THE JOY OF QUALITY ASSURANCE: EVALUATING FACULTY QUALITY ASSURANCE TRAINING AT A MEDIUM-SIZE UNIVERSITY IN THE WEST

Kevin W. Kaatz, California State University, East Bay

ABSTRACT

Universities are more frequently training their faculty to teach online. As the number of quality assurance trainings increase, the need to evaluate its usefulness also increases. One way to assess quality assurance training is to examine faculty perceptions. This qualitative study found that 96% of faculty who had taken some type of quality assurance training through the university and responded to a survey question about their experience found their training to be helpful while 4% were not sure. Faculty reported that the topics of course organization, alignment, accessibility, benefits to students, rubrics, and the helpfulness of elearning specialists were important areas from their training that helped them in creating and delivering their online courses.

Keywords: qlt, quality matters, faculty surveys, quality assurance training, teaching online

INTRODUCTION

Taking online courses is no longer a novelty—it has become the norm for many university students and sometimes an entire degree can be completed online. With the rise of online courses comes a few big questions: Are these online courses just as good as face-to-face classes? Do students have the similar success rates? Are faculty prepared to teach online? Once they get quality assurance (QA) training, how does it affect their teaching? What are faculty perceptions about the training they received? This project focused on the last two questions.

It is hoped that improved student success is the outcome of well-designed online and hybrid courses. Many times, quality assurance is calculated strictly by the measurements of students through grades (Kuo et al., 2013), exams, student evaluations of the teaching they received, and employment after graduation (Ellis & Hogard, 2018; Younger & Ahern, 2015). Now it is time to focus on quality assurance of the instructor. A quality online course comes from the design and pedagogical expertise of the faculty member who created the course. It is, however, rare that PhD or MA students, in disciplines outside of Teacher Education, are trained in online course design and implementation, and many faculty who are asked to teach online receive little to no training in teaching a distance course (Chalwell, 2020), or if they have training, it may be ineffective for a number of reasons (Alexander, 2018). Fortunately, this is now changing as it is recognized that faculty development in terms of online course design and pedagogy are important to a program’s success (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Meyer & Murrell, 2014), with many institutions now providing this training, based on the Quality Matters (QM) program (Wright, 2018). Other educational systems have used a variety of instruments other than QM in their quality assurance training (McGahan, 2018).

WHAT IS QUALITY ASSURANCE?

It is important to first examine the definitions of quality assurance and how it can be measured and evaluated. The term originally comes from the manufacturing industry (Ellis & Hogard, 2018), but what does it mean for higher education? Previous research has shown that definitions can be slippery (Vlachopoulos, 2016), and the definition of the...
word “quality” really depends on which group you ask: providers of quality, the users of products (students), the users of outputs (employers), or employees (academics and administrators). This also makes defining quality assurance difficult as there are many aspects to look at (Ryan, 2015; Welzant et al., 2015). For Mehralizadeh et al., (2007), “Quality assurance refers to the means by which an institution can guarantee, with confidence and certainty, that the standards and quality of its educational provision are being maintained and enhanced” (p. 353). Ellis and Hogard (2018) also investigated the issues surrounding the definition of quality assurance, and for the purposes of this paper, the definition of quality assurance will be “ensuring that standards are specified and met consistently for a product or service” (Ellis & Hogard, 2018, p. 27).

WHY EVALUATE QUALITY ASSURANCE?

There is a recognized need for trained faculty (Hinck et al., 2018). Providing faculty with support in online teaching has been found to be a best practice for institutions, and as online course offerings grow, the need for quality assurance training also grows (Mohr & Shelton, 2017). Providing faculty support also increases faculty motivation to make better online courses (Mohr & Shelton, 2017). This is important as students tend to be dissatisfied if a course is poorly taught, which of course can have long-term consequences for a department in terms of future course choice by students (Young, 2014). Quality assurance research has thus grown significantly (Steinhardt et al., 2017; Vlachopoulus, 2016) and there are many reasons why higher education institutions would want to examine the quality of its online courses and the effectiveness of its quality assurance programs. These factors include external accreditation (Asif & Rauf, 2013; Hinck et al., 2018), the accountability between governments who provide the funding and education systems that provide the education (Jeffrey & Ahmad, 2018; Younger & Ahern, 2015; Vlachopoulus, 2016), internal evaluation of an institution’s own programs (Mehralizadeh et al., 2007, 365), and the need to improve online courses (Crews et al., 2017). Another important reason to do quality assurance for online courses is to create a better experience for students that ideally increases student success rates (however that is measured—grades, graduation rates, etc.).

