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e-Learning Maturity Model (eMM) as a methodology to self-assess the quality of blended learning

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Abstract

One of the main objectives of this paper is to present the development and implementation of a quality assurance system to improve e-teaching and e-learning strategies and to ensure a consistently high quality of online and blended education for adult learners.

Throughout an intervention study in three centers of adult education and interviews with different stakeholders within these centers, the e-learning Maturity Model (eMM) (Marshall, 2010) was contextualized and fine-tuned to fit their specific needs. Guidelines on how to contextualize and use the eMM to self-assess the quality of e-learning or blended learning in one’s own institution are presented.

This study was carried out in the context of the Strategic Basic Research project ‘Adult Learners Online: Blended and Online Learning in Adult Education and Training (ALO)!’ (www.iwt-alo.be) funded by Research Foundation Flanders (formerly by the Institute for Innovation through Science and Technology).

Introduction

Over the last ten years – a time span in which blended learning has become the new ‘normal’ according to some authors (Graham, Woodfield, & Harrison, 2013; Norberg, Dziuban, & Moskal, 2011) - a vast amount of studies has been published on blended learning (Drysdale, Graham, Spring, & Halverson, 2013). The majority of studies are conducted in the context of Western higher education institutions (Drysdale et al., 2013), although many authors also address the participation of the so-called “non-traditional students” (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002) in higher education (HE), who are in many cases older and often combine their studies with work and family occupations (Bates & Sangra, 2011; Deschacht & Goeman, 2015; Tyler-Smith, 2006). The focus of blended learning research is mainly on the course level and course development topics, while – according to Graham et al. (2013) – only a few studies guide institutions on how to implement blended learning deliveries at the institutional level.

The main objective of this paper is to present the development and implementation of a quality assurance system to improve e-teaching and e-learning strategies and to ensure a consistently high quality of online and blended education for adult learners. Through an empirical study in three studies
based on the e-Maturity Model – a model for higher education – an adapted framework for adult education will be put forward.

Continuous quality improvement (CQI) in education

CQI and Total Quality Management in Education

The Total Quality Management (TQM) movement – promoting a holistic and process-oriented quality management approach to support the continuous improvement of all aspects of an organisation (Bloxham, 2010) – provided the foundation for the management approach in CQI. Operationalizations of TQM are Deming’s PDCA-cycle, the RADAR-cycle of the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) and the process-based quality management systems from the ISO 9000-family (Bollaert, 2014a; Stracke, 2006).

The introduction of quality assurance (QA) in the sector of HE in Europe in the late 1980s and the early 1990s has led to discussions on how quality in (higher) education could be defined (Bollaert, 2014a). Harvey and Green (1993) propose five ways for describing quality, of which quality as transformation – which implies quality enhancement and continuous improvement (Newton, 2000) – is most stressed in Western HE. The European Standards and Guidelines in Quality Assurance (ESG; Bollaert, 2015a) designed to support the Bologna process fostered the development of national and institutional quality assurance systems in European HE. Many European HE institutions (HEI) increased their efforts to develop and implement internal quality management systems. Despite these efforts, the value and power of QA to lead to quality improvement or enhancement has been debated in recent years (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Kleijnen, Dolmans, Willems, & Hout, 2014; Williams, 2016) because of the possible extra burden and control on the teaching staff.

The e-learning Maturity Model

The e-learning Maturity Model (eMM; Marshall, 2007; 2010) is in origin a quality improvement framework that can be used for benchmarking purposes of describing the e-learning capability of institutions, and specifically Higher Education Institutions. The eMM consists of 35 processes grouped under five process areas (learning, development, support, evaluation, and organisation). Per process several practices are formulated (on five dimensions of capability) that should be evaluated through a (color-coded) five-point scale (not practised / not adequate, partially adequate, largely adequate, fully adequate, not assessed).

