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Challenges of Online Education System

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Abstract: *This text addresses issues concerning the online educational system from the perspective of quality standards – what quality means, what are the challenges of a quality online learning program, what are the best practices, advantages of learning within an online system, what aspects should be improved and strengthened in order to meet the beneficiaries’ expectations and quality requirements.*

Interest in online learning and participation continued to grow, registering an increasing number of participants, especially since 2020, when schools and universities were forced to launch and develop new online learning programs to meet the current demand.

The quality of the online education system is often criticized, as being asked if the quality of this system is similar to the one specific to conventional education. This study explores a series of aspects linked to and influencing the quality of online learning, taking into consideration that there is, sure, needed a framework to be implemented within universities in order to achieve a performing educational system, both for learning providers and also for the beneficiaries of the learning. However, all stakeholders have a common interest in achieving a performing education system to meet all expectations, and this is possible when measuring in terms of didactics, technology and administration.

The most important aspects this text concerns are the following: are students as satisfied with online courses as they are with face-to-face instruction?; is online education meeting the social standards and the labour market requirements?; is online education developed within an organized system? can ITC (Information and Communication Technology) instruments meet the challenges generated by the physical distance between student and teacher? Can they provide added value to form challenging and soft skills and enrich learners’ experience?

Keywords: *education, quality, online learning, interaction, institutional quality policies*

Introduction

Even if quality assurance in education is open to interpretations, especially online learning, it is necessary to have a quality framework for reviewing the teaching process in a reflective and evaluative manner. COVID-19 has created the need to

face special situations, raising the issue of other possible pandemics and thus the need for solutions for a normal, productive, healthy and quality life. Admitting that the situation during the pandemic was under control – classes and even extra-curricular activities went on, there is a need to approach this aspect at a deeper level. Since education determines the quality of an individual's life, the online learning system can improve knowledge, skills and individuality. Even if online learning systems register certain advantages (flexibility, networking, extended documentation, better time management, technical skills), there is a need to framework quality standards regarding planning, managing, developing, assessing and controlling the process of e-learning.

Aim and Structure of the Study

In the context mentioned above, this study tries to find out what quality means when talking about the online education system and to underline how the school approaches the challenges of quality teaching in the online system and how technology will be capitalized to offer students a richer, more engaging and holistic learning experience. Therefore, the study aims to identify good practices in the field of education, especially the online education system, to identify improved aspects and strengthen educational policies from a quality educational standards perspective.

However, quality in education is hard to define; quality assurance is when all internal and external stakeholders (customers, suppliers and other interested parties) are satisfied that standards will be met. Therefore, during the inquiry into the meaning of quality in the online education system, the study addresses several aspects, such as the premises to develop quality online education, the relationship between school and society, the context of the needs, a comparison of traditional and online education systems, quality issues regarding online education system – aspects to be focused on and to be improved, specific methods of teaching and learning etc.

Premises for Developing the Quality of the e-Learning System

Online learning came out within the distance education system, initially conducted through postal services. In 1840, for example, professor Isaac Pitman developed the most widely used stenography system, now known as the Pitman Method, using correspondence and postal services for sending didactics materials to his students and receiving papers from these. (Mustapha Bukar Gana, 2017, p.8). Over time the system has developed; if we think about the year 1960, when the University of Illinois developed the first generalized computer-assisted instruction system – PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations). The online system has developed continuously through technologies that allow access to online learning systems and other digital tools in the modern world of our day. Still, the digital revolution of education requires a complete renewal of pedagogical approaches for teaching and learning.