Surveys from faculty on faculty development are important so that improvements can be made (i.e., “clothing the loop”) (Gregory, 2018), and knowing what faculty perceptions are can inform future plans to make online courses better (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Bollinger et al., 2014; Walters et al., 2017). Budden & Budden (2013) reported on a small informal survey given to seven business faculty members on their experiences with QM training. They found that many faculty wanted training, but it was time consuming. Walters et al. (2017) did a similar study and looked at other things such as Online Environmental and Personal Factors, Institutional Factors, and Student Engagement/Active Learning in terms of faculty perceptions with teaching online, and they showed that faculty had very “positive perception of support via technological resources and professional assistance” (p. 14). Finally, Gregory (2018), noting a gap in the research, looked at faculty perceptions of the usefulness of the Quality Matters rubric itself and in particular the perceived usefulness of the Applying the Quality Matters Rubric (APPPQR) course. In 2018-19, this current study (funded by the Chancellor’s Office of California State University, East Bay, and the Online Campus) looked at faculty perceptions of the usefulness of faculty quality assurance training for their teaching and student learning.

WHAT WE ARE DOING AT OUR CAMPUS?

Our campus it part of a much larger state-wide university system that has been working to improve online courses through faculty training since 2014. Our campus in particular has been a leader in providing quality assurance training for its faculty who teach online and/or hybrid courses. We have over 14,000 students and have taught 4,500 online/hybrid courses between 2015 and 2018, and 54% of students have taken either a hybrid or totally online course. Our university uses both the Quality Matters rubric and the Quality online Learning and Teaching (QLT) rubric for course design. Quality Matters began in 2003 when the Maryland Online Consortium, a group of Maryland colleges and universities, wanted to ensure that its online course offerings were quality courses. In the same year the consortium applied for a Fund for the
Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) grant from the U.S. Department of Education. In 2014 Quality Matters became a separate nonprofit and as of 2020, they have over 60,000 members and have helped faculty certify over 10,000 courses using their Quality Matters rubric. The rubric itself is in its sixth edition and is updated every 3 to 4 years (the rubric is copyrighted so no examples can be given).

Another training used in our university system is the Quality online Learning and Teaching rubric (QLT), which was developed in 2003 (the same year as the development of QM) at California State University, Chico State (https://www.csuchico.edu/eoi/rubric.shtml). QLT has many similarities with the QM rubric, but the major difference is that QM focuses only on course development while the QLT rubric also focuses on course delivery. Faculty buy-in is vital to the success of any large-scale changes in the curriculum (Gregory, 2018), and just as important, getting faculty buy-in for training in course design can improve student success (Varonis, 2016). To achieve this, our campus made the decision to allow faculty to choose the rubric they wanted to use for their online courses—either QM or QLT. The belief was that giving faculty a choice would be more conducive to getting them involved in creating a quality online course rather than telling faculty they had to use a specific rubric.

Funding for this faculty quality assurance training has been provided by the Chancellor's Office, the Provost's Office, and funds from our Online Campus. Some institutions have provided faculty incentives (You et al., 2014), while others have tried “bootcamps” with stipends for their faculty (Johnson et al., 2012). Our campus has done both. It began in 2014 with our own Summer Institute and here faculty were introduced to the QLT rubric and online course design. In the 2015-16 academic year, the campus began to offer faculty financial incentives (the Online and Hybrid Course Quality Transformation Grants) to take quality assurance training and to get their courses QM or QLT certified. Faculty could receive up to $3,500, and a further $1,000 would be given if faculty became a certified QLT or QM Course Reviewer. There have been twelve cohorts at our campus, consisting of 209 faculty since the first call. As of 2019, faculty have completed 359 QA training courses in QM and 10 in the QLT rubric, along with 74 faculty who have gotten their courses QM certified, and another 16 are actively working on course certification. Currently there are 29 QM Peer Reviewers, three Master Reviewers, and one QM Program Reviewer. More faculty will soon be trained to become QLT and QM Facilitators.

