Chapter III

Quality Assurance Issues for a Web-Based Degree in Motor Disability Assessment

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ABSTRACT

The growth of credit-bearing distance learning offerings and enrollments at accredited, degree-granting colleges and universities has been astonishing in the last few years. This growth raises the demand for reliable information about quality. According to Kess et al. (2002), quality in education should not be forced into one single definition, but rather a collection of smaller elements, processes, which contribute to education quality in different dimensions. These elements, when chained together, constitute the overall quality in training, and the improvement of quality is achieved through simultaneous action on all these levels. Furthermore, accreditation and quality assessment in education should not be considered as separate systems. They are an integral part of the continuous quality improvement context on the road to total quality.

In this chapter we will discuss the approach adopted for ensuring the quality of the MODASPECTRA (MOtor Disability Assessment SPEcialists’ TRAining) Web-based degree: a research and technology development project funded by the European Union. More in detail, the procedures enacted for ensuring the
quality of contents and the quality of the software tools developed, and of their documentation, will be discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The growth of credit-bearing distance learning offerings and enrollments at accredited, degree-granting colleges and universities has been astonishing in the last few years. According to Eaton (2001), “During the academic year 1997-98, approximately 1.6 million students were enrolled in credit-bearing distance learning courses (whether electronic, television-based, or print- and mail-based, and including both synchronous and asynchronous instruction) in degree-granting post-secondary colleges and universities in the United States. That year, 54,000 college-level credit-bearing distance-learning courses were offered in 1,680 institutions. Thirty-five states currently operate virtual universities or participate in a regional virtual university, typically created by existing degree-granting colleges and universities.”

Klaus (2002) reports about a comprehensive funding program launched by the German government regarding the promotion of new media in education. Federal funds up to the amount of 175 million euro, corresponding to about a hundred euro for each student in the country, have been allotted for the program covering the period from 2000 to 2004. The objective is “to develop a new quality of Web-based training arrangements with digital content using the potential of multimedia technology.” A similar program, the Swiss Virtual Campus Impulse Programme, involves the higher-level academic institutions in Switzerland (Universities, Federal Institutes of Technologies and Universities of Applied Sciences). For the years 2000-2003, a budget close to 50 million of CHF has been made available by the Confederation and the various institutions involved, to be used for a total of approximately 50 projects. The goal of the program is the formation of responsible bodies for the development and use of Internet-based e-study modules for higher education (Stucki, 2002).

This growth raises the demand for reliable information about quality.

Quality is defined in ISO 9000 as “the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs.” According to the Higher Engineering Education for Europe working group, quality in higher education can be interpreted as “specifying worthwhile learning goals and enabling students to achieve them.” Specifying worthwhile learning goals involves paying attention to academic standards, to the expectations of society, to students’ aspirations, to the demands of industry and other employers, to the requirements of professional institutions, to the fundamental principles of the subject, etc. Moreover, enabling students to achieve these goals involves making use of research into how students learn, adopting good course design procedures and building on successful teaching experience, all of which may require professional development for lecturers (H3E, 1999).
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