The dimensions of capability (see Marshall, 2007, p5 for full descriptions) should not be regarded as levels which would imply a hierarchical model; yet, the underlying idea is holistic capability. As described in Marshall (2007, p.4): ‘... Rather than the model describing progressive levels, it describes the capability of a process from synergistic perspectives. An organization that has developed capability for all processes will be more capable than one that has not. Capability at the higher levels that is not supported by capability at the lower dimensions will not deliver the desired outcomes; capability at the lower dimensions that is not supported by capability at the higher dimensions will be ad-hoc, unsustainable and unresponsive to changing organizational and learner needs.’
**Dimension 1. Delivery** is concerned with the creation and delivery of process outcomes. Assessments of this dimension are aimed at determining the extent to which the process is seen to operate within the institution.

**Dimension 2. Planning** assesses the use of predefined objectives and plans in conducting the work of the process.

**Dimension 3. Definition** covers the use of institutionally defined and documented standards, guidelines, templates and policies during the process implementation.

**Dimension 4. Management** is concerned with how the institution manages the process implementation and ensures the quality of the outcomes.

**Dimension 5. Optimization** captures the extent an institution is using formal approaches to improve capability measured within the other dimensions of this process. Capability of this dimension reflects a culture of continuous improvement.

The evaluations of the practices are then averaged per process (and dimension) to get a color code for that process in that dimension. This way, departments/institutions can get a visual image of the level of maturity of their department/institutions, and compare with either other departments/institutions or with an earlier state of the department/institution. Figure 1 provides an overview of the 35 processes per process area; the development processes provide an example of the visual scaling per dimension.

**Quality Culture in Education**

Bendermacher, oude Egbrink, Wolfhagen, & Dolmans (2014) state that “there is a growing sense of awareness among HEI that tools and instruments for quality management have too often been implemented while neglecting the organizations’ culture”. The importance of developing a quality culture is acknowledged by Bollaert (2015b) and Harvey and Stensaker (2008).

In the previous century, the TQM-team of the Juran Institute already stressed the importance of a quality culture and proposed to determine and influence the quality culture as a part of the human resource management (Gambi, Boer, Gerolamo, Jørgensen, & Carpinetti, 2015; Juran & Godfrey, 1999; Woods, 1997). In the literature of QA in HE, the concept of quality culture regained attention due to the Quality Culture Project of the European University Association (EUA) (“Quality Culture Project 2002-2006,” n.d.). Since then, a considerable amount of articles has been published on this topic, different projects and conferences on quality culture were launched (AQ Austria, 2016; EUA, 2012a; NVAO, 2014; Sattler, Götzen, & Sonntag, 2013; Sattler et al., 2016) and the recognition of quality culture as an essential factor of quality and QA was incorporated in the renewed ESG (Bollaert, 2014b).

In the Quality Culture Project, the EUA defines quality culture as:

“An organisational culture that intends to enhance quality permanently and is characterised by two distinct elements: on the one hand, a cultural/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality (= quality commitment) and on the other hand, a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts (= quality management)” (EUA, 2006)“.

3
According to the EUA (2006), three conditions mediate quality management and quality commitment: communication, participation and trust. The institutional leadership plays a vital role in facilitating, promoting and operationalizing these circumstances. In two follow-up projects, the EUA further examined and expanded the concept of quality culture (EUA, 2009, 2012b). Some important conclusions from these projects were the acknowledgement of the organizational contexts, the existing of particular cultures and subcultures in organizations and the diversity of stakeholders perspectives, values and belief in the context of QA and quality culture (Vettori, 2012; Vettori & Loukkola, 2013). Vettori & Loukkola (2013) point out that institutions should deal with three engagement issues to assure the commitment and participation of different stakeholders: ownership, sense-making and communication with transparent feedback loops. Ehlers (2009) acknowledges the importance of participation and communication for building trust among stakeholders in a quality dialogue.
The HEI Quality Cultures Project (2012-2016) developed a model of Quality Culture and a Quality Culture Inventory (QCI) to assess institutional quality culture in HE, based on empirical evidence from a systematic literature review and interviews with international experts (Sattler et al., 2013, 2016). The assessment model of the HEI Quality Cultures Project encompasses both structural-formal and organizational-psychological elements (see figure 2). The structural-formal elements comprise normative dimensions (e.g. quality goals) and areas of attention at managerial level (e.g. allocation of sources and responsibilities) and operational level (e.g. tools and measurement instruments). The organizational-psychological elements refer to the attitude of all staff members and relevant stakeholders, both collectively as individually. Quality oriented leadership, communication and participation are essential to connect the structural-formal to the individual level and vice versa, as mentioned before (Ehlers, 2010; EUA, 2006).

