Editorial. Quality issues in online higher education
Editoriale. Il tema della qualità nella formazione superiore online

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Concerns about the quality of education is nothing new. However, in the last decades it has become more apparent, especially with respect to National policies and International Organizations such as the OECD, who insist upon systematic quality criteria for education, and also establishing appropriate evaluation mechanisms for its periodic review. Evaluation of quality in higher education has therefore begun to be a key issue for higher education institutions' accountability to society. Although there is no clear agreement about the meaning of quality in this context however, obtaining evidence of good practice to achieve quality outcomes has been widely adopted.

Harvey and Green's (1993) seminal work indicated the relative nature of the concept of quality in relation to higher education. It is polyhedral, because it has a different meaning for different people since it can be applied to processes or to outcomes. The philosophical principles and political underpinnings from which one could approach quality will establish the meaning that better matches these approaches. In the end, giving quality a meaning could well be a matter of personal judgement (Doherty, 2008). These authors grouped the concept of quality into five different categories: as exception, as perfection, as fitness for purpose, as transformative, and finally as value for money.

Several models for the evaluation of higher education have been tested. Usually they respond to two strategies for establishing standards and measuring how the system fits the standard; together with accountability and transformation (Schindler, Welzant, Puls-Elvidge, & Crawford, 2015). Some examples include the systemic model of Van Slyke, Kittner and Belanger (1998), the five-level evaluation model of Marshall and Shriver, in McArdle (1999), and the four-level model of Kirkpatrick (1994).

Most of these models make a value judgment regarding the merits of people, programs and/or educational institutions, and involve making a comparison within certain values, parameters and standards, all of which change over time (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 1987). It must be recognised that the salient elements such as the criteria and parameters that are applied to the model, together with the context and the moment in time at which the valuation takes place, will influence the conception of the quality of education. It is therefore important to reach a consensus about these factors and to make them explicit. Taking all these constructs into consideration makes assessing quality in higher education a difficult job, as it requires an understanding of the different conceptions of quality that inform the preferences of a number of stakeholders (Harvey & Green, 1993).

Penetration of online higher education has increased considerably in the last two decades. In the US, 31.6% of the higher education students are taking, at least, one course online, and almost 15% take a full degree online (Seaman, Allen, and Seaman, 2018). In Canada, Donovan et al. (2018) state that 17% of the students study everything online, this represents an increase of 17% in the last 6 years. In the Australian context, according to the study provided by Norton, Cherastidtham and Mackey (2019), there are 20% of students fully online while 45% are being engaged in some online activity. Although there are few studies measuring this in a disaggregated way, Europe too is moving in this direction. Take for example, the increase of students in the *università telematiche* in Italy, the use of flexible learning in the Nordic countries, and 15% of students taking their degrees fully online in Spain (Hernández-Armenteros and Pérez-García, 2018). Although it is not exactly the same, the phenomenon of MOOCs and other Open education initiatives could be considered as an example of how learning through online means has increased its presence in the educational landscape.

Additionally, some studies have also indicated that the learning outcomes obtained through online learning programmes are the same, or even higher to those that use traditional methods of classroom training (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009; Seaman et al., 2018).

Although evidence of good learning outcomes is on the increase, the quality of online education has always been questioned. Doubts about its value, the risk of fraud, and the actual impact on the students' personal and professional development are the preferred arguments against the use and quality of online studies. This is the main reason for an increasing number of organizations and associations developing different tools for ensuring the quality of higher online education provision.

As previously stated, each of these instruments has an underlying notion of quality and this in turn usually means they in turn support particular models of online education, with very different approaches and practices. Models for evaluating quality in education cover a wide range of perspectives, from those that try to control only the final product (quality control), those that search for assuring the correctness of a process (quality assurance),together with the way it is properly managed (quality management), to the more recent approach which takes for granted that quality has been attained and we should therefore purse its improvement (quality enhancement).

In order to accommodate these different approaches, a large number of different initiatives have been developed in the field of online education. These vary from creating standards of accomplishment, such as ISO or AENOR, in this way adopting a business strategic approach to quality but this modus operandi is more difficult to apply to the multidimensional and contextualised world of education. Benchmarking has therefore been adopted to help institutions to mirror, to take advantage of practices adopted by good quality institutions (BENVIC, e-Quality). More recently, rankings have started to play a relevant role as a metric for what can be considered quality in higher education. This has been undertaken in the online education arena too, as online education institutions are not considered by the traditional university ranking systems This in turn harms the prestige and opportunity for improvement of the reputation of these institutions (Brasher, Holmes, & Whitelock, 2017).

