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ASSURING AND ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF BLENDED LEARNING COURSES – REFLECTIONS OF COURSE DIRECTORS

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ABSTRACT
This paper reports on an empirical study exploring the way in which blended learning (bLearning) courses in Portuguese higher education institutions (HEIs) apply their internal quality assurance (QA) and how the evaluation of the courses should be made in order to enhance their quality, according to the opinion of course directors.

A survey was conducted with 19 bLearning course directors in 11 Portuguese HEIs and two sets of data were collected and analyzed: how the evaluation of bLearning courses has been made and how they think it should be made in order to enhance their quality. Questions like who evaluates, how to evaluate, what is evaluated and what to evaluate for and also what should be implemented in order to improve course quality were put to the course directors under scrutiny. Results revealed that students, teachers and directors are the main performers of modules evaluation, although institutional and external agents themselves are seen as very relevant. The main instruments used for evaluation are the course final reports and the students’ final questionnaires. The discussion forums should also be included as important instruments to evaluate online modules. As to the objects of evaluation that are being selected in Portuguese institutions all directors mentioned the communication tools used, the quality of didactic materials and the pertinence of the learning tasks proposed, all of them also seen as most pertinent for the purposes of evaluation. The main goals of evaluation are the improvement of the curricular plans and the adequacy of the teaching strategies. The study highlights the need for HEIs to reassess their approach to the QA of bLearning courses, and brings some contributions to those who are in charged of bLearning courses, providing a useful framework that covers all aspects of quality assurance in order to enhance teaching and learning quality.

KEYWORDS
Quality assurance, quality enhancement, evaluation, bLearning courses, Higher Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many institutions are now responding to the pressures imposed by 21st century challenges by embracing new technologies. Blended Learning (bLearning) is widely used nowadays in many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), especially those which have embraced distance education and any other form of e-learning as one of their major institutional and teaching efforts (Mortera-Gutierrez, 2004). bLearning is pervading HE, compelling educators to confront existing assumptions of teaching and learning.

The imperative for quality assurance initiatives for eLearning, or particularly for bLearning, in HE, is highly acknowledged (Weaver et al, 2008; Ireland et al., 2009). Oliver (2005, p. 183) explains this “quality agenda” in the following terms: “As more and more universities seek to use e-learning as a mode of delivery for their units and courses, and as more and more they are held accountable for the quality of the services they provide, the need grows for accepted standards and benchmarks against which performance can be judged.” Indeed, HE leaders are challenged to position their institutions to meet the connectivity demands of prospective students and meet growing expectations and demands for HE quality learning experiences and outcomes (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004).

In some institutions in Portugal, the educational and teacher education matrix are still managed, in a general way, on the basis of relatively conservative models (Costa, 2006), placing a strong barrier to the implementation of pedagogical innovation. Nevertheless, and due to the Bologna Declaration, signs of
change are already visible. The Bologna process submission, while bringing in a new reorganization of the Portuguese HE system, aims to encourage people to go to university, improve teaching and learning quality and encourage Portuguese students’ mobility. Currently, in Portuguese HE systems, almost all or even all Universities and Polytechnics already have eLearning initiatives, although those are more focused in the use of eLearning platforms as a complement to face-to-face (f2f) modules (Magano and Vaz de Carvalho, 2008) to support the learning process in order to improve the training quality and to allow access and learning opportunities to other potential users. Nowadays, 11 institutions already have bLearning course offers implemented in their curricula.

