

## Open Teaching/Learning – PIN Code of the Future/Quality of Higher Education

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### Abstract

*The environment, place, type and curriculum of higher education programmes are the essential factors encouraging the re-examination of the established quality assessment criteria for higher education programmes. Open learning concepts require a change in attitudes regarding the quality of higher education and the concept of teaching and learning. The article analyses the transformation experienced by the learner during the period of high quality studies from traditional studies to the open learning culture. How can quality learning transformation be measured?*

*The aim: to test the assessment methodology of open learning opportunities responding to the quality of higher education provided.*

*Methods: analysis of scientific literature, case study, survey throughout the course. A case of one mixed course has been investigated. The target group is fifth year medical students of the Lithuanian University of Health Sciences.*

**Keywords:** *open learning, independent learner, learning culture, goals of studying and studies.*

### 1. The characteristics and quality assessment of open learning culture in university education

#### 1.1 The concept of open learning culture in higher education

Paulsen (2003) in free cooperation theory emphasises the autonomy of the learner in cooperation with other learners and the teacher. This scientist presents six dimensions of openness: content, time, space, pace, environment and access. All these dimensions give both the learner freedom to choose learning possibilities and the provider of the learning services the chance to open directions of learning opportunities. The application of this theory at the institution of higher education would allow for a new learning culture to emerge. In this culture the principal aspect of the lecturer's activity would be opening of studying possibilities for their students: facilitating the students to influence the study content, to choose study time, place and pace and to use various interactive environments for studying. All these measures would minimise the barriers of involvement in studying.

While discussing lecturing Ramsden (2003) points out that it can be understood in three different ways: as information transfer, as organising of the studies and as opening of studying possibilities. These aforementioned ways of understanding lecturing give foundation for different directions of lecturing activity: lecturing the study subject, choosing and using the lecturing methods and creating the studying environment. The first is related with traditional lecturing while the third is related with the open learning culture paradigm in studying.

Coomey and Stephenson (2001) offered a learning paradigms model in which they used the control of the learning process and the openness of tasks as the principal dimensions of the model. Traditional and open learning paradigms are clearly separated in this model. Traditional teaching includes closed tasks and teacher-controlled teaching, while contrary to this, open learning includes the learner's independence in the learning process and open tasks form the essence of teaching/learning.

Different learning concepts are used for conceptualising the studying process. Learning can be understood differently in different learning cultures (Marton, Beaty and Dall'Alba, 1993). Learning can be considered to be: increase in the amount of knowledge; recall and reproduction; acquisition of facts, methods and means for use; search for meaning; interpretative process directed at understanding reality; cultural adaptation while mastering group thinking and action models; process of personal and professional perfection. The first two learning definitions discussed above can be related to traditional teaching while the rest are linked with the open learning culture.

The main feature of open learning culture at a higher education institution is openness to the diversity of students and creating opportunities for students both to have different study objectives and to choose learning possibilities. Beatly, Gibbs and Morgan (1997) distinguished among four studying orientations: professional, academic, personal and social. These orientations provide the framework for formulating studying objectives.

The creators of study programmes who base their programmes on the open learning culture hand the studying control to the student and share with this same student the responsibility of matching studying objectives with the goals of the study programme. Quality as the PIN code in open learning culture can be achieved only when all participating subjects reflect on studying and study programme aims and also strive to match them while transforming learning culture.

## 1.2 The concept of quality in the context of open learning culture

While analysing scientific literature it becomes clear that there is no single and universally accepted concept of quality. E. Sallis (2002) distinguishes between two concepts of quality: quality as the absolute and quality as a relative concept. Quality as the absolute is the highest point of perfection, a reached pinnacle of an activity. This view of quality is usually considered traditional. Quality as a relative concept is expressed in the language of social and individual needs and in wish language (Lemaitre, 2002). One of the most important life-long learning factors is creation of possibilities for learning and their application to every member of the society simultaneously guaranteeing both learning quality and the fulfilment of the expectations and needs of the users (Ehlers, 2004; ISO, 2006). Based on the relative concept of quality, several definitions of the concept of quality that are relevant to the implementation of the idea of open learning culture in higher education as its quality PIN code will be distinguished.

- Quality as matching course objectives with the context of open learning culture. Quality indicators: it is beforehand intended in the fixed course objective that students will be able to raise their studying goals and strive towards their fulfilment; in the course objective dominates orientation towards support of studying, not of lecturing; study goals raised in the course programme are close to the studying objectives raised by students themselves.
- Quality as matching of the realisation of open learning course with foreseen purpose. Course quality indicators: achievement level of goals that are raised by students; realisation of the students' studying concept during the course; successful use of the possibilities for studying by students aiming to realise the goals raised for themselves in the course.
- Quality as fulfilment of the clients'/students' needs. Quality indicators: overcoming studying difficulties and barriers during the course; justification of the support offered to the students during the course.
- Quality as transformation of open learning culture in higher education. Course quality indicators: finding new studying methods; development of competencies of e-learning; expansion of the concept of learning during the course.

