A framework for Assuring Quality of e-Learning Programs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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Abstract:

E-Learning is a growing concern of educators and policy makers as it captures a large number of students’ population who is unable to attend formal classroom education. Many tools and contents have been developed and many more are being developed on a regular basis but the element of Quality has not been equally stressed. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has established a National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA) which is responsible for assuring quality of higher education programs. The commission has produced a draft version of standards for E-Learning programs. However, the standards suggested for E-Learning are the same as the standards for formal classroom based teaching.

National Center for E-Learning is also actively involved in facilitating and advancing E-learning areas but they too have not come up with any guidelines for quality assurance of E-Learning programs.

A review of literature reveals that considerable work has been done in some countries as an attempt to provide some framework for Quality Assurance to E-learning programs.

This paper attempts to provide a general framework to Quality Assurance professionals for producing standards for quality assurance of E-Learning programs within the general framework of the National Commission for Academic Accreditation & Assessment (NCAAA) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
Introduction:


E-Learning is a growing concern of educators and policy makers as it captures a large number of students’ population who is unable to attend formal classroom education. There has been a considerable development in E-Learning and many offline and online solutions have been identified which cover a wide array of learning (Close et al, 2000), (Ruttenber et al-2000). The increasing interest of learners in E-Learning program is not limited to working adults only but teenagers from 16 to 18 also have increasing interest in E-Learning due to their popularity of the internet in that age group. (Lau,2002)

E-Learning in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been placed at a high priority and universities have devised programs to enroll students through e-learning thereby educating a greater number of students who do not have access to universities to attend formal classes. Though the importance of E-learning has led universities develop and offer various degree programs through e-learning yet no formal mechanism or system has been devised to assure Quality of these programs.

National Commission for academic accreditation and Assessment is responsible in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia to assure the Quality of higher education programs. This commission has produced standards for assuring quality at program and institutional level for classroom based education. Universities have to meet these standards to get accreditation at program and university level. This commission has also produced a set of standards for distance education programs, but a review of that document reveals that it is the same set of standards as required by regular classroom based program as shown in the following table.
A review of draft version also emphasizes that
“many of the requirements for programs offered through distance education are the same
as for any other program. But in addition to these there are some additional requirements”.

(NCAAA standards for Distance Education. Draft, April-2012)

However, these additional requirements are not given in the form of standards in the draft
version of the document. It may be that the final official version of the standards might have those
additional requirements. The same document further reads:

“To be accredited by the NCAAA a program offered through distance education must
meet regulations established by the National Center for ELearning and Distance Education
and approved by the Higher Council of Education.”

However, no such standards were found on the official website of National Center for
e-Learning and distance education. It is expected that such standards would be under progress
for future implementation. Thus, it is a high time to present some theoretical framework that may
facilitate the development of standards for e-learning.

In the current study, a framework has been provided for developing standards for E-Learning
programs. The framework includes only the areas which need special focus in e-learning programs. The
framework would help QA professionals to prepare a set of standards for e-learning and distance learning
programs which can be included in general standards of higher education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Suggested Framework:
The following framework is based on literature reviewed and cited in the reference section.
Each component of the framework has been discussed in detail.
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Figure 1. Program QA Cycle

The above framework has four elements making a cycle and two elements supplementing the cycle during its cyclic movement.

Following is a brief discussion on each component of the framework.

**Program Design:**

The foundation of program design is based on program overall purpose and learning outcomes desired at the end of the program. A face to face instruction program has a clear statement of its existence along with learning outcomes at the end. In case of E-Learning, there are a number of variables that may limit the formulation of goals and outcomes. Thus a careful planning based on Need Assessment for the proposed E-learning program is the first step. This need assessment would include diversified population. Goals and learning outcomes would be based on this need assessment.

**Learning Material (Contents):**

The material of an e-learning program is different from the material in face to face teaching. The E-Learning material takes into account the lack of availability of instructors. Thus a printed
book may still be needed, but the learning material needs to be interactive and self-explanatory. Thus quality standards would be developed keeping in mind that the material in E-Learning is interactive, illustrative within multimedia environment. Secondly, the preparation of learning material is usually in the hands of a team of experts rather than a teacher. Learners are also involved in the process of material production. Thus it leads to the question of quality of process and product. Finally, great care is required in setting learning outcomes of learning material/modules as the contents are developed through a variety of learning resources such as video, interactive pictures, collection of articles etc. The use of all these forms must aim at achieving the learning outcomes.