Most studies about evaluation of teaching concerning the specificities of the exploitation of the potential of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) tend to report more varied aspects of the students’ learning experience, and a small number of studies take a more holistic approach considering also faculty’s perspectives. This study is related to a previous one (Pombo & Moreira, 2010) that examined the evaluation practices of teaching and learning, concerning the perceptions of course directors. This paper aims at offering an approach to understand how HEIs apply their internal quality assurance (QA) programs and how the evaluation of the courses should be made in order to enhance their quality and, therefore, put forward new methodologies for evaluation. Questions asked to the participants include who evaluates, how to evaluate, what is evaluated and what to evaluate for, and also what should be implemented in order to improve course quality.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Bologna Declaration, the creation of a common European space for HE and consequently an unique HE market where institutions all around the continent will compete, implies that “quality” is now taking on a new role for the success or failure of those institutions. Therefore, institutions are nowadays concerned with the design and the development of eLearning and with the quality of the teaching they offer. This topic has acquired relevance and it is expected to be the focus of endeavour in the forthcoming period in Europe (ENQA-EU, 2005). The notion of quality is becoming an important and overriding issue. Many universities are now offering courses and programs based on online delivery modes and are starting to question aspects of these forms of teaching and learning (Herrington et al., 2001). Questions that are being asked include: ‘Is online learning as effective as face-to-face learning?’; ‘Are online courses as good as they could be?’, ‘What is the best way to deliver online courses?’, or ‘By what means can we measure online learning quality?’

Alongside institutional concerns there are national and global pressures that demand a focus on quality. The issue of quality teaching, while central to the missions of HEIs, is now taking on a new role. In the past, quality was a way for lecturers to improve their own practices as part of their professional responsibilities. Nowadays, the new pressures brought about by competition, globalisation and the changing role of governments with respect to university governance are changing the purposes of the mechanisms that aim at teaching quality improvement.

The goal of the evaluation process might be either to provide a means to check (process evaluation) or to improve (result evaluation) the teaching and learning process. Evaluation is a procedure that involves the comparison between a real situation and what is (highly) expected; it is guided by a theoretical referential (Hadji, 2001) about what is expected of the evaluation object. The complexity of the evaluation objects imposes diverse perspectives about them (using various sources and actors) as well as a subjective process of negotiation among the actors involved. Evaluation is also considered as a process of finding ways to improve the quality of the object under evaluation, i.e., quality enhancement. The literature (Jara and Mellor, 2009) discusses the difference between assurance and enhancement. While some opinions tend to look at them as two mutually exclusive positions where improvement is mainly seen as the result of internally focused enhancement processes led by academics (Harvey, 2005), there are other perspectives which integrate assurance and enhancement, recognising their differences, but seeing them as parts of the same process. Assurance is concerned with determining whether objectives and aims have been achieved and enhancement being concerned with making improvements; both should be seen as part of a wider framework, as stages in the management of quality.

Initially it seems paradoxical to talk about the quality of bLearning as quality is often linked with checking by externally imposed standards. However, quality can also be understood from a development-oriented perspective, which means enabling learners to develop themselves in their own learning process and
consequently produce better results as far as quality is concerned. In this view, methods of self-evaluation, reflection and peer-evaluation are seen as more important. This kind of quality methodology does not have anything to do with normative, universally valid standards, but aims at improving the quality of the learning process (Ehlers, 2009). Although online learning exhibits many benefits in terms of flexible interaction, availability of various media and tools, etc., there are still some obstacles to the design of online learning solutions (Karadeniz, 2009). While online learning ensures flexibility and the development of competences that are difficult to ensure in a real class setting, f2f education enables social interaction that is required as guidance for students (Ugur, Akkoyunly and Kurbanogly, 2009). Some studies underline that technology and type of interaction should be taken into consideration in order to design effective, attractive and efficient learning environments (Blinc et al., 2007; Ginns and Ellis, 2007; Karadeniz, 2009). The best aspects of both f2f and online learning and the integration of e-learning into traditional learning programs with the development of new delivery communication technology systems have created bLearning.

The literature highlights that when designing blended modes of teaching and learning, strategies and/or tools in order to make the most of them, we need to consider the teaching and learning context to obtain the most appropriate mix or blend. In this contribution, and since we think Graham (2004) definition is the most accurate and widely accepted, bLearning is taken as the integration of f2f activities with technology-supported activities at a distance (Graham, 2004; Conole et al., 2007). Consequently, the different definitions of bLearning show us the diversity and strength of this type of learning. In this study, bLearning means integrating the online and f2f modes of delivery to create a more effective learning experience than either medium could produce alone.