Faculty are given a wide range of options for their quality assurance training. According to our Online Campus, these are the following courses that faculty could take:

Quality Matters workshops (course descriptions can be found at the QM website: https://www.qualitymatters.org/index.php/professional-development/workshops)

- Gauging Your Technology Skills (GYTS)
- Designing Your Online Course (DYOC) Fifth Edition of the QM rubric
- Designing Your Blended Course (DYBC) Fifth Edition of the QM rubric
- Connecting Learning Objectives and Assessments
- Addressing Accessibility and Usability (Standard 8)
- Teaching Online-An Introduction to Online Delivery
- Peer Reviewer Course (PRC)
- Improving Your Online Course (IYOC)
- Applying the Quality Matters Rubric (APPQMR)

Other workshops that a few faculty have also completed:

- QM Coordinator Training
- Master Reviewer Certification (MRC)
- Course Review Manager Certification
- Applying the QM Rubric Online Facilitator Certification (AOFC)
- Applying the QM Rubric Face-to-Face Facilitator Certification (AOFC)
- Improving Your Online Course Face-to-Face Facilitator Certification (IFFC) Fifth Edition of the QM rubric
- Improving Your Online Course Online Facilitator Certification (IFFC) Fifth Edition of the QM rubric
• Introduction to Teaching Online Using QLT
(descriptions of the QLT workshops can be found here: http://courseredesign.csuprojects.org/wp/qualityassurance/training/)

• Reviewing Course Using QLT

We are now at the point that we need to evaluate the effectiveness of the QA training at our university. This has been done with the creation of the SQuAIR program—Student Quality Assurance Impact Research, which started in 2016. The Chancellor’s Office and our Online Campus have so far funded four Faculty Research Associates (1/year), with a $2,000 stipend that can be taken as cash or equipment, to study the impact that quality assurance training has had on both student success and on faculty. These Faculty Research Associates meet systemwide once a month to share data and results and to make suggestions for future research. The first two years of the SQuAIR project on our campus were spent determining the impact of faculty training on student success. The next SQuAIR Faculty Research Associate for 2018-2019 (this author) focused on faculty perceptions of their QM training.

METHODS

The goal of this project was to gauge the impact that quality assurance training had on faculty by examining their perceptions of this training. A survey, which received IRB approval on April 15, 2019, was sent out using Qualtrics. Only one question was sent out. It asked:

How has our quality assurance training (either through QM, QOLT, or OLC) helped with your courses (online, hybrid, and/or in-class) in the following areas—preparation/design, teaching, and students’ learning? Please be as specific as possible, provide examples, and/or provide students’ feedback.

The survey was sent out to 198 faculty who had taken some type of quality assurance training through the university (the emails were provided by the Online Campus). The survey was totally anonymous and no demographic information was collected (such as time teaching online, which discipline they taught in, and so on), nor was any data collected on which training faculty had taken. No follow-up survey was done. The trainings faculty received covered many aspects of course design and student learning, so the survey question was designed to be broad enough to cover everyone who had taken just one QA training course. Faculty were given four weeks to respond and a reminder email was sent out two weeks after the initial survey link.

