Chapter III

Building Quality from Satisfaction in Online Learning Using Total Quality Management: A Case Study

Paul Darbyshire, Victoria University, Australia

Abstract

Full degree programs have been offered via virtual classroom environments for some time now, and the pace of online program development is not abating. Even though many of these programs are beginning to mature there is still skepticism in terms of the quality of the programs utilizing the new paradigm. While some of this may be unfounded, there is always a justification phase with the introduction of a new paradigm, and it is important to demonstrate “equivalent quality”. The issue of quality education is not an online learning issue only, and often student satisfaction surveys are what we use to point to quality programs. There is often some doubt as to whether such surveys are capable of addressing the issue of quality, but in many cases these are all we have in terms of feedback.
However, if an online program is designed around “best practice” in education, and utilizes total quality management techniques, then such surveys can be taken as indicative of “quality”. This chapter discusses the issues of student satisfaction and design of a quality program using total quality management techniques. This chapter utilizes a case study of an online MSc program to highlight these issues.

Introduction

Although full degrees have been offered in a virtual classroom environment since 1969, it has really only been since the development of the Web that such degree programs have appeared in larger numbers. Since its inception just a decade ago, the Internet promises to become the dominant paradigm for education of the future. It is ironic that universities and many academics are struggling to come to grips with the evolving nature of education being forced on them by the ubiquitous Web. The universities are largely responsible for the Web’s development and evolution, which is now in turn causing us to challenge the very nature of education itself.

Most Western academics now utilize the Web in one form or another for hybrid teaching modes in their subjects. While this trend dominated the early “discovery years” of the Web in education, many universities either have developed, or are developing subjects or entire degree programs to be offered solely online. There are a number of factors driving this including competitive advantage, market domination, opening education markets, economic (perceived), and so forth, but it does raise some interesting questions on quality. There has been concern for some time about the quality of education in these programs, and while some attempts have been made to address this, the questions remain largely unanswered.

In fact, there are differing opinions on how to judge the quality of education in general, notwithstanding the extra dimension of online education. Such questions are hard to answer in subjects where hybrid teaching methods (combination of online and on-ground) are used; it would seem that we need comparisons between identical programs utilizing online and on-ground paradigms. There are even questions here as to whether this would deliver the answers we want. In subjects, and entire degree programs taught online, student satisfac-