The key question of this contribution is how we can design a learning environment to ensure effective, efficient and flexible learning for the learner? Course directors’ views are very important in order to assess efficiency and effectiveness of a learning environment. Moreover, course directors opinions help us understand the state of the art of the practices related to the evaluation of teaching and learning in online contexts and, furthermore, to propose new methodologies for evaluation in order to improve HE quality in teaching.

3. THE STUDY

3.1 Methodology

Little is known about the practices related to the evaluation of teaching and learning in bLearning contexts, namely answers to questions like who evaluates, how to evaluate, what is evaluated and what to evaluate for. Indeed, they remain unanswered to monitor and inform performance and progress of quality teaching and learning. The main aim of this paper is to contribute to this area. The study has an exploratory and descriptive nature. The research method is mixed, using mainly quantitative techniques of data collection and analysis. The data used in the study was collected through the administration of an online questionnaire to course directors of all courses offered in a bLearning mode at national level. The course directors have a global vision of the course they are in charge of, as all the sectors that promote evaluation in this domain (for example, the final reports) are sent to directors. Another important role of the directors is the leadership they have in the curriculum of their courses as decision makers of the main issues related to the course.

The instrument was sent directly using the institutional email of each course director, personalising the request and raising the importance of filling in the form, exposing the main aims of the study. The opportunity to answer the questions by phone was also considered; 5 respondents used this method. The questionnaire was answered by 18 of 19 course directors from 11 public Higher Education institutions that offer courses in a bLearning context. The questionnaire designed for the above-mentioned purpose included 4
main topics in a total of 54 closed questions, except for the items where other topics that were not considered in the questionnaire (a total of 7 open questions) were required from respondents if they so wished. The data presented here only show the analysis of the closed questions. The instrument was divided in four dimensions (see figure 1) which comprised the following questions: (i) who evaluates the modules?; (ii) how and when does that evaluation take place?; (iii) what is evaluated; and finally (iv) what to evaluate for? In all those topics and despite the practices of evaluation, course directors were asked about their perceptions of what should be changed in the evaluation in order to improve the quality of the course; e.g. concerning course directors’ experience in bLearning they were also asked about how they think evaluation of bLearning in Education should be done taking into account the curricular proposals of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycles of Higher Education as to: (i) who should be involved in the evaluation for the improvement of the course?; (ii) how and when the evaluation of the modules should be made?; (iii) what should be evaluated; and (iv) what should the evaluation goals be? The data were analysed using quantitative techniques, namely descriptive statistics, using ‘Paws Statistics 18’ and ‘Microsoft Excel’.

3.2 Findings and Discussion

The majority of course directors responded that students (17 respondents), directors (15) and teachers (13) had an important role in the evaluation of the modules (figure 2).

![Figure 2. Course directors’ answers about who makes the evaluation of the modules in the course they are in charge of, and also who should be involved in the evaluation for the improvement of the course.](image)

However, when asked about the degree of relevance of each type of evaluator for the improvement of the course, they select students (15 respondents), external agents (13) and teachers and directors (12 respondents each) as “relevant” or “very relevant”. They considered the institution and other teachers less important as evaluators of the modules.

As to how and when the evaluation of the modules is made, i.e. what instruments are used in the evaluation (figure 3), most course directors answered evaluation report of the course and end-modules students’ questionnaires (13 respondents each), followed by discussion forums between students and teachers (11 respondents). Students’ questionnaires at the start or during the modules, as well as external evaluation report were less mentioned by the directors. As to individual reflections, only final teachers’ reflections were mostly identified (9 respondents) as instruments of evaluation.

