THE UKᴇU REPORTS

ANNEX 3 TO REPORT 12

UKeU Policy and Standards: A Guide for HEIs

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0.   Introduction[*]

This paper is intended to be read alongside the paper "Partnership with the eUniversity: a guide for HEIs" to which this originally formed an annex. That paper gives an overview of the way in which an HEI forms a partnership with the UKeU.[†] This paper concerns the quality assurance aspects of the partnership.

The process of obtaining and maintaining quality assurance approval from the UKeU structure involves four sorts of review. A first stage process allows the programme to proceed to advertise etc. Design approval is kept separate from production approval to minimize costs. Finally, ongoing approval follows from an annual monitoring review.

UKeU is committed to high quality delivery of high quality learning opportunities. This paper expands on these for the use of HEIs in understanding the role of the Committee for Academic Quality (CAQ) and the procedures that it follows in fulfilment of the terms of the license and quality standards agreement laid on it by the e Learning Holding Company Limited, representing the UK academic community.

The approach is to rely on the institutional procedures as far as possible and not to replicate work done by either the Institution or the QAA. Accordingly, we have established a list of areas where we would expect institutions to have policies and standards. We also expect HEIs to have associated reporting and exception reporting procedures in place. In addition HEIs will need to be prepared to share with the CAQ and its representatives the results of their monitoring processes.

Where necessary standards or procedures are not yet fully evolved in some areas, the role of CAQ will be one of working with the institution, putting them in touch with other institutions and national bodies such as ILTHE,[‡] in order to encourage the transfer and development within the institution of the relevant standards. The role of UKeU is to broker to enable HEIs to address the areas that need to be addressed for effective electronic delivery. There is no intention of using the CAQ as a way of *stopping* courses; that would be a waste of time and resource for all.

Inevitably there will be a few areas where many universities will not have everything in place. This is most likely in topics that are relatively new to them such as standards for delivery of distance learning materials to students, remote tutor monitoring, and technology standards. Some others will be unused to the concept of administrative aspects of their operation being monitored against service levels and to open reporting. It is likely that there will be more to do in these areas than in more traditional ones.

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[*] This document was originally CAQ 02/17 with a title of "The eUniversity Policy and Standards: A guide for HEIs". Internal evidence in the file suggests a date for it of June 2002. It supersedes an earlier CAQ document, CAQ 02/11 with an explicit date of April 2002.

[†] That paper is published as Annex 1 to Report 01 "UKeU Overview".

[‡] Now part of the Higher Education Academy (http://www.heacademy.ac.uk).

As an example, consider tutor responsiveness to a student email. In an e-learning world it is necessary for there to be clearly set expectations (not necessarily the same for all operations or courses). In traditional environments there is not always a clear service level, and, when there is, it is not clear that a failure to meet it is followed up and monitored in a non ad-hoc fashion. Our requirement will be that the HEI has thought through the issues, has standards, monitors them, reports the results of the monitoring, has follow up actions in the event of failure by a tutor such as reminding the tutor, and has escalation procedures such as involving the person responsible for delivery if the tutor still does not respond. Our platform can help with a lot of these actions. We are not in the business of specifying the actual standards beyond a general feeling of minimal reasonableness such as responding within the lifespan of the piece of learning or before the terminal assessment. Most HEIs now have this in place in the special case where the tutor is assessing and returning marked work.

Responsibility of the quality assurance (QA) of the course lies uniquely with the HEI. The academic integrity and delivery standards belong to them alone. Thus UKeU will not wish to argue about the academic awards given and "the reviewer" is not the same as "the external examiner". UKeU's concern is to ensure that the standards adhered to are in line with those of other UKeU learning programmes, and are appropriate for e-learning. In addition, we require that standards have also been followed in design and development to ensure technical quality assurance and contain costs, for instance in subsequent modification.

Standards are required on both parties. Thus some of the standards and reports will be for the platform and that will usually be the responsibility of UKeU.

What follows is a draft of the list of areas that we would expect to be covered. It will continue to be refined to map onto a summary version of the Teaching Quality procedures document of an HEI, *at section heading level only*.

The CAQ, through a subcommittee responsible for the discipline area in which the course is located, will appoint a reviewer for the proposal and subsequently one for the delivery (possibly but not necessarily the same). The reviewer will have an expanded version of this document as a checklist but will also have subject expertise. Originally it had been thought that the reviewer could also be the external examiner appointed by the HEI for the course, but responsibility and timing considerations do not allow this. The reviewer will be backed up by UKeU people with technical expertise in the capabilities of the platform, in administrative procedures for the e-learning, in pedagogic models for effective e-learning, and in cultural, regional, and disability considerations.

