Excellence in e-learning: a quality enhancement approach

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Abstract: This paper describes the E-xcellence methodology for the quality assurance of e-learning. It outlines the E-xcellence process, and describes the main supporting resources: a set of 35 benchmarks, a quality manual and the 'Quickscan' self-assessment tool. The manual expands on the 35 benchmark statements, offering performance indicators and supporting discussion. The Quickscan is available online and is intended for use as an initial self-assessment. A key part of the E-xcellence approach is the 'local seminar'. This is a collaborative workshop where an interdisciplinary team of staff from a higher education institution discuss the quality of their e-learning with visiting expert assessors. The paper describes the processes involved in the local seminars and discusses their value to participants. We conclude that the E-xcellence methodology, and in particular the local seminars, provide valuable opportunities for reflection and discussion among staff with different roles, supported by visiting experts. This collaborative approach helps higher education institutions to review their e-learning and to plan for improvement.

Keywords: quality assurance, e-learning, benchmarks, self-assessment, collaboration

1   Introduction

E-learning is now taking its place as part of mainstream higher education, both in the distance learning sector and in conventional universities. E-learning can support learners who are in employment and need access to part-time study at a distance; it can also be a valuable supplement to learners at conventional educational institutions. As an increasing part of mainstream provision, e-learning must be subject to quality assurance procedures. It is important that the teaching and assessment in e-learning courses are of a high standard, and that students are challenged, engaged and supported. Only if these requirements are met will e-learning continue to gain acceptance.

The challenge now is to establish quality assurance processes that are suitable for e-learning contexts (Ehlers & Hilera, 2012) Although there are well-established quality procedures for higher education generally, these were designed for conventional universities and do not necessarily fit well with

e-learning. There is therefore a need for resources and processes specifically designed to support quality assurance for e-learning.

This paper presents an approach described as the *E-xcellence* methodology. The approach was developed in a series of projects funded by the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme between 2005 and 2012, culminating in the most recent project *E-xcellence Next*. The E-xcellence approach is based on the use of benchmarks and collaborative quality assurance workshops, supported by a comprehensive set of resources and procedures. The paper describes the methodology, the project resources and the quality assurance workshops, which were carried out at a number of European higher education institutions. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the value of the E-xcellence approach, based on feedback from participants.

2   The quality assurance spectrum

What constitutes quality assurance in higher education still varies widely across Europe and internationally. The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) aims to achieve integration across the European Union, but it faces a long journey with many starting points. Points of difference include: whether the function of a quality assurance system is to check compliance with standards or to promote quality enhancement; the extent to which external oversight is required; and the applicability to e-learning compared to face-to-face contexts (Inglis, 2005; Jara & Mellar, 2007; Parker, 2008). Mature quality assurance systems allow institutions signicant autonomy in determining their goals (and how to achieve them) within a broad framework of national standards. By contrast, quality assurance systems emerging from tightly defined regulatory regimes may have specifications relating to (for example) lecture rooms and laboratory facilities. These specifications will have little relevance for e-learning.

Thus there is a range of starting points for the implementation of quality assurance systems for e-learning. Institutions operating in mature, enhancement-focused regimes have the flexibility to demonstrate performance against criteria which are relevant to mission and context (Ossiannilsson & Landgren, 2012). However, other institutions may face a greater challenge, and be constrained by inappropriate norm-based criteria.

These challenges are evident globally. For example, perspectives on Asian approaches are presented in Jung, Wong & Belawati (2013); Britto *et al*. (2014) give perspectives from three institutions in the USA. These case studies illustrate the options available to institutions operating innovative systems: to focus on development of appropriate internal systems, and to influence national systems as they develop. All the case studies indicate that buy-in from staff is essential to quality assurance, irrespective of the source or nature of the criteria.

The E-xcellence approach to quality assurance is grounded in the belief that institutions are well placed to assess the quality of their own e-learning and to identify what is relevant to their own context. The benchmarks and other resources are designed to support institutions in this endeavour, and to encourage a collegiate and collaborative approach to quality assurance.

3   The E-xcellence suite of projects

The E-xcellence suite consisted of three linked projects, managed by the EADTU (European Association of Distance Teaching Universities). The E-xcellence projects involved a core pool of experts from six European bodies with a stake in e-learning developments, and an extended group drawn from a total of 50 institutions during the course of the projects. The core E-xcellence partners were: EADTU; Open Universiteit Nederland; The Open University (UK); Oulu University (Finland); Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (Spain); and the PROSE network (Belgium).

The first project, simply called *E-xcellence,* took place in 2005-06. In this project a set of benchmarks and performance criteria were developed, together with comprehensive supporting resources. These were implemented in the form of:

- a quality manual for e-learning

- an online self-assessment tool called Quickscan

- an assessors' handbook.

The next project, *E-xcellence Plus,* took place in 2008-09. In this project the E-xcellence methodology was disseminated to institutions and to Quality Assessment agencies in ten European countries (Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, The Netherlands, Russia, Slovakia, Sweden, Switzerland).

The third project, *E-xcellence Next,* was carried out in 2011-12. A key part of this project was an update of the E-xcellence resources. This update, as well as clarifying language and terminology, dealt with increasing awareness of: blended learning; social networking in education; Open Educational Resources (Kear *et al*., 2012).

The E-xcellence Next project also continued the use and dissemination of the methodology. This was achieved primarily through a series of 'local seminars': quality workshops which each focused on assessment of e-learning at a different higher education institution. The following sections of the paper discuss the E-xcellence resources and the format and outcomes of the local seminars.

