

Summer Course of the UPM  
**TEACHING AND LEARNING BY INTERNET:  
QUALITY OF PROCESSES AND RESULTS**

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**La Granja (Segovia)**

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Main theme of the presentation

The Quality Assurance (QA) of distance education (including e-learning)

The Question

How does it differ from the QA of face to face education?

The More Fundamental Question

Does it differ?

Once upon a time

There was face to face education and  
distance education who lived in different  
worlds

# Early External Quality Assurance

Based on face to face

Two main elements

- ✍ Comparison with an intuitive known
- ✍ Qualitative and quantitative measures based on the face to face model

# Part-time students

Distance Learning students are usually part-time students

Part-time students have traditionally been the Cinderellas of the quality assurance system

# Factors contributing to the growth of external quality assurance 1

- ✍ The recognition in many countries of the need for greater accountability for the use of scarce national resources.
- ✍ The growth in higher education that has occurred in many countries.
- ✍ The increased diversity in HE provision including the establishment of binary systems, and the growth in distance learning.
- ✍ In some countries there was a trade off between the reduction of direct governmental control of higher educational institutions and the introduction of external quality assurance arrangements.

# Factors contributing to the growth of external quality assurance 2

- ✍ The increase in some countries in the number of private, including “for profit”, providers.
- ✍ Regional developments, for example in Europe and South America, aimed at creating a higher education space which encourages student mobility and the mutual recognition of qualifications.
- ✍ The ever increasing internationalisation of higher education including the growth in cross -border providers and the need for the mutual recognition of qualifications and higher education credits

# Emerging Issues

- ✍ Accountability versus enhancement
- ✍ From inputs to outputs via process
- ✍ The move from reliance on experience to the reliance on more explicit agreed specifications

# The dangers of a “Compliance Culture”

The danger is that institutions will engage in what has been termed a “compliance culture” when the all the effort is put into attempting to obtain a positive accreditation decision, or a good score from the external quality assurance body, rather than actually improve the quality of what is being done.

The attitude underlying a compliance culture can be expressed in the question

✍ “Tell us QA agency what you need in evidence that this programme is healthy and we shall provide it”.

In such a situation institutions are encouraged to hide weaknesses rather than to demonstrate that they have identified them and are taking steps to overcome them.

From inputs to outputs but not  
forgetting process

# Importance of direct and indirect measures of learning outcomes

## CHEA policy

Accrediting agencies should place upon institutions the following expectation that they should

- ✍ Regularly gather and report concrete evidence about what students know and can do as a result of their respective courses of study, framed in terms of established learning outcomes and supplied at an appropriate level of aggregation (e.g. at the institutional or program level).
- ✍ Supplement this evidence with information about other dimensions of effective institutional or program performance with respect to student outcomes (e.g. graduation, retention, transfer, job placement, or admission to graduate school) that do not constitute direct evidence of student learning

# Specifications against which learning outcomes might be judged 1

A number of countries and regions are publishing Qualification Frameworks that specify the attributes that are required to be demonstrated in order to receive an award. In Europe they are called the “Dublin Descriptors” and cover three levels of degree, bachelors, masters and doctoral

## Specifications against which learning outcomes might be judged 2

Expectations relating to the specific competences related to different disciplines are also being published. The QAA in the UK has published over 40 “subject benchmarks” while in Europe a group of universities are engaged in the Tuning project

# The Tuning Project 1

- ✍ More specifically, the project aims at identifying points of reference for generic and subject-specific competences of first and second cycle graduates in a series of subject areas: Business Administration, Education Sciences, Geology, History, Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry. Competences describe learning outcomes: what a learner knows or is able to demonstrate after the completion of a learning process. This concerns both subject specific competences and generic competences, like communication skills and leadership.

# The Tuning Project 2




Competences are described as points of reference for curriculum design and evaluation, not as straightjackets. They allow flexibility and autonomy in the construction of curricula. At the same time, they provide a common language for describing what curricula are aiming at.

*Source: European Commission Website*

*[http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/educ/tuning/tuning\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/educ/tuning/tuning_en.html)*

# Indirect measures of students' learning

Performance indicators such as

-  Retention (success rates)
-  Time taken to graduate
-  Employment outcomes

# The interpretation of performance indicators

An indicator is only a number if one does not have something to compare it with. An institution can of course compare its current to its past performance through time series analysis but it is also very useful to be able to make comparisons with the performance of others. A quite common practice is for institutions to select a group of others institutions which they believe are similar to themselves and then compare their performance against that of the “peer group”. The comparison may be confined to publicly available data or the institutions may agree to exchange confidential data for their mutual benefit.

# Performance indicators UK practice

In the UK the Higher Education Funding Councils have for a number of years published a set of performance indicators covering, as far as teaching is concerned, access (which mainly measures the social mix of the student intake), non-completion rates, efficiency (a measure based on the average time it takes a student to graduate), and employment indicators. The tables were first published in 1999 and may be accessed via the Higher Education Council for England's (HEFCE) website ([www.hefce.ac.uk](http://www.hefce.ac.uk))

# Adjusted sector benchmarks 1

An interesting feature of the publication is the use of adjusted sector benchmarks. These make allowance for various factors which affect the indicators. The main factors used are the subject mix of an institution, and the entry qualifications of its students while for those indicators which cover all age groups the benchmark also takes into account the proportions of young (under 21) and mature students entering the institution.