Some of the premises for analyzing quality assurance within online learning systems are:

- How do changes and the evolution of society affect education, and what should be done to meet current needs?
- One of the significant aims of education should be the adjustment to the evolution of society, to the needs of students and the current labour market.
- Educational institutions are increasingly offering formal and informal online and face-to-face learning, which is no longer the only way to learn.
- Even if online learning is gaining more and more control and more interest from learners, several policies are still needed – regarding aspects such as planning, development and assessment.
- Within the online system, beware of the danger of focusing on technology and not on students' needs. Of course, technology is instrumental in meeting needs, but attention should also aid the particular demands.
- Soft skills should be an essential goal of education so that future citizens have more professional and personal advantages.
- How do we measure success in online learning? One of the quantifiers is the satisfaction of the need for learning. To achieve this goal, a mechanism should be created through which the leading market players (universities, research institutes, government, and economic agents) can work together to achieve the expected economic and social growth goal.

Relation between School Institution and Society

There is an excellent connection between education and society since education generates economic and social growth. Moreover, a substantial effect of education is giving people the necessary skills to manage their own lives, compete in the market, to be actively responsible for their facts. This is why one of the quality system indicators is the employment degree and the satisfaction of all educational services beneficiaries – institutions, students, economic agents, and society.

Learning must recognize the relations between the social and economic actors engaged in the educational activity (Neculau, 2004, pp. 11-12). Therefore, the school's role is essential within man-community conjunction from the perspective of two mutual and complementary sides. One of them regards the effect of education on the progress of society, which is revealed both by the level and quality of education offered to each individual as a member of the community and by the adjustment of the educational system to the economic, cultural, scientific and political evolution of the society. The other side of this relation invokes how society determines the individual's education through the type of information transferred to people, the effects of the environment in which people live and learn, the influence of community characteristics that lead to specific educational ideals, the principles and ideals of the community, expressed by the way society selects, classifies, evaluates and disseminates educational knowledge (Bernstein, 1971, p.47).

Therefore, education and society (with all its ideals and changes) are in a relationship of mutuality: education is determined by the society's values and ideals (Hanuszkiewicz, 2019, p.203), and the individual actions have consequences on the social group (as the individual is a result of both the educational process and the social effects and changes).

The evolution of society is an unceasing process, education always being a priority area in the interest of the state and society; need permanent training to meet the current requirements of society so that young people would be able to adapt to social and professional life actively. Moreover, technological development significantly affects society at the educational, social and economic levels, in close connection with the competencies that citizens should have.

This progress impacts the lifestyle, the way of learning, the automation of processes at work, the emergence of the need for digital skills, and the emergence of new trades. Multiple and profound changes mark the current reality. One of the lessons learned is that the education system should be prepared for any conditions, and it should prepare young people to be ready for adult life, involving active participation in community life, flexibility, openness to the new, and active involvement in their learning process.

The Online Learning in the Context of Needs Analysis

Besides the inherent development of society on all levels, especially the technological one, the current reality reveals other factors (war, diseases etc.), certifying that being physically present is no longer the only option to learn today. Hence, society needs to be prepared for digital education by reconfiguring the whole learning system. Moreover, according to the development policies and strategies in the field, the long-term strategic vision for digital education envisages the development of an ecosystem of high-performance digital education, as well as the development of relevant digital skills and competencies in this regard (*Action Plan for Digital Education for 2021-2017*).

Digital education is, therefore, a goal of education and, at the same time, a means of accessing information and acquiring the knowledge necessary for complete personal development. Therefore, it is necessary to create a digitalized, flexible education system that will concur with developing a digital and sustainable society. For this, it should respond to the changes and demands of society by training active citizens, ready to manage challenges and to be integrated into the labour market.

No doubt that the online learning system also has some questionable aspects: the lack of direct communication and interpersonal relationships, increased dependence on the digital environment, the higher degree of fatigue (extended use of computers can harm the general state of health), teacher's diminished control, the distraction of students by multiple external factors, longer time to correct tests for the teacher, difficulties in the assessment process.

Some of the most problematic aspects of online learning are individual counselling and personalized support for students with special learning needs, which are more difficult to be developed within the online systems, at least at the moment. In addition, online education also increases certain inequities in that it can significantly affect economically and socially disadvantaged social groups, characterized by low-income, rural backgrounds - groups that in traditional education also had barriers in terms of participation in education.

