e-QUAL: e-Learning with Quality. Proposal for an Evaluation Model on the Quality of e-Learning Courses

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1 Introduction

The goal of this study is to address e-learning quality by analysing the main specific approaches to the process, recommendations and lists of good practices. Based on this information we present a model, called e-Qual, to access the quality of e-Learning courses. Considering that the complexity of such models can lead in many cases to its reduced use, the e-Qual model should be simple and flexible to allow the analysis of different pedagogical models.

The adoption and the integration of e-Learning vary significantly from country to country. The ROI issue is not taken for granted; e-learning is, not only focused on technology, but it is mainly centred in an individual-oriented learning; the quality of many e-Learning programmes and courses can be classified as “not satisfactory”; high-quality e-Learning programmes and structures presuppose a significant investment on resources in what concerns evaluation, design, development, contents and management; etc. [1].

In this discussion about quality, it becomes clear that e-Learning has to be oriented towards learners [4, 8].
In [2] Ehlers and colleagues refer to the open nature of quality as both a normative definition and a relation between supply and training needs.

2 e-Qual Model

The e-Qual model derives from the analysis of reference frameworks presented through projects such as Open eQuality Learning Standards [5], SEEQUEEL – Sustainable Environment for the Evaluation of Quality in eLearning [6], Innoelearning [9], MECA-ODL [3], Quality On the Line [7] and the several lists of good practices and is based on structural simplicity and flexibility for the analysis of different pedagogical models.

The need to consider the contributions from several reference frameworks, already mentioned, and also to overcome the conceptual complexity and some lack of flexibility of some of them are the reasons for the creation of a new model.

The structure of our model is the result of an adaptation of the structure of the Open eQuality Learning Standards and includes four areas: Learning Contents, Learning Management System (LMS), Processes and Results.

The two first areas concern the necessary resources for the implementation of an e-Learning course (Learning Contents, Learning Management System). The third area deals with the processes ensured by the staff (administrative, technical and pedagogical). The last area is related with the results, in particular with learners’ satisfaction, which is the main aspect to be considered as far as quality is concerned.

Within the four areas 16 items have been identified, which are to be classified according to a 0–10 scale. The flexibility of the classification chart lies in the attribution of a weight to each item, which varies from 0 to 3 according to the pedagogical model adopted. Therefore, the score obtained depends on the punctuation of each item and respective weight.

The course analysis can be done in a global basis or by area.

The Learning Contents comprise four items: Written Contents, Multimedia Contents, Complementary Bibliographical Sources and the Content Management System.

In this area all the content-related aspects are analysed. The two first items refer to the materials made available while the third item addresses the content markers used to deepen topics. The last item, in turn, deals with the way contents are acceded.

In the second area the Learning Management System, a fundamental infrastructure for learning performance, is assessed in three items: the Common Space of the Learning Community, the Asynchronous Communication Tools and the Synchronous Communication Tools.