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How does quality assurance make a difference?

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Abstract:

Although e-learning has become mainstream provision in European higher education it has not yet become integral part of the QA systems.

Surveys like the E-learning Quality (ELQ) report (2008:11R) show that quality in e-learning is a non-issue for many and there is a need for methodological development within QA-agencies. At the same time, there is a need for increased cooperation between national agencies on QA in e-learning. (ENQA Workshop 14)

An opportunity is created by EADTU in partnership with European and global stakeholders for the existing channels in QA to adopt new quality guidelines. EADTU serves universities and QA-agencies in a cooperational model with the open source instrument E-xcellence.

This will be a co-presentation by EADTU and NVAO addressing:

- A. New benchmarks for quality in e-learning; social media and OER**
- B. Recommendations by UNESCO's Global TF QA in e-learning**
- C. Challenges for Quality Assurance Organisations in Europe**



E-xcellence: Quality assurance in e-learning; a co-operational model between universities and QA-agencies

1. Introduction

E-learning has become mainstream provision in European higher education and is essential in supporting lifelong learning and internationalisation. By becoming integral part of higher education, e-learning should also be integral part of the QA systems, internal and external, with related innovative and appropriate criteria. In practice this is however not the case. In the E-learning Quality (ELQ) report (Report 2008:11R) the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (NAHE) surveyed the work on quality assurance of e-learning in higher education on a European level in nine selected countries. One conclusion is that quality in e-learning is a non-issue for many. To this end, there is a need for methodological development within quality assurance agencies. At the same time, there is a need for increased cooperation between national agencies as e-learning enhances the development of borderless education. (From ENQA seminar Sigtuna 10/09)

The expertise and responsibility for QA in e-learning is clearly in first instance within the universities. Some 25 universities have taken up that task in the past years under coordination of EADTU, leading to the E-xcellence instrument. In September 2012 the new version of the manual was launched with new quality benchmarks on the use of Social Media and OER.

What is the E-xcellence instrument?

With E-xcellence, EADTU is leading a European movement on QA in e-learning. More specifically, the building of an e-learning benchmarking community of Associates in Quality. The E-xcellence Associates are focusing on the improvement of four priority elements of progressive higher education: Accessibility, Flexibility, Interactiveness and Personalization.

Working on the European level with different countries and different systems of higher education, *setting standards* for Quality Assurance in e-learning is not only impossible but would also disregard the complexity and variety of the European HE systems. A benchmarking approach as a system of references is therefore much more appropriate and effective.

In our approach, *benchmarking is an improvement tool*; a process of comparing the universities performance with best practices in the field of e-learning. This process guides universities in critically looking at their own business models and practices leading to identification of weaknesses and strengths in comparison to other universities. By offering also directions and examples of enhancements, users of E-xcellence are guided towards improving their e-learning performance based on benchmarks.



This process of improvement can be a stand-alone exercise for the higher education institution, leading to a first insight in fields of improvement. The approach can be extended with a review at a distance or on-site from e-learning experts. This extension is formalised in an E-xcellence Associates label. (www.eadtu.eu/e-xcellencelabel)

The E-xcellence Associates label is not a label for proven excellence but rather a label for institutions/faculties using the E-xcellence instrument for self-assessment and take measures of improvement accordingly.

This label was established to reward the efforts of universities in a continuous process of improving their e-learning performance and offer them the platform and networking opportunities to meet virtually with peers and experts in the field. On their part universities can present their fields of expertise as well to this community.

2. The E-xcellence assessment instrument is created and shared with universities and quality assurance agencies in three stages.

In a first stage (2005-2007), the e-xcellence instrument has been developed. E-xcellence represents a quality assessment and benchmarking instrument that covers the pedagogical, organisational and technical framework of e-learning provision, with special attention on the enhancement of the accessibility, flexibility and interactiveness of higher education programmes and courses.

The E-xcellence instrument supplements existing QA systems with e-learning specific issues and addresses directly the higher education and adult education sector as well as assessment and accreditation bodies. From the start, we were seeking integration within the existing QA frameworks rather than re-inventing them. The instrument was developed by 10 conventional and open universities in cooperation with the NVAO and the EUA.

