

Benchmarks and quality assurance for online course development in higher education

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Abstract: As online education has entered the main stream of the U.S. higher education, quality assurance in online course development has become a critical topic in distance education. This short article summarizes the major benchmarks related to online course development, listing and comparing the benchmarks of the National Education Association (NEA), the benchmarks of the American Distance Education Consortium (ADEC), the benchmarks of the American Federation of Teachers, and the benchmarks of the Quality Matters project. In doing so the author hopes to promote awareness of and commitment to quality assurance in online education.

Key words: benchmarks; quality assurance; online learning; course development

The Sloan Consortium surveys (Allen & Seaman, 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006; 2007) report that online programs keep on increasing and online education has entered the mainstream in American higher education. With the rapid growth of online programs, quality assurance has become an important topic for institutions regarding student retention and student satisfaction. There is a critical need for quality assurance in online education.

What are the standards and benchmarks for distance teaching and learning? The rest of this paper includes a brief summary of some recent and relevant standards for online course development.

1. Benchmarks of the National Education Association (NEA)

Sponsored by the National Education Association and Blackboard Inc., the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) created *Quality on the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education* in 2000. Based on a case study of six leading higher education institutions in online teaching and learning, IHEP identified 24 benchmarks under seven categories. Three categories of the benchmarks are particularly related to course development.

1.1 Course development benchmarks

Guidelines regarding minimum standards are used for course development, design and delivery, while learning outcomes—not the availability of existing technology—determine technology being used to deliver course content.

Instructional materials are reviewed periodically to ensure they meet program standards.

Courses are designed to require students to engage themselves in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as part of their course and program requirements.

1.2 Teaching/learning process benchmarks

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Students' interaction with faculty and other students is an essential characteristic and is facilitated through a variety of ways, including voice-mail and/or email.

Feedback to student assignments and questions is constructive and provided in a timely manner.

Students are instructed in the proper methods of effective research, including assessment of validity issues.

1.3 Course structure benchmarks

Before starting an online program, students are advised about the program to determine: (1) if they possess the self-motivation and commitment to learn at a distance; (2) if they have access to the minimal technology required by the course design.

Students are provided with supplemental course information that outlines course objectives, concepts, ideas and learning outcomes for each course are summarized in a clearly stated and straightforward manner.

Students have access to sufficient library resources that may include a "virtual library" accessible through the World Wide Web.

Faculty and students agree upon expectations regarding times for student assignment completion and faculty response.

2. Benchmarks of the American Distance Education Consortium (ADEC)

Created by the American Distance Education Consortium, the *Guiding Principles for Distance Learning* fall into four categories:

- (1) Distance learning should be designed for active and effective learning;
- (2) Distance learning should support the needs of learners;
- (3) The provider of distance learning should develop and maintain the technological and human infrastructure so that learners and learning facilitators are supported in their use of technologies;
- (4) Distance learning programs should be sustained by administrative and organizational commitment.

The first benchmark is about course design for active and effective learning. Distance learning designs should consider the six aspects, which are:

- (1) Specific context;
- (2) Needs, learning goals, and other characteristics of the learners;
- (3) Nature of the content;
- (4) Appropriate instructional strategies and technologies;
- (5) Desired learning outcomes;
- (6) Local learning environment.

3. Benchmarks of the American federation of teachers

Based on a survey of distance educators in 2000, the American Federation of Teachers created *Distance Education: Guidelines for Good Practice*. These guidelines include the following 14 benchmarks:

- (1) Faculty must retain academic control;
- (2) Faculty must be prepared to meet the special requirements of teaching at a distance;
- (3) Course design should be shaped to the potentials of the medium;
- (4) Students must fully understand course requirements and be prepared to succeed;
- (5) Close personal interaction must be maintained;

- (6) Class size should be set through normal faculty channels;
- (7) Courses should cover all material;
- (8) Experimentation with a broad variety of subjects should be encouraged;
- (9) Equivalent research opportunities must be provided;
- (10) Student assessment should be comparable;
- (11) Equivalent advisement opportunities must be offered;
- (12) Faculty should retain creative control over use and re-use of materials;
- (13) Full undergraduate degree programs should include some same-time same-place coursework;
- (14) Evaluation of distance coursework should be undertaken at all levels.

4. Benchmarks of Quality Matters

Initiated by Maryland Online (MOL), which is a consortium of 19 Maryland colleges and universities offering certificate and degree programs in a primarily online format, Quality Matters project addresses peer-reviewed continuous improvement of online courses. Through a grant from the U.S. Department Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), Maryland Online has created an inter-institutional continuous improvement model for quality assessment and quality assurance in online course development. The Quality Matters project has created an online course review rubric that is composed of 40 elements under eight categories of standards. The peer-review process is not about individual instructor and faculty evaluation. Instead, it focuses on course design and course improvement.

The eight standards base on the research literature and the national standards of best practice, which include:

- (1) Course overview and introduction;
- (2) Learning objectives;
- (3) Assessment and measurement;
- (4) Resources and materials;
- (5) Learner interaction;
- (6) Course technology;
- (7) Learner support;
- (8) Accessibility.

The benchmarks of the National Education Association, American Distance Education Consortium, American Federation of Teachers and Quality Matters are in common: active learning, personal interactions, timely feedback, and appropriate instructional materials are important in online course design. Making a brief summary of the benchmarks for online course development is only a first step leading to quality assurance in online education. It is a hope that these benchmarks will be helpful to distance educators and administrators as they are striving to continuously improve the quality of online education.

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