

Quality Assuring E-Learning: A Review of Policy and Implementation in Adult Occupational and Vocational Learning in South Africa

Jason le Grange, Ph.D.
Head of Research
The Institute for Upskill and Development
Cape Town, South Africa

Abstract

The research considers e-learning implementation and the quality assurance thereof. Specifically, an analysis is provided of the implementation of e-learning in an occupational learning context in South Africa and the use of the Criterion-referenced Assessment methodology for quality assurance. Consideration is also given to how Training Providers have worked with each of the eight core criteria of the methodology in order to ensure credible learning and to meet quality assurance needs.

Feedback from Training Providers and other people working in the education and training industry is used to evaluate the usability of e-learning in a regulated framework and to consider the challenges and the opportunities that this methodology creates.

Country specific information is provided about South Africa's e-learning practices and the analysis provided regarding the implementation of e-learning in countries using a systematic quality assurance methodology will encourage debate and discourse.

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Policy Framework, e-Learning

Introduction and background

South Africa has a regulatory framework in place that provides for quality assurance of occupational learning against eight core criteria. The framework uses an outcomes-based methodology, which is linked specifically to unit standards with specific outcomes and assessment criteria that accumulate towards a qualification. All educational institutions are accredited against application of these criteria and all learner achievements evaluated by their performance against them. The policy framework has been adopted by the South African

Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the role of managing its implementation has been vested to the Education and Training Quality Assurance divisions of South Africa's Sector Education Training Authorities (SETA's).

Le Grange (2011) and Hoosen and Butcher (2012) note that there is a distance-learning framework in place that specifically provides guidelines for Training Providers regarding the delivery of good quality e-learning. Hoosen and Butcher (2012) further comment that the function of the new Quality Council for Trade and Occupations (QCTO) is to provide the framework for quality assurance and note that "[the QCTO's] QA [quality assurance] systems are designed to take account of the different modes of delivery employed in skills development and training, including DE [distance education]" (p. 53). The fact that, as of December 2013, there is still no South African national policy for e-learning, even though it is the role of the QCTO to develop one, while there continues to be a national focus on distance learning, suggests that those working in education and training in the country remain inexperienced with respect to quality assurance of e-learning.

As no national policy exists against which quality assurance of e-learning can be audited the Education and Training Quality Assurance body of one of the SETA's has adopted its own e-learning policy, the first of its kind in South Africa. Le Grange (2011) argues that e-learning as a delivery methodology can be aligned to the SAQA eight core criteria as well as the eight quality indicators for e-learning discussed by Anderson, Brown, Murray, Simpson and Mentis (2006). These two quality frameworks have been used as the basis of the policy developed by the SETA and for the approach to e-learning provision that it recommends.

Since the introduction of the policy very few Training Providers have attempted to be register as e-learning providers, even though they had previously asked for the policy and framework.

Review and evaluation of policy implementation

The e-learning policy developed by the SETA does not consider a technological framework, but rather looks at how a quality assurance framework, namely the eight core criteria, can be complimented by the use of technology that is not platform or software specific. Hirumi, writing in 2005, observes that "[m]aybe it is more practical to define separate standards first, then look to synthesize them over time. What we do know is that advances in technology will continue to outpace research and challenge conventional views of

teaching and learning” (p.327). While a policy linked to technology would require continuous updates as technology advances, as the SETA’s current policy is not written in this manner the challenge for Training Providers is to ensure that advances and updates in technology are recorded in their program explanations and quality management systems.

More specifically, in South Africa the following major challenges are noted:

1) E-learning and outcomes-based methodology versus distance learning

An outcomes-based methodology requires that learners demonstrate not only an understanding of theoretical-based knowledge but also their ability to “do”. Le Grange (2011) argues that e-learning and outcomes-based education are not only compatible, but perfect partners to monitor, track and support the learning process, and ultimately the learners. However, for this partnership to be effective there is a need for a shift in understanding amongst providers that e-learning cannot be distance learning only, in which learners manage their own learning without any participation or contribution from providers. Masoumi and Lindström (2011) argue that “e-learning is not just a delivery medium along with other educational tools; rather, it ought to be viewed as a new approach to education, teaching, and learning” (p. 28), which is in line with an outcomes-based methodology. This indicates that e-learning should be given its own language and methodology and be separated from distance learning. Unfortunately, the Training Providers consulted struggle to note that the onus is not only on the learner to be in charge of their own learning, but for the delivery platform to be able to track and support the learners’ progress.

