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Considering the roles of professional accrediting bodies in online programme quality: the case of the NASPAA

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ABSTRACT

While there has been a good deal of discussion of what principles and practices tend to foster online education quality, there has been very little about what professional accrediting bodies at the university level could or should do to ensure appropriate levels of quality. This study uses five practice areas derived from the literature to survey 144 member institutions in the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA). The article provides an analysis of the findings related to institutional support, student readiness, faculty (i.e. teaching staff) motivation, course delivery consistency and systemic online quality standards. The findings highlight that explicit use of online quality standards, training of faculty, faculty member motivation to teach online and technical support for faculty and students are the most highly correlated with perceived quality of programme. Generalisable recommendations for practice and considerations for future research are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Online education; accreditation; online programme quality; online standards; online teaching

With the expansion of online instruction in professional programmes in business, public administration, education, social work, medical education and a host of other areas, comes the need to be conscious of the determinants of quality by teaching staff (hereafter faculty), programmes, institutions and accrediting bodies. The concern for quality in online teaching in higher education has been addressed to some degree in national and regional accrediting bodies, often provided directly by ministries of education in many countries such as France, Asian and other countries around the world, or indirectly by legally authorised organisations such as the seven commissions of higher education in the United States of America (USA) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the United Kingdom. However, quality in online education has been almost entirely ignored by university-level professional accrediting bodies reviewing standards at the programmatic level.

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This issue takes on special prominence in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced much of the higher education world to shift entirely to an online delivery mode overnight (Martel, 2020; Marinoni *et al*., 2020). The growth of online education in the USA is well documented but nonetheless has been quite uneven. It has long been noted that the interest in online education 'has been slow to capture Asian learners' interest' (Subramaniam, 2008, p. 10) as well as in Europe (Gaebel *et al*., 2014). Fortunately, some baseline online learning capacity has been present in most major European and Asian universities for some time (Gentile *et al*., 2020) but the transition was nonetheless 'messy' (Weiss, 2020) and relied heavily on the goodwill of students who, while generally able to cope with the transition, had to tolerate poorly designed classes (Chung *et al*., 2020; Kedraka & Kaltisidis, 2020). While the bulk of higher education will return to primarily traditional modes, the inevitable expansion of hybrid and fully online modes will inevitably be much accelerated, as well as the use of virtual technologies in traditional classroom settings.

The literature provides an overall sense of the principles and practices that tend to enhance online education quality (Van Wart *et al*., 2019). The major principles and practices discussed in that literature affecting quality online education are as follows:

1. Enhancing institutional support.
   a. Tracking reliability and technical support; taking actions as necessary.
   b. Providing and ensuring faculty training, training quality and accountability through training.
2. Ensuring student readiness.
   a. Tracking student readiness; taking actions as necessary.
   b. Employing student readiness 'tools'.
3. Ensuring faculty motivation.
   a. Tracking faculty motivation; taking actions as necessary.
   b. Enhancing faculty motivation through recognition or incentives.
4. Enhancing online course delivery consistency (internal orientation).
   a. Tracking delivery outputs at the faculty and programme levels; taking actions as necessary.
   b. Providing a robust system of online class visits, student evaluations and other feedback.
5. Enhancing the coherence of online quality provision (external orientation, accreditation standards).
   a. Promoting best practices (*ad hoc*).
   b. Promoting an overarching model of online quality.

However, the above list of principles and practices does not provide specific guidance about which practices may be more critical in the professional accrediting body context, what critical mass or combinations of these practices may be

necessary to ensure good or high quality and, in some cases, who should or should not be responsible for quality assurance of online instruction. This exploratory study provides a substantial dataset from one such accrediting body, which must consider if and how it should enhance its support of online education among its members. This study itself is an example of evidence-based review of assurance of learning practices, which is the hallmark of an accrediting body's mandate.