One way of approaching the proposal, approval and production sections is for the university to offer to the reviewer its quality procedures, perhaps with an index or map to the items listed. The reviewer can then readily and quickly assess the areas in need of attention or clarification and engage in dialogue or brokering to reach a conclusion.

 In the case of annual monitoring, a possible way forward is for the UKeU course monitor to talk through the report with the course team at a suitable meeting. Again, further actions will be identified on both parties.

Reviewers will also have available the result of the HEI filling in the UKeU template at the proposal stage. This will include costs as well as much of the material required internally. Costing of courses is in its infancy in many UK HEIs but that is not the concern of the CAQ.

 Specifically covered will be:

- How the proposal interacts with existing UKeU learning objects (at all granularities – programme, module, unit, chunk or whatever).

- Timescale of proposals including launch date and any lead times, criticalities or dependencies; whether cohorted/push-and-go/free; and cohort size information.

- Any key persons associated with the course (the "Lapping is a household name" factor)[*] and their continuing availability; any other special features (USPs).[†]

- Contact details.

- Method of ensuring that appropriate staff are available in a timely manner.

- Realistic sizing of staff resource needed for production and delivery.

- The platform to be used and the sizing of the use.

- Accreditation proposed.

- Specification of tutor role/skills/knowledge and proposal as to how to acquire them.

- Tutor and other deliverer training materials required.

- Taster materials for students/ "am I ready for" material requirements.

- Need for any pre-test materials to see whether student can matriculate.[‡]

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[*] Readers from outside UK HE may not recognise the reference to Gordon Lapping, the fictional head of department in the University of Poppleton, immortalised on the back page of each week's Times Higher Education Supplement (http://www.thes.co.uk). In a memorial lecture in 2001 "Risky Business: Changing Landscapes of Anthropology" (http://www.kent.ac.uk/anthropology/stirling/caplan5.html) an eminent professor stated:

> My own way of keeping sane in the current climate, like that of many other academics, is by reading Laurie Taylor's weekly column in the THES – a brilliant mini-ethnography of academia, based in the Media Studies department of the University of Poppleton, headed by Professor Gordon Lapping, who is assisted by his redoubtable secretary 'Maureen' (who is of course the real head of department).

[†] USP = Unique Selling Proposition.

[‡] That is, enrol as a student.

- Methods, potential organizations and people to undertake work, and costs of design, production and delivery including licenses for support material and tutor costs (plus assessment costs).

- Any requirement for investment of capital by the UKeU.

- Marketing requirements as perceived by the HEI.

- Statement of ownership of Intellectual Property (IPR).

- Process for clearing third party rights.

- Statement on reusability and at what granularity.

- Proposed uptake and where it is proposed to offer the learning, leading to a five year cost flow projection.

- Criteria for discontinuation and timescale and costs for disposal of students in progress.

The following areas will then be looked at using an appropriate checklist.

1. Course/Module/Object Proposal and Initial Approval

1.1 Internal Review Process

We should understand the nature and purpose of the internal review system and what is covered. It needs to cover the overall procedure involving review and response and formal approval, the coverage of learning outcomes and their weights, the evidence of need / market analysis (this may have come from the UKeU), the sizing in terms of learning hours, credits and level, and the matriculation criteria (pre-requisites and co-requisites). The handling of the assessment strategy and its linkage to the weighted learning outcomes including those for transferable skills, needs to be complemented by the pedagogic delivery model including any alternatives for cultural minorities, learners with disability, and regional variants.

In order to understand the model and costs we would expect the review to cover the supporting material required and its medium and any licensing and related issues as well as the tutorial model and sizing. The granularity of award of credit and the nature of that credit with respect to named awards need to be covered. Finally we expect to see in the course approval process parameters involving feedback, evaluation, shelf life and update.

As much of this material is generic, it may be helpful if a previous course has been approved from the HEI.

1.2   The UKeU Procedures and Their Responsiveness

This will cover the targets on the UKeU including the timescale on which the UKeU will respond, the selection and preparation of referees/reviewers and the time to appoint them, any resubmission criteria/timescales, and the time to draft contract.