![Assessment model of quality culture, HEI Quality Cultures Project](image)

**Figure 2: Assessment model of quality culture, HEI Quality Cultures Project (Sattler et al., 2013, 2016)**

**Context: QA of online and blended learning in Flemish adult education**

Until now, formal Flemish adult education does not belong to HE institutions but is organized in adult education centers. Adult education centers (AEC) offer education for a highly diverse audience, from adult participants at the level of primary schooling (K9) over second chance education for students without a secondary degree to students in courses at level 5 of the European Qualification Framework (associate degree) and teacher training programs.

**Blended learning in adult education**

Since 1999, the Ministry of Education is promoting blended learning in adult education, and AEC can receive additional funding for their blended learning courses if these include between 25 and 95 percent of distance education since 2007 (“Decreet betreffende het volwassenenonderwijs,” 2007).
Due to its flexibility of access and learning mode, blended and online learning (OBL) is becoming more and more popular in Flemish adult education, especially in the teacher training programs, where almost 75 percent of the enrollments take place in blended learning courses (figure 3). Since 2012, the number of enrollments in blended learning programs on the secondary level is increasing as well (figure 4). By data retrieved for the Ministry of Education, it turns out that 70% of all the Flemish adult education centers organize blended learning courses, although there is considerable diversity among blended course delivery.

It is known from literature that blended learning is defined in different ways by several authors in literature (Boelens, Van Laer, De Wever, & Elen, 2015). In this study, we use blended learning as a combination of face-to-face and distance learning, as defined by the Ministry of Education in Flanders, which is responsible for the funding of the AEC.

Quality assurance in higher and adult education

For higher education institutions, external quality assessment (or visitation) has been installed in Flanders since 1993. The Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) is responsible for the accreditation and the evaluation of the programs on the basis of institutional visitations conducted by a NVAO commission. In preparation of the visitations, institutions have to submit a self-evaluation report that serves two goals. On the one hand, it is the guideline and primary
source of information for the Commission before, during and after the site visits. On the other hand, writing this report collaboratively should stimulate interaction among and engagement of the staff; and foster the internal quality system and a shared quality dialogue.

Adult education centers are encouraged to develop internal quality assurance since the 1990s and are obliged to have one since a decree of 2009 (Decreet betreffende de kwaliteit van onderwijs, 2009). Every institution has the autonomy to set up an internal quality assurance approach at their own discretion (“De kwaliteitswijzer van de onderwijsinspectie,” n.d.). AEC are controlled by the Inspectorate of Education, which recently developed a new framework of inspection. In this framework, the Inspectorate formulates distinct quality expectations for education, aiming to enhance the internal quality development of institutions and foster the quality culture through self-reflection (“Van ROK naar OK naar inspectie 2.0,” n.d.)

Currently, the Inspectorate of Education controls the blended learning provision within the scope of the provisional funding on four formal criteria: 1) the delivery has to meet the criteria of the legislation, 2) courses have to comprise at least one face-to-face moment for evaluation, 3) the evaluation mode must be clearly described and 4) teaching materials and methods should support multimedia and 5) the regular participation of students has to be followed (“Decreet betreffende het volwassenenonderwijs.,” 2007).

Methodology

This paper presents a descriptive case study of an intervention by the primary author of this article in three centers for adult education. The process of assessing the quality of blended learning programs started consecutively in the three cases. Therefore, the interventions in cases two and three could build upon the knowledge gained in the previous case(s). The focus here is not on the results or findings of the assessment itself, but on the process of assessing the quality of blended learning programs through the eMM, aiming to provide guidelines to tailor the assessment procedure to the context and to contextualize the eMM. In every case, a preparatory meeting was held between the researcher and the management, to discuss and explain the methodology and assessment procedures and to select the appropriate institutional contexts or programs.