Of the 198 emails sent, seven were sent back with incorrect email addresses. One faculty member said she did not want to take the survey until she finished her QA training, and another was on maternity leave and did not complete the survey. Of the remaining 189 surveys sent, 26 responded (14%). Two did not quite answer the question but provided useful data that is included in this study. There were eight blank responses, but according to the time stamp given by Qualtrics, some had opened the survey, closed it, and then opened it up again soon after. The percentage of faculty who completed the survey is somewhat lower than some studies (Walters, 2017, had a 34% response rate) but a bit higher than others (Gregory 2018, had a 11% return rate on a study that looked at the perceived usefulness of the QM rubric on course design). One possible reason for the lower than expected return rate in this study was that our university had just switched to semesters in Fall 2018 and the survey was sent out in the last month of classes during our first spring semester.

At the end of the four weeks, the survey answers were collected and coded per the usual qualitative process, using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006; see also Cormack et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). They describe a theme as capturing “something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 82). Braun and Clarke also discuss the six phases of analysis, which were followed in this study:

1. Get familiar with the data
2. Generate the initial codes
3. Search for themes
4. Review themes
5. Define and name themes
6. Produce report

After the coding was finished, three major themes were revealed from the data: (a) those with
positive responses to their QA training, (b) those who were not sure if their QA training was helpful (no one had a negative response to the research question), and (c) criticisms. Within the Positive Response theme there were six major subthemes that faculty felt their QA training had helped with. These subthemes were coded as Course Organization (46% of the respondents mentioned this), Alignment (24%), Accessibility (15%), Benefits to Students (15%), Further Use of Rubrics (8%), and the eLearning Specialists themselves (8%) (see Figure 1). Within the Criticism Response theme there were three subthemes: student evaluations, grade reduction in QA-faculty trained courses, and the lack of training with web design.

Figure 1. Six Subthemes for the Positive Response Theme

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The faculty who responded to the survey made it exceedingly clear that the QA training they received through the Online Campus and its eLearning Specialists were extremely useful to their teaching, and 96% of those who responded stated that the training they received was helpful. Only one person (4%) was not sure if it was useful. Significantly, no one stated that it was not helpful. Two noted that they used their training in all their courses, whether online, hybrid, or face-to-face. These findings are similar to those found in surveys sent to our faculty in 2016 and 2019. In 2016 faculty who signed up to receive QM training and/or to get their courses certified were asked about their experiences. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being Strongly Disagree and 5 being Strongly Agree, faculty had an average of 4.71 to being asked about the support they received from our Online Campus and a 4.78 average score on the question whether or not faculty will continue to apply QM standards to their online courses in the future. In 2019 a system-wide survey was sent out that asked faculty if their QA training specifically impacted their teaching effectiveness, and 74.1% stated that it was “very useful,” 24.5% stated it was “somewhat useful” (these categories were not defined in that survey), while 3.4% said it was “not useful.” Others have noted similar results. Walters et al. (2017) found that “adequacy/reliability of the technical support and the support provided to help design online courses” (p. 12) rated the highest in terms of what they called institutional factors (mean 3.817 out of 5).

Course Organization

Good course organization allows students to spend less time figuring out the course structure and more time on the course materials (Jeffrey & Ahmad, 2018; Ralston-Berg, 2014). Good course organization also leads to better student learning outcomes (Jaggers and Xu, 2016; Mehta et al., 2017; Santelli et al., 2020) and a well-designed course increases student self-efficacy and motivation (Simunich et al., 2015). Crews and Wilkinson (2015) noted that “In an online teaching and learning environment, quality course design impacts the quality of teaching” (p. 48). In this current study “course organization” was mentioned by 42% of those who responded and was the most popular response to the survey question “How did our QA training help with… your courses…”

This makes sense because learning about course design takes time and effort (Mehta et al. 2017) and many of the QA rubrics are focused on quality course design (Jaggers & Xu, 2016), making this a major focus for the eLearning Specialists who are assigned to work with faculty. Both the QM and QLT rubrics provide annotations with examples that make it easier for faculty to be sure their course is up to QM/QLT standards. Within this category, many survey respondents said that the useful hints and design aspects they received during their training were very helpful. Three of the faculty in this study gave specific lists of areas in course organization that they found to be very helpful in terms of their QA training: creating an alignment map, creating introductory videos, creating the Start Here area, making better syllabi, and making navigating courses easier. One faculty member noted:
I have used information from QM training into all of my courses (online, in person, and hybrid). I have incorporated a road map, created a video intro/course outline, added valuable information about assignment grading time and faculty availability to all syllabi, created alignment between the learning objectives and the assignments, as well as ensured accessibility of all items posted.