This examination and dialogue leads to initial approval. This allows the HEI to use the UKeU trade marks in any advertising and marketing and for the process of design to start.

2.   Course Production

Much of this is in line with QAA procedures but these are due for review.[*]

2.1   Course Design

UKeU will have design methodologies available for those using its platform. We need to understand the underlying pedagogy and methodology, the assessment design, conformance to any agreed standards and the mapping onto learner activities. Usually a design involves a storyboard or flow: this should cover each learning object (for instance a piece of self directed web based learning, a threaded discussion,[†] or the submission of an assignment) stating what it requires (for instance HTML pages with Shockwave plug-in or threaded discussion tool with access to a supporting third party website and a piece of costed material).

The actual design is another approval point in the CAQ process. Design will include aspects of the remaining sections in course production but approval can be given piece by piece. CAQ procedures allow the delegation of approval appropriately so as not to hold up procedures. Whilst there is a danger in a piecemeal approach, the costs of not following such an approach are too high.

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[*] They have now been reviewed. The "Guidelines on the quality assurance of distance learning" (http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeofpractice/distancelearning/contents.asp) of March 1999 have now been replaced by a new Section 2 of the "Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education", entitled "Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning) – September 2004" – for full details see http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section2/.

[†] The term "threaded discussion" is one of those that was heard a lot more inside and around UKeU circles than further away. In essence (and I do not think it was ever carefully defined) it means a set of postings in an online discussion forum (bulletin board, computer conferencing system), usually a set in which the original message and all of its replies (and replies to replies, etc.) are linked together. Thus the "thread" is analogous to a conversational thread. The alleged benefit of a threaded discussion is that it is easier to follow the conversation; research on this gives varying levels of support for that theory.

2.2   Technology

It is assumed that the design objects (e.g. a piece of assessment, threaded discussion etc.) will map onto those available on the platform. If it is the UKeU platform and this is not the case, then there will need to be some negotiation. If the UKeU platform is not to be used then the support will nevertheless need to be assured.

It is assumed that all that is required of the student is Internet connectivity and a browser that is either Netscape or Explorer, in a version 4.0 or higher in both cases.[*]

It is assumed that the platform and production conform to a variety of technical standards at appropriate releases. This will be further detailed as required and is still evolving but covers such areas as metadata, assessment, and exchange of learning objects.[†] The UKeU framework will lead to shared vocabularies and taxonomies[‡] on those using its platform and others. As far as possible these will interwork with others.

Authentication/authorization/encryption services will be built into the platform as a set of available tools, in line with emerging standards work. UK HE alternatives will be allowed.[§] A significant range of assessment types will be supported.

Data will be interchanged with local administrative systems by agreed flat file standards. They may also be used internally if an administrative module has been acquired on a "best of breed" basis.[**]

Usage logging, and audit trails, with time and date etc, will be available together with tools to allow their complex manipulation – for instance of threaded discussions. This, for instance, will enable tutor and learner monitoring.[††]

2.3   Learning Materials

Libraries of presentational frames in UKeU formats will be built up and made available on top of the platform and preferred usages in HTML/XHTML[‡‡] will be drawn

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[*] Internet Explorer is now on version 6.0; Netscape as a company has had a difficult period but is now part of America Online (AOL) and the Netscape browser is on version 8.0.

[†] For a quick introduction to this in a UK context see http://www.cetis.ac.uk.

[‡] There were technical studies done on these topics by Sun's university consultants but no shared vocabularies and taxonomies were ever developed.

[§] This is a cryptic reference to the widely-used (in UK HE and FE) Athens authentication system developed under JISC auspices and the possible enhancements and replacements for this, such as, in the past, Sparta and now Shibboleth. For a succinct description of the current position see the JISC statement on "Managing Content Provision" at http://www.jisc.ac.uk/coll_factcards_mcprov.html.

[**] No such administrative module was ever acquired; but discussions took place with more than one of the leading suppliers of such systems, particularly in the area of standards.

[††] Not for the first time in the history of online universities, there were many discussions about usage logging, rather less action, and even less use made of what data was produced.

[‡‡] Whether the author actually meant to say XHTML or XML is not clear. For those who care about the difference, see http://www.w3schools.com/xhtml/ and http://www.w3schools.com/xml/.

up to match the frames. Tutor training documentation and guides must be built into the process and linked appropriately.