Case one

Case one - described in depth in Van Laer et al. (2015) – is one of the largest centers of adult education in Flanders with more than 10 years of experience with blended learning programs both at level 5 of the European Qualification Framework (EQF) as programs at the level of secondary adult education (level 4 of the EFQ). The purpose was to assess the quality of the existing blended learning delivery and detect areas of improvement.

Case two

The second case is in a center of adult education that just underwent a merger between several centers and the program is to become mentor in childcare. This is a program at the level of secondary education (level of 4 of the EQF) and is situated within the subject area ‘Personal care’. The Flemish government has recently decided that every employee of a nursery should have a degree at level 4 –
such as that of mentor in childcare — so there is a need for this program. Because only limited numbers of centers are entitled to provide this program, people from the wider region enroll. Moreover, most student work already in childcare and have to combine a job with education. Providing this program in a blended format is as such a great asset.

The center has limited experience with blended learning in the program Mentor of childcare and the initial question for the assessment was: what quality criteria must be considered when converting a F2F-program to a blended learning format. The center had requested (and obtained) additional funding from the government for converting the program to a blended program.

Case three

The third case is a medium-sized center of adult education, belonging to an umbrella of centers with a general management level, responsible for communal services for all member centers (e.g. the management of the electronic learning management system (LMS)). The program is the same program as in case two: mentor in childcare. The center is offering blended learning in some courses of this program for a few years, but the whole programs is not yet in blended learning. The center considers converting the program to more than 50 percent of distance education expecting a growing intake of unqualified employees in nurseries and will apply for additional funding from the government for the next academic year. The program coordinator and the person in charge for the support of the LMS took the initiative to do an assessment with the team in preparation to the conversion of the program to promote a quality awareness and shared understanding of the requirements of qualitative blended learning. The management approved the initiative, but couldn’t join the assessment session.

Results

Assessment of the eMaturity Model in three cases

Case one served as pilot study to examine whether eMM is appropriate for the context of adult education. In this pilot, the English version of the eMM, and its practices were used. The practices of the different processes were clustered on the dimension level into a questionnaire for self-assessment such that the respondents should not go through 35 different worksheets. The management of the center selected 9 people of different profiles (2 OBL teachers, 4 program managers from different departments (Informatics and Accountancy at level 5 of the EQF; Second Chance Education and Business Management at level 4 of the EQF), 2 IT staff members and the principal) to fill-out the questionnaire. Every respondent had to rate practices of processes from three different process areas that fitted best with their profile. Respondents were given three hours to fill out their questionnaire individually.

In this case, an assessment of all the dimensions was possible, although the two teachers (T1 and T2) and one IT staff member (IT) declared to be insufficiently familiar with the QA-procedures in the center, which led to uncomplete assessments on the dimensions definition (not assessed: T1: 5%, T2: 40%, IT:42%), management (not assessed: T1: 46%, T2: 68%, IT: 25%) and optimization (not assessed T1: 77%, T2: 74%, IT: 35%). This finding supported our consideration that group assessments could be
more supportive to foster a quality dialogue between the management and coordination level of an organization and the practitioners.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
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<td>Optimization</td>
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Figure 5 Sample of the adapted (translation & description) eMM after case one.

In case two, the management selected 15 processes -mainly from the process areas Learning, Development and Support- for a group assessment with the teachers of the program and 10 processes of the process area Organization for a group assessment with a task group addressing blended learning issues on the institutional level. In both assessments, the manager and program coordinator were involved. For this assessment, the original eMM was translated to Dutch, including short descriptions of the practices. The respondents filled out the instrument collaboratively on paper during three sessions (see figure 5) and afterwards, the assessment scores were entered in the digital version of eMM. The manager and program coordinator participated in every group assessment and were very supportive, constructive and engaged.