## Adjusted sector benchmarks 2

- ✍ For example, for those who enrolled on full-time first degree courses in 2002/03
- ✍ The non-continuation rate for young entrants to courses in medicine and dentistry was 1.8% while the rate for young students taking combined studies degrees was 14.3%. (Young entrants are those aged under 21 on entry to first degree courses),
- ✍ The overall non-continuation rate for young students was 7.8% but for mature students 15.4%
- ✍ In terms of entry qualifications young students whose tariff points on entry were below 100 exhibited a non-continuation rate of 13.3%, while the corresponding figure for those whose tariffs on entry exceeded 481 was 1.7%.

# Performance Indicators

Comparison with peers

Sector benchmarks

	<i>Non-continuation rates</i>	
	<b><i>Actual</i></b>	<b><i>Benchmark</i></b>
Leeds Metropolitan	8.4%	9.6%
LSE	5.5%	4.1%

## Process is still important

Not all the outputs of higher education, such as intellectual honesty or the recognition of the need for continuing life long learning are measurable.

If it is believed that certain education approaches are more likely to produce the desired outcomes then process might be regarded as a proxy for output.


## Is there a difference?

The gap between face to face is narrowing and quality assurance is increasingly becoming “mode independent” but, from a quality assurance perspective, what differences remain?

# Features often associated with Distance Learning

But which are not necessarily part of Distance Education and might be found in a face to face

 Open Entry

 Disaggregation of the academic process – different people write the course, support the students and examine the students

# A feature always associated with Distance Learning

The question of whose work is being assessed remains an issue for some.

## The UK Open University

- ✍ Over 200,000 students, all part-time except for a few hundred full-time PhD students
- ✍ At all levels of HE
- ✍ Covers much subjects including engineering, music and modern languages (not medicine and architecture)
- ✍ At undergraduate level entry qualifications not required

# The UK Open University 1

Is subject to exactly the same external QA procedures as other universities

For internal QA it does all the things that other universities do but does two things extra

- ✍ Checks a sample of the quality of the teaching (in a way that does not disturb the teaching process)
- ✍ Exposes its teaching materials to public view

## Course production and student support

- ✍ Courses produced by course teams including full-time academics, editors, video producers, IT specialists etc
- ✍ Students supported by Associate Lecturers (ALs)
- ✍ ALs managed by full-time central and regionally based academic staff
- ✍ Courses run by maintenance teams (FT academic staff) who revise course content and write examination papers and other forms of assessment

## The basic traditional OU model 1

- ✍ Courses carry 30 or 60 points (120 points equivalent to one year's ft study) and take nine months to complete.
- ✍ Students allocated to groups of 20/25 each of which is supported by an AL.
- ✍ Students have to complete a number of Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs)
- ✍ Students take an unseen invigilated examination.
- ✍ To gain a credit students have to pass both

## The basic traditional OU model 2

- ✍ Students have the option to attend a number of face to face tutorials involving the whole group.
- ✍ Some courses have compulsory residential schools
- ✍ There are also optional “stand alone” residential schools

## The OU's move to e-learning

- ✍ For some time students have been able to contact each other and their ALs electronically and have been directed to web based resources

More recently

- ✍ TMAs submitted and returned electronically
- ✍ For a number of courses materials are sent to students electronically rather than through the post

# The UK Open University 2

The OU also

- ✍ Ensures that there are good links between those who produce the courses (the central academic staff) and those who teach the students (associate lecturers)- a process moderated by the regional academic staff
- ✍ Has stringent procedures for ensuring the integrity of student assessment)

The result

- ✍ The OU gained the highest score in terms of overall student satisfaction in the first National Student Survey (4 and a half out of 5)

# Distance Learning – Quality Assurance Guidelines

## 1

These have been produced by a number of agencies.

Some features of the guidelines seem highly relevant to distance learning such as technical support and access to advisory services these are not without relevance to the face to face student.

# Distance Learning – Quality Assurance Guidelines

## 2

While some (many) of the guidelines seem equally relevant to students of all modes, for example QAA Code of Practice Section 2 “Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning) issued in September 2004

# Distance Learning – Quality Assurance Guidelines

## 3

### Precept B7

“Students should have access to:

- ✍ Information on the ways in which their achievements will be judged, and the relative weightings of units, modules or elements of the programme in respect of assessment overall;
- ✍ Timely formative assessment on their academic performance to provide a basis for individual constructive feedback and guidance, and to illustrate the awarding institution’s expectations for summative assessment”

And so do face to face students

# USA – variations in practice

Survey of specialised accreditation agencies

		<b>% age</b>
Same for DL and F to F	23	42
Separate standards for DL	9	16
Separate arrangements for DL	16	29
Do no accredit DL	7	13
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>55</b>	

Source: Specialized Accreditation and Assuring Quality in Distance Education, CHEA 2002

# US Regional Accreditors

Have all adopted “Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs” which was produced in 2001. Most provisions are applicable to all modes, some references to technologies (appropriate, consistent approach and student support) and one provision relating to student identification at examinations

# Conclusion

A number of developments over the years have narrowed or eliminated the differences between distance and face to face education. This is particularly true in the case of quality assurance.

While there are some (a declining number?) agencies and authorities who emphasise the difference by for example publishing separate standards the differences between those standards are not fundamental.

My thanks for your attention

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