Introduction to third 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 eight 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 of the manual is based on earlier versions, updated to reflect both the experience gained through engagement with institutions and agencies, and recent developments in e-learning practice. Changes and additions to the manual have been made by a group of experienced E-xcellence reviewers who contributed knowledge both of practice in a range of institutions and of the current literature. A series of online discussion meetings allowed the group to share views. Subgroups took responsibility for

updating particular chapters, and all contributors were asked to comment on the full manual. A final edit of the entire manual was carried out by two members to ensure the content was comprehensive and consistent. We have tried to ensure that the use of English is accessible and a glossary is provided for specific terms used in e-learning.

There have been significant changes in the e-learning landscape over the period covered by the E-xcellence projects. The second edition of the manual acknowledged the increasing use of blended learning, where e-learning is used in combination with more traditional face-to-face teaching. It also included material that reflected the rise of social media and social networking sites, and the increasing visibility of Open Educational Resources (OER). This edition includes additional material to reflect more recent trends: the rapid rise of Massive Open Online Course (MOOCs), a surge of interest in learning analytics, and an increasing use of learning design in a more systematic approach to the development of e-learning courses. A number of other topics that are not yet widespread have also been included, such as an increased focus on personalisation, flipped approaches to teaching, virtual and remote laboratories, digital badges and e-portfolios.

There has been considerable interest in MOOCs since the previous edition of this manual, but also concerns raised about the quality of the MOOC learning experience. This manual will give useful background information which may be of some benefit to e-learning practitioners creating MOOCs. However, the E-xcellence benchmarks and associated review process are designed to evaluate a programme (i.e. a number of courses leading to one or a group of related qualifications) and the scale is therefore

inappropriate to MOOCs which are typically short, stand-alone and not offered for credit. The OpenupEd Quality Label[1] offers an alternative to E-xcellence designed specifically for MOOCs. The OpenupEd Quality Label has been derived from E-xcellence, with closely-related benchmarks and the same overall aim of quality enhancement by self-assessment and review, but a lighter-touch process.

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.

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[1] http://www.openuped.eu/quality-label

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. One result has been cooperation on quality in online and open education between EADTU and ENQA under the SEQUENT initiative (Supporting Quality in E-learning European Networks)[2].

It has not been the intention of the E-xcellence 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.

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

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[2] http://www.sequent-network.eu/

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 elements of the programme 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, needs 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.

Organisation of the Manual

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 benchmarks, detailed indicators, and 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.

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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.

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.

Availability

The resources are available online at http://www.eadtu.eu/e-xcellencelabel/ 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

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with shared interests in the enhancement of quality in their e-learning activities.

Institutions involved

Core Partners (2005-2016)

- EADTU (The Netherlands)
- Open Universiteit Nederland (The Netherlands)
- Open University (United Kingdom)
- OULU-University (Finland)
- Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) (Spain)
- Dublin City University (Ireland)
- Ghent University (Belgium)
- Lund University (Sweden)
- University College London

Partners E-xcellence (2005-2006)

- Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance (CNED)
- Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC)
- 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)
- Högskoleverket / NSHU (Sweden)
- KU Leuven (Belgium)

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- 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

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- 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
- PROSE Network for Quality Management

Associated partners in E-xcellence 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

Partners updating Quality Assessment for E-learning a Benchmarking Approach (third edition, 2016)

- OUUK: Jon Rosewell, Karen Kear and Keith Williams
- UNED: Covadonga Rodrigo, Ángeles Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua, Miguel Santamaría Lancho
- AQARTO Agency & Ghent University: André Vyt
- UCL: Harvey Mellar
- Ossiannilsson QOOL (quality in open online learning) Consultancy & The Swedish Association for Distance Education (SADE): Ebba Ossiannilsson
- EADTU: George Ubachs, Lizzie Konings

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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.