4 E-xcellence resources

The E-xcellence resources are freely available for use by higher education institutions (see e-xcellencelabel.eadtu.eu). The primary resource is the E-xcellence manual (Williams *et al*., 2012) which was updated to a second edition as part of the E-xcellence Next project. The manual uses a six-item framework for focusing attention on quality in key areas of e-learning (see Table 1). It includes a set of 35 benchmarks, grouped into the six areas of the framework. It also includes a considerable amount of supporting text, together with sets of performance criteria.

Table 1. The E-xcellence framework

1. Strategic Management	A high level view of how the institution plans its e-learning
2. Curriculum Design	How e-learning is used across a whole programme of study
3. Course Design	How e-learning is used in the design of of individual courses
4. Course Delivery	The technical and practical aspects of e-learning delivery
5. Staff Support	The support and training provided to staff
6. Student Support	The support, information and guidance provided to students

An example benchmark, from the Course Design section, is:

'E-learning materials have sufficient interactivity (student-to-content or student-to-student) to encourage active engagement and enable students to test their knowledge, understanding and skills.'

A further valuable resource is the Quickscan tool. This can be used as a starting point for a self-assessment of an institution's e-learning quality. The Quickscan contains the 35 E-xcellence benchmarks, grouped according to the framework in Table 1. For each benchmark, a self-assessment is invited on a rating scale. Participants are invited to provide comments explaining their self-assessment for each benchmark and giving any further information.

The Quickscan is available as an online tool with scoring buttons or as a PDF. Feedback is provided for any benchmarks where a relatively low self-assessment is entered. This feedback provides advice on aspects of e-learning relevant to that benchmark. It is strongly recommended that the Quickscan self-assessment is carried out as a collaborative process by a group of staff from different areas (e.g. educators, technical staff, managers) so that a range of views can be shared, and issues discussed. One possibility is to distribute the Quickscan template to a group of participants to complete individually, and then to hold a workshop where the self-assessments are discussed.

Carrying out a Quickscan self-evaluation is the first step towards a fuller E-xcellence Next quality assessment. The main focus of such an assessment is a 2-day on-site event, described as a 'local seminar'. This involves discussions and review by two expert assessors from the E-xcellence team. The E-xcellence assessors are supported by an additional project resource: the assessors' handbook. This is structured using the same framework as the manual, but contains more in-depth material. It offers advice to assessors on the characteristics of high quality e-learning that they should be looking for.

5 E-xcellence Next local seminars

During the E-xcellence Next project a series of seven local seminars were held with project partner institutions in Russia, Lithuania, Poland, Cyprus, Latvia, Portugal and Greece. These seminars had several purposes:

- to engage the HE institution in constructive discussions about the quality of their e-learning, and how it might be improved

- to explore with the quality assurance agency how to embed e-learning into their frameworks

- to collect feedback on the E-xcellence resources, in order to improve them.

As preparation for the two-day local seminar, a team of stakeholders – typically managers, teachers, course designers, technical staff and students – is formed at the institution. The team meets to decide which programmes are to be assessed, and which of the E-xcellence benchmarks are to be used. They then collaborate to complete the Quickscan self-assessment. There follows correspondence with the two E-xcellence assessors, to provide details of the programmes and to share the results of the Quickscan self-assessment and supporting evidence, most being accessible online.

On the first day, the institution's team meet with the E-xcellence assessors. Institutional presentations consolidate the assessors' overview of the e-learning provision, prior to presentation of the results of the Quickscan. Discussions then follow, interrogating aspects of the Quickscan profile and supporting evidence, in order to identify any particular issues and to highlight areas of best practice. Towards the end of the day, the assessors present their perspectives, conclusions and advice.

The second day is a meeting with senior staff from the national quality assurance agency, to discuss how the agency's quality assurance processes may apply to e-learning. Experience to date suggests that integration of e-learning into national quality assurance processes is at a very early stage. These discussions are therefore important for highlighting this issue and encouraging future progress.

After the local seminar, the E-xcellence assessors produced a report giving their conclusions, together with advice for improvements and aspects for future consideration. The team at the higher education institution then create a roadmap for improvement, which is sent to the assessors for comment. The assessors' feedback on the roadmap is the culmination of the E-xcellence process. By undertaking the full process of review, the institution has the option to gain the Associates in E-xcellence label (see e-xcellencelabel.eadtu.eu).

6   Discussion and conclusions

Staff from the institutions that were reviewed have provided feedback on the processes and resources involved in the E-xcellence process. Participants commented that the E-xcellence framework (Table 1) helps to ensure that all aspects of e-learning are covered. They particularly appreciated the Quickscan tool as a means of structuring discussions about the quality of e-learning. The

team-based approach was seen as a key aspect, because it enabled participants to exchange perspectives with those in other departments of the institution. The external perspectives provided by the E-xcellence assessors were seen as valuable, because new ideas were brought in from outside the institution. This led to fruitful discussions and was helpful for thinking about the design of future courses, and becoming aware of different choices and implementations. The E-xcellence approach, and specifically the local seminars, enabled a valued 'moment of reflection' on quality. It gave staff the time to discuss with colleagues the strengths and weaknesses of their e-learning offerings. It also supported decision-making, formulation of policy for e-learning and constructive plans for the future.

Moscow State University of Economics, Statistics and Informatics has adopted the E-xcellence structure and benchmarks into their plan for institutional change (Williams & Rosewell, 2013). Dalarna University, Sweden, used E-xcellence Next for their nursing programme, commenting that 'Benchmarking can function as a tool to initiate a process of heightened awareness and ongoing quality work. The quality of eLearning in the nursing programme increased as a result of this quality assessment' (Elf *et al.*, 2013). The Estonian system for quality assurance in e-learning described by Plank *et al.* (2013) was supported by material derived from the E-xcellence manual.

Experience from the E-xcellence Next project suggests that its collaborative approach to quality assurance is effective and helpful. The examples above show that it has also been influential beyond its immediate project context.

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