The study is divided as follows: background discussion of online education quality principles and practices, methods used in the study, study findings, discussion and relevance of the findings for professional accrediting bodies.

Background discussion of quality principles and practices

The principles that enhance programme quality often emphasise different aspects of education (for example, quality support *versus* quality control) and thus are somewhat inconsistent overall in both face-to-face (Ryan, 2015) and online approaches (Pedro & Kumar, 2020; Baldwin & Trespalacios, 2017). Based on a comprehensive review of the literature, this study focuses on, and succinctly summarises, five principles and ten practices that have been widely cited as leading to higher quality in online teaching.

Institutional support takes many forms; three of the primary forms are ensuring and enhancing learning management system reliability, technical support for students and faculty and faculty training. A potentially great cause of anxiety is learning management system reliability (Asoodar et al.,, 2016; Bolliger *et al*., 2014; Mohammadi, 2015). For example, Bolliger & Wasilik, (2009) observed that technical difficulties were a significant detractor for retention of faculty in online teaching. Reliability is primarily determined by complete system outages for a period of time but may also include temporary or structural 'glitches' that substantially reduce expected functionality. At its worst, an unreliable system can crash during an examination and cause faculty and students to avoid online courses thereafter. However, the literature reports reliability issues have become more minor and infrequent with technological improvements over the years (Jaschik & Lederman, 2019). Technical support for students and faculty is important when they perceive that there might be a technical glitch but more often they cannot work out how to use some feature of the online learning system in which case it is functioning as just-in-time training (Asoodar et al., 2016; Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Mohammadi, 2015; Roby *et al*., 2013). The issues are generally the accessibility of support and the ability of technical support staff to address the issues raised. Although the quality of institutional quick-fix staffing has been reported to have improved, some programmes with intensive online offerings have auxiliary technical staff who assist not only with technical support but curriculum design as well. Long delays in getting assistance with a feature or element of an online course is aggravating to users and more likely than reliability to be an ongoing resource issue (Wingo *et al*., 2017).

Faculty training is generally considered one of the more important determinants of quality (Baran & Correia, 2014; Meyer & Murrell, 2014; Paecther & Maier, 2010; Roby *et al*., 2013). McGowan and Graham (2009) found that multiyear training of faculty made an enormous difference in improving learning engagement, teacher–student interactions and clear learning outcomes. One dimension of quality for this factor is its basic provision: availability, array of offerings and quality of training. Is training offered to faculty and is the training offered at convenient times and places and in appropriate formats? Does the array of training offerings provide for different levels of faculty expertise and different types of teaching contexts? Finally, how competent are the trainers in efficiently providing training and customising it as necessary? A second dimension of quality relates to the requirements for faculty training, which can be voluntary or mandatory. When mandatory, faculty training can be required in a number of ways. Faculty can be required to have assistance in setting up new courses, in which instructional designers provide customised training. Faculty can be required to go through generalised training courses covering the online learning system features, online learning principles and select best practices. The amount of training required can vary from a few hours to a semester-long course leading to an institutional certification of online teaching competence. Finally, institutions vary in their requirements from strong recommendations and expectations to careful audits of training compliance.

Another approach to enhancing online learning outcomes is to ensure student readiness *via* tracking of student outcomes (Joo *et al*., 2011; Otter *et al*., 2013) and using student readiness tools (Bawa, 2016) to assist initiating students into online systems and courses. Poor outcomes in online course *vis-à-vis* face-to-face courses can be an indicator that students were poorly matched for an online course or did not have appropriate expectations of workload, timeliness requirements, or style of learning (Bawa, 2016). Indicators that student readiness may be deficient include poor comparisons of retention, learning effectiveness or student satisfaction in online and face-to-face classes (Rooij & Zirkle, 2016). Measures can be taken to mitigate potential student readiness issues. Students taking an online class can be required to take a special orientation to familiarise themselves with the learning management system and expectations since more students in quality programmes frequently report an increase in the perceived workload. Alternatively, programmes can require students to take a self-assessment or tutorial prior to taking online classes. For their part, instructors can provide an introductory video or videoconference session at the beginning of the course that focuses on the navigation features of the course or tips on how to be successful and satisfied in an online learning environment.