**Delivery of Material:**

In a classroom based instruction, the delivery of material or teaching strategies may be restructured as per students' feedback. However, this is not the case in E-Learning context. The quality of delivery of material can only be maintained if it is made sure that instructional strategy is based on learners’ profile, learning needs, learning context and modes of learning. Moreover, the delivery of material should be such that learners can manage it within time and with a good pace along with arrangements for prompt and constructive feedback as and when required. Finally, students of E-Learning should be provided with complete material along with Intended Learning Outcomes and assessment methodology in the beginning of the program. This is equally important in face to face teaching, but it becomes more important in case of e-learning as learners may decide their own pace of learning keeping the expected end in mind.

**Assessment:**

Assessment in the classroom based teaching is significant as it determines the achievement of learning outcomes. However, its importance increases further in case of E-Learning. The first consideration in this context is that students must be well informed about the ways and means through which they would be assessed. Secondly, it must be representative of the context of real life encounters so that ILOs (intended learning outcomes) achievement may be measured. Till this point, there is no essential difference between face to face and E-Learning, however, the reliability and validity of test items remains under question in case of E-Learning. Separate standards are required covering how assessment was planned, designed and implemented in the E-Learning program. Post test analysis and development of a standardized question bank may assure the quality of assessment of the program.

**Learners’ Support:**

Learners in an E-learning environment experience a very different learning environment.
Several studies have been reported by Andersson (2007) highlighting support issues in E-Learning. He has identified four categories of support: Faculty Support for Students, Social Support for Students; Support from Employers; Support for Faculty. Standards for learners support may consider including these categories while making standards for E-Learning programs.

**Learning Environment:**

Learning Environment deals mainly with virtual environment available for learners in E-Learning programs. With the passage of time, the learning environment has extended its scope from within the structure of program to a wider platform that includes search engine, instant messaging chat groups, blogs and RSS feeds. The learner experiences all these tools and comes across several new things. With the emergence of new learning environment, it is not easy for the institutions to have control over quality.

In addition, the selection of learning tool by teachers also influences the learner. Thus standards for learning environment need to include the basis for the selection of learning environment, control over other learning environment and future improvement plans.

**Suggested Framework and NCAAA Guidelines:**

Following is the list of 11 standards given by NCAAA for both regular as well as E-Learning programs.

1. Mission Goals and Objectives
2. Program Administration
3. Management of Program Quality Assurance
4. Learning and Teaching
5. Student Administration and Support Services
6. Learning Resources Facilities and Equipment
7. Financial Planning and Management
8. Employment Processes
9. Research
10. Relationships with the Community

In our suggested model, program design, contents, delivery and assessment may be placed under standard-4 (Teaching & Learning) of NCAAA with a separate set of sub-standards encompassing the unique elements of E-Learning program as given in discussion in this paper. Similarly, Learning Environment and Learners’ Support in the suggested model may be placed under standard 5 (Student Administration and Support Services) and standard 6 (Learning
Resources Facilities and Equipment) of NCAAA.

Thus the standards given by NCAAA are comprehensive, but there is a need to revisit the sub-standards given under each standard and make them specific for E-learning programs. The suggested model may facilitate in developing the parameters for specific standards for E-Learning.
Conclusion:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has got a very structured approach for assurance of Quality in higher education through its National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment. The center for E-Learning in the Kingdom is also playing a vital role for the promotion of E-Learning. However, there is a need to prepare a set of standards for E-Learning programs. The suggested framework is an attempt to highlight the areas which are unique to E-learning programs only. In order to prepare standards for E-Learning, parameters may be drawn from this model in order to produce more reliable and compatible standards for assuring quality of E-Learning programs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
References:


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Standards for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Higher Education Programs Offered by Distance Education (draft) Retrieved on 17th September from http://www.ncaaa.org.sa/ProductFiles/40_Product.pdf