

## Performance Indicators to assess Distance Education Quality in Malta

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### ABSTRACT

The use of performance indicators (PIs) as quality assurance (QA) instruments within traditional campus-based higher education institutions has been the centre of much debate and research as educators and administrators questioned the effectiveness of such tools. Additional issues, doubts and research possibilities materialized when the same PIs were applied to assure distance and eLearning courses quality offered by traditional universities and other commercial higher education institutions. This paper analyses the issue of PIs in eLearning policy as quality assessment tools by briefly tracing the development of PIs within QA schemes, as well as, investigate the way they have evolved to form part of eLearning policy.

**Keywords:** Performance indicators, eLearning, quality assurance, distance education, online education, higher education

### INTRODUCTION

A combination of three phenomena, namely, political, commercial and scientific, has led to an amplified demand for higher education courses, programmes and certification. The collapse of political barriers and the attractiveness of a free market economy, together with the commercialisation of universities and escalation of other private higher institutions, in tandem as well with the widespread evasiveness of ICT in all sectors of society, least of all higher education, have led higher education to become easily and conveniently available to a wider audience. This not only brought about other parties who's main financial interest has nothing to do with education, but also a much more serious threat, quality degeneration. The boost in demand for higher education certification through the electronic medium is testament to the proliferation of distance education and online courses within the higher education realm (Zou, 2006). Similar to the development of quality assurance and the evolution of traditional higher education policy, that brought about the debated use of performance indicators (Patrick & Stanley, 1998), eLearning policy had to adjust in order to accommodate quality assurance preoccupations, thereby satisfying both the educators and administrators (Stella & Gnanam, 2004) (Alstete & Beutell, 2004). In this paper I will be specifically focussing on the role of performance indicators in the elearning QA policy, rather than QA instruments in general. The rest of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 will look into QA and PIs in particular, with particular focus on whether mechanisms developed to assure quality within traditional higher education campus-based institutions in Malta can be directly transposed onto elearning. The specific use of PIs within elearning policy will be analysed in Section 3, while three case studies will be presented in the following section to further shed light on how such a policy implementation truly assures the quality of higher education programmes and institutions. My final thoughts, together with the conclusions drawn will be presented in Section 5.

### PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Quality assurance in higher education requires no justification as the term higher, by definition and expectation, entails something exceptional, of excellence (Harvey & Green, 1993), and thereby paramount that it strives to maintain such high quality standards that distinguish it from all other kinds of education. The need of a quality assurance policy in higher education in Malta is also mandated by the fact that a private and/or public institution is accountable to investors, management, and society with regular assessments, audits, and endorsements (Ball & Halwachi, 1987) (Blackmur, 2007). One popular way to measure and quantify quality levels in higher education has been the use of performance indicators. Such instruments are usually designed to provide reliable information on the nature and performance of the higher education institution, thereby giving a consistent set of measures of this performance (Patrick & Stanley, 1998). They can be considered as a range of statistical indicators that offer an objective measure of how the institution is performing. Such information could not only provide information on the nature and performance of the HE institution, but could potentially be employed as a performance benchmark for comparisons between similar institutions, and thereby used as quantitative evidence to inform policy makers (Barnetson & Cutright, 2000) to help monitor the progress of program implementation, compare actual performance

with planned or targeted goals, identify successes and areas in need of improvement, and identify opportunities for future enhancement. PIs are typically scored to mathematically check whether a specific institution is above a set threshold or not, and whether the required quality assurance standard, the PIs are measuring, has been achieved. Such standards are set upon higher education criteria that administrators and policy makers set out to ensure various dimensions of best practice (Martin & Stella, 2007). Before getting into the content and interpretation of PIs it is important to point out that PIs are by far the most widely employed QA instrumentation due to their as post-performance characteristics, in contrast to others like activity indicators that are predominantly meant to continuously assess ongoing processes and activities that will eventually bring about the final performance.

### **2.1 PIs content**

The contents of the PIs in higher education quality assurance policy vary from country to country but some common trends can easily be traced out into five categories. The first category gives important statistical information about where the entrants' come from by quantifying the different proportions sourcing from various under-represented groups such as state schools or colleges, specified age-adjusted socio-economic classes and low-participation neighbourhoods. This PI that is commonly termed 'widening participation indicators', is significant and justified to be part of such a policy because it ensures that higher education is not exclusive for a particular sector of society but accessible and affordable to all young people from whatever community or family they originate, including those with no particular tradition of higher education.