The degree of faculty motivation can affect not only the quality of the delivery of online classes but also the size of the faculty pool since many tenured faculty may opt out if unmotivated, leaving an excess of part-time faculty with

online expertise teaching online courses (Horvitz *et al*., 2015; Kearns, 2016; Mansbach & Austin, 2018; Seok *et al*., 2010; Windes & Lesht, 2014). Occasionally surveying faculty attitudes is key to knowing faculty preferences, concerns and suggestions for online teaching assignments (Bolliger *et al*., 2014; Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009). Significant issues can then be discussed with faculty and concrete actions may be taken to enhance motivation. Numerous steps can be taken to enhance motivation, dependent on the issues involved (Porter & Graham, 2015). Nonfinancial improvements in staff support, scheduling and recognition can make a considerable difference when those areas are deficient. Setting aside time in meetings of faculty members to address online issues on a regular basis can develop a shared approach and common vision for the challenges of online education. Workload and financial incentives may be possible and include a stipend or professional development funds for training, a stipend or professional development fund for building the first class, a stipend or professional development funds for teaching every class and occasional reassign times (reductions in the teaching load) for teaching online classes.

While learning achievement has been demonstrated to be equivalent in face-to-face and online modes when the quality is equivalent in meta-analyses (Bernard *et al*., 2004; Nguyen, 2015) and in public administration programmes (Ni, 2013), frequently it is not equivalent for the reasons being investigated here. The delivery of individual courses is a faculty prerogative in general but tracking the success of delivery and providing guidance can be a programmatic responsibility (Mohammadi, 2015; Otter *et al*., 2013; Paechter & Maier, 2010). For example, Xu & Jaggars (2014) pointed out the critical importance of tracking the success of students with special educational challenges due to financial, cultural, or personal circumstances. Some of the tracking methods mentioned under student readiness apply here as well: face-to-face and online comparisons in learning achievement, student satisfaction and retention (Bangert, 2008; Dolan *et al*., 2015). Programmes can also survey the methods used in classes and recommend best practices such as those that enhance social presence. Additionally, programmes can track their enrolment trends and can survey employer perceptions. Such data may demand discussions or corrective actions at the senior management or faculty governance levels. At the individual level, faculty can be urged to carefully review their course evaluations in online courses. Faculty subject to course visits may get detailed feedback in their reports. However, tenured faculty tend not to get much feedback except through student evaluations; in egregious cases of online teaching failure, the head of an academic department may take specific corrective actions with faculty in any category.

Relying upon every faculty member to discover and master good practices and ideals in online teaching may be unrealistic about maintaining quality consistency and ultimately, may not be fair to them either. One way to promote online teaching coherence is to provide a series of best practices

in critical areas: navigation, response times, discussion formats, interaction methods, accessibility, lecture quality and rehearsal (practice) opportunities. Such best practices represent an *ad hoc* but *de facto* recommended guideline. Such best practices may be embedded in a training programme or an instructional guide (Duesing *et al*., 2016). A second approach is to adopt an overarching framework or online quality teaching model (integrating both technical and pedagogical elements) such as Quality Matters (2020). Quality Matters provides a widely used rubric in higher education in the USA covering eight areas: course overview and introduction; learning objectives; assessment and measurement; instructional materials; learning activities and learner interaction; course technology; learner support; and accessibility and usability. For example, two of the items in the 'course overview and introduction' section of Quality Matters include 'Computer skills and digital information literacy skills expected of the learner are clearly stated' and 'The self-introduction by the instructor is professional and is available online'. Quality models, externally adopted or home-grown, tend to encourage consistency, efficiency in design and increased technical rigour. Such models may be voluntary for greater flexibility or may be mandatory to ensure higher quality design control.