The identified critical aspects generate, in turn, a series of needs/approaches necessary in order to achieve the goal of a high-performance digital education. Among these needs, we mention: completing a methodology based on the use of ICT for all scholar subjects, adapting the curriculum to digital education, establishing methods for assessing the digital skills of students and teachers, training them in the use of digital tools, providing high-performance platforms and resources online learning.

The teacher has to reorient himself in the didactic approach to prove innovation, and creativity, to make more effort to attract students in the learning process, and to make them overcome the resistance to change. There is also a need for an e-learning system with procedures and measures for at-risk groups and methods of remote psychological counselling. Otherwise, it could increase inequality of opportunity in education and the risk of disadvantaged socio-economic learners dropping out of school (see lack of internet connection and digital tools). An online learning education system should consider several issues to solve them, meeting quality standards from the perspective of meeting the needs of direct and indirect beneficiaries of the learning process.

The Quality of the Online Learning System

In order to determine how the online learning system can meet the quality standards, it is necessary to determine what the quality refers to. Quality is the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs (Ellis, 1993, p. 16). Of course, we are taking in view here all the stakeholders involved – universities, teachers, students, the academic community, social, economic and cultural actors, and the whole society, as the ultimate goal of education is to support the best outcomes for the learners.

The key pillars to provide quality online education regard:

- Teaching and learning activities (the type of activities, but also other tools to facilitate interaction between teacher and learner and between learners themselves – social networks, public groups, platforms for discussion, blogs, discussion forums, video tools, podcasts, videoconferences.
- Assessment – types, methods and procedures – to assess the teaching process and qualitative interviews and analysis are needed to explore the students' satisfaction.
- Extra-curricular activities – carried out through online mentoring programs, interactive games, book clubs etc.

- Digital infrastructure – digital libraries, internet bord accessible for many users, management systems for digital tools.
- Conventions regarding all activities – teaching, research, mentoring, extra-curricular activities, and personal data protection.

We also can talk about a series of terms when talking about quality regarding online education:

- Quality assurance mechanisms (tools, processes and actors) - the quality of the teaching process means the standards it must meet.
- A clearly defined system of principles, criteria, standards and indicators is reflected in all aspects of the educational process: planning, development, evaluation, and assessment. In addition, the quality system also refers to assurance, management, control, and self-evaluation: quality assurance refers to accomplishing the satisfaction of the customers involved; quality control considers the conformity of standards and the steps to be taken if needed; quality assessment involves an external check of educational services. Off course, the abovementioned terms are only complete with the commitment to improvement and development (Ellis, 1993, p. 19).
- Online learning quality also derives from analyzing the identified needs and problems (which should be addressed by all the actors involved in the educational process - direct and indirect beneficiaries) and how they are approached.

In addition to the above, the following aspects should be taken into account in the design and development of an online education system that meets quality standards:

- development of teaching materials which are adapted to the online learning process;
- development of interactive learning methodologies, course design, and delivery methodologies;
- support is given to teachers in the design of courses;
- ensuring the technical resources needed to deliver the courses (institutions should provide costs dedicated to these issues);
- providing institutional support (vision, planning and infrastructure);
- supplying adequate support to students to facilitate learning, including mentoring;
- establishing a methodology for assessing knowledge and ensuring the security of exams.

Some experts approach quality in education as perspectives rather than as definitions - the "five ways of thinking about quality" (Harvey, Green, 1993, pp.9-34): quality as exception/ excellence - meeting the highest academic standards and not always being achieved; quality as perfection or consistency - as a process of rejecting the flaws; consistency means continuous improvement and elimination of flaws; quality as purpose - when measured through the accomplishment level of an aim; quality

as value for money - quality is achieved when you can attain a better result at the same or a lower cost/investment; quality as the transformation has in view learning centred on the student - quality is achieved when the learning proves transformative for the student.