Non-continuation rates of students who failed to complete their higher education is another important indicator that reveals important information about the performance of that institution. The interpretation of such an indicator and the rest of the PIs will be discussed in the next sub-section. The third category corresponds with the previous one as it takes into consideration and attempts to evaluate completion rates, thereby giving an indication of successful graduates at a particular institution. This indicator sheds significant light on the success of the institution itself and considered an important factor within the quality assurance policy. At a more academic and research level a higher education institution requires to excel and thereby a number of PIs set out to measure and assess criteria related to research output. Traditional universities have over the years measured up against each other merely only on such an academic criteria especially before the 'new managerialism' era (Deem, 1998).

One final category of PIs that are commonly employed with QA policies at higher education is the employment of graduates, which in some way impinges and says something about the education levels they have accomplish or managed to attain from the same institution.

### **2.2 PIs interpretation**

The interpretation of the above mention five categories of PIs, based upon criteria and standards that had been set to ensure best practices, does not necessarily translate congruently to the original concepts of best practices set out in the quality assurance policy. We may have different understanding of what 'best' is, and there may be no one measure of it, and this can defeat the purpose of the policy itself. When designing, setting, employing and interpreting PIs administrator need to ensure that the spirit in which the QA policy was framed remains the same. Furthermore, if the outcome from the PIs interpretations are used to compare between HE institutions, then it needs to be ensured that the criteria set out are similar enough to compare and clear enough to identify the differences. Such policies within an institution are usually designed to holistically cover all possible facets, yet the benchmarks of two or more institutions can potentially have diverse benchmarks beyond comparison.

## **E-LEARNING POLICY**

Similar to the need of a QA policy in traditional campus-based programmes and institutions in Malta, is the indispensable necessity of a QA policy for distance and elearning courses and higher education providers that are increasingly emerging. The exponential growth of such commercial providers, together with the ICT accessibility escalation provided by the widespread use of the Internet, coupled with a supportive political/financial situation, has further consolidated the need to assess, regulate, and quality assure both the programmes offered and the institution offering them. The focus here will be on issues related to performance indicators in elearning policy as part of the QA instrumentation in Malta.

### **3.1 More of the same?**

One major concern when considering QA in elearning is whether to apply the same criteria, standards and indicators as those applied to traditional face-to-face education. Distance education and elearning are intrinsically different from conventional education (Van Damme, 2002) due to their characteristic methodological, pedagogical and organisational features. A thorough investigation is required to clearly identify what distinguishable attributes exist between the two modalities within a specific context, and not just in general. The institution's higher education philosophy, ground principles and educational standards when quality assuring its campus-based courses needs to

adjust and accommodate the different criteria that adequately fit their corresponding online course. The previously required assurances for traditional course are more than ever required and applied to elearning courses to meet the same academic and professional standards (World Bank, 2002), thereby introducing adequate criteria, standards and performance indicators within the elearning policy.

### 3.2 Continuous self-assessment or not?

Another issue that requires attention when consider QA in elearning is the self application of performance indicators as a continuous process, considering that PIs are conceptually post performance as mentioned earlier. Self-assessment can be performed at mainly three stages during the delivery of any kind of course or programme, namely, before, during or after. In the case where a higher education institution is seeking to ensure it exceeds the quality assurance thresholds set by a certifying authority's PIs, then a pre-screening process before the course and the institution are given the go ahead, is justified. On the other hand, a continuous self-assessment process where activity indicators (rather than PIs) are being employed by a HE institution to self-monitor itself, is encouraged to ensure it monitors and maintains its quality delivery or adjusts to improve it. Finally, PIs are even more ideal at the end of an educational delivery performance to reconfirm the institution/course standing, as well as, to compare to other similar institutions/courses. The decision of whether to continuously self-assess or not depends on motivation, context and timing.

