

Quality Assessment for E-learning: a Benchmarking Approach

Second edition



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For the full-assessment, experts can be involved from the E-xcellence network.



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Introduction to second edition

The European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) is Europe's leading association for Lifelong Open and Flexible (LOF) learning in distance Higher Education (HE) (www.eadtu.eu). As well as e-learning, the model of LOF learning embraces a range of other characteristics such as open learning, distance learning, online learning, open accessibility, multimedia support, virtual mobility, learning communities, and dual mode (earn & learn) approaches.

This manual is the main product of a suite of EU funded projects undertaken under the auspices of EADTU: E-xcellence (2005-2006), E-xcellence plus (2008-2009) and E-xcellence Next (2011-2012). The overall aim of these projects has been to develop a methodology and supporting resources for the quality assurance of e-learning in higher education. The E-xcellence projects involve a core pool of experts from six European Universities with a stake in e-learning developments (see below), and an extended group drawn from a total of 50 institutions during the course of the projects.

The tools produced in the E-xcellence project have been used by institutions involved in the E-xcellence Plus and E-xcellence Next projects, and the outcomes of these exercises shared with respective national Quality Assurance Agencies in discussion events. This edition is based on the manual developed during the initial E-xcellence project but updated to reflect both the experience gained through engagement with institutions and agencies and the extensive changes in e-learning practice in the period since 2005. The most significant developments over this period have been the user friendly suites of communication services packaged and made available in consumer markets as

social networking sites, and the growth of the Open Educational Resources (OER) movement in the higher education sector.

The E-xcellence Next project has reviewed the impact of these developments and their quality assurance implications. Reports and publications on the process and analyses are available.

In our engagement with institutions, the E-xcellence team has reviewed a broad spectrum of uses of e-learning in institutions operating in both face-to-face and distance teaching modes. We have observed many common challenges in managing the integration of e-learning into pre-existing modes of delivery indicative of a convergence in teaching modes between two formerly distinct sectors.

The launch of the E-xcellence project was broadly coincident with the adoption of the Standards and Guidelines for the Quality Assurance of Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) at the Bologna ministerial meeting in Bergen in 2005. There since has been significant progress in the development of quality assurance systems in higher education led by ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education). Quality assurance shaped by the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) has received much attention at the institutional, national and European level through validation centres, universities (and their umbrella organisations), quality agencies, and national ministries of education. These have established systems to cover the full organisational and content-related quality assurance of HE institutions and their programmes. However, few of these systems have so far developed a focus on the parameters of quality assurance relevant to e-learning. This has therefore been the objective of the E-xcellence project. However, despite online learning being identified by ENQA as a

priority area, a survey of their members in 2011 indicates that few of their members routinely address e-learning in their activities.¹

It has not been the intention of the project to interfere in any way with existing systems of quality assurance, and this manual is not a comprehensive guide to QA procedures, even in the context of 'pure' e-learning provision. It is assumed that institutions and regulatory bodies will have a defined set of processes which provide for the development, monitoring, evaluation and enhancement of HE provision. This manual offers a supplementary tool which may be used with these QA processes to allow the consideration of e-learning developments as a specific feature. An important aspect of the E-xcellence project is that it offers a European-wide standard, independent of particular institutional or national systems, and with guidance on educational improvement. The E-xcellence Associates scheme has established a community of institutions committed to using the methodology for quality enhancement.

Institutions involved

Core Partners (2005-2012)

- EADTU (The Netherlands)
- Open Universiteit Nederland (The Netherlands)
- Open University (United Kingdom)
- OULU-University (Finland)
- Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) (Spain)
- PROSE (Belgium)

Partners E-xcellence (2005-2006)

- Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance (CNED)
- Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC)

¹ Quality Procedures in the EHEA and beyond: Visions for the Future ENQA 2012

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- Estonian Information Technology Foundation (EITSA)
- National Council for Distance Education (APERTUS)
- Network per l'Universita Ovunque (NETTUNO)
- European University Association (EUA)
- Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatie Organisatie (NVAO)

Partners E-xcellence PLUS (2008-2009)

- International Telematic University UNINETTUNO (Italy)
- NVAO (Belgium/The Netherlands)
- Estonian Information Technology Foundation (Estonia)
- Höskoleverket / NSHU (Sweden)
- KU Leuven (Belgium)
- The Czech Association of Distance Learning University (CADUV)
- University of Hradec Králové (Czech Republic)
- Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava (Slovakia)
- Moscow State University for Economics, Statistics and Informatics, MESI (Russia)
- Universitäre Fernstudien Schweiz (Switzerland)
- Hungarian e-University Network (Hungary)

ESMU: E-learning Benchmarking Exercise in European universities (2009)

Participating universities

- University of Southern Denmark
- University of Copenhagen
- Aarhus University
- University of Latvia
- Lund University
- University of Kuopio
- University of Porto
- University of Bologna
- University of Oulu

Partners E-xcellence Next (2011-2012)