Another noted: “Following the QM guidelines gave me organizational hints…” Yet another wrote: “My students have especially appreciated the “Start Here” section of my online courses.” These faculty also listed areas such as creating instructions for students, “course architecture,” better course organization that helped with delivering the course to students, as well as having to think about the visual aspects of course design. One noted: “It has helped me get my course better organized for delivery to students. I have had feedback from some students that say it is well organized.”

Other research has noted similar results. In particular, the Start Here page, which is an important part of the QM and QOLT rubrics, gives students their first impressions, which can have a lasting effect on student performance and even how they view the rest of the course (Samudra et al., 2016). Budden and Budden (2013), in a project that looked at faculty perceptions, gave an informal survey of seven faculty members who had taken QM training. They asked faculty “Whether QM certification had been beneficial to your classes” and “How had QM certification improved online or partially online classes?” One answer was that it “helped improve the structure of the online class.” Yowe (2016) conducted small focus groups of faculty that had received QA training. In her qualitative study she asked faculty to discuss the perceptions of the training they received to teach online and found that faculty, while they thought it helpful, actually wished for more training. Finally, Gregory (2018), in a qualitative survey of eight faculty on the usefulness of the QM rubric, found that 75% of faculty “expressed a positive perception of the rubric’s usefulness for course design.”

Alignment

The next most popular category, mentioned by 24% of the faculty, was “alignment” and how it was helpful in designing online courses. This is not a surprise as alignment is one of the most talked about topics in the QM course review. Alignment, according to Quality Matters, occurs when “critical course components … work together to ensure students achieve desired learning outcomes” (https://www.qualitymatters.org/qa-resources/rubric-standards/higher-ed-rubric). Like course design in general, creating a course in which the course learning outcomes are aligned to the entire course is an important part of the QM/QLT rubrics. If alignment is missing or is incorrect, a course review will be stopped before it gets started. As Loafman and Altman noted (2014): “Mastering the skill of writing clear measurable objectives at both the course and module levels should not be understated” (p. 35).

One faculty member wrote that “Following the QM guidelines gave me… an opportunity to align all learning objectives.” Another wrote, “The connection between course activities and course outcomes is more transparent.” Other research has shown similar results when faculty were surveyed. Bento and White (2010) showed that learning about alignment was “the main potential benefit” of using QM. Koepke and O’Brien (2012), in a qualitative study, found that faculty believed creating and using course objectives was an important part of what they learned in their faculty development course. Learning about alignment and how to apply it was found to be one of best practices for faculty who teach online, including “writing measurable course objectives” (Mohr & Shelton, 2017, pp. 132–133). Finally, Gregory (2018) found that “learning objective alignment was the most influential yet controversial aspect of training” (p. 84), with the controversial aspect being that some faculty did not believe alignment was related to student learning.

Accessibility

The third most popular category that faculty found helpful was creating an accessible course, which was mentioned by 15% of the faculty. This is one of the more difficult parts of using the rubrics (Gregory, 2018). Yowe (2016) noted the difficulties faculty had with making their online courses ADA compliant, and it can be a challenging and time-consuming process for faculty, especially if done after the course has already been designed (van Rooij & Zirkle, 2016). One faculty member noted that “QM has helped to focus on accessibility”
while another wrote “I received QM training. This training helps me to develop online courses to incorporate accessibility to different learning styles…” Quality Matters offers a training course specifically on accessibility (Addressing Accessibility and Usability [Standard 8]), and even if a particular faculty member did not take this, all the other trainings discuss the importance of making a course totally accessible for all learners. No longer can courses be text-based or video-based without some mechanism in place that allows access to all students (for example, those who are visually or hearing impaired and/or with a documented learning disability). Quality Matters has also spent quite a bit of effort in refining its rubric to be sure that this is a required part of its course certification. The most recent edition (6th) has made great strides in helping faculty make sure that every aspect of their course is accessible and it is clear that these specific training aspects are valued by faculty.