In the second stage (2008-2009), E-xcellence was updated with the involvement of some 50 universities and 10 assessment and accreditation agencies in a European event on QA in e-learning in Madrid and intensive local seminars in 13 countries. Also, the instrument was fine-tuned to blended learning situations (in cooperation with ESMU).

Being confronted with the choice of organising assessment of universities ourselves (a special business/consultancy unit) or offering the benchmarks in open source to the regular quality assurance channels in European higher education, the decision was made for the latter. EADTU wants to follow the general principle for quality assurance in higher education, by which *the primary responsibility lies with each institution itself (staff, curriculum, management) and quality assurance agencies are responsible for structural external evaluation.* The benchmarks and assessment guidelines as constructed by experts of different countries in EADTU can serve both.

The availability of the criteria and benchmarks in open source has led to a wide and free dissemination in Europe and even worldwide.



The third stage (2010- 2012) of integrating the quality assurance of e-learning in quality assurance processes is focussed even more on using the regular channels for QA and sharing expertise. This means that EADTU wants to serve universities Europe wide with an open and updated “quality assurance in e-learning” instrument and seeks partnership with other stakeholders such as European and national QA-agencies, European university organisations and student organisations. As QA in e-learning, Internationalisation of curriculum, institutional capacity building and student mobility are all global topics and relevant to expansion of e-learning, a worldwide cooperation framework is part of this third stage.

This approach will therefore build on the principles of participative or collaborative action research and on open source provision of expertise, accessible to universities and agencies and to be freely applicable in their practice. E-xcellence NEXT wants to make QA agencies more sensitive for integrating e-learning specific criteria into existing codes of practice and QA-systems.

The objectives of E-xcellence NEXT are:

1. Extended European introduction (countries not yet involved in E-xcellence)

In total some 50 Universities have done the E-xcellence exercise with the support of the E-xcellence team and involvement of more than 10 QA agencies.

2. Updating of the instrument

Special focus is given on the recent developments in open educational resources and the growing application of social networking.

3. Broadening the partnership: E-xcellence NEXT wants to make QA agencies more sensitive for integrating e-learning specific criteria into existing codes of practice and QA-systems.

The ultimate goal is to have the universities (1) and their QA-agencies (2) use the instrument in agreement to the benefit of the student (3). There is a key role for ENQA and the national quality assurance agencies in cooperation with (organisations of) universities and students to cover the field of QA in e-learning. In addition to that there is a key role for experts in e-learning to guarantee:

- full coverage of e-learning issues (also recent developments)
- common language for assessment
- keeping the instrument up to date



3. The NEXT steps in QA in e-learning

A. New benchmarks for quality in e-learning, social media and OER

Within the E-xcellence NEXT project we have **updated the manual** with a team of experts with a view to monitoring changes in e-learning. The total review of the manual is based on feedback from a European seminar on e-learning and a series of local seminars of universities and AQ-agencies. Updating the manual based on collected feedback and inclusion of new developments resulted throughout the document of some 5,000 changes. The updating was supplemented with additional paragraphs on Social Media and Open Educational Resources.

Social Networking needed to be included in response to the overall increase of interest by universities in the past 5 years. Through social networking tools the educational provision is becoming more accessible and new interactions are available. Basic features were previously available within VLE systems but not “bundled” in the way they are for example in Facebook. However, having the tools available even in a bundled form does not make them useful without a clear academic purpose. So, the manual still concentrates on the academic use of conferencing, messaging etc. Major issues around the boundaries between the institutional world and the private world of the students are addressed as they need consideration if teachers chose to work with commercial Social Network systems rather than use the university system. Policy issues such as this need resolution by University senior management.

On Open Educational Resources (OER) the majority of published work and profile has been on the push side of OER and not as much guidance on the use. Therefore, the E-xcellence manual presents a guide to factors to be considered in the use of OER.