A final avenue to improve online teaching quality is to enhance the coherence of online teaching practices and principles through accreditation (de Paor, 2019). Accreditation bodies provide guidelines, nudge institutions to be consistent and quality-oriented, encourage a culture of shared best practices and ultimately choose to provide an evolving set of appropriate and realistic standards. While quality standards help achieve programmatic quality and consistency, when relatively comprehensive they frequently involve degrees of trade-off, balancing and flexibility in implementation (Seyfried & Reith, 2019). This makes the implementation of concrete accreditation standards quite challenging.

Methods

On 30 April 2019, an online survey was distributed to 214 NASPAA member programmes (of 190 unique institutions) for basic and applied research purposes. The survey was approved by an institutional review board and the respondents were guaranteed anonymity regarding their individual responses. Only aggregate data was reported to the accrediting body and members. During June and July 2019, follow-up emails were sent to individual US-based programme directors or coordinators. To achieve a higher response rate, the primary investigators also made separate emails to all accessible non-respondents. Eventually, 150 unique institutions responded to the survey, achieving a response rate of 79%. Of the 150 participants, 38 (25%) reported that they did not offer any online classes.

Table 1. Sample vs. population comparison

	Sample		Population*	
Mode of Instruction	%	*n*	%	*n*
In-person instruction only	38	25	48	22
In-person instruction with online classes available	48	32	87	41
Primarily online (students must come to campus at least once)	6	4	3	1
Completely online (students never have to come to campus)	29	19	4	2
Other/Mixed of above	24	16	41	19
No response	15	1	31	14
Total	**150**	**100**	**214**	**100**

*The population distribution is based on the NASPAA historical institutional records that programmes have reported in the past. The questions were asked slightly differently from the survey.

A comparison between the entire NASPAA programme population and the sample of NASPAA programmes reported in this survey indicates that during the past several years, more programmes are engaging online education, especially offering a completely online curriculum (Table 1).

Results

Institutional support

In the first of three institutional support functions, online management system reliability scored quite high, with 83% stating that their systems were perceived to be quite or extremely reliable. With a similar pattern, technical support for the online learning management system from the university was rated as good or very good 81% of the time (Table 2). Training is noted in the literature as very important and so it is not surprising that over half the programmes (55%) require some online instructor training (Table 3). Of course, some faculty get training even when not required to do so. When asked approximately what percentage of the faculty (core and adjuncts) who teach online get formal

Table 2. Online learning management system reliability and support

Reliability (*n* = 101)			Technical Support (*n* = 101)		
	%	*n*		%	*n*
Very unreliable	3	3	Rather poor	4	4
Somewhat unreliable	15	15	Acceptable	16	16
Quite reliable	50	50	Good	40	40
Extremely reliable	33	33	Very good	41	41
Total	**101**	**101**	**Total**	**101**	**101**

Table 3. Requirement for training before teaching online

Are faculty required to take some training before being allowed to teach online? (*n* = 102)		
	%	*n*
Yes, required	55	56
No, not required	45	46
Total	**100**	**102**

training before and during their first online course delivery, the mean was 70%. Institutional support was perceived as relatively strong, on average, across programmes.

Student readiness

Approximately half the respondents said student readiness in online courses, based on student dropout rates in classes, overall retention, or satisfaction, was not a problem at all; 45% said it was somewhat a problem and only 5% called it a true or serious problem. When questioned about what types of student readiness tools they required, the top three answers were no tools required, a special online learning orientation and a standard readiness assessment used in all classes. However, nearly half of all programmes do not monitor the use of student readiness tools (Table 4).

Faculty motivation

The issue of faculty motivation was examined from two perspectives: their motivation to teach online at all and their motivation to teach with high-quality methods. The results were similar, indicating that once faculty agreed to teach online they tended to be committed to teaching well. However, perceptions of the degree of faculty motivation varied greatly. Respondents fell into approximately thirds, with only one-third stating that it was not an issue, a little less stating it was a small issue but over a third saying that it was somewhat of an issue or a significant issue (Table 5).