2) Outcomes-based methodology versus traditional education

Some challenges are observed relating particularly to the attempted use and application of traditional educational tools and techniques in an e-learning environment, such as:

a. Content dumping

Training Providers take content that is or would have been used in traditional learning environments and make it available online for learners without considering that the e-learning platform should transfer and adapt the content from a self-study context into either lecture-based or interactive tools that track the learners’ progress through the learning program.

b. Inappropriately designed assessments

Training Providers develop and administer assessments that have been designed to be only knowledge recall type questions, so that the system can “assess” the learners without the need for human interaction. This is in direct contravention of outcomes-based methodology. Furthermore, the types of assessment instruments selected are not the most appropriate for the outcomes being assessed.

Comparing the challenges experienced by Training Providers (educational institutions) in Taiwan with those experienced in South Africa

E-learning is implemented in multiple countries, and across multiple quality assurance frameworks, some of which are self-imposed by the organisations that use them, or recommended by the communities in which they are applied to ensure the application of best practice. In order to understand the commonalities in terms of challenges noted in the delivery of e-learning in a regulated environment it is important to consider reviews that have been conducted by other researchers.

Sang, Chang and Yu (2011) conducted an evaluation of the quality of programs and some of the shortfalls experienced in Taiwan. When comparing and contrasting this evaluation to that of South African programs, it is helpful to note that challenges experienced in a more global context are in fact similar to those identified locally. For example:

- It is noteworthy that in Taiwan, like South Africa, Providers use knowledge recall in the assessment of knowledge, and “many courseware applications used multiple-choice questions to test the level of memorization in the knowledge” (p. 1621).
- Similarly, preparing content that is fit-for-purpose and outcomes-based is limited to providing simple download processes and content that is cut and pasted from the original paper bound products. “Most presentations in the courseware were limited to using streaming content, which usually comprised lectures or slide shows as a major method of presentation. This type of presentation is generally ineffective in motivating learners since it differs little from reading a textbook” (p. 1621).

What the South African market can learn from the Taiwanese is that the role of the technology developer needs to be incorporated into discussions regarding the implementation of e-learning. While Training Providers may have education and training knowledge, this does not necessarily translate into an understanding of the software or platform development required in order to meet the needs of education and training in an e-learning environment. In many cases, it would be helpful not only to engage with the Training Provider representatives,

namely the curriculum designers and content developers, but with the developers of the e-learning platform to ensure that there is no misrepresentation or misunderstanding with respect to what can be achieved or what is required to be achieved. Sang, Chang and Yu (2011) note that “clients who request courseware applications from developers often do not know how to inspect the products, and the [technology] developers often encounter problems communicating with clients due to the lack of a common language for describing the quality of e-learning courseware” (p. 1623).

Recommendations

For regulatory bodies that intend to develop e-learning policy, based on current experience, the following is recommended.

- 1) Ensure that e-learning policy is aligned with national policy on the delivery of learning, especially if a current framework exists.
- 2) Ensure e-learning is defined and understood in terms of the delivery methodology required and the expectations of the body, including and not limited to:
 - a. Ensuring terminology and definitions of e-learning are clearly explained in light of the education system namely, norm-based, outcomes-based etc.
 - b. Ensuring that the quality assurance tool (evaluation instrument) to be used for assessing providers is supplied prior to any visits scheduled for that purpose.
 - c. Ensuring that discussions are had regarding the benefits, challenges and implications of using open-source versus proprietary software (closed-source).
- 3) Engage in information sharing and sensitization workshops on e-learning delivery as required in terms of the definition adopted, with both Training Providers and their development partners.
- 4) Develop a language guide in terms of regulation, which explains how the regulatory body defines and interprets e-learning vocabulary.
- 5) Consider the multiple delivery methodologies noted within e-learning and whether or not mobile learning may pose a challenge to the integrity of existing quality assurance.

- 6) Pilot the policy in conjunction with accrediting a Training Provider. This will help with understanding the unique challenges faced by all participants in the development and delivery of e-learning within the country in which the policy will be implemented.

Conclusion

A Quality Assurance Framework can only improve the quality of provision in education, training and development. However, the challenges identified as part of discussions and evaluations indicate that sharing information and capacity-building are required by a regulatory body.

E-learning has the potential to offer learning in remote areas of South Africa, and the world, and with careful consideration of the power offered by this opportunity, an empowered evaluative framework can be developed and implemented such that it ensures quality provision.

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