Quality Management Systems for Distance Learning

Business, and commerce have widely adopted organized systems to manage quality of products and services. Terms like Total Quality Management, Continuous Quality Improvement, Six Sigma, and Baldrige are commonly accepted means of assuring adherence to quality standards. Colleges, universities and other higher education institutions have continued to rely on overall reputation and “accreditation” to convey an image or level of quality.

Distance learning and the rapid application of technology to teaching and learning processes is quickly changing the face and competition for education. Non-traditional, for-profit, and expanding programs of traditional institutions are creating global pressure on all and introducing the need for accountability and quality of outputs.

Application of ISO 9000-2000 developed by the International Organization for Standards can become a useful tool to manage the process of developing, delivering, and improving distance learning efforts. It provides a way to measure and assure appropriate learning outcomes. This paper discussed some of the applications and implications of ISO 9000:2000 in the distance setting.

Throughout the world, it is becoming increasingly commonplace for students in undergraduate and graduate curricula to take courses and even enroll in degree programs via distance education. The competition for quality courses is increasing as higher education institutions offer broader menus of pedagogical approaches that attract students who are already in the workplace and need a flexible program to meet their career demands and schedules. This progress, however, has triggered significant issues of quality and quality management.

One college has begun to adapt and use contemporary quality tools to begin to get an indication of effectiveness and efficiency of teaching, as well as student satisfaction with distance learning initiatives. A further goal of these initiatives has been to embrace principles of quality management, and to consider quality certification under the terms of ISO-9000 of the International Standards Organization. Focus groups, comparative test results, student feedback, online surveys to measure satisfaction and inclusiveness, or community in the learning experience have been used. These tools provide a means to refine and improve on distance design, development and delivery efforts.

The targets in distance learning are quickly evolving and are fast moving; there is an ever-escalating zero-point. Customer bases are changing, and the technology advances make the effort more challenging. Yet we are trying to bring them all together for more effective learning experiences. This paper brings together the design elements, measurement activities, lessons learned and suggestions for application in the future for quality, quality management, and potential recognition through ISO 9000 certification.

Academic Underpinnings – Recent Publications

IHEP (2000). Quality on the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education. Washington, Institute of Higher Education Policy: 45.


Bill Chernish has been an early adopter of technology in a broad range of settings. He has been instrumental in the development of ITV and online global distance learning programs at the undergraduate and masters level. His recent academic -- and practical -- research has been on the improvement of distance learning activities at all levels. His education included engineering, business and economics, and his work has been in the private sector, university teaching, and continuing education.