It is generally assumed that the use of incentives will increase faculty motivation. In this study, the use of faculty incentives by programmes varied significantly. Most programmes (61%) offered some type of incentive for online teaching or training and 31% used two or more incentives. Incentives vary from stipends or professional development funds for building online classes,

Table 4. The use of student readiness tools by programmes

Please indicate which, if any, of the following student readiness tools your programme requires (choose all that apply). (n = 99)

	%	n*
No, we don't require any	50	49
Providing a readiness video as a standard part of the entry to the programme or as a part of class introductions	21	21
Providing a readiness assessment or survey as a standard part of the entry to the programme or as a part of class introductions	13	13
Having a special online learning orientation	27	27
Other	8	8
Total	**N/A**	**118**

*Multiple responses possible; 118 responses from 99 respondents.

Table 5. Faculty motivation

	To what degree is faculty motivation an issue in teaching online in your programme/school? (n = 107)		To what degree is faculty motivation an issue in teaching online with high quality methods in your programme/school? (n = 107)	
	%	n	%	n
Not an issue	35	37	32	34
A small issue	28	30	29	31
Somewhat an issue	29	31	27	29
A significant issue	8	9	12	13
Total	**100**	**107**	**100**	**107**

Table 6. The use of incentives by programmes

Does your institution provide any of the following incentives for teaching online? Choose all that apply. (n = 105)		
	%	n*
No incentives provided	39	41
A stipend for attending training	21	22
A stipend for building the first class	45	47
A stipend for teaching every online class	5	5
An occasional reassign time for teaching online	8	8
Special recognition	1	1
Other incentive	18	19
Total	**N/A**	**143**

*Multiple responses possible; 143 responses from 105 respondents.

taking training, teaching classes, receiving reassign times, or other miscellaneous encouragements. The top two incentives were a stipend for building the first online class (45%) and a stipend for attending training (21%) (Table 6).

Monitoring the delivery of online courses

Monitoring implies standards but standards can be *ad hoc* or planned, locally created, or use or adapt a known quality rubric. An important aspect of this survey was to investigate what, if any, sources of quality standards specific to the online context are used by programmes. About two-thirds (71 out of 106 programmes) said that they have a 'particular source for determining what online teaching best practices should be'. In follow-up qualitative responses (built into the survey), 69 programmes provided information about the source of the quality standard. Thirty-three programmes indicated that their standard was Quality Matters or derived from Quality Matters. Thirty-six programmes indicated that it was from sources other than Quality Matters, with most indicating that an internal standard had been generated by technical staff or faculty familiar with online teaching. A few respondents indicated that the source of quality standards came from accreditation bodies or learning consortia. When those programmes with specific sources for their quality standards were

asked about the extent of use of those standards, 71 programmes responded. Nearly half of the programmes responded that the extent of use was only modest but about one-third said that their guidelines are used as required checklists or for teaching audits. Another perspective was the effectiveness of the standard being used no matter whether they were explicit standards or not. Overall, nearly half of the programmes thought that the standard being used was either not effective (6%) or only somewhat effective (42%). Only 9% thought their standards were extremely effective (Table 7).