### 3.3 Challenges

The main challenges with performance indicators in elearning policy emerge from the issues discussed in the previous sections as the specific characteristics of the domain itself distinguishes it from traditional learning and thereby requires specific criteria, standards and indicators to assure higher education providers attain, maintain and endeavour to operate within a reliable, ethical, efficient, and quality-oriented environment taking into consideration the benefits of all the stakeholders. eLearning policy should clearly identify and explicitly distinguish how performance indicators deviate from traditional indicators highlighting the variances that define and differentiate them uniquely. PIs in such a policy need to specifically capture the new conditions and structures within HE itself but which elearning emphasizes even more due to its nature. This is not just a matter of delivery but additional factors like resources, contact hours, administration, faculty members, coursework, course management, and other academic aspects that are usually taken for granted, due to their accustomed and established modus operandi, but which now take a completely new role, thereby generating new and atypical challenges for the validity of quality assurance through PIs. Another aspect that PIs need to capture differently from traditional HE learning, is the fact that the focus on who takes the leading role tends to spin around completely from the educator and institution, to the learner alone. Due to the distance factor and the extent of student control over the same outcome, PIs in elearning policy need to focus even more on the learning outcomes irrespective of the learning input. This is distinctly dissimilar from traditional PIs as student outcomes and attainment requires specific attention, assessment and quality assurance of how good the elearning institution is rigorously setting standards on how to measure achievement, certify, and eventually bestow degrees that are indistinguishable and recognised as their traditional counterparts. This stigma that elearning degrees, not just in HE, are considered of a lower quality, needs also to be addressed by PIs to specifically remove any doubts and any misconception that the degree awarded is dubious or inferior.

Another challenge related to quality assurance is the issue of site visit. This matter of physically going on site highlights most prominently the distinction between elearning and traditional learning as assessors are unable to actually go to the 'brick and mortar' institution and get a feel of the ambiance, resources available, staff and overall educational environment. Performance indicators need to be able to capture the equivalent of a site visit by capturing the essence of what happens during a physical equivalent, and assess those same criteria and standards that traditional PIs are out to evaluate. This turns out to be most challenging but it might simply involve a run-through the elearning course itself by a professional assessor, or even random online visits to capture snapshots of what it happening.

### CASE STUDIES

To better make the case for the different performance indicators in elearning policy, a number of real case studies will be presented to show how quality assurance has already been effective and has addressed much of the challenges discussed in the previous section. The Open University around the world ranks amongst the top universities for the quality of its performance that is predominantly by distance through its method of supported open learning (Sharples, et al., 2012). In UK alone students have highly rated the Open University as specific performance indicators assessed traditional quality assurance matters, as well as, other issues related to elearning (MORI, 2013). These included access to learning resources and educators without physically having to attend, flexibility in access to training and learning programs any time and from anywhere, flexibility to manage learning around work, family and personal commitments, capacity for students to learn at their own pace, as well as, capacity to network with other

learners via online forums. In Sri Lanka elearning in higher education has been making giant strides as policy makers have embraced the medium by developing a quality assurance toolkit (Rama & Hope, 2009) for distance and higher education institutions and programmes. This toolkit makes specific use of performance indicators to address elearning within the quality assurance policy by putting together a rubric to assess the quality of potential higher education programmes or institutions, as well as, existent ones. Similar toolkits have been made available in UK where the Quality Assurance - Quality Enhancement in e-Learning Special Interest Group (QAQE, 2013) developed a toolkit for 'Harnessing Quality Assurance Processes for Technology Enhanced Learning' whereby higher education institutions are seeking to quality assure their programmes that employ technology using a variety of modes like blended, online and distance courses (Barefoot, et al., 2011). Another similar toolkit developed by the Commonwealth of Learning makes use of performance indicators to judge the quality of non-traditional learning methods that involve open and distance education (Latchem, 2012). Finally the European Students' Union acknowledges the use of focussed performance indicators to ensure the quality of higher elearning programmes to be able to acknowledge the achieved learning outcomes while taking into consideration its specifics (ESU, 2013).

## CONCLUSIONS

In this paper performance indicators have been discussed within the context of elearning policy as instruments to assess and assure quality of higher education programmes and institutions in Malta. It has been argued that such mechanisms, due to their nature, are ideal for pre-screening purposes as in self assessment exercises to test, gauge and enhance the programme and/or institution prior to a QA exercise to attain accreditation. Alternatively, it could also be ideal to assess quality post procedure to maintain accreditation or compare with similar programmes and institutions. The main focus of the paper was to ensure that PIs applied to elearning within a QA policy need to take into consideration the unique characteristics of elearning in higher education in contrast to traditional learning at campus-based universities, to ensure that the QA exercise truly reflects the real intentions of what is being assessed. The majority of the PIs employed for traditional learning can be directly applied to elearning as they address theoretical criteria of a programme, but on the other hand, elearning policy makers need to be alert and knowledgeable about the specific characteristics of elearning and how it philosophically and pedagogically differs from traditional ways of teaching. Those aspects where elearning varies drastically from traditional ways need to be dealt assiduously, whereby elearning policy makers need to be creative and yet effective in adjusting the QA performance indicators to reflect the educational criteria under investigation.

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