Teaching faculty to create accessible online courses is also a best practice (Mohr and Shelton, 2017) and should be shaped from the beginning by using Universal Design in Learning (UDL) practices (Houston, 2018). Ko & Rosen (2017) defined UDL as the ability “to design so that course content and instructional activities can be utilized by the greatest number of students to the greatest extent possible without having to make special adaptations” (p. 52). Not only is creating an accessible course useful, but it is a requirement for students who need it—and this includes the use of free material found on the internet in a course that uses websites such as YouTube and iTunes (Sokolik, Rehabilitation Act) requires that any organization receiving federal funds must make all materials accessible (van Rooij & Zirkle, 2016).

**Student Benefits**

Part of the research question specifically asked about perceived student benefits, and 15% of the faculty specifically mentioned these. Their answers ranged from making courses more engaging to students recognizing that the course was more organized than other online courses. Getting students engaged is a continual problem with online teaching—especially for faculty who have only taught face-to-face where it is obvious when students are interacting with each other or when they have having difficulties. One faculty member noted that “The quality training enabled me to improve my overall teaching style for both online and on-ground courses. I have adapted blended learning, rubrics, team quizzes, and interactive classroom activities to engage students.” Student engagement is a hallmark of student success (Harsasi & Sutawijaya, 2018; Jaggers & Xu, 2016; Martin et al., 2018; McGahan, 2018) and is the key to increasing graduation rates (Banna et al., 2015). Taking courses online can be very engaging for students if done correctly, and faculty believed that their QA training helped with this issue. It was also pointed out by one faculty member that students asked fewer questions, and this was believed to be the result of a better-designed course.

**Use of Other Rubrics**

Among the various online quality assurance rubrics, the QM Rubric “most strongly emphasizes the importance of course organization and presentation” while also highlighting (along with other rubrics) alignment and a clear grading policy (Jaggers & Xu, 2016, p. 272). Minnich et al., (2018) and McGahan (2018) have shown the usefulness of rubrics on student performance and rubrics are clearly important in course design and implementation. In fact, 8% of the faculty who responded to the survey specifically mentioned that they are now using other rubrics as a result of their QA training. One wrote, “Yes, it got me to rethink having weekly learning outcomes and to also add more rubrics to my class.” Another noted, “I received QM training. This training helps me to develop online courses to incorporate… rubrics…” While they did not provide details, but one guess for why QA training would increase faculty use of other rubrics would be that these faculty, having seen how helpful a rubric can be, decided to use other rubrics in their course for the very same reason.

**Specific Mention the eLearning Specialists**

It is clear from the research that having helpful and knowledgeable staff is vital to any quality assurance program (Ellis & Hogard, 2018; Gregory 2018). Legon (2019), citing the 2019 CHLOE Report (Changing Landscape of Online Education), found that “Institutions that require instructional design input or rely on course design teams see greater student engagement with faculty and other students” (para. 8). While it is recognized that the
overwhelmingly positive response by faculty to their QA training in this study is really a reflection on the eLearning Specialists who teach the QA sessions and do precourse reviews with faculty, it should be noted that 8% of the respondents specifically mentioned the help they received from the eLearning Specialists. As mentioned before, there have been numerous funding opportunities for faculty at our university to go through the rigorous QM and QLT review process. Part of this process is to have courses reviewed first by eLearning Specialists and to have the opportunity to work directly with them. Faculty then make any necessary revisions to help the course get its QM certification (QLT no longer does course certification). One faculty member stated that “It has been useful to work with the QM team and have another set of eyes to have my course met National QM standards.” Another stated that their assigned eLearning Specialist “was very helpful… [and] was always there to answer my questions and do some work for me to show me how to proceed.”

