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Title: **Internal quality assurance and enhancement procedures for e-learning courses in UK higher education institutions.**

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Abstract

This paper reports on a research study that explored how campus-based higher education institutions in the UK apply their internal quality assurance procedures to their e-learning courses. A case study approach allowed an examination of the procedures as well as the features of the courses under study. Two sets of data from each of four e-learning courses were collected and analysed: quality assurance documentation and interviews with stakeholders. The results show that the main factors impacting on the effectiveness of the internal QA procedures were the organisational position that these courses had within their institutions; the distributed configuration of course teams; the disaggregated processes that characterise e-learning; and the distant location of students. These factors were found to be impacting on the potential of the QA/QE procedures to enhance the quality of e-learning courses.

Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have a set of internal mechanisms to assure and enhance the quality of the courses they offer. The use of External examiners, annual reviews, student questionnaires, student representatives and team meetings are among the common strategies used by universities to monitor, assure and ultimately enhance the quality of their on-campus programmes.

In the UK these internal mechanisms are part of the requirements that institutions have in place as part of their responsibility for the quality of their programmes in line with the Code of Practice established by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2008).

The QAA recommends higher education institutions to use these mechanisms in order to assist them in the processes of assuring and enhancing the quality of all their their courses. (QAA, 2002). It is not, however, clear whether these internal quality assurance mechanisms are equally effective for every type of course that institutions provide, and in particular whether they are effective to assure and enhance the quality of e-learning courses.

There is relatively little information available about how campus-based universities running e-learning courses assure the quality of their online and mixed-mode programmes, and as to whether they use the same methods as for their campus based courses, or whether they have different procedures in place.

Whilst we have little empirical evidence, there is a plenty of discussion in the literature as to whether the quality assurance arrangements for e-learning courses should be different from those of traditional distance learning and campus-based courses.. Four main arguments can be identified in the literature that support the revision of the quality assurance arrangements, based on four differences identified between e-learning and campus based learning (CVCP, 2000; Harvey, 2002; Hope, 2001; Middlehurst and Campbell, 2003):

- disaggregated processes: the processes involved in e-learning courses are often less tightly connected together than in face to face courses, so course design may be separated from course delivery, paper based materials development may be separated from on-line materials development, delivery may be separated from assessment; the overall design process involves interaction between many different professionals involved in the different phases of course design and delivery (Connolly, Jones and O'Shea, 2005);

- organisation of the teams: e-learning courses usually the responsibility of a whole group of people, who are not always located in the same place (Robinson, 2004);

- openness to review: in e-learning courses activities can be monitored in greater depth, and continuously and unobtrusively than in face to face delivery or traditional distance learning (Fielding, Harris and King, 2004); and

- limited access by staff to students (Walmsley, 2004).

In addition, there is evidence from surveys and interviews that practitioners do not know how to adapt the QA/QE mechanisms used in their campus-based courses for e-learning provision, and that there is a tension between accountability and enhancement in the application of the quality assurance procedures which is not easily resolved, putting greater strain on the capacity of institutions to manage their internal procedures effectively with respect to e-learning courses (Jara, 2007).

Quality assurance of e-learning courses: current practice

A study of the audit reports of 129 UK higher education institutions published between 2003 and 2006 was carried out in order to get an overview of how institutions were approaching the application of their quality assurance and enhancement procedures to e-learning courses (Jara and Mellar, 2008). These reports were analysed in order to identify the specific quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms that were reported as having been modified in order to be applied to e-learning courses.

The results showed that although institutions may be aware of the need to modify and adapt current quality assurance and enhancement procedures for their e-learning courses, actual changes to existing practice are not widespread. Variations in procedures were reported for student feedback, annual reviews, periodic reviews and validation procedures, but not for external examiners, student representatives, staff feedback, team meetings and peer review.

While these results give us an overall picture of the way that HEIs are modifying their quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms, they do not, of course, tell us what it is about online courses that is perceived as impacting on these procedures as effective mechanisms for the assurance and enhancement of the courses' quality.

To throw light on these issues, we carried out four case studies of postgraduate courses in a range of universities to explore how dual-mode universities approach the application of their internal quality assurance procedures to their e-learning courses.

