern": models adopt a data-driven approach and are theoretically-grounded. The data on which models run not only allows to correlate existing standards and educational context of the university, but also personalises quality management. Culture of working with data is turning into a casual strategy of online-programmes realisation. Study experience of students is the centre of this period models along with educational materials for e-learning.

Parameters' evolution analysis showed that they are either invariant - comprising the central domains of quality online and appearing in each model - or variant - absent in some models. They are subsidiary quality domains, which can add a different perspective to quality work if required.

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