

Chapter 5.24

Quality Assurance Issues for Online Universities

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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 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

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

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