The case studies

Four case studies were carried out of online or mixed mode courses that were part of the academic offer of a dual mode higher education institution in the UK. All four courses had been under most quality assurance procedures.

The research strategy aimed to identify whether the quality assurance procedures already in place in these institutions were able to capture the specific aspects of e-learning courses. By using a case study approach we were able to carry out an in depth examination of the quality assurance procedures as well as the features of the courses under study within their institutional context.

In each case study we collected two sets of data: the quality assurance documentation for the last few years and transcripts of interviews with stakeholders (administrators, educational technologists, tutors and students). This data was analysed through a comparative examination of their content, using a list of quality categories based on a review of the research literature in the field of quality assurance (Jara and Mellar, 2007). This analysis allowed us to devise a map of the issues which were not being captured by the quality assurance procedures, and thus to identify those aspects of the courses which were impacting on the implementation of the procedures.

Results

The results showed that the application of the quality assurance procedures to e-learning courses in campus-based universities was affected both by the organisational context in which the courses were located, and by a number of features of the on-line courses themselves.

As regards the organisational context of the courses, online courses were found to be in a rather 'detached' position in their institutions, a position which created both a sense of autonomy and simultaneously isolation. This isolation drove e-learning courses off senior management's agendas and was made evident in the way the institution wide quality assurance mechanisms allowed these courses to carry on their business on their own, sometimes without significant oversight, as the university had not set up any specific QA requirements for e-learning courses. This isolated position also often led course teams to fail to collect relevant information that would support

their enhancement activities, for example failing to obtain module evaluations from students, which then had a crucial detrimental effect on their enhancement activities.

The features of the on-line courses that impacted on the quality assurance procedures were: the disaggregated processes, the distributed configuration of teams and distant location of students.

The disaggregation of processes that characterises e-learning courses affected the levels of coordination and communication among the members of the teams, which led to an unclear distribution of responsibilities and consequently sometime a failure to apply quality assurance procedures.

> *…I think probably [the module evaluation] fell between the cracks for this session, because I thought …[…]… would be sent out by the development team to all the students but it didn't go out at all, not to our students and I don't know who was responsible for sending it out…*

Additionally, the collaboration with external and specialised units that is typical of online learning courses added further complexity to the distribution of roles and allocation of responsibilities and further reduced the consistency of application of quality assurance procedures.

In terms of the distributed configuration of teams, all the courses in the case studies were run by campus-based institutions, yet the e-learning courses were increasingly taught by a mixture of full time tutors, tutors with fee-based contracts and tutors working from home or elsewhere. As a consequence, course teams were scattered and course leaders were often not aware of, and therefore not prepared to cope with, the coordination requirements of a distributed team. This was particularly evident in the mechanisms courses had for collecting feedback from tutors. In the cases where staff were mostly based on campus and face to face meetings were held regularly, tutors were fully integrated in the running of the course and regularly fed back their views regarding the modules and students to the course leaders. In contrast, in those courses with more off campus tutors, course leaders had mostly ad hoc information on which to base their decisions:

> *There is an atmosphere that people just let me know if there are problems and that is actually quite healthy and I suppose that you probably just relied on that and certainly well we have been still developing but I think we definitely need in… not just a feedback on materials and the pedagogical stuff that just generally for better sort of establishing feedback mechanism where we are not depending on just ad hoc people doing all things.*

The way course leaders of e-learning courses within campus-based universities tended to organise their teams resembled the mechanisms for coordination and feedback used for on-campus staff, often trusting informal encounters as the main source to discuss issues related to the course.

Finally, distant location of students also affected the quality assurance mechanisms, as it obstructed the implementation of some of the procedures in their current form (e.g. the use of student representatives). However, this distance was sometimes

compensated for by a stronger relationship between students and tutors, which would open up new ways of thinking about student involvement in online courses, although it was only occasionally taken up by course teams.

From the perspective of the specific quality assurance and enhancement procedures studied across the case studies, the analysis of the findings show that the mechanisms most affected by the online features of the courses were module evaluations, team meetings, student representation and annual reviews.