When directors are asked about the degree of relevance of using students’ questionnaires as evaluation instruments for the improvement of the module, most respondents only valued students’ questionnaires applied at the end of the modules (14 respondents), ascribing less relevance to questionnaires applied by students at the start and during the modules (10 and 7 respondents respectively). These results show that few institutions consider diagnostic questionnaires important for the evaluation of the teaching and learning modules, but they consider them important at the end of the modules. Then, where is the comparison about the development of skills before and after the modules, and what are the learning achievements proposed for each module? Furthermore, we can infer that evaluation is strongly associated with final products and less
with the process itself, i.e. with the development of skills during the tasks. As to the directors’ opinions about the degree of relevance of using discussion forums as evaluation instruments, some consider them valuable for the improvement of the modules, namely discussion forums between students (13 respondents), between students and teachers (13 respondents) and also between teachers (12 respondents). This might be related to the importance of collaboration between teachers and students and also to inter and intra group collaboration, providing opportunities for students to acquire the skills of working in teams and to negotiate, discuss and constructively criticize solutions to problems (Naismith et al., 2007).

Figure 3. Course directors’ answers about how and when the evaluation of the modules is made in the course they are in charge of, and also how and when the evaluation of the modules should be made for the improvement of the course.

Now, on the degree of relevance of using individual reflections as evaluation instruments few directors consider it ‘relevant’ or ‘very relevant’, either for students’ or teachers’ reflections during the module (6-7 respondents) comparing to final reflections, probably due to the assumption that reflections do not enable students to develop their knowledge individually and/or collaboratively by re-thinking and re-discussing the module contents over and over again, as Draper (2007) defends. The evaluation report made by an external panel is ‘relevant’ or ‘very relevant’ according to 11 respondents, and the course final report and the report on modules made by the teacher are also considered relevant or very relevant by 11 respondents – although 5 respondents declare they used it as an evaluation instrument (see figure 3). This could be interpreted as a result of bLearning courses being very recent and associated practices not yet fully implemented at institutional level, although directors find them important. In addition, Harvey (2005, p.273) argues that the internal quality procedures are the place where an enhancement process can be carried out: “… In most institutions where it occurs, improvement of the student experience is a function of internal review and monitoring processes, usually heavily reliant, nowadays, on student feedback, examiners reports, internal improvements audits, periodic revalidation of programmes of study and staff teams critically self-reflecting on their everyday practice.”

Considering the topic “what is evaluated”, i.e. which evaluation objects are being adopted in Portuguese institutions (figure 4), all directors (18) mentioned the communication tools used, the quality of didactic materials and the pertinence of the tasks. In general, directors also consider those topics as ‘relevant’ or ‘very relevant’ evaluation objects themselves.

Quality modules are activity-based rather than content-based, and the communication tools should be used according to the purpose of the activities sustained reflecting real life tasks (Herrington et al., 2001). When asked about the evaluation of teachers, most directors mentioned their pedagogical competence (13 respondents), the dynamics of online sessions and quality feedback (both with 12 respondents). They also found those items ‘very relevant’ to be considered in evaluation issues, specially the dynamics of online sessions (17 respondents). This is in accordance with Hummel (2006) who defends that feedback can be
considered an important, if not the most important, support mechanism in a variety of educational contexts as bLearning calls for individualized support to reach the learner’s needs of heterogeneous groups. With respect to learning strategies, 13 directors mentioned the development of specific competences, followed by type and adequacy of assessment instruments and adopted evaluation strategies (10 respondents). Logistic resources were mentioned as evaluation objects by 9 directors. In general, directors also consider those topics ‘relevant’ or ‘very relevant’ (12-14 respondents).

Figure 4. Course directors’ answers about what is evaluated and what should be evaluated.