On the other hand, online education quality as seen by a course participant might have a different meaning to the way it is perceived by a course provider or other stakeholders as for example the employer, the public administration, the National agencies or society as a whole. Although many people think that quality in online education should be mainly the quality of online teaching and learning, and, thus, it should not be very different from the idea of quality applied in face-to-face education, we have to recognize that there are several differences between online and face-to-face education that are obviously related to the influence of technological aspects of delivery, student support needs, redefinition of teacher and student roles, etc. (Inglis, 2005).

Several dimensions need to be taken into account when analysing these differences and are summarised by Sangrà and Fernández-Michels (2011) and Rubio (2003) These include: the range of courses that are provided, the organization and technology, the learning resources and materials, the teaching and creation of knowledge, the learner's support services and the cost-effectiveness of each system. More recently, Martin, Polly, Jokiaho, and May (2017) carried out a study in which they reviewed several documents containing standards for online learning. A high

number of the standards are related to instructional analysis, design, and development, while a few others focus upon faculty support and satisfaction. This gives us a current picture of how complex and disputed is the scenario of evaluating quality in online education.

All these standards, frameworks, instruments, tools, and rankings are influencing the data collected by and performance of online higher education institutions. Since traditional brick and mortar universities are also now providing quality online higher education their influence is spreading in unanticipated directions.

As we have seen, the issue of quality in online education plays a crucial role today, and the debate revolves around a number of different dimensions, from research to policy-making, from evaluation to ranking. With this in mind and in order to contribute to the Quality debate, we have gathered together in this Dossier, three research papers which outline a range of reflections and practices in this domain which aim to raise the reputation of higher education institutions through the adoption of quality metrics in online education.

In particular, two papers in the Dossier address the issue of ranking as a tool for comparing the online dimension of universities, highlighting the fundamental importance of the methodological aspects which define such tools. The paper "*Indicators for ranking online universities: the students' perspective*" by Pozzi, Manganello, Passarelli, and Persico focuses on the way rankings are constructed, emphasising the importance of such variables as validity and reliability when defining rankings' indicators. Furthermore, the paper "*Collecting data for feeding the online dimension of university rankings: a feasibility test*" by Sangrà, Guitert, Cabrera-Lanzo, Taulats, Toda, and Carrillo addresses data collection methods, providing evidence from a feasibility test to argue that aspects linked to the peculiarities of each ranked university should also be considered in order not to penalize them in terms of their ranking position.

The same paper by Pozzi, Manganello, Passarelli, and Persico introduces another fundamental, and often underestimated, aspect for consideration when defining ranking systems for online higher education: that is, the students' point of view. In their paper, the authors stress the importance of integrating students' perspective in the online dimension of university rankings, as their opinions have some important differences from that of the online teaching experts. The students' point of view about quality in online higher education is also the focus of the article entitled "*Students' perception in evaluating blended university courses*", by Cecconi, Sannicandro, and Bellini, whose main aim is to describe methods and results of an investigation carried out with a sample of students enrolled in four universitary courses delivered in blended mode. The peculiarity of the approach proposed by the authors lies precisely in the fact that, in the context of their study, it was the students' perception that was considered as one of the most important features for evaluating teaching.

Outside the dossier, the issue contains another two papers. The first paper by Al-Azawei, "*The moderating effect of gender differences on learning management system acceptance: a multi-group analysis*", investigates the influence of gender differences on users' attitudes towards technology adoption in Iraq. In particular, the proposed study uses the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to estimate acceptance of a Learning Management System (LMS) by 302 undergraduate students. The results are discussed to highlight potential implications for research. The latter study by Carioli and Peru, "*Teaching online reading strategies using the Think Aloud technique. Evidence from an experimental study*", investigates the "Think Aloud" technique when this is used to foster young readers' comprehension of online texts. The study has involved eighty-nine 10-14 year-old students and its findings indicate a positive effect of the technique on the students' abilities to evaluate website reliability.

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