Enhancing accreditation standards

Accreditation standards can provide two types of quality support via articulation and rigour. Accreditation standards can help provide structured ways to monitor quality and the standards can reflect increasing levels of rigour. Programmes were therefore asked how useful a general NASPAA guideline for online teaching might be. The forced choices were 'not necessary or useful', 'somewhat useful', 'quite useful' and 'extremely useful'. A normal distribution of the answers centred on 'somewhat useful' with 40%; only 13% indicating that they would be 'extremely useful'. The qualitative comments on this question were extensive. In general, the programmes that considered themselves high performing were less interested in accreditation standards because of the extra work entailed in the accreditation process, while weaker performers were more amenable to more

Table 7. The use, rigour of use and effectiveness of online quality standards by programmes

Does your college/department have a particular source for determining what online teaching best practices should be? (e.g., Quality Matters, Community of Inquiry checklist, internally generated guidelines, etc.) (*n* = 106)		
	%	***n***
Yes, it has a quality source	67	71
No, it does not have a quality source	33	35
Total	**100**	**106**
If you have a source for determining what online teaching best practices are, to what extent do you promote them? Choose the best answer. (*n* = 71)		
	%	***n***
Our guidelines are recommendations only (modest use)	48	34
Our guidelines are used for class visitations (moderate use)	11	8
Our guidelines are used as either required checklists or for programmatic teaching audits (rigorous use)	35	25
Not applicable	6	4
Total	**100**	**71**
How effective do you feel your current online teaching standards are at ensuring a quality online teaching programme? (*n* = 103)		
	%	***n***
Not at all effective	6	6
Somewhat effective	42	43
Quite effective	44	45
Extremely effective	9	9
Total	**100**	**103**

Table 8. Perceptions about the usefulness of a NASPAA guideline for online teaching

How useful would a general NASPAA guideline be for online teaching? (n = 103)		
	%	*n*
Not useful or necessary	23	24
Somewhat useful	39	40
Quite useful	25	26
Extremely useful	13	13
Total	**100**	**103**

concrete standards. However, the qualitative comments also made clear that most programmes did not favour rigorous standards at this point in online education and there was much greater interest in best-practice guidelines (Table 8).

Overall perceptions of NASPAA programmes related to quality in online teaching

Programmes were asked about how well they believe they are doing with their online learning course quality. The normal distribution centred on the statement that programmes could do a little more to ensure consistent high-quality training (45%): 21% thought that were doing almost everything necessary. However, about one-third of the programmes thought they could do a good deal more, or a lot more, to enhance consistent quality in online teaching (Table 9).

Correlations of factors to perceptions of quality

While not all of the questions asked directly related to the narrower definition of quality (because some related to satisfaction) specific practices and other non-teaching issues, 12 did. Each of those items were analysed for their Spearman's ρ correlations with their perceptions of their programme quality. The items with correlations under 15% did not meet at least .05 significance levels.

Table 9. Perceptions by programme directors about their ability to provide assurance of consistent high quality

Overall, how well do you think your programme is doing at ensuring a consistently high-quality online teaching programme? (n = 99)		
	%	*n*
We could do a lot more to ensure consistent high-quality teaching	14	14
We could do a good deal more to ensure consistent high-quality online teaching	19	19
We could do a little more to ensure consistent high-quality online teaching	45	45
We do almost everything necessary to ensure consistent high-quality online teaching	21	21
Total	**99**	**99**

While technical learning management system reliability and technical support may be important, it seems to be largely assumed and therefore not a significant determinant of quality programmes today (as it might have been a decade ago). The general requirement for actual training was found to be significant element in the achievement of quality. However, the extensiveness of training, training quality and the convenience of training did not reach significance. Perceptions that training made a difference in programme quality was negative because for programmes that have a higher perceived quality, additional training does not make much difference. Even though both the literature and the anecdotal stories tout the importance of ensuring student readiness, at least for some portions of the student population, it did not achieve significance in this study. Not surprisingly, (lack of) faculty motivation items had high correlations with programme quality perceptions, along with high levels of probability significance. However, while incentives may boost motivation indirectly as moderators or intervening variables, the correlation to quality was very low and not significant according to programme director perceptions. While the use of standards was correlated and significant as a quality determinant, the rigour of the use of standards was more highly correlated with quality. As would logically be expected, the perception of the effectiveness of standards was highly correlated to the actual programme quality. While efforts to ensure consistency between modes were significant, requirements to ensure social presence were not. Finally, lack of an accreditation standard was negatively associated with quality (Table 10).