- Module evaluations were heavily affected by the online mode of the courses and teams struggled to get it right in their courses. The problems identified in this procedure were not only related to its effectiveness but also at compliance level. The most relevant problems encountered were related to response rates, the tool used to collect the feedback and the moment in which it was collected. The low response rate usually observed in the e-learning courses was in part a direct consequence of the distant location of students, and this low response rate in turn led staff to discard the results. However when the content of the responses was positive, staff were more likely to report the responses as backing up their evaluation of the course. The type of tool used to collect the feedback and the point in the course in which this collection was carried out also affected the response rates, as students were concerned about not fully anonymous evaluations (e.g. when responses were to be submitted by email) and they were not keen on responding once they felt the course was over, and when they were 'on holiday'.

  Quite apart from the issue of poor response rates, the research findings showed also the module evaluations were affected in more drastic ways by the distributed organisation of teams and its unclear allocation of responsibilities among team members. As course teams had not allocated a person as responsible for the application, collection and analysis of the evaluation, courses were sometimes not applying module evaluation, and even where data was collected it was often not properly analysed and hence, not acted upon, thus direct impacting on the quality enhancement of the course.

- Team meetings played a key role as a mechanism for coordinating, monitoring and dealing with the daily running of courses, particularly when teams were distributed. The way in which course teams organised themselves was affected by the number and location of the members of staff and also by the style of leadership of the course directors.

  There was a tendency for course teams and directors to rely on informal encounters as the main mechanism to coordinate and communicate, which clearly affected the consistency of the information managed by team members.

  This lack of formality put at risk the teams' capacity to deal effectively with the issues identified and to monitor their resolution, as there were no occasions for putting the information together and finding solutions. Adjustments made by some teams to overcome these limitations took the form of increasing the formalisation of the communications and coordination channels either online or face to face.

- Annual Reviews were perceived by course teams as a useful exercise as it helped them to organise the paperwork, get the issues discussed and written down. However, annual reviews were also seen as an administrative burden which had to be done for accountability purposes only. This dual view of annual reviews by staff

is not unique to online courses, but the perceived effectiveness of the process itself was related to the online nature of the courses in that staff perceived senior management as not understanding the relevance of the issues that they were including in their reviews and hence did not provide the necessary support or means to address the problems. The consequence of this perception was that course teams produced only very limited and formal reports that were not helpful in supporting their enhancement activities.

- Student representation was found in operation only in one course, a course which had a combination of online and mixed mode modules. Although the team had made efforts to get student representatives to attend their team meetings, this still presented serious problems in its implementation. This was partly influenced by the distant location of the students, but there was also a feeling amongst the students that they did not need to appoint student representatives as they would always contact their tutors directly. This raises the question whether student representation is an appropriate procedure for e-learning courses. Considering the strong and close link that is established between students and tutors, student representation may not have a useful role to play in this context.

Conclusions

These results suggest that the quality assurance procedures in place in dual-mode higher education institutions require adaptation to be effective when applied to e-learning courses. The findings also show that the e-learning mode of delivery, coupled with the complex institutional environment in which these courses are located, were affecting the application of quality assurance mechanisms, obstructing their capacity to assure and enhance the quality of the courses. Institutions need to promote the integration of e-learning courses into the institution's mainstream activities, by avoiding the implementation of informal or ad hoc processes for e-learning courses, and ensuring that they are fully integrated into the normal quality assurance processes.

From an institutional point of view, the results indicate that higher education institutions may need to approach the quality assurance and enhancement of their e-learning courses from a different organisational perspective: e-learning courses require a stronger and more formal definition of coordination, communication and planning strategies, as well as a clearly defined leadership, than face to face courses. The absence or limited clarity of any of these elements affected the effectiveness and enhancement roles of several of the procedures, such as team meetings and students surveys.

Also, institutions and course teams may need to consider with particular care the strategies to improve the ways in which they canvass student opinions. E-learning courses were particularly affected by a restricted access to students, which had a direct effect on the quantity of the feedback gathered and the appropriate representation of students' views. Student representation, in its present form may not be useful mechanism for canvassing student opinions in e-learning courses. The data suggests however that the closer relationship established with tutors may be a route worth exploring for student representation.

These case studies also highlighted the additional challenges that course teams faced in moving on from the application of quality assurance procedures to addressing the issues of quality enhancement.

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