Faculty Competency-Based Micro-Credentials and Quality Assurance in Distance Education

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Abstract

Given the rise in the number of distance education courses being offered, it is increasingly important for educators to be prepared to teach online. In this session, we share best practices to enhance the quality of distance education based on the rules and procedures of competency-based micro-credentials and quality assurance for online teaching and learning. Faculty interested in teaching online or developing classes in the online environment are expected to be both credentialed and have their courses go through an approval process. Evidence-based teaching and learning practices were evaluated and prioritized to positively improve student learning in online environments. This session will be valuable for educators who support online teaching, learning experience designers who support professional development for online teaching, and administrators who support online teaching in higher education.

Keywords: faculty development, micro-credentials, quality assurance, quality matters

Background

In distance education, learners and teachers are physically separated in time and space. Distance learning is a preferred choice for individuals who are either employed or unable to be physically present to attend courses. The forms of distance education have been evolving in various ways, and the number of distance learners has also been increasing (Keegan, 1980; Johnston, 2020; & Saykili, 2018). Many efforts have been made to provide quality distance education. In the aftermath of COVID-19, discussions about the quantity and quality of distance education have become more crucial (Lassoued et al., 2020; Selvaraj et al., 2021; Teele et al., 2021). Many distance learning institutions have established or adopted standards as part of these efforts (Bolliger & Martin, 2021; Castro & Tumibay, 2021; Naim, 2021; Timbi-Sisalima et al., 2022).

Specifically, distance education guidelines, suggested by the Higher Learning Council (HLC, 2021) along with The National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA, 2021) and the Council of Regional Accrediting Agencies (CRAC, 2021), have articulated our distance education program. The guidelines were created in collaboration with accreditors, other organizations, and subject matter experts in the education field and are consistent with the standards adopted by other institutions for assuring the quality of distance education and planning continuous improvement. In order to improve the quality of distance education, faculty and other academic support staff need to continue their professional development.
The professional development should be ongoing and include attention to “educational technology, instructional design, learning science, pedagogy, assessment, and methods of using data for improvement.” Their institution ensures that “learning resources used for instruction and tools used for access to services are sufficiently supported and ensure accessibility and privacy for students” (HLC, 2021, p.4). Higher education institutions should provide clear rules and procedures regarding their distance education. The guidelines for evaluating distance education state that faculty who teach online courses and evaluate students’ achievement in online learning should be appropriately qualified to perform their duties.

Based on these guidelines, our institution established and developed its standards, rules, and procedures for ensuring the quality of distance education. To fulfill the requirements for quality and to achieve the goal, educators who deliver online courses and assess student success must demonstrate evidence that they are qualified to teach distance education courses. Faculty may present either (a) evidence of their online pedagogy training or (b) teaching online experience that conforms to best practice standards. To provide training opportunities institutionally, faculty development programs for online teaching were reformed, incorporating best practices in online learning pedagogy, and ensuring competencies in the variety of educational technologies employed by the institution.

**Purpose of the Impact Practice Session**

As the demand for distance education opportunities grows, it has become increasingly critical for faculty to be prepared to teach online. As a practitioner-oriented session, we shared best practices on their preparedness to teach online based on the rules and procedures of micro-credentials and quality assurance in online courses. Faculty interested in teaching online or developing classes in the online environment are expected to be both credentialed and have their courses go through an approval process. This session introduced evidence-based teaching and learning practices to positively impact online student learning. Finally, the session has practical implications for faculty who teach online teaching, professionals who support faculty development for online teaching, and administrators who support online teaching in higher education institutions.

**Evidence-Based Practices**

Micro-credential is “a short, competency-based recognition that allows an educator to demonstrate mastery in a particular area” (National Education Association (NEA), 2020). The micro-credentials are based on research and best practice. Using micro-credentials, complex professional development is divided into smaller tasks and flexible along with a list of competencies where learners can choose to learn on their own and submit evidence for evaluation of competencies (Meyer, Clifford, & García-Arena, 2021). Additionally, micro-credentials provide a way to tailor and recognize professional learning based on performance and flexibility (Hunt et al., 2020; Rossiter & Tynan, 2019) and enables institutions to provide competency-based learning, regardless of time, cost, and place (Acree, 2016; Selvaratnam & Sankey, 2021). The micro-credential system makes it easy for all faculty members to access professional learning opportunities throughout their teaching careers. Remarkably, given the rapid advancements in educational technology, continuous professional development is needed to perform new strategies (Hunt et al., 2020; Selvaratnam & Sankey, 202; Tooley & Hood, 2021).
According to the American National Standard (ANS), quality assurance comprises “all the planned and systematic activities implemented within the quality system and demonstrated as needed, to provide adequate confidence that the entity, product or service will fulfill the requirements for quality.” (ANS, 1994). Quality assurance for distance education is one of the significant concerns of institutions and stakeholders in distance education (Scull et al., 2011; Stella & Gnanam, 2004). With growing national interest in ensuring the quality of distance learning, the HLC and associated accreditation agencies set their standards to include distance education in their evaluation system (Bolliger & Martin, 2021; Castro & Tumibay, 2021; Naim, 2021; Timbi-Sisalima et al., 2022; Scull et al., 2011). These standards help coordinate new and existing resources into educational practices and to enhance innovative ways of improving distance education without chaos. Our institution has established or adopted standards as part of these efforts to provide high-quality distance education.