## 2. Case study of a blended course at university

### 2.1. Characteristics of the blended course

The blended course entitled "Skills in obstetrics, gynaecology and neonatology" is meant for the fifth year students of the continuous medical studies programme. It consists of 12 credits and 240 contact hours. The course has both theoretical and practical components. Students study the theoretical course component by distance learning. The following e-learning tools are used: video recordings of lectures on the internet (ViPS tool), virtual learning environment (Totaros [www.myhybridlab.com](http://www.myhybridlab.com)), e-textbooks and synchronous communication tools. Students study the practical part of the course at contact seminars and during unaided work at a hybrid laboratory. Contact seminars with the lecturer are on 25 different topics. 2 specialised simulations for assessing acute conditions also take place. Practical unaided work in teams in the hybrid laboratory takes place on 8 different topics, with 3 hours allocated for each topic. The theoretical studies of this course (listening to lectures, independent literature reading, discussions in virtual reality, self-assessment test) take place parallel to the practical activities (searching for ideas, formation of groups). Assessment is integrated into the study process. At each stage there is reflective self-assessment of studying performed by the student himself/herself, a tutor's informal assessment that has an influence and declarative assessment of the studying results performed by the lecturer together with the tutor.

There are four roles in the assistance system: lecturer, tutor (1 for 20 students), study administrator and technician.

## **2.2. Methodology of blended course quality assessment**

One data selection method was adapted for study course quality assessment. Open learning course quality indicators became the basis for the preparation of the research tool. The typologies of studying goals and lecturing and studying concepts discussed in the article helped to distinguish measurable variables. The study was performed in 2019 in the course “Skills in obstetrics, gynaecology and neonatology” that was prepared and run as a blended course by the Gynaecology and Obstetrics Clinic of the Lithuanian University of Health Sciences. The survey was anonymous. Students answered the survey questions by filling in electronic questionnaires online. In order to sum up the data, the following procedures of statistical analysis were applied: frequencies, cross-tabulations and correlations.

## **3. Blended course assessment results**

### **3.1 Correspondence of study objectives with the context of open learning culture**

The objective of the study programme is to introduce and teach to perform in a standardised manner practical skills related with the topic “Skills in obstetrics, gynaecology and neonatology.” The study goals raised in the programme are primarily oriented towards professional orientation students who are raising studying objectives related to their professional careers. These goals are important to students: 66.7 per cent of students believe that it is important to acquire knowledge and skills necessary for practical activities, while getting a diploma as a means of professional or academic career is important to 44.4 per cent of students. The most important designated objectives of students are to check their skills and strengthen confidence in their abilities (88.9 per cent) and to perfect their skills, learn something new and achieve personal development (88.9 per cent). The goals set in the study programme are presented to students as a fact. After running the course for a few times, the goals are adjusted, corrected if it is noticed that they are not in line with the current situation. Study objectives can be updated while improving the study programme. Evaluation according to this indicator allows us to affirm that the practice of formulating study objectives in higher education is remote from the norms dominating in open learning culture. In this course its objective is named and this objective involves creation of various conditions for students. This course attempts to give students a possibility to raise their own studying objectives. The goal of the course is not officially documented in the programme, but the reflection and introduction of this goal can be seen as manifestation of open learning culture in the course.

### **3.2 Correspondence of open learning purpose in a blended course**

In the realisation of the individual studying concept, turning practical experience into knowledge (66.7 per cent) and acquisition of information, skills for use (66.7 per cent) take precedence. The second place is taken by individual development – 44.4 per cent. The use of offered studying possibilities. Assessing course quality it is very important to pay attention to how students use studying possibilities created for them. The survey of students showed that the first priority activities satisfying the students were as follows: solving practical situations – 77.8 per cent, independent literature analysis – 66.7 per cent, and objective structured clinical examination (OSCE) - 55.6 per cent. Least useful were consultation in virtual environment. Students somewhat little used consultation possibilities available to them. Free discussion possibilities in virtual environment were also poorly used. While evaluating virtual environment elements used in the course, students named the recordings of lectures online as the most useful element of the course – 50 per cent. We suppose that students were not so much impressed by the content of those online lectures as by the possibility to view these recordings at any time and as many times as they wanted. Virtual library was also pointed out as a useful priority element. The study revealed an interesting aspect: the essential virtual environment elements of this course – consultations and discussion forums in the virtual environment - were less useful. Based on these study results it is possible to postulate that these elements of virtual environment are new to students and not sufficiently mastered. The smaller usefulness of consultations could be linked not so much with the use of this element, but more with the psychological difficulties of consulting: the ability to present not fully understood things in a question

form and having enough courage to ask a question publically. Discussion forums play an important role in the virtual environment of the course: it is necessary to show to the students how they can fully use this element for achieving a more qualitative studying process.

