

# Quality in Distance Education: Perceptions in Private Liberal Arts Universities

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*Abstract:* - This qualitative study sought to define quality in distance education by attempting to validate existing benchmarks of quality in distance education. The process was done through exploration of how constituencies at two liberal arts universities perceived, applied, and measured quality in distance education. Four types of constituents were studied: students, administrators, faculty, and teaching assistants. The research design involved phenomenological interviews and written descriptions engaging a primary sample composed of 10 graduate students, 10 undergraduate students, 4 administrators who worked for the distance education department, 2 full-time faculty, 4 adjunct faculty, and 10 teaching assistants for a total of 40 participants.

*Key-Words:* - Educational Quality, Distance Education, Phenomenology, Higher Education, Liberal Arts

## 1 Introduction

Distance education opportunities have become increasingly common in higher education [26]. In 2005, about 62% of the 2- and 4-year higher education institutions offered distance education courses [26], up from 56% in 2001 [32] and 34% in 1998 [17]. In addition, enrollment in distance education courses exceeded 3.5 million in 2006 [3], up from 3.18 million in 2005 [2]. Eduventures, a Boston-based consulting firm that tracks education trends, predicted that by 2008 roughly 1 in 10 students would be enrolled in an online degree program [25]. Most of this growth would come as a result of the accessibility that technology has provided.

Parallel to the growth in distance education, there has been a heightened interest in defining and measuring its quality [26]. Ample discussion has taken place in state legislatures and other policy-making agencies to define and implement quality assurance plans that would strengthen the effectiveness of postsecondary education institutions [16]. This interest has moved beyond the policymakers. Individuals outside academia have inquired about the quality of the education provided by higher education institutions [16].

In response to the growing demand for a clear definition of quality in distance education, different organizations have provided guidelines and standards. Chickering and Gamson [12] published the Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education. The Quality Assurance

Agency for Higher Education (QAA) published a set of guidelines of good practice [24]. The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) published the Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education [22]. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) published the Guidelines of Good Practice [6]. The American Distance Education Consortium (ADEC) published the Guiding Principles for Distance Learning [4] and the Guiding Principles for Distance Teaching and Learning [5]. The Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunication (WCET) published the Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs [33]. The Sloan Consortium [19] published the Effective Practices.

A review of the published standards revealed a high degree of congruence among them [31]. However, although most standards included specifics on how to evaluate Internet-based education, none of them provided measurement tools to determine quality [27]. The standards have been a good start, but more needs to be done in terms of reaching a consensus on what constitutes quality in distance education and how to measure it. A successful education is associated with a number of factors. The quality of the learning experience, and the expectations that learners bring to the table are among the most important ones [26].

The study focused on defining quality in distance education, and in validating the benchmarks for success in Internet-based distance education recommended by the IHEP [22].

## 2 Problem Formulation

Several studies [1][4][5][6][12][14][19][22][24][33] concurred with the problem addressed in this study which was the lack of consensus on what constitutes quality in distance education. Was it possible to reach a consensus on what constituted quality in distance education; a universal set that defined overall fitness for all purposes? If so, was it possible to agree on a set of indicators to define and measure quality in distance education? What relationship, if any, existed between these indicators and the level of satisfaction with the quality in distance education perceived by an individual? This study attempted to answer these questions by exploring how different constituencies perceived, applied, and measured quality in distance education.

The purpose of this study was to define quality in distance education, as perceived by constituencies at private liberal arts universities. These perceptions were compared to the benchmarks for success in Internet-based distance education proposed by the IHEP [22]. These benchmarks were used as a framework to explore how constituencies at two private liberal arts universities perceived, applied, and measured quality in distance education, and how their perceptions influenced the level of satisfaction with quality in distance education.

This study attempted to answer two research questions:

1. How do constituents define quality in distance education?
2. Does a constituent's definition of quality play a role in the level of satisfaction of distance education received?

To answer these two questions, four types of constituents were studied: students, administrators, faculty, and teaching assistants.

### 2.1 Research Design

A phenomenological approach was chosen for this study. According to Patton [20], phenomenological inquiry seeks to answer the question, "What is the structure and essence of experience of this phenomenon for these people? . . . [It focuses on] the structure and essence of experience of [26] phenomenon" (p. 69).

The setting of the research for the applied dissertation was the division of continuing education at two private liberal arts universities in New England: a small tuition-driven, postbaccalaureate college, and a large endowment-driven, very high research activity university [10]. The similarities

between the two research sites allowed comparability of circumstances, whereas the differences provided a broader spectrum. Constituents from the two institutions were selected for the study.