To ensure this quality, our institution participates in the NC-SARA, a nationwide organization to improve distance education quality and provide oversights on higher education programs. Also, we adopted Quality Matters™ (QM, 2018) to provide peer-reviewed assessments of online course design and recommendations for quality assurance and improvement (Legon, 2006; Naim, 2021; Sadaf et al., 2019).

Rules and Procedures

The rules and procedures regarding distance education have been tailored and established to implement evidence-based practices. By these rules and procedures to ensure students achieve online learning goals, faculty members should be appropriately qualified and trained. The following section explains the details of the rules and procedures regarding faculty credentialing and quality assurance for distance education.

Faculty Credentialing

The rules and procedures align with NC-SARA (2021) and the CRAC (2021) guidelines in conjunction with the HLC (2021) guidelines for distance education. The general rules and procedures are as follows: (a) Faculty should review detailed expectations for credentialing and approval processes, (b) Apply to get credentialed to teach online, and (c) Submit either evidence of training in online pedagogy, such as transcripts, certificates, etc., or evidence of experience teaching online that conforms to best practice standards (QM). Faculty credentials are reviewed and approved by the department of distance education.

The competency-based micro-credential program is designed for faculty and educational professionals who want to build on their knowledge and practice in online/hybrid teaching and learning. The program is intended to institutionally provide professional development opportunities that engage faculty and staff in educational practices and resources to support their move to online teaching directly. The in-house program consists of three competency-based micro-credential courses, which will satisfy the requirement for faculty online teaching credentialing: (a) PD101: Online Teaching Foundations (Introductory topics with six modules; Fully online), (b) PD102: Online Teaching Academy I (Basic topics with six modules; Hybrid), and (c) PD103: Online Teaching Academy II (Advanced topics with six modules; Hybrid). Multiple facilitators deliver these courses through online modules and synchronous sessions. The courses will also include a follow-up in-person training to help participants solidify their new skills. The other elements designed for competency-based micro-credentials include: (a) Spiral
curriculum design, (b) Measurable competencies, (c) Flexible learning pathways, (d) Teacher as a coach/facilitator, (e) Experiential learning, and (f) Gamification.

Quality Assurance
Faculty are required to submit their online course for approval to the online review committee. Fully online courses must meet 85% of the QM standards. The general rules and procedures are as follows: (a) Obtain permission from the department to develop an online course, (b) Upon approval, develop a course utilizing the master template and resources, (c) Complete a self-evaluation using the QM rubrics, (d) Submit a formal application for the course and self-evaluation. It will be approved if the course meets 85% or more QM standards. If the course fails to meet 85% of the standards, the review committee will recommend revisions with suggestions, and they need to resubmit for consideration within two weeks. Faculty may schedule a meeting with the learning experience designer if assistance is required in course development.

To comply with the U.S. Department of Education (2020), faculty teaching online/hybrid courses should demonstrate evidence of Regular and Substantive Interaction (RSI) in various ways. For instance, distance education courses include at least two types of substantive interaction that should be scheduled and predictable between students and instructors either synchronously or asynchronously. The importance of RSI is reaffirmed as a critical factor for high-quality distance education and facilitates more regular and effective instructor-student interaction than a traditional online delivery format (Federal Register, 2021).

Discussion and Implications
The roles of faculty competency-based micro-credentials and quality assurance for online teaching and learning are critical in high-quality distance education. These efforts should be supported through continuous investment in various ways. The crucial elements in improving distance education require (a) Strong educational leadership and support, (b) Diverse collaboration for professional development, (c) Periodical improvement via quality assurance discussion, (d) Multi-faceted learning design support, (e) Pedagogical technology integration, and (f) Agile project management. It is also important for educators to continuously upskill their pedagogical and technological knowledge and skills as a part of their professional development. A potential challenge from the lesson learned is securing experienced coaches and reviewers internally. It is key to securing a stable pool of highly experienced coaches to meet a long-term goal with every facet of the program. In order to review a large volume of courses and provide high-quality feedback, securing certified course reviewers remains a challenge.

All online courses should be reviewed and approved periodically for continuous improvement. Thus, all faculty members are encouraged to participate in continuous professional development and quality assurance process to learn best practices for teaching in online learning environments. The lesson learned from the evidence-based practices would enable distance education to continue to develop best practices in online teaching and learning to help faculty start strong and succeed in their courses. We hope that participants create innovative ways to effectively implement evidence-based micro-credentialing and quality assurance to build an engaging online learning environment.
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