# Quality Assurance Issues for Online Universities

**Floriana Grasso**
*Liverpool University, UK*

**Paul Leng**
*Liverpool University, UK*

## INTRODUCTION

Online delivery of degree-level programmes is an attractive option, especially for working professionals and others who are unable to contemplate full-time residential university attendance. If such programmes are to be accepted, however, it is essential that they attain the same standards and quality as conventionally delivered degrees. The key challenge is to find ways to ensure that the qualities that make university education attractive are preserved in the context of a new and quite different model of delivery.

Many systems have been developed to support online learning (see, e.g., Anderson & Kanuka, 1997; Davies, 1998; Persico & Manca, 2000; Suthers & Jones, 1997; Yaskin & Everhart, 2002). These systems may or may not mimic conventional lecture-room teaching, but will necessarily involve major differences in the ways in which teaching and student support are organised. Furthermore, the Internet lends itself naturally to an internationalisation of education delivery, but this also poses challenges for universities that have developed their structures within the framework of national education systems. To address these issues, it may be desirable for the university to work in partnership with other agencies, for example to provide local support services for students. This too, however, may introduce new problems of quality control and management. We will discuss here what structures are required to ensure the quality of the education provided and the standards of the degrees offered in this context.

## BACKGROUND

The emergence of the Internet as a way of delivering higher education has led to examinations of its implications for education policy in many national and international contexts. A set of benchmarks for quality of online distance education was developed by the (U.S.-based) Institute for Higher Education Policy (2000). This identified a total of 24 benchmarks, in seven categories. In the UK, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education has issued guidelines on the Quality Assurance of Distance Learning (QAA, 2000a), with a similar scope to those of the IHEP. A comparison of the main headings of the two frameworks is illustrated in Table 1. Also relevant, when the delivery model involves partnership with external agencies, is the QAA Code of Practice in relation to Collaborative Provision (QAA, 2000b). Similar issues are examined in an Australian context by Oliver (2001), and from Hong Kong by Yeung (2002). Yorke (1999) discusses quality assurance issues in relation to globalised education, touching especially on collaborative provision. Other perspectives are offered by Pond (2002), Little and Banega (1999), and Davies et al. (2001).

Much of the work in this field reflects "an implicit anxiety that the 'values' of traditional teaching may somehow be eroded" (Curran, 2001). There is consequently, in most prescriptions, a strong emphasis on replicating in an online context the characteristics of quality that we might expect to (but do not always) find in conventional teaching. Thus, one of the precepts of (QAA, 2000a) calls for "…..managing

*Table 1. Comparison of U.S. and UK QA frameworks*

| IHEP (USA) | QAA (UK) |
|---|---|
| Institutional Support | System Design (i.e., institutional issues) |
| Course Development | Programme Design (course development and structure) |
| Course Structure | |
| Teaching and Learning | Programme Delivery |
| Student Support | Student Support |
| Faculty Support | |
| Evaluation and Assessment | Student Assessment |
| | Student Communication and Representation |

the delivery of each distance learning programme of study in a manner that safeguards the academic standards of the award"; and one of the benchmarks of the IHEP specifies that "Feedback in student assignments is provided in a timely manner". Unexceptionable as they are, these requirements are not peculiar to online distance learning. The key issue is not, therefore, one of defining quality assurance criteria, but rather that of providing structures to ensure their implementation.

## QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR ONLINE DEGREES

### Pedagogic Issues

Before examining quality assurance as such, we will first consider questions relating directly to the pedagogic approach used in online learning. In this respect, the premise that quality in online learning involves only a replication of on-campus characteristics is, we believe, limiting. We start, instead, from the standpoint that lecture-based teaching, whatever its merits, is not necessarily an ideal which online teaching must emulate. Students all too frequently attend lectures in an entirely passive mode, expecting to listen and receive the information they require while making no positive contribution themselves. Interaction between lecturer and students, and within groups of students is low, especially in the large classes that are typical of modern universities.

Conversely, online teaching makes it possible to recreate, through the medium of moderated online discussion, an atmosphere that is closer to that of a small-group on-campus seminar, and, paradoxically, can be far more involving and interactive than is typically the case in on-campus teaching. Two broad principles inform the approach: *constructivism* (Wilson, 1996), and *collaborative enquiry.* Collaborative enquiry via Internet-mediated communication provides a framework for this mode of learning (Stacey, 1998). The aim is to use the medium to foster the creation of a *learning community* (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997) that will enable dialogue between participants, sharing of information, and collaborative project work.

Moderated discussion (Collins & Berge, 1997) is a key feature of the teaching paradigm here, and serves a number of purposes that are relevant to the question of quality. Most obviously, it provides the means by which students may share information and experience, comment on the course materials and assignments, raise questions, and bring to the class knowledge and expertise that is outside the experience of the course teacher. To a significant extent, the students thus participate actively in the teaching process, augmenting the overall learning experience. Less obviously, there are other issues of quality in which classroom discussion can have a role; we will discuss these next.

### Quality Assurance Issues

Key issues of quality assurance in an online degree programme include:

- Academic control
- Academic standards
- Staff appointment and training
- Monitoring of programme delivery
- Assessment procedures
- Student identity and plagiarism
- Student progression and support

Our review of these issues, next, draws on our experience with the online degree programmes at the University of Liverpool (Gruengard, Kalman & Leng, 2000).

### Academic Control

The primary requirement of the frameworks defined by the QAA and other bodies is that all academic aspects of an online degree programme should remain the responsibility of the parent university, which should have structures and procedures that are effective in discharging this responsibility. The issue here is that the academic standards and quality of the programme may be threatened by differences between the parties involved in its delivery, especially when there is only an indirect relationship between the university and some of the people involved (for example, regional partner organisations, or locally-based tutors).

In principle, these problems can be resolved by placing online degree programmes firmly within the framework defined by the university for approving and managing its courses. To oversee this, we have at Liverpool established a dedicated organisational unit within the university, the e-Learning Unit.

### Academic Standards

A corollary this is that, wherever possible, the quality management of an online programme should follow procedures that are comparable to those established for other degrees of the university, especially in respect to those procedures that define and maintain the academic standards of the degree. These will include course and module approval and review procedures, assessment criteria, and so forth. In most cases, it should be possible to exactly replicate the procedures that apply on campus.