COMPARING ONLINE DISTANCE UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Being able to compare effectively universities and their courses is of particular interest to a wide range of stakeholders – including potential students, policy makers, media organisations, funders, and universities themselves. There does exist a range of university ranking schemes (for example, the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities) that enable some level of comparison but these systems and the metrics that they use are sometimes limited and often controversial. In addition, of particular interest to the Open University, one of the world’s largest online universities, these widely-used ranking systems are designed for face-to-face teaching and learning universities, such that their metrics can be inappropriate for online distance universities. In our paper, we will discuss work that we have undertaken to date towards the establishment of a ranking system that includes indicators of the quality of online distance teaching and learning, to enable the effective comparison of online distance universities. The work reported was completed in the first 8 months of the EU Erasmus+ funded CODUR project with partners from Universitat Oberta De Catalunya (Barcelona, Spain) and Consiglio Nazionale Delle Ricerche (Genova, Italy).

Keywords: quality assurance, comparison, online education, metrics, ranking.

1 INTRODUCTION

The higher education arena is becoming an ever more competitive market, with universities under constant pressure to secure increasing numbers of students and research funding. It is in this context, that university ranking systems have become powerful tools. Systems such as the Times Higher Education World University Rankings [1] and the Academic Ranking of World Universities [2] enable universities, potential students, employers, policy makers and funders to measure and compare universities at a global level.

The metrics of reputation and research are the factors that contribute most to positioning in many of the current ranking systems but learning experience and student satisfaction are increasingly becoming included in the set of metrics used. However, there are some issues with and criticism of rankings. These include ill-defined target audiences; homogenization that ignores institutional diversity; narrowness of focus, e.g. some just concentrate on research; volatile methodologies [3].

Every ranking system is based on a different theoretical conceptual framework which determines what is good or bad from the point of view of that system, and therefore results from different ranking systems are not comparable [3]. However, there is no specific ranking for online education providers. Despite sharing many goals with traditional universities, online universities (such as Universitat Oberta De Catalunya and the Open University UK) use a variety of teaching approaches and delivery mechanisms, and cater for a more disparate range of students and student needs. The existing ranking systems do not measure (or at least the indicators or metrics that they use are inapplicable) and thus inevitably undervalue these unique characteristics, making it especially difficult for online universities to compete effectively in the global higher education marketplace.

This is also true of other online education providers, such as Higher Education Open Educational Resources and the recently emerging Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) enterprises. However, the rapid growth of these low-cost or free online offerings highlights questions about the quality of online provision between the various online providers, necessary for prospective students to be able to make properly informed choices that the existing ranking systems are also unable to address.

In this paper we discuss work that we have undertaken to date towards the establishment of a ranking system that includes indicators of the quality of online distance teaching and learning, to enable the effective comparison of online distance universities. The focus of our work so far has been on developing a process for systemic comparisons of current online education quality assurance (QA) tools and systems. The process under development is intended to enable comparison of quality indicators along a variety of dimensions of import to different actors who will be involved in using and
producing indicators of quality in online education. This work has been completed in the first 8 months of the EU Erasmus+ funded ‘Comparing Online Distance Universities’ (CODUR) project with partners from Universitat Oberta De Catalunya (Barcelona, Spain) and Consiglio Nazionale Delle Ricerche (Genova, Italy).

2 METHOD

Our initial work on developing a process for systemic comparisons of current quality assurance tools and systems for online education has been through desk research. This has included an exploration along two themes. The first theme has been the current state-of-the-art in quality assurance tools for online education. The second theme is a consideration of the nature of the ranking tools that are targeted at comparing conventional universities e.g. the Times Higher Education World University Rankings [1] and the Academic Ranking of World Universities [2].

The approach has been the same for both themes and comprises

1. A review of relevant literature
2. An analysis of specific examples of relevant tools.

Our aim has been to normalise the terminology used to describe similar concepts in metrics and indicators across both themes, to identify dimensions that are considered important with respect to the quality assurance of online education, and to identify dimensions that are not included in the current crop of tools targeted at online education, but maybe useful.

The quality assurance tools and systems for online education that we have studied are shown in table 1. In table 2 we provide a summary of the ranking tools that are targeted at conventional universities which we have studied. The literature that we have consulted includes two reports reviewing relevant quality assurance tools i.e. the Nora project report produced by the Open University of Catalonia [4] and a review of Quality Models in Online and Open Education [5].

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3 RESULTS

Our analysis has shown that there are a variety of dimensions along which the current state of the art of QA tools and ranking systems can be discussed. Both approaches use a variety of different indicators to describe and/or quantify the quality of a range of aspects of the performance of an institution or course. The nature of these indicators varies greatly (e.g. presence and nature of institutional policies; mean class sizes).