New developments in higher education like social media and OER demand a responsive approach by the universities and QA-agencies. Not only in recognising the opportunities created by these developments to improve the learning process, but also by identifying methods of making the best possible use of it. Quality indicators need to be agreed on locally between universities and QA-agencies. Even better, on a European level within a common language of assessment. A (local-European) cooperation model between universities and QA-agencies should support their anticipation on new developments.

B. Recommendations by UNESCO’s Global TF QA in e-learning

On the global level EADTU established together with UNESCO a **Global Task Force QA in e-learning** as an expert platform representing various instruments, models and approaches in organising quality assessment dedicated to e-learning. In



UNESCO's Global TF for QA in e-learning, EADTU (E-xcellence) is representing Europe as one of the regions.

The TF was established at the JOINT SEMINAR ON QUALITY ASSURANCE IN E-LEARNING and OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES, March 12 2009, UNESCO, Paris.

Members of the Global TF are:

- UNESCO
- Commonwealth of Learning (COL)
- CALED
- AAOU
- ACDE
- EADTU

The TF has worked in the past year on the 2:

1. Components of e-learning to be covered by QA
2. Recommendations for QA agencies and universities on the integration of e-learning in their QA-systems

C. Challenges for Quality Assurance Organisations in Europe

In 2008, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (NAHE) challenged the European quality assurance community when it published the report *E-learning quality: Aspects and criteria for evaluation of e-learning in higher education*. The report invites Quality Assurance agencies to take a stance on four policy issues. In 2009, NVAO responded to the challenge through its contribution to the ENQA/NAHE workshop *Quality Assurance of E-learning* in Sigtuna, Sweden.

Below, we summarize NVAO's position on three of these issues, updating them to account for developments in recent years. We conclude this section with an impression of a workshop involving other quality assurance agencies with ENQA membership status.

The case of NVAO

Integration of e-learning criteria in the national quality assurance system

NVAO is not concerned with the quality of e-learning as such; the NVAO accreditation framework does not feature any explicit reference to it. What we are concerned with is the quality of Bachelor's and Master's degree programmes, which may or may not involve elements of e-learning.

In its discussion about the integration of e-learning criteria in the national quality assurance system, the NAHE report formulates this conclusion: "*In order for quality assessment of e-learning to become an integral part of national quality reviews, aspects and criteria need to be incorporated into the general basis for assessment.*"



NVAO agrees with this statement, although our interpretation of “incorporated” may not conform completely to the one intended by the NAHE report. We are convinced that incorporating e-learning specific aspects and criteria does not necessarily have to entail a revision of our assessment framework.

Since 2011, the accreditation system in the Netherlands features both institutional and programme levels. Universities may apply, on a voluntary basis, for an institutional audit. If they do and the outcome is positive, they are entitled to having their degree programmes externally assessed in a limited way. The assessment framework for limited programme assessments consists of only three standards:

1. Intended learning outcomes

The intended learning outcomes of the programme have been concretised with regard to content, level and orientation; they meet international requirements.

2. Teaching-learning environment

The curriculum, staff and programme-specific services and facilities enable incoming students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

3. Assessment and achieved learning outcomes

The programme has an adequate assessment system in place and demonstrates that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.

We consider the above assessment framework an “open” one, very well capable of accommodating input on e-learning.

We have as yet no empirical evidence of the use of E-xcellence in formal external quality assessments geared to accreditation. What we do know is that a small number of universities have incorporated a selection of E-xcellence benchmarking statements into their system of *internal* quality assurance. Thus, it is a matter of time before we will see E-xcellence surface in external assessment reports.

Intelligence and competence within the organisation

The NAHE report states that incorporating e-learning specific aspects and criteria into the general basis for assessment requires intelligence and competence within the organisation: “*A special function for e-learning needs to be set up within the quality assurance agency, i.e. a function with the task of monitoring, on a continuous basis and under special regulations, national and international developments within e-learning. To keep pace with international developments, we recommend the adoption of a strategy for extended representation in international organisations, projects and networks. The establishment of an e-learning advisory board is also recommended.*”

As with the previous policy issue, NVAO agrees, but what we consider crucial is that e-learning specific intelligence and competence is present among panels of experts. In the case of reaccreditation of existing degree programmes, external assessment is done by a panel of experts composed by and run by an Evaluation Agency. However, NVAO has to approve the composition of each and every panel. Where e-learning is substantially involved, we see to it that relevant expertise is present among expert panel members.



