How Students’ Experience in E-Learning Affects Their Judgements about the Quality of an Online Course

Roumiana Peytcheva-Forsyth, Sofia University, Sofia, Bulgaria
Blagovesna Yovkova, Sofia University, Sofia, Bulgaria

ABSTRACT

The increasing attempts of traditional universities to introduce e-learning in its different modalities – ranging from fully online to different combinations between online and face-to-face pedagogical interactions - raise serious questions about the quality assurance of the learning experience. One possible approach to explore the quality of online learning is to adopt the perspective of the decision-makers, the higher educational institutions and their staff. Another approach is to investigate what are the different dimensions of quality online learning experience from the perspective of students. This article presents a study of students’ opinions and attitudes about the quality of different elements in the pedagogical design of blended courses. The majority of the students involved in the research have had no or little experience in online learning. The authors try to find out whether there is a relation between the students’ previous experience in e-learning and their judgements about different aspects of its quality.

Keywords: Blended Learning, E-Learning, Quality Evaluation

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of information technologies over the past few decades has caused major changes in our modern, globalised society, reciprocally reflected in higher education. Intensive development of various forms of technology-enhanced teaching and learning have been observed worldwide, even in traditional universities, and some of them have seriously challenged traditional pedagogical approaches. Similar processes have been observed in Bulgarian universities, but with a significantly slower pace, since the traditional teacher-centred model of teaching in general prevails over student-centered constructivist pedagogical approaches, especially ones associated with digital technologies (Peytcheva-
A significant impetus for the uptake of e-learning in Bulgarian universities was provided by the initiative of the Ministry of Education during recent years when the government invested 30 million BGN through European Structural Funds on the implementation of distance education. As a result, over 25 universities are developing and testing various approaches for transforming traditional courses into online ones, while university lecturers are trained in effective models and strategies for online teaching. The various practices of blending face-to-face with online teaching and learning, in turn, have given rise to intensive processes of theoretical reflection of these practices in an attempt for them to be conceptualized by existing pedagogical theory, or used as a basis for creating new pedagogical paradigms. One important aspect of theoretical reflection on the phenomenon of e-learning is its quality – the subject of analysis in this article.

E-learning assumes different models and modifications (from being fully online to integrating particular technology in a traditional course), and its quality has become increasingly difficult to assess by using solely the criteria and approaches of quality assurance pertaining to traditional face-to-face education (Jara, 2007). The initial enthusiasm of theoreticians and practitioners for the easily predictable efficiency of any new-technologies-based learning has increasingly become a subject of serious doubt in view of research results in this field. A growing number of researchers are directing their efforts to establish the specific characteristics of effective e-learning in higher education, as well as those sets of factors which in their complementarity ensure the quality of the learning experience (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia & Jones, 2009; Tamim, Bernard, Borokhovski, Abrami & Schmid, 2011).

Specific characteristics of e-learning which play a special role in ensuring its quality include: e-content and resources, online communication, learners’ support, assessment and especially formative assessment. The quality of these characteristics as a part of online course design is a special focus in this research.

In this paper the quality of distance education courses is considered through the perspective and evaluation of the students participating in some of its various forms and blended patterns. It partially presents the results from a study conducted within a large-scale project for the implementation of distance learning in the education specialties at Sofia University. Over the last few years more than ninety lecturers have been trained in redesign of traditional courses into online format, as a result of which more than 100 courses were transformed.

ABOUT THE STUDY

One of the most important issues for us was to ensure that the quality of online learning is established at the design stage. This is the reason why an online course assessment-and-self-assessment tool was developed, comprising more than sixty quality criteria covering all design components such as course introduction, learning objectives and activities, resources, communication, student support, and assessment. The system is developed based upon research of wider European experience in the field, and the quality criteria for distance education developed by the Bulgarian National Accreditation Agency. After the evaluation of the courses by external experts the ones that fulfilled the criteria were approved for pilot-testing.

The pilots were carried out with more than 900 full-time and part-time students from one Bachelors and three Master programmes at the Faculty of Pedagogy, Faculty of Primary and Pre-School Education and Teacher-Training departments at Sofia University.

Courses subject to the study differed in terms of number of students enrolled, subject matter, duration and the ratio of online and face-to-face learning activities. For their typologisation, Jara and Mohamed (2007) classification was used. It is based on a thorough analysis of the formats of courses and modules at the Institute of Education, University of London.
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