In case two, only the dimensions planning and definition could be assessed as there were no practices on the dimension delivery for blended learning courses yet. Nevertheless, many processes of eMM are valid for F2F-delivery as well (e.g. process L1: “Learning objectives guide the design and implementation of courses”). For this kind of more generic educational processes, practices on the dimension delivery could be assessed on comparable F2F practices. In case two, the participants of the group assessment sessions were able to formulate clear areas for special attention for the conversion of the program into blended learning and to prioritize actions for improvement.

For the assessment in case three, the instrument was simplified as shown in figure 6: a short introduction outlines the essence of each processes and processes are assessed on the dimension level instead of on detailed practices, as was suggested by practitioners of several AEC during a workshop in December 2016.
In case three, the focus of the group assessment was mainly on the dimensions delivery and planning. In contrast with case two, the process to formulate areas of improvement passed off less smoothly because the participants felt less concern and the lack of commitment of the management to confirm possible engagements.

The assessment in case three was on a team day, and the team decided to focus on 16 processes (L1, L7-10 of process area Learning, D5-7 of process area Development, S1, S2 and S4 of process area Support, E1 and E2 of process area Evaluation and O2, O5 and O9 of process area Organization). During the assessment session, the staff was not really motivated to take part in the assessment, as their program just underwent an external quality assessment that turned out positive for the blended learning provision. The participants had the feeling that the assessment was free of obligations because the conversion of the program did not start yet and because of a lack of participation and engagement of the management.

**Discussion**

Depending on the level of experience with online and blended learning in the institution, department or program, the nature of an assessment with eMM became different.

In all cases, all processes were introduced before the assessment sessions, including the reasoning behind the dimensions of eMM (reflecting a PCDA logic which was familiar to most participants) and the holistic and “synergetic perspectives” of eMM. In cases two and three, only a selection of the eMM processes were assessed. In case two, the management made these selections intentionally in function of the assessors involved (learning and development processes for the teaching staff and...
organizational processes for members of the work group blended learning); in case three, the staff members selected the processes on their own according their point of interest, which was not conducive to the focus of the assessment.

The first center had already a lot of experience with online and blended learning in different programs. The self-assessment with eMM enabled assessors to reflect on their current state of play and to identify strengths and areas of improvement. In the other two centers - with less experience with blended learning or the intention to convert a program to blended learning- a self-assessment proved to be a way to create an awareness of what quality criteria must be taken in consideration when converting to blended learning or expanding the amount of distance education.

Development of a quality culture

One of the pitfalls of using assessment- or benchmarking instruments is that self-assessments are restricted to a process of “ticking boxes”, generating glossy reports, which disappear in cupboards and reappear when an external auditor comes around. In such a case, a self-assessment does not lead to in-depth discussions and reflections and a quality commitment to improve the practices needing improvement.

Due to the circumstances in which the assessment took place in case one -with individual assessments and with a difficult English version of eMM- several conditions for a less successful assessment were fulfilled. Especially teachers and one IT staff member had difficulties to assess practices on the dimension definition, management and optimization. A group session could have been valuable to discuss these findings and talk about strategies to improve communication strategies between the management level and people on the work floor. After the assessment, the management organized a follow-up day for the program managers and the IT-people, during which the vision on blended learning was discussed and fine-tuned. Eight processes of eMM were selected for an improvement plan. Unfortunately, the teachers could not join this session and till now, the improvement plan is not yet put in concrete actions, due to external factors, such as personnel changes on the management level. Nevertheless, participants were positive about the assessment: “eMM helps me to reflect about our current state of the delivery of OBL programs in our school.” and “While doing this assessment, it becomes clear to me that we need to think more about a consistent pedagogy for our OBL programs. I think that we have to cooperate more on this issue, for instance together with the media lab.”

Notwithstanding these positive reactions, we were convinced after case one that a self-assessment with eMM should be more supportive to foster a quality commitment of all participants and create a forum for communication about shared expectations, values and beliefs. Hence, the methodology was changed into group assessments in cases two and three to create a forum for quality discussions on the selected processes of eMM.