Finally, directors were asked about the goals of the evaluation implemented in their courses, i.e. what to evaluate for? In the category improvement of the course, most of the respondents referred the improvement of the curricular plan (16 respondents), 15 mentioned the adequacy of the students’ profile and the adequacy of teaching strategies in use. In general, directors found those goals ‘relevant’ or ‘very relevant’ (14 to 16 respondents). In the category improvement of teaching and learning, the adequacy of teaching strategies in use (15 respondents), students’ academic success (14) and improvement of learning outcomes (14) are the evaluation goals practiced in the courses inquired. Generally, directors found those goals ‘very relevant’ or ‘relevant’ (13 to 15 respondents). 14 directors mentioned students’ support during the course leading to development of competences as a goal of evaluation. Thirteen directors found this topic ‘very relevant’. As to improvement of resources, only 7-10 directors selected this category as a goal of the evaluation practiced in their courses. Nine directors considered it a ‘very important’ goal.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Quality in bLearning cannot be understood as an overall classification of good schools, programmes or learning scenarios, but needs to be seen as a result of clear negotiation processes of value systems, requirements and results (Ehlers, 2009). The need for determining and maintaining quality in the process of designing, developing and delivering bLearning courses is becoming an important issue for universities and institutions worldwide. It is a process that some Portuguese institutions have recently taken seriously and are now in the process of formalizing. bLearning not only centers the learners as receivers but also as active actors which take part in the definition and evaluation of the quality of learning resources and processes. The
results show us that the evaluators are, at the moment, mainly students, teachers and directors. The institution and external agents themselves are considered very relevant in the course directors’ views.

The main instruments used for evaluation are the course final report and the students’ final questionnaires. Students’ questionnaires (at the start and during the module) as well as individual reflections (teachers’ or students’) were less used to evaluate the modules. From the course directors’ points of view, and also in our opinion, those instruments in addition to discussion forums (between students and teachers and also among students during the process) should be included as important instruments to evaluate online modules. Regarding teaching and learning, and considering in particular the orientations inherent to the Bologna Declaration, the inclusion of self and peer formative evaluation, namely through self reflections and also through communication forums between the participants could be very helpful for the evaluation of modules. For example, when formative feedback is also delivered along the process, trying to answer students’ questions and doubts, one should give them constructive suggestions about what to change, how and why. Various authors such as Jara and Mellar (2009) claim that a cycle of evaluation and improvement based on student feedback is a fundamental component of the process of quality improvement in HE.

The objects that are being most evaluated in Portuguese institutions are the communication tools used, the quality of didactic materials and the pertinence of the tasks. Directors considered those topics very relevant as evaluation objects. According to Herrington et al. (2001) the underlying pedagogies used in quality learning materials include: (i) authentic tasks that reflect the way in which the knowledge will be used in real life settings; (ii) opportunities for collaboration, where students collaborate to create products that could not be produced individually; (iii) learner-centred environments, where the focus is on student learning rather than teaching; (iv) engaging, where learning environments and tasks challenge and motivate learners and (v) meaningful assessment, where authentic assessment is used to evaluate students’ achievements. In addition, teachers’ dynamics of online sessions and also the development of students’ specific competences were considered the most relevant objects that should be included in the evaluation process. Finally, results show that the main goal for modules evaluation is the improvement of the curricular plan, the adequacy of students’ profiles and the adequacy of teaching strategies used.

Our evaluation framework recommends, also considering results from previous studies (Pombo et al., 2008; 2009; Pombo, Loureiro and Moreira, 2009) that quality evaluation of bLearning focuses on the learning process, during the development of the tasks, and not only at the end. When it comes to evaluation, subjectivity decreases when there are several evaluators; evaluation should be made not only by the teacher but also by students and teaching peers. Using more than one instrument allowing for triangulation of data and using several different quality criteria having in mind the improvement of teaching and learning quality, also guarantees the quality of the course. Online learning evaluation should be implemented to serve a variety of functions, such as to explore the potential effectiveness of online courses, compare online courses, and also as a formative tool to guide and inform the development of online learning materials.

As more and more educators and researchers realise that effective teaching and learning with technology must be driven by pedagogical principles, it is of paramount importance to ask questions such as how this could be achieved, and what aspects should be considered for a more effective assessment to ensure the quality of web-based teaching environments. These findings, linked to the quality categories mentioned above, bring some contributions to those who are in charged of bLearning courses, providing a useful framework covering all aspects of quality assurance in order to improve the enhancement of teaching and learning.

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