In the case of initial accreditation of new degree programmes, NVAO itself composes and runs the panel of experts. That way, we are in a position to even more actively ensure the presence of e-learning expertise in a panel.

It is obvious that the above requires a measure of e-learning specific intelligence and competence within NVAO. Some of our staff are reasonably up to date with e-learning developments and we do our best to keep pace with international developments. Participating in E-xcellence is one way of doing so.

Methodological development

One NAHE report's policy issue is about methodological development. The conclusion reads: "*Extensive methodological development will be necessary to adapt the general methods for assessment of quality in higher education to the assessment of quality in e-learning.*"

It could be argued that methodological development shows substantial overlap with the previous policy issues. However, the NAHE reports' discussion of this issue contains at least one important element that has not been touched upon earlier: "*While the assessment of digital applications implies difficulties for the assessors, they also offer novel opportunities for them to reach the heart of teaching and learning, as many of the educational environments are more easily accessible.*"

In NVAO's view, a true e-learning expert is someone who is fully aware of the novel opportunity of having access to the record of learning interaction and engagement.

Thus, we say yes to methodological development, and, again, as with the second policy issue, it is the external experts who have to do the job. They must embody sound methodology and represent methodological development. It is NVAO's duty to ensure that panels are adequately composed in this respect.

Other European QA agencies

In June 2011, a European Seminar on QA in e-learning was organised by EADTU in Paris (UNESCO headquarters). NVAO brought the seminar to the attention of a group of 26 colleagues who (1) at the time were being employed by a QA agency with ENQA membership status and (2) had attended the 2009 ENQA/NAHE workshop "Quality Assurance of E-learning" in Sigtuna, Sweden. A number of them participated in the event, and in the afternoon opted for a workshop run by NVAO entitled *QA agencies: integrating QA in e-learning*.

Representatives of seven QA agencies with ENQA membership status actively participated in the workshop. In a first round, participants were invited to share their agency's current practice in dealing with e-learning in accreditation. Next, participants were requested to individually try and answer questions relating to E-xcellence's benchmarking statements.

The results will be presented at the EQAF conference.



4. Concluding

The main element of this E-xcellence NEXT approach is to make QA agencies more sensitive for integrating e-learning specific criteria in their QA system. EADTU therefore offers them the E-xcellence instrument as a possibility to do so in a flexible way and according to their own experience of good practice. As indicated, the E-xcellence instrument is fit for this as it was especially developed to be part of the existing channels in HE.

It is clear that, also in this further stage, EADTU wants to serve the universities directly by providing the instrument for free as an open source instrument. It is of course also for QA-agencies freely available too as to offer them the opportunity to find connection with new developments in the field of QA and e-learning of their related universities.

Just having the instrument on-line is however not enough. Like in the local seminars, some events for sharing expertise and experiences is needed to keep universities and QA agencies up to date on the know-how covered by the instrument as well as the proper interpretation of the benchmarks. For the E-xcellence experts on their part it is important to receive feedback at these events for further enhancements of the system. We therefore work towards a shared model of expertise and exploitation on QA in e-learning.

The paper presentation will focus on the interaction between universities and QA-agencies in using the E-xcellence approach at the local level as well as the possible integration of the instrument in the current approaches of QA-agencies.



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Questions for discussion:

- **Do we need e-learning specific criteria?**
- **How to anticipate on new developments in higher education (like Social Media and OER) and guarantee:**
 - full coverage of e-learning issues
 - common language for assessment
 - keeping the instruments up to date
- **How to organise e-learning specific intelligence and competence being present among panels of experts?** How to ensure panels are adequately composed on expertise.