In case two, there was a strong commitment of both participants of the management level, teachers of the program in conversions, supporting staff and course developers and the group discussions were appreciated by the participants: “It makes us conscious and throughout the discussions, it becomes clear which problems we have to solve” (program coordinator), or: This is a mini audit with the focus on blended learning and in the meantime, we are working on our internal quality” (director). One of the teachers add: “If I look back on the assessments from a teacher’s point of view: during the assessment sessions, we had the opportunity to mull things over, before we had to start with the
blended learning courses. For me, it pointed out a direction: what is the purpose of blended learning, which direction do I have to take and what kind of impact I can expect on my teaching.” In this case, the visible commitment of leadership was one of the crucial elements for the success of the assessment session. One of the directors participated in all sessions, taking the position of an observer and inviting all the participants to speak frankly, while resuming and prioritizing actions of improvement. The director stimulated the participation of all participants, did not interfere with the communication, which created a climate of trust and shared understanding. The participates co-created their vision on blended learning for the program Mentor in childcare together and always kept the wellbeing of the students in mind, when considering actions.

Case three was highly comparable to case two (identical program, environmental conditions and student profiles, same methodology), but the group assessment session did not generate a comparable result because a lack of engagement of the participants, less commitment and visibility of the management and uncertainties about the directions of the general management of the umbrella institutional level.

Conclusion

The interventions in the three cases were instructive to understand how the instrument of eMM should be adapted for the context of AEC, both in terms of language use and methodology to introduce a process of continuous improvement and to foster a quality culture. To achieve the latter purpose – a culture of continuous improvement – several conditions should be fulfilled:

1. An assessment – as the beginning of an improvement process – can only by successful if an institution/department or program feel the need, either because of experienced problems or because they are planning a revision or a conversion of a program.
2. Management commitment: The management has to (1) align assessment initiatives to the institutions policy on teaching and learning; (2) frame the initiative and (3) participate in the assessment session and/or define clear responsibilities. If the assessors experience a lack of engagement or commitment of the management, they lose motivation, especially when decisions have to be made.
3. Group assessments can foster a culture of continuous improvement and a greater commitment towards quality if the participants are convinced that their input is needed and valued. Otherwise, participants will experience the assessment as a waste of time and resistance can crop up.
4. Communication strategies are vital, both during the assessment (to create a climate of trust) and afterwards (to elucidate improvement plans and initiatives to gain as much as commitment as possible).

From the three interventions, several lessons can be learnt:

No one-size-fits-all-approach

The interventions in the three cases made clear that a differentiated approach is advisable, especially when centers have different levels of adoption of blended learning. Considering above mentioned conditions, it is necessary to adjust the methodology to the characteristics of the institution and the existing culture.
Less is more

To avoid assessment becoming a “tick-the-boxes-operation” eMM was gradually simplified. The main purpose of an assessment process is challenging participants to reflect on existing practises and improvement strategies. As many assessment models, eMM is using a language who was difficult to understand for many participants. According to our experience, assessing all processes of eMM is not imperative. Yet, the selection of processes is very important and should be well-considered and tailored to the group of people conducting the assessment.

A quick win is not the path to a culture of continuous improvement

It is a misunderstanding to believe that one assessment with eMM will influence a culture of continuous improvement significantly. A self-assessment with eMM helps participants to reflect on strengths and weaknesses, to detect areas of improvement and to plan actions of improvement. Therefore, presenting eMM as a holistic model is advisable, with all the synergies on the different dimensions, to prevent them making ad-hoc decisions on the delivery dimension only or to exclusively focus on standards and procedures, without overseeing how to implement them into practice and at all levels of an organisation. Improvement projects should be planned with care and systematically implemented, communicated, monitored and assessed.

Finally, an important element of an assessment processes is to create a quality awareness and quality commitment at all levels of an organisation. The question is whether an assessment with eMM can substantially influence or foster a quality culture. Based on our interventions, we believe that the truth lies somewhere in between. It’s probably a chicken-and-egg-question, that needs more research.

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