Hence the question of how to measure success in online learning. The most relevant criterion is satisfying the student's learning need, this being the leading benchmark in determining the quality of the educational activity. Online learning should not be a series of ideas to be transmitted. However, it should be interactive and make the student think. One of the biggest dangers of digital education is the focus on technology (which should be seen as a tool rather than a goal) instead of the needs of the beneficiaries. Online learning must be built as a collaborative process between the beneficiary and the learning environment. The evaluation of the quality level by the student takes into account criteria that refer to assistance through tutorials in the use of platforms and learning tools, the level of communication and cooperation during the classes, transparency and the existence of supporting information.

Other important outcomes to prove the quality standards of the online learning process are the degree of employment after graduating and the usage of academic research results. For this, it is mandatory to consider the correspondence between curricula and the current labour market requirements. Employment after graduating affects both the graduates and the employers, as school institution participates in the economic and social life of the community. Based on scientific results, partnerships between academic institutes and economic agents will increase the economic and technological level of innovation.

In the context of increasing employability, we mention another need of the educational system - that of developing software skills, which increases the chances of employment and work retention. Specific surveys suggest that 70% of employees are promoted for their hard skills, but 80% leave work because of a lack of communication and self-management abilities (Leadership studies). These abilities include intellectual, social, and interpersonal communication skills and character traits that are helpful in social and professional life and relate to problem-solving skills, use of experiences, time planning and management, communication and teamwork, initiative and responsibility for one's deeds and decisions. The didactic activity is thus analyzed not only in school results but in acquired thinking and observation skills, the education having the role of developing the students' potential to prepare them for life. Soft skills training emphasizes the holistic perspective of online learning because, in addition to acquiring technical knowledge in a particular field (hard skills), it is necessary for graduates to become valuable people both to themselves and to society, as active, involved, capable persons to manage their own life. Today's young people build the future of society, so that it will depend on the type of guidance offered to them. The fulfilment of quality standards also considers the responsibility of the provider of education services, in this case, not only to the direct beneficiary but also to the whole society as a final beneficiary.

Online Education vs Traditional Education

Online learning reveals the inconsistency of traditional learning methods, given the decreased involvement of the student in the traditional learning process. Therefore, the short comparison between the two systems concerns the learning methods, the curriculum structure and content, and the central element of the educational process (is this the child or the school information?).

Emphasizing the contrasts does not aim to blame or reject certain practices but to identify the best solutions to provide a sustainable education. It is necessary to reset the traditional system, which may be considered too rigid once students learn more in a constrained system, focused on the transmission and assertion of information by teachers "from above and outside" (Dewey, 1977, pp. 175-176).

A modern system is needed to focus on personalized learning, individual needs and the usage of students' skills and experiences. Specific to the traditional system, transmission is perceived as an educational activity, carried out mainly by adults on young people, a social form specific to the traditional society, with imperative connotations, which generates direct and passive knowledge through its receptive nature (Blais, Gauchet, Ottavi, 2019, pp.22-23). The specialization of traditional educational institutions in the production of goods and the approach of learning as a consumer product (Illich, 2017, pp.107-108) is often criticized. Online learning sets up the premises for establishing a relationship between man and his environment, the educators' access to simple tools in the environment so that resources should not be approached as mere learning tools but as some that lead learners to a self-learning process.

Suppose the traditional learning system is relatively static, not adapted to a society characterized by permanent changes. In that case, online learning is defined by a dynamic approach to learning, aligned with the changing society, capitalization of individuality, learning through involvement and self-effort, and the learner becoming an active participant (co-author) in their learning process.

The synthesis of this comparison emphasizes that subordinating a student's experience and life to the school curriculum (which is specific to the traditional style) determines a mechanical educational process, often perceived by the student as a challenging, tiring, unattractive task. Therefore, it is recommended to consider the objects of study as tools to activate the didactic content through correspondence with real life. The study becomes educational as it highlights the processes and the evolution of the economic-social life, becoming an integrating factor of all knowledge learned. The efficiency and value of school subjects can be achieved only by the possibility they offer to use, interpret and control past experiences and, at the same time to provide tools for control and management of present and future experiences, possible only through the opportunity of direct contact with real life.