The mix of participants was composed of 10 graduate students, 10 undergraduate students, 4 administrators who worked for the distance education department, 2 full-time faculty, 4 adjunct faculty, and 10 teaching assistants for a total of 40 participants from the two private liberal arts universities considered in this study. With the exception of the teaching assistants, half of the members of each constituency were from each institution. Institution B does not employ teaching assistants.

The study was conducted during the Fall 2006. In September, participants were solicited via e-mail. E-mail solicitations were sent to all prequalified constituencies by administrators at each institution. The e-mail solicitations pointed constituencies to a Web-based qualifier questionnaire. To meet selection criteria, participants were required to have been involved in distance education at their respective institution for at least one term in their respective roles (i.e., student, staff, faculty, or teaching assistant).

Participants were purposely selected from the pool of volunteers to include a broader range of diversity. Selected participants were sent a follow-up e-mail containing a link to the informed consent form. Participants were interviewed over a period of 3 months. There was an additional month of follow-up interviews with all constituents.

## 3 Problem Solution

A total of 195 candidates responded to the Web qualifier. From the respondents to the Web qualifier, 128 did not qualify and 27 were eliminated. Reasons for not qualifying included (a) 101 respondents who did not meet the criteria for the study, (b) 11 respondents who submitted duplicate applications, (c) 5 respondents who submitted an invalid address, and (d) 11 respondents who submitted their application after the available slots for the corresponding constituency had been filled. Reasons for eliminating respondents included (a) 6 participants who abandoned the interview, (b) 7 participants who indicated lack of time to complete the open-ended questionnaire, (c) 9 respondents who did not respond to the invitation to participate, and (d) 5 participants who abandoned the interview after signing the informed consent form, but prior to

beginning the open-ended questionnaire.

Data from 40 participants were analyzed: 25 affiliated with Institution A and 15 affiliated with Institution B. Most participants were male (52.5%), between 26 years and 45 years of age (62.5%), considered their level of technological expertise above-average (82.5%), had been involved in distance education for at least 4 terms (55%), resided in New England states (62.5%), were working (95%), and paid their own tuition (55%).

Highest educational level achieved varied by constituency. The majority of faculty (83%), administrators (75%), and teaching assistants (60%) had earned at least a master's degree, in contrast with the students (15%).

### 3.1 Discussion of Research Questions

Following is a discussion of results related to the study's research questions. Results were interpreted following a 5-phase phenomenological reduction process.

#### 3.1.1 How do constituents define quality in distance education?

Participants identified 78 unique themes that define quality in distance education. The seven categories identified by Phipps and Merisotis [22] were recognized and discussed by participants. Participants emphasized institutional support (21.8%), teaching and learning (19.2%), course structure (17.9%), and faculty support (16.7%) as the most important areas when defining quality in distance education. Evaluation and assessment (9%), course development (7.7%), and student support (7.7%) came in second. The order of these categories was similar in both institutions, with a preference for student support over course development and student support at Institution A.

Students focused on themes in the categories of course structure (27% for Institution A and 16.7% for Institution B), institutional support (24.3% for Institution A and 21.4% for Institution B), and teaching and learning (18.9% for Institution A and 21.4% for Institution B). These results supported the available literature [9][18][30] regarding the goals of adult learners to keep their skills up to date, and to acquire new skills if they wish to advance their careers.

Administrators focused on themes in the categories of faculty support (26.3% for Institution A and 16% for Institution B), teaching and learning (21.1% for Institution A and 24% for Institution B), course structure (21.1% for Institution A and 8% for Institution B), and institutional support (15.8% for Institution A and 28% for Institution B). These

results supported a prior study by Chari [11], which identified organization and learner support systems among the issues encountered by administrators.

Faculty focused on themes in the categories of faculty support (26.1% for Institution A and 25% for Institution B), institutional support (21.7% for Institution A and 19.4% for Institution B), teaching and learning (19.6% for Institution A and 16.7% for Institution B), and course structure (10.9% for Institution A and 19.4% for Institution B). These results were consistent with prior studies [13][28] using the IHEP's benchmarks to study faculty perceptions with regard to quality.

Teaching assistants focused on themes in the categories of institutional support (32.4%), teaching and learning (23.5%), and course structure (23.5%). The teaching assistants' focus on pedagogical aspects supported prior studies [7][8][29].

#### 3.1.2 Does a constituent's definition of quality play a role in the level of satisfaction of distance education received?