### 3.3 Fulfilment of student support needs

While running the course, most difficulties arose due to the intensity of study programme (50 per cent) and the complexity of the course content (70 per cent). The scenario of this course was not flexible, so all students had to adjust to the same pace of the course. Quite a few people were facing difficulties due to the unusual organisation of the course. It would be easier to overcome this difficulty if, in the study programme, more courses were taught as long-distance learning or mixed courses. Difficulties of technological nature were not seen as most important. Analysing the use of support it was found that lecturers and fellow students helped to overcome most difficulties (80 per cent), followed by instructions (60 per cent). Although a lecturer and a tutor play significant roles in preparing the course, analysing individual studying trajectories of students during the course, assessing achievements and providing feedback to the students, this remains unnoticed by students. The course technician's help was seldom used - this work was most likely done by family members and co-workers.

### 3.4 Transformation of the learning concept during transition from traditional learning culture to open learning culture

Discussing the justification of studying methods in the course it was emphasised that students tried out methods that were new to them and these methods were useful in the studying process. One newly found method was trial and error method (for 21 per cent of students). 15 per cent of students found mutual help method useful. 12 per cent of students named role play as a potentially useful learning method. 13 per cent of students said that individual consultations with the lecturer were a new method that served its purpose. Although the proportion of students finding new methods was small, it should be kept in mind that time is needed for mastering a new method, and that it is difficult to reach the best results while using that method for the first time. During this course *the development of the competence of e-learning* was investigated. The development of this competence forms perfect preconditions for the evolution of open learning culture at university and for opening new teaching/learning opportunities by using more versatile teaching/learning environments online. While summing up the survey results the most important elements of understanding, skills or abilities and development of attitudes were distinguished: understanding various learning possibilities – 90 per cent; ability to think critically about the studying content and form and the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) for education – 80 per cent; ability to choose the most suitable learning methods for oneself – 70 per cent; ability to organise the studies or independent learning and to control the learning process – 70 per cent; having the attitude to raise learning goals for oneself and having internal motivation – 60 per cent; being interested in using information and communication technologies (ICT) in wider spheres – 60 per cent. All these create perfect conditions for taking responsibility of learning during one's entire life that is life - long learning. While analysing the realisation of *the studying concept* it was noticed that during the course some students acquired new studying experiences and learning concepts. Even though a course that is only one semester long is too short to discern cultural changes, based on the study results it is possible to spot beginnings of acquiring new experience that can be considered as a step towards open teaching/learning culture: turning practical experience into knowledge and acquiring knowledge and skills for use – 60 per cent; constructing of one's own personal knowledge, personal development – 40 per cent. These indicators show that open learning culture can find its place in higher education institutions.

## 4. Conclusions

Essential features of open learning course in university studies: the course is open to students who raise different studying objectives, who differently understand the study process, and who prioritise different study methods and forms. While teaching, the prioritised activity is opening studying opportunities, creating favourable environment for studying and ensuring necessary support for it, but not conveying subject knowledge. Students are independent, take responsibility for achieving goals and control the studying process themselves. The course is oriented towards problem solving, with

students getting involved in independent research, searching for answers and actively cooperating with other students.

1. Open learning is evaluated based on the relative quality concept. According to this concept, quality is defined as follows: correspondence of the programme/course goals with the open learning culture context, matching of the purpose of open learning in the experiential blended course, meeting the students support needs, the transformation of learning while switching from traditional learning culture to open learning culture.

2. One blended course case study was assessed and analysed. This course revealed open learning possibilities: the openness of the study course becomes tangible while looking at the studying experience and results. The fulfilment of individual needs can be evaluated by comparing data of the whole sample size. The employed assessment methodology allows insights into certain changes of learning culture. It is possible to make a conclusion that open learning is the PIN code of the quality of higher education. This code makes it possible for quality learning culture to emerge. This culture opens learning possibilities and applies a transforming learning concept. This learning concept enables students to independently, cooperating with fellow students and lecturers and reflecting on their own studying process, strive towards achieving their studying goals and thus create perspective professional and personal life.

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