Online learning, specific to modern education, replaces the classic meaning of the learning act - focused on an imposed transmission, with a modern one, focused on the initiative and action of the individual, because "we live the end of education of

the young generation by the previous generation, education that has existed since our origins” (de Haan, 1996).

The quantity and measurable character of the school's successes, specific to the traditional framework, limits the sphere of personal development, which cannot be framed in quantifiable parameters. Hence the hierarchy system is inappropriate, as well as the act of relating the educable to institutional standards instead of own needs and achievements. These would be quantifiable and measurable after studies completion when young people enter the economic and social market, this being an important quality indicator of the educational learning system. The excessive standardization of the traditional education system is closely connected with low learner involvement and responsibility for their growth process. The learning activities within the online system are instead understood as a manifestation of its own, generated by its own impulses. Lack of fostering responsibility for its development is equal to a social regression and by no means to an increase necessary for society. Online school could turn the process of compulsory learning into a desired form of learning, an assumed choice.

The opposition between the two learning systems is apparent, the goal not being a negative result, considering that the evaluation of some contrasting components does not generate positive results but rather errors of perspective on the whole educational picture. The analysis aims to review learning, identify answers on how learning occurs, ways of greater openness to knowledge, and solutions for learning to meet quality standards.

Emphasizing contrasts does not aim at blaming or rejecting certain practices but at identifying the interdependent relations between learning items that lead to the success of the educational process. A revised education model aims to reduce the student's dependence on the educator and the system by activating him in his learning process, both attitudinal and practical. Online learning can achieve this goal by providing the individual with the means to understand the world around him so that he can develop his ability to manage his own life, adapt to different conditions, and acquire skills that will ensure his general well-being.

Conclusions

As the short analysis shows, the online learning system has several advantages: the existence of digital resources (platforms, libraries, databases) and their easy access, saving information delivered during classes, an interactive learning process, development of digital skills, faster communication, building soft skills, an engaging, interactive learning process that involves the learner's resources (through discovery, research, experiencing). Furthermore, a qualitative online learning system is built on a process in which the role of the teacher is not to transmit information but to guide people in their development process, combining technical knowledge with soft skills - imagination, creative thinking, focused on identifying solutions and action plans.

We do not exclude any education, but we emphasize the advantages of online learning that give it the quality assurance of the learning process. A quality learning system considers the importance of developing, monitoring, and assessing teaching. In addition, improving teaching means improving students' learning, stressing their responsibility and involvement in their learning (Brown, Atkins, 1988, pp.1-2).

We saw already that one of the essential quantifiers of quality education is the actors' satisfaction and the accomplishment of their needs, both teachers and students, and of course, the whole society as an indirect beneficiary. Online education is a complex process and different from the conventional one – face to face system. Learning effectiveness depends on the processes, methods and involvement of the participants. If these are achieved, they become opportunities, rendering a greater diversity in studying 6tools and interactions with different people – including the international environment.

Regarding specific tools, ITC instruments have to meet the challenges generated by the physical distance between students and teachers. However, they also can bring added value, embodied in improved teacher and student performance, so in an upgraded learning experience—video presentations replace experiential learning and transfer good practices to meet the learners' expectations.

Quality assurance refers to the planned and systematic actions necessary to provide adequate confidence that a product or service will satisfy given requirements for quality (Borahan, Ziarati, 2002, p.914). A successful and valuable online learning system is a complex one, both intellectually and socially, consisting of a set of general abilities, engagement in academic goals and perseverance in facing challenges. An effective and qualitative education system is systematic, stimulating, and caring (Cohen, 1981, pp.281-309), defined by direct and indirect beneficiaries of educational services, built on shared values, and assumed in partnership between school and community.

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