*Not Sure if it was Helpful*

One faculty member (4% of the respondents) had not taught online before and felt that they were unable to determine if the training helped primarily because this faculty member did not have anything in which to compare it. This was not considered to be a negative response. This person stated that “Online/hybrid courses are terrible teaching experiences” and listed several things that they believed made it difficult: a lack of personal connections to students, the workload for students, and the problem with the lack of internet connection. The instructor was also concerned about the lack of “web-design skills” in terms of the QA training they received (see below).

*Criticisms*

Three faculty voiced criticisms related to the quality assurance training faculty that they were given. These fell into three subthemes—student evaluations, grade reduction in QA-faculty trained courses, and the lack of training with web design. The first faculty member noted that student evaluations for their online courses were either similar to pretraining or actually lower. The reason given was that meeting all the QM standards meant that the course may be seen to be harder for students, especially when students are comparing the course to a non-QA faculty-trained course. The faculty member wrote:

*Interestingly, my evaluations, since passing QM standards, are not necessarily higher and in some cases lower. I think students are comparing to other courses and believe this course is a lot of work and since the course also meets National Standard it may be even more challenging for them. Students need to be made aware of standards too so they understand why a teacher is assigning X number of words for an essay or must do X, Y, and Z to meet the national standards.*

Crews et al., (2017), in a study based on student perceptions, found that some students thought QM-designed courses made the courses harder and increased their workload. Anecdotally, I have chatted with someone at Quality Matters and she noted that others are starting to see this same trend—students see the QM-certified courses as more difficult than noncertified courses and this is affecting student evaluations.

Another faculty member stated that not all students in a higher quality online course are going to get good grades, primarily because of the use of rubrics making grading more objective. This faculty member wrote:

*I know making a higher quality [sic] is a risk that students might not all receive good grades and everything will be based on a rubric that is more objective. In a way, no need to worry about grade inflation but knowing students are receiving DFW are really the one probably didn’t put a lot of efforts to the course [sic].*

These comments align with the results of a quantitative study from 2017-2018 at our university (done through the previous SQuAIR project). That particular Faculty Research Associate found that the percentage of A grades went down in courses that were taught by QA-trained faculty compared to non-QA trained faculty, while at the same time the percentage of B grades went up (unpublished research).

Finally, one faculty member stated that there was no “web design training” to go along with their QA training in course design. They stated that “students struggled” with this lack. Again, there
are no follow-up surveys planned so it is not clear what “web design training” would be in this case. The faculty member noted this was an issue with Blackboard, and it is possible they are referring to course design or simply referring to how the course looks and how this can be manipulated in the learning management system.

RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

While it is understood that this is a qualitative study and the results are based on the answers of faculty who decided to respond to the survey, the fact that so many faculty were overwhelmingly happy with their training indicates that I can go one step further to suggest some recommendations that both our institution and others who are providing QA training could consider implementing. Recognizing issues or strengths can be used to produce better results in student success (Swan et al., 2014), and this can be done by applying changes where something may be lacking or where existing structures can be improved. Here are seven recommendations:

1. Because so many faculty found their training helpful, universities/colleges/community colleges could offer QA training to more faculty who teach online—both lecturers and tenure/tenure-track faculty. All new tenure-track hires here at our university are given some QA training, but lecturers (part-time instructors) are not automatically given this. More and more departments are moving courses online but are the faculty teaching these courses qualified to teach and design quality online courses? More training could be done with incentives (as has been done here). If not offered systematically, another possibility is to have departments require some type of QA training for all faculty who teach online (but this may lead to other issues—as stated above, any change in curriculum needs faculty buy-in and forcing faculty is usually not a good way to do this). One example of this comes from the move our university made from quarters to semesters. Those departments who transformed their majors (meaning the major was totally revamped, including most of the courses) were required to show not only how their faculty who teach online would actually teach the course but how departments would support and/or train faculty members in how to teach online. Departments also need to determine how the courses that are taught online are “quality” courses. The details can be seen in our university transformation document, which lists what our university requires for every new online course:

• Describe the strategies for teaching this course either in an on-line or hybrid format. (Discuss the instructional methods for offering the course(s) content in an online or hybrid format.)