Graduate students are often a bit more demanding than undergraduates and there is stiff competition for Master of Public Administration students (Van Wart *et al*., 2019). Consequently, Master of Public Administration programmes have a substantial stake in being perceived as high quality and accreditation becomes very important for top programmes. As stated earlier, there are many trade-offs in introducing or increasing quality and accreditation standards can reduce flexibility, increase costs, and add to accreditation uncertainty (de Paor, 2016). Given a wide range of contexts and missions, NASPAA member programmes already have a relatively wide range of online competencies to demonstrate. Those competencies are: (1) lead and manage in public governance; (2) participate in and contribute to the public policy process; analyse, synthesise, think creatively; (3) solve problems and make decisions; (4) articulate and apply public service perspectives; and (5) communicate and interact productively with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry. With commendable candour, programmes report a large range of perceived success in attaining consistently high-quality online teaching. Interpretation of the findings depends on one's perspective. One perspective is to focus on the average evaluation of the factors leading to quality performance; the other, is to identify where there seems to be unacceptably low performance for an accredited programme (which could result in additional guidance or explicit standards).

Table 10. Spearman's ρ correlations and significance of factors related to perceived online programme quality

Factors	Related questions	Correlation to perceived programme quality	Signif. Prob
1. Enhancing institutional support	Reliable LMS	0.0555	0.5853
a. Tracking reliability and technical support; taking actions as necessary	Technical support quality	0.1498	0.1388
b. Providing and ensuring faculty training, training quality and accountability through training	Extensiveness of faculty been trained	0.1774	0.079*
	Requirement of training before teaching online	0.2789	0.0052**
	Extensiveness of training programs	−0.0104	0.9535
	Training quality	0.0592	0.5625
	Convenience of training	0.0774	0.4462
	Training making a difference	−0.1826	0.0704*
2. Ensuring student readiness	Student readiness being a problem	−0.1789	0.0764*
a. Tracking student readiness; taking actions as necessary			
b. Employing student readiness 'tools'	Requiring student readiness tools	0.2691	0.0112*
3. Ensuring faculty motivation	Motivation being an issue for adoption	−0.3655	0.0002***
a. Tracking faculty motivation; taking actions as necessary	Motivation being an issue for quality	−0.3224	0.0011***
b. Enhancing faculty motivation through recognition and/or incentives	Providing incentives	0.0481	0.6363
4. Enhancing online course delivery consistency	Using standards	0.1928	0.0559*
a. Tracking delivery outputs at the faculty and program levels; taking actions as necessary	Rigour of standards usage	0.4461	<.0001***
	Effectiveness of standards	0.5348	<.0001***
b. Providing a robust system of online class visits, student evaluations, and other feedback	Requirement to ensure social presence in class	0.1281	0.2064
	Effort to ensure quality consistency between modes of instruction	0.1771	0.0794*
5. Enhancing the coherence of online quality provision	Need for NASPAA guideline	−0.2750	0.0059**
a. Promoting best practices (*ad hoc*)			
b. Promoting an overarching model of online quality			

LMS refers to the learning management system such as Blackboard or Canvas.

Average performance in areas that affect quality most, the programmes in this sample perform relatively well in many but not all categories. Over 80% of the programmes rated their online learning management systems reliable and the technical support as good or very good. Seventy per cent of the faculty were thought to have received at least some training and over half of the programmes required faculty to get training. Over two-thirds of the online programmes had implicit or explicit standards and over half of the programmes were relatively pleased with the standards' effectiveness. However only a third of the programmes felt that their faculty were completely motivated and that was equalled by those who thought that faculty motivation was a significant problem in getting faculty to teach online and expend the considerable energy necessary to redesign their courses. Because of the relatively high correlation of faculty motivation with quality, this is an important issue for most programmes to work on. Ironically, external incentives were poorly correlated with quality and were not statistically significant, unlike training and standards.