We have identified two broad categories that are of interest to the CODUR project:

1. Dimensions of indicator content
   These dimensions relate to what is evaluated.

2. Dimensions of indicator production and use
   These dimensions relate to how indicators are produced and made use of by a variety of stakeholders.

There are a variety of actors with interest in the uses of quality assurance tools for online education. Çakır, Acartürk, Alahşehir and Çilingir [6] identified four groups with interests in summative tools:
- Prospective students and their families
- University administrators
- Policy makers
- Media organisations.

Sandmaung & Ba Khang [7] studied 8 papers on QA tools in HE and identified
- Students
- University teaching staff
- University managerial staff and
- employers

as stakeholders in addition to the groups put forward by Çakır et al. The perspectives of all these stakeholders need to be reflected in any process for systemic comparisons of current online education quality assurance tools and systems. We outline initial findings related to dimensions of indicator content and indicator production and use in sections 3.1 and 3.2 respectively.

3.1 Dimensions of indicator content

Ossiannilsson et al found that most quality models relate to three domains, which divide into six main dimensions as illustrated by Figure 1.

![Figure 1](image-url)
This figure is a summary of the three domains that Ossiannilsson et al identified i.e. Management (Institutional strategy, visions, planning and resourcing) Products (processes of curriculum and module development) and Services (student, and staff support, information resources etc.). Our analysis of the tools shown in Table 1 supports the use of these dimensions as a basis for a set of indicators to evaluate online education. Ossiannilsson et al also observed variations in the tools they assessed:

“Differences between the models reviewed lie in the grouping of criteria and the granularity of the detail applied at the performance indicator levels rather than the inherent approach to quality assurance” [5].

The differences in the grouping of criteria and the granularity of the indicators can be explained by variations in the tools conceptualisation of quality e.g. some have a greater focus on institutional strategy whilst other place emphasis on learning design. We discuss the ‘inherent approach to quality assurance’ that Ossiannilsson et al remarked on in section 3.2.

3.2 Dimensions of indicator production and use

Moore et al make the point that the intended use of any evaluation of distance education generally breaks down into two broad categories: formative and summative [8]. Formative use of quality indicators is usually of interest to the institution, programme or course that is being assessed, whereas summative evaluation is of interest to other stakeholders e.g. students and prospective students, media organisations. No matter whether the aim is for formative or summative use, use, there are 3 processes that need to be carried out to yield a set of indicators that can be used by stakeholders:

1. Data collection process
   - Questionnaires (completed by students, staff, and third-parties); publicly available data, visits.
2. Indicator production process (data analysis, processing and validation),
3. Indicator representation and publication
   - Reporting and publication online via interactive, non-interactive sites, copyright issues.

The exact nature of these processes will vary according to the aims of the particular QA tool under consideration, including its emphasis on formative vs summative use. Other factors such as the timing and frequency of the collection of data will influence both the utility of a set of indicators to a range of stakeholders including potential students, and the impact of the effort required to sustain the production process on other stakeholders (e.g. media organisations and universities).

The ‘inherent approach to quality assurance’ [5] shared by the tools mentioned in Table 1 is one of formative evaluation, in that these tools are usually used within a process that can produce recommendations for improvement of a course or programme. In addition the processes followed by each tool can and often do lead to a summative output in the form of some kind of certificate. In contrast, the tools shown in Table 2 result take a purely summative approach.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Through studying a range of literature about QA tools for online education, and a range of examples of such tools, we have identified several dimensions along which QA tools for online education can be compared. There are a variety of stakeholders interested in the utility of these QA tools, and it is apparent that there may be tensions between what one particular stakeholder group would find useful and the interests of other stakeholder groups. For example, a tool that facilitates comparison of teaching approaches across institutions within a particular subject may require significant investment to be effected. So despite its utility to students and prospective students it may not be appealing to policy makers or funders.

The overall process within which the QA tools for online education shown in Table 1 are used is usually one of formative and often collaborative evaluation leading to recommendations for improvement, as well as certification. The ranking systems shown in Table 2 typically make use of information from institutional questionnaires and other databases which can be efficiently processed to produce indicators. However, more analysis is needed to determine if this efficiency occurs at the cost of a meaningful representation of educational quality.

Our next steps include building on the initial steps described in this paper to specify a process for systemic comparisons of online education quality assurance tools and systems. We plan to carry out
a Delphi survey of stakeholders during the remainder of the project to further inform these developments.

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REFERENCES