• Describe the experience, support, and/or training available for the faculty members who will teach this online or hybrid course. (Discuss how you will ensure that faculty will know how to teach online or in a hybrid format.)

• Assessment of online and hybrid courses. (Discuss how your department will assess the quality of the online and/or hybrid instruction to ensure it is equal or superior to your on-ground instruction.) Note: Assessment of learning is NOT addressed through student evaluations.

What our Online Campus is providing in terms of QA training fits perfectly into the university mission to create excellent online courses, and it makes sense to expand this training to more faculty members. Of course, there may be times when funding is short or not available. Would faculty take part in QA training without incentives? It is possible, especially if faculty need to be trained and courses need to be assessed for quality.

2. A few faculty noted that they are using their QA training in their face-to-face courses. Universities/colleges/community colleges could start offering some course development training to in-class faculty and introduce them to the QM/QLT rubrics. In-class courses still need to have alignment with their learning outcomes and assessments, and this could be helpful for all faculty.
3. If #2 is implemented, then this creates the need for developing a rubric like QM or QLT specifically for in-class courses. Clearly having a rubric for online course design is useful and it could also apply to face-to-face courses.

4. Some of the more important aspects of QA training noted above are learning about alignment and creating accessible courses. It would be useful to have more workshops specifically dedicated to designing and implementing alignment maps and creating fully accessible courses for both online and in-class faculty.

5. Community colleges in our state are particularly looking for instructors with online teaching experience or at least online course design experience. Many job postings for college/university level teaching are requesting this skill. It would be useful to make course design/quality assurance training mandatory for MA/MS/PhD students who plan on teaching. This has already started in our department. If the process of understanding quality assurance can start earlier (before obtaining a teaching position), then it will become a natural part of creating online courses later.

6. Creating a quality online course is time consuming and it sometimes seems that students do not appreciate that fact or they indicate (as in this study) that a QA course seems more difficult. To remedy this, it would be useful to take the QM rubric (or some version of it) available to students. This would show them that the course had been designed in a specific way and was not thrown together at the last minute. This has been done before with excellent results in student success (Loafman & Altman, 2014) and research has shown that getting students involved in the quality assurance culture on campuses is important (Ryan, 2015). One possibility would be to have a trimmed down version of the rubric in the Start Here section or in the area where faculty introduce themselves. Another option would be to have the faculty make a short video about the rubric and the process that was undertaken to create the course.

7. If more faculty need training, then more eLearning Specialists need to be hired. Certainly more will be needed especially if recommendations 1 through 4 are implemented. Walters et al., (2017) noted that new faculty benefit from interacting with instructional designers, and this study also shows that they do benefit.

**PLANS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Faculty find their training useful and now is the time to survey faculty as soon as they finish with a specific training course. For example, faculty could be given a survey right after they complete the Designing Your Online Course. It would be useful to know which training is better at providing faculty with, say, creating an accessible course or creating an alignment map. It may then be possible to target specific faculty with specific training. Moving forward, it would also be useful to know if the number of QA trainings affects faculty perceptions on its usefulness. For example, is it more helpful to faculty who have not taught online if they only take Designing Your Online Course, or do they feel their training is better if they continue on to take the Improving Your Online Course? Finally, another area for research is to look at student perceptions of their QA faculty-trained courses as compared to non-QA faculty-trained courses. This could be done by direct survey after they have finished both courses. This may limit the numbers of participants, but as mentioned, we have quite a few students who are taking online courses. It may also be possible to compare student evaluations in the QA faculty-trained courses to non-QA faculty-trained courses to see if faculty perceptions are correct that students feel QA courses are more difficult.


Yowe, B. (2016). Faculty perceptions of the online course review process: Does it improve quality? (ProQuest no. 10640870) [Doctoral dissertation, Wingate University]. ProQuest Dissertations. http://search.proquest.com/docview/1973261158/abstract/2E90F4383CE94630PQ/1