From an accreditation standpoint, the findings are a little less sanguine because a major focus of quality assurance is on ensuring a baseline or level of acceptable consistency. The best news was that less than 20% of the programmes had reliability and technical support issues and they were overwhelmingly mild issues. While not a significant factor in quality *per se*, but rather a best-practice, only half of the programmes required student readiness tools. It was fortunate for 40% of the programmes that incentives were not an important quality determinant, because approximately 40% did not provide any, including types of non-financial recognition and appreciation. Incentives for faculty would not normally be a directly observed aspect of accreditation in any case. More critically, related to possible accreditation standards, almost half of all programmes found the effectiveness of their standards to be weak. Although very important for quality consistency because of the technical and pedagogical demands of online teaching, 30% of faculty teaching online did not receive any training. Widespread faculty motivation issues were especially notable, although again less likely to be directly assessed in accreditation standards, but it was still indirectly concerning since qualitative comments indicated significant, or outright, resistance. From this minimum-standard perspective, the role of accreditation would seem a legitimate consideration, especially in light of worldwide move to online venues during the COVID-19 crisis. Once students become accustomed to online education, especially when it is of at least moderate quality, it is hard for them to ignore putting it in their schedule, even as many express a preference for face-to-face modes (Ni *et al*., 2021). It seems likely that the trajectory of online education will be catapulted ahead of its pre-COVID trajectory around the world, even if the rushed transitions were often suboptimal (Weiss, 2020).

Degree of involvement of professional accrediting bodies and timing are also significant issues. While most faculty were supportive of best practice advice and generic guidance, there was far less interest in requiring concrete standards. From the qualitative data, it was clear that much of the stiffest resistance was from some of the programmes that perceived themselves as doing well already and concerned about additional work being added to the accreditation process. Because of the current resistance of a significant number of programmes, including some 'flagship' programmes, it raised the issue about whether concrete accreditation standards are simply not yet ripe but may be so in the future. If so, it would seem that providing an ongoing dialogue among the accrediting body's leadership and during its conferences, might lead to more informal guidance in the near term and possibly lead to concrete standards in the long term.

Relevance of the findings for professional accrediting bodies

Before any accrediting body such as NASPAA can begin to consider what, if any, role it could or should play in supporting efforts to improve online teaching or focusing more concretely on the assessment online teaching as a part of the accreditation process, it must have preliminary data. This study has sought to provide preliminary data in three areas. First, what are the commonly recognised factors that typically ensure and enhance quality online teaching? Five overall areas, with their related factors, were identified. Next, how important do programmes think the various factors are in their contexts and what are programmes doing currently about these factors? The study reveals not only different ways of achieving quality but also points to the fact that there are significant weaknesses in many areas for many programmes, which is reinforced by respondents' overall assessment of their programmes. The interpretation of the data provided here, however, related to the role that NASPAA should or should not play can only be decided by its members in consultative forums. The range of options is broad: (1) maintain the *status quo* (largely hands off in this case); (2) continue to provide survey data and links to primary sources; (3) provide flexible guidance documents with best practices and alternative models; (4) incorporate specific guidance in the accreditation standards themselves, based on the types of practices discussed in this study.

Finally, the authors would suggest consideration of the following for professional accrediting bodies. Online education is only going to grow and the challenges and resources it demands are extensive. While many programmes have been able to take on the challenge robustly, many programmes feel that could use additional tools and some programmes are floundering and essentially begging for help. While concrete changes in the standards may be years off, or not even necessary, it seems that it is appropriate for accrediting bodies such as NASPAA to provide more forums of discussion for this exceptionally urgent and important topic, offer educational

opportunities to better share and learn and consider providing some best practice guidance documents that help programmes self-assess and consciously improve their online teaching. Accrediting bodies are not only about accreditation but also about being a helping hand and providing recognition of quality that is prized.

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