

# Reimagining student success: The critical role of quality learning materials in higher education

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Higher education institutions bear the responsibility of empowering their students and setting them on the path to success. This duty must encompass the mandatory provision of dedicated, constructively aligned learning materials. These materials are pivotal, as they enable students to develop the essential knowledge and skills that they require in order to thrive in their chosen fields. This focus on quality learning materials enhances students' educational experience, and it supports their development into successful, self-reliant individuals.



## Rethinking success in higher education

Traditionally, success in higher education has been measured by the attainment of a certificate, diploma or degree. However, this view seems myopic in today's complex, 21st century world. While such qualifications serve as 'packages', 'vehicles' or 'pathways' for learning and act as markers of success, they do not fully encapsulate the fruits of the higher education experience.

Higher education equips students for future careers, shaping them into well-rounded, knowledgeable adults with the capacity, agency and autonomy to be successful, impactful individuals. Such education builds upon the foundational knowledge and skills that are acquired during primary and secondary education, so as to equip students with more advanced knowledge and specialised skills in a particular field or discipline. Higher education also promotes personal growth and development, exposing students to new ideas, perspectives and cultures, while encouraging critical thinking and intellectual inquiry. Quality learning materials are instrumental in facilitating this process. They not only foster deeper understanding, critical thinking and active engagement with the subject matter, but they also promote social and emotional growth, assisting students in developing independence, self-awareness and a sense of purpose.

Nonetheless, one may ask the following: What defines the baseline 'quality' of an educational experience that best sets students up for success?

## Defining baseline quality and fostering self-reliance

Quality Matters (QM) provides one approach to ensuring the quality of learning materials. QM, which is a leading entity in educational quality assurance, offers a faculty-centred, peer-review process that is aimed at validating the quality of online and blended courses (Shattuck et al., 2014). Its standards, which advocate for measurable competencies, active student engagement, mentorship, interactive strategies, high expectations, authentic assessments, prompt feedback and consistent faculty support, are based on years of educational research and best practice.

The fourth general standard of QM (see Figure 1) focuses on instructional materials. It emphasises that materials must align with designated learning objectives, be pitched at the appropriate level, and clarify to students the relationship between objectives and materials. The content should be current, authoritative and cited properly, and it should have sufficient breadth and depth. Additionally, educators should have the flexibility to customise and add content to the course. This standard, which is rooted in comprehensive research and practice, serves as a reliable benchmark for quality in learning materials.

**Figure 1**

*Quality Matters' criteria for instructional materials*

| Criteria for Instructional Materials |  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
|                                      | 1. The instructional materials contribute to the achievement of the stated course and module/unit learning objectives or competencies. |
|                                      | 2. Both the purpose of instructional materials and how the materials are to be used for learning activities are explained clearly.     |
|                                      | 3. The instructional materials are current and authoritative.  |
|                                      | 4. The instructional materials have sufficient breadth and depth for the learner to learn the subject.                                 |
|                                      | 5. The publisher provides the ability for the instructor to customise the content.   |
|                                      | 6. The publisher provides the ability for the instructor to add content to the course or component.                                    |
|                                      | 7. All instructional materials used in the course are cited appropriately.   |
|                                      | 8. The distinction between required and optional materials is explained clearly.   |

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Building on this foundation, Edge Education is committed to creating learning materials that not only meet QM's standards, but that also foster self-reliance in students. We believe that the key to student success lies in the mandatory provision of dedicated, constructively aligned, interactive, multimedia-rich and accessible learning materials. Yet, 'quality' extends beyond content; it also encompasses engagement and connection – with the material, fellow students and educators – around the content.

In a resource-limited setting such as South Africa, we must empower students to become self-reliant. This idea may unsettle the purists and watchdogs; however, we are not suggesting that higher education should be an unsupported endeavour. Instead, we propose a baseline of quality support that is grounded in QM's principles. Learning materials that take this into consideration promote engagement and connection, thereby teaching students to 'learn to learn'. By providing students with these robust, self-guided learning materials, we can free up training institutions to focus their resources on delivering vital support to students.

## The impact of learning materials on student success

Learning materials play a crucial role in student success (Smart and Jagannathan, 2018; and UNESCO IIEP Learning Portal, 2023). These resources not only facilitate in-depth exploration of complex concepts, but they also foster deep engagement, which ultimately leads to improved academic performance. In fact, in low-income contexts, quality learning materials have been shown to compensate for factors such as large class sizes and a lack of reading materials at home (UNESCO IIEP Learning Portal, 2023).

Despite the importance of these materials, their provision can vary significantly across institutions. For instance, some public higher education institutions have experienced a reduction in the availability of learning materials due to financial constraints or policy changes. This resource deficit can create barriers to learning – particularly for students who may not have the means to acquire the necessary materials independently.

In contrast, many private higher education institutions (PHEIs) prioritise the provision of dedicated learning materials for all students. While not necessarily causative, there appears to be a correlation between such provision and improved student success rates, suggesting that quality learning materials may enhance student outcomes (UNESCO IIEP Learning Portal, 2023).

The contrasting experiences underscore the integral role of quality learning materials in fostering student success. By aligning with established quality frameworks like QM and adopting innovative approaches to learning material design and delivery, higher education institutions can enhance their students' educational experiences. This, in turn, equips students with the skills and knowledge necessary to excel in their fields, thereby setting them on the path to success.

### **Edge Education's CourseBook™: A revolutionary approach**

Edge Education's CourseBook™ is an innovative content solution for higher education. It is designed to transform the learning experience and prepare students to become economically active and socially engaged citizens. Our comprehensive academic publishing model ensures a commitment to quality that permeates every stage of production. Each phase involves meticulous reviews and quality checks, culminating in a final QA phase.

CourseBook™ is engineered to provide an enriching and empowering learning experience. It enables students to form meaningful connections with the content and their peers, and it offers access to a range of interactive tools, including highlighters, annotations, summaries, multimedia playlists and self-assessment quizzes. These tools facilitate deep engagement with the content, which promotes active learning. Moreover, an embedded community feature enables students to collaborate, discuss and share their ideas with peers and educators, which ultimately fosters a supportive and intellectually stimulating learning environment.

By incorporating interactive tools and promoting a sense of community, CourseBook™ supports personal and intellectual growth. It equips students with the knowledge, skills and experiences that they need in order to navigate the complexities of the world. These graduate attributes prepare students to make meaningful contributions to society, leading to their overall success.

In conclusion, Edge Education's CourseBook™ represents a paradigm shift in higher education. It emphasises the provision of quality learning materials that align with course objectives, engage students and foster self-reliance. By delegating the responsibility of providing mandatory, quality learning materials to Edge, higher education institutions are freed up to focus their efforts on delivering crucial support services to their students. Following quality frameworks like QM and adopting innovative solutions like CourseBook™ empowers these institutions to deliver learning experiences that truly prepare students for success in their careers and that aid them in becoming impactful members of society. In essence, nurturing successful students in higher education extends beyond merely providing qualifications – it also entails ensuring the mandatory provision of quality learning materials and effective student support.

### **References:**

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