The majority of participants (57.5%) indicated they were satisfied or highly satisfied with distance education at their respective institution. However, students (42.5%) seemed to be more satisfied than faculty, teaching assistants, and administrators (15%). This scenario was consistent in both institutions, although no members of the faculty or staff at Institution B rated the quality as more than a work in progress. These results contradict the findings by Perry [21] who concluded that faculty rated their beliefs about the quality in distance education higher than they rated their perceptions of student beliefs in the same areas. On the other hand, consistent with prior studies [15][23], Puffer wrote that students enroll "for personal achievement and for access to employment and higher education . . . [while scholars remain] polarized, with traditional faculty distrustful of credentials earned through nontraditional study" (p. xi).

No statistical relationship was found between the participants' age and their self-reported level of expertise or level of satisfaction. No statistical relationship was found between participants' level of technological expertise, number of terms involved in distance education, or level of satisfaction. The lack of statistical relationship between level of technological expertise and level of satisfaction contradicted the common assumption that individuals' perceptions of quality vary depending on how experienced these individuals were with technology prior to engaging in distance education.

Results indicated a moderate positive correlation ( $r = 0.45$ ) between terms involved in distance

education and age range. This could be attributed to the fact that older participants, probably working adults, are more likely to become involved in distance education.

Contrary to what might have been expected, results indicated a moderate negative correlation ( $r = -0.39$ ) between terms involved in distance education and level of satisfaction. The more time participants had been involved in distance education, the less likely they were to be satisfied with the quality of distance education. These results are in contrast with the proverbial learning curve through which individuals go through when learning something new. It could also be argued that the more participants get involved in distance education, the more they realize how much more there needs to be done.

### 3.2 Toward a Definition of Quality in Distance Education

With the exception of three benchmarks, each benchmark was specifically brought up by participants, even though they were only provided with the overall categories, not the individual benchmarks.

Two of the three benchmarks not mentioned were discussed indirectly or in combination of other benchmarks. A participant shared the following comment while discussing course structure: "Typically, professors also send out a 'welcome to this week's unit' e-mail each week that includes their expectations, etc." Although related to course structure, the fourth benchmark was not specifically addressed. This benchmark stated that quality in distance education must consist of "courses . . . designed to . . . engage . . . [students] in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as part of their course and program requirements" (p. 2). The third benchmark in evaluation and assessment was not mentioned either. However, while discussing course structure, a participant commented, "The delivery, learning outcomes, materials, etc. all fall together if those two items are developed well." Phipps and Merisotis, wrote that this benchmark stated that quality in distance education requires that "intended learning outcomes . . . [be] reviewed regularly to ensure clarity, utility, and appropriateness" (p. 3).

Phase V of the phenomenological reduction process involved a cross analysis across categories of constituents across institutions. The number of themes per category is shown in the Table. The support categories: institutional, student, and faculty, accounted for 36 (46.2%) of the themes. The course categories, development, teaching and learning, and structure, accounted for 35 (44.9%) of

the themes. The remaining 7 (9%) themes pertained to evaluation and assessment.

Table

*Themes by Category*

Category	Themes	
	Absolute	%
Institution support	17	21.8
Course development	6	7.7
Teaching/learning	15	19.2
Course structure	14	7.7
Student support	6	16.7
Faculty support	13	16.7
Evaluation and assessment	7	9.0

*Note.*  $N = 78$ .

## 4 Conclusion

Participants in this study directly discussed 21 of the 24 benchmarks. Additionally, they discussed two of the benchmarks indirectly. Therefore, the results of the study supported the thesis that the IHEP's benchmarks adequately describe quality in distance education.

This study was designed to be informative. A clear definition on what constitutes quality in distance education was at the top of the priority list of institutions of higher education engaged in such endeavors.

The focus of this study was on liberal arts universities in New England. Whereas this limited the scope and applicability of the results to other universities or even other regions of the country, it certainly may serve as the starting step for further research. Other limitations were inherent to the methodology employed, including but not limited to, (a) recruitment of participants, (b) participants' understanding of the interview questions, (c) variability of participants' perceptions of quality depending on the subject matter, (d) participants who abandoned the study, and (e) technological issues.

This study sought to find a consensus on what constitutes quality in distance education, by finding a universal set of indicators to define and measure quality in distance education. Results from this study indicated that such a set exists in the IHEP's benchmarks. Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that when it comes to defining quality in distance education, the IHEP's benchmarks may be perceived as fit for all purposes.

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