- Universidade Aberta (UAb), Portugal
- Open University of Cyprus (OUC), Cyprus
- Riga Technical University (RTU), Latvia
- Akademia Górniczo-Hutnicza (AGH), Poland
- Hellenic Open University (HOU), Greece
- Kaunas University of Technology (KTU), Lithuania
- Moscow State University of Economics, Statistics and Informatics (MESI), Russia
- Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), The Netherlands
- Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR), Belgium
- The Flemish Council of University Colleges (VLHORA), Belgium
- African Council for Distance Learning (ACDE), Kenya
- Commonwealth of Learning (COL), Canada
- Latin American and Caribbean Institute for Quality in Distance Higher Education (CALED), Ecuador

Associated partners in Next

- European Centre for Strategic Management of Universities (ESMU), Belgium
- European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), Belgium
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), France
- EADTU Student Council, The Netherlands

Purpose of the manual

The primary purpose of this manual is to provide a set of benchmarks, quality criteria and notes for guidance against which e-learning programmes and their support systems may be judged. The manual should therefore be seen primarily as a reference tool for the assessment or review of e-learning programmes and the systems which support them.

However, the manual should also prove to be useful to staff in institutions concerned with the design, development, teaching, assessment and support of e-learning programmes. It is hoped that course developers, teachers and other stakeholders will see the manual as a useful development and/or improvement tool for incorporation in their own institutional systems of monitoring, evaluation and enhancement.

A glossary of terms is provided.

Context

Currently there are few institutions that are not exploiting ICT in some way in support of their teaching and learning activity. It is intended that the manual will be relevant to this wide range of e-learning contexts, including the various styles of blended as well as full online provision. Where e-learning is offered alongside other forms of learning as part of an integrated or blended learning programme, it is important that the evaluation of e-learning components takes place alongside those delivered by other means. This allows the relative contributions of different teaching/learning approaches and the role of e-learning in overall provision to be determined. A set of performance indicators, both qualitative and quantitative, chosen to reflect the effectiveness of the programme as a whole, need to be employed.

One of the characteristics of an e-learning environment is the sheer amount of monitoring information which may be made available relative to more traditional methods of learning. Most e-learning platforms provide for an extensive level of monitoring and feedback, and student learning behaviour is usually more easily tracked and recorded in an e-learning context than in a traditional classroom. Also, external reviewers are able to gain access to the full range of course materials and to sample the delivery of the programme directly. This has obvious advantages for evaluation but also certain potential disadvantages associated with the sheer volume of data and opinion available.

The structured environment of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) presents one dimension of e-learning but institutions also need to consider the much more unstructured environment provided by the Web. The topic of 'learning analytics' is one of growing interest as academics and others explore how learning takes place within online learning communities and social networks.

It is hoped that by focussing on specific benchmarks and criteria, institutions will be able to develop performance indicators which are fit for purpose in their own context.

Feedback

EADTU is committed to supporting the continuous improvement of e-learning programmes and intends to produce a web-based supplement to the quality manual giving examples of good practice identified by contributing organisations. The resources are published under a Creative Commons licence 2.5. Additionally EADTU welcomes feedback from and dialogue with any organisation which may be able to contribute to the dissemination of good practice through the E-xcellence user community.

Organisation

The manual is organised into six sections covering Strategic management, Curriculum design, Course design, Course delivery, Staff support and Student support. Each section follows a similar format setting out i) benchmarks, ii) performance indicators, and iii) guidance notes.

The benchmarks provide a set of general quality statements covering a wide range of contexts in which programme designers and others work. It is intended that the benchmarks will be relevant to virtually all e-learning situations. These benchmarks might usefully form the basis for an institution's quality self-evaluation where the full range of criteria and performance indicators are not judged relevant to the institutional context (*e.g.* in situations where e-learning developments are confined to a minority of courses or to specialist areas of the institution's work).

The performance indicators which follow then focus on particular topics relevant to the benchmark statements. Not all the performance indicators will be relevant in all situations and several will be seen to cut across more than one benchmark statement. Thus there is not a one-to-one relationship between the benchmarks and the performance indicators since they are pitched at different levels of analysis. Performance indicators have been developed at both general and excellence levels.

Availability

The resources are available online at <http://www.eadtu.eu/excellencelabel/> in the following formats:

- Full text of the Manual in Word and PDF version
- *Quick scan* online questionnaire based formats that enable interactive engagement with the materials.

The website also provides information on the E-xcellence Associates scheme that fosters a user community of institutions with shared interests in the enhancement of quality in their e-learning activities.

How to use the Quick Scan

The Quick Scan online questionnaire is intended to give you a first orientation on the strengths of your e-learning performance and the potential for improvement. An initial self-assessment via the Quick Scan can be the basis for a subsequent review using the resources in the manual.

The Quick Scan should ideally be filled out by a team which includes different stakeholders in your organisation: management, academics, course designers, tutors and students. It is therefore recommended that you build a small team which includes members of the stakeholder groups. The review can be conducted at institution, academic department or module level to suit your own needs. However, if you are operating at department or module level, you should ensure that your team includes those with experience of institutional policy and practice relevant to e-learning.

The team should identify which benchmarks are relevant, and which are less important for your organisation. The team should then collaborate to complete the Quick Scan, including adding comments in the open text areas which are provided.

The result of the Quick Scan exercise should be an agreed self-assessment against the benchmarks that fit your organisation. This will reveal those aspects of e-learning where your organisation is already strong, and those aspects where there are opportunities for improvement.