2.4   Culture and Disability, Markets

At each stage it will be possible to access an alternative object or page or equivalent by means of a flag on either the type of learner, individual learner or the device or line speed.(e.g. slow lines cannot deliver video). Exploitation of this will be up to the producer but the founding father of the UKeU* expected a differentiator for the UK to be its sensitive treatment of cultures, persons with impairments, and markets. Presentational forms suitable for some cultures will eventually build up. In the meantime a guide will be produced. The UKeU system (portal etc) will have been tested with respect to these concerns.

Separate views may also be needed to address particular markets. For example specific corporate customers or regions may require different datasets, case studies or assessments.†

2.5   Other Materials

Thought needs to be given to access to or distribution of other materials such as third party Web sites or DVDs. Rights clearance services will be available‡ but need to be planned in to the process. There may also be issues of accessibility and change control.

2.6   Assessment

In e-learning, assessment activities need to be carefully controlled and planned. Attention needs to be given to security and authentication, appropriateness of the method and any alternatives, training for assessors, moderation, deadline handling and pro-

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* There has been some debate about what exactly happened in the early stages of setting up UKeU, but it is assumed that the author was talking about David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education at the time. The 2005 Report on the "UK e-University" by the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmeduski/205/205.pdf) noted in Paragraph 1 that:

> In February 2000, the then Secretary of State, David Blunkett, announced the ambitious project to establish the e-University as a single vehicle for the delivery of UK universities' HE programmes over the internet. The Government allocated £62 million to the HEFCE for the project over the period 2001–2004.

† This began to happen more than once near the end of the life of UKeU. In fact, the final meeting of CAQ had one such proposal on its agenda. However, fragmenting an offering loses its economies of scale and given (now we know) the marginal nature of the e-learning business, it was not likely to be a widely used approach despite early optimism.

‡ In reality, UKeU never offered a rights clearance service; it was left to the HEIs.

gress chasing (the shoulder tapping* of learners and assessors). Any requirement for physical exams needs to be identified and permissions obtained and invigilating/venue organizing agencies identified. This can lead to extra costs.

2.7   Validation and Testing

We need to understand how basic quality assurance will be performed on the materials including links to third party materials. This is likely to involve an editorial policy on production including conventions for layout and links, a testing strategy, a rigorous change control procedure including legacy versions for resits, and access for the HEI external† as well as the UKeU reviewer.

The third CAQ point of approval is of the final material prior to its use. This will be done at a much coarser level of granularity, typically a whole programme or more likely module will be approved.

3.   Course Delivery

Again we follow the QAA guidelines. Once the course is approved it will run, probably on a semester or annual cycle‡ in a cohorted form.

The remainder of this document describes the interaction with the CAQ and its representatives for delivery phases. To date, once the approval has been given, most of the HEI side of the interaction has been with the academics or department but now we see more involvement of the university centre.

3.1   Matriculation and Enrolment

Pre-requisites need to be clearly articulated in a form that allows students to be identified clearly in all territories and admitted in principle§ in a significant majority of cases, with admission, query handling, and matriculation, assignment to tutor etc. against clear temporal targets.** Appropriate marketing materials need to be provided

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* This was another of the phrases beloved by some in UKeU and few outside. As a Google search will show, it has a wide and amusing set of meanings, few of which are to do with e-learning. Within e-learning, there are only a couple of public usages. The article "Research Underpinnings of the UK eUniversity" (http://www.shef.ac.uk/nlc2002/proceedings/symp/02.htm) describes shoulder tapping as "to remind learners and tutors/markers of impending or expired deadlines". For a more recent article mentioning the term see the short article "Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning: A National Perspective" in "Learning and Teaching in Action", Volume 3, Issue 2, summer 2004 (http://www.ltu.mmu.ac.uk/ltia/issue8/slater.shtml).

† This was provided for at least some external examiners on UKeU courses.

‡ Most UKeU award-bearing courses had two starts per year.

§ This was the subject of much debate between UKeU and some HEIs who felt that the subtlety of the judgements needed in the admissions process meant that it could be neither codified nor delegated.

** The writer uses temporal in the sense of timescales, not in the sense of juxtaposition with the spiritual.

to agreed standards including a suitable online course description and an online student handbook is required.

3.2   Technology

Any platform used must have standards for availability and preferably 7x24 support as well as plans for backup and disaster recovery.[*] Appropriate security needs to be in place and remedial action/escalation procedures must be defined.

3.3   Approval of Suitability of Local Partners

A timely method of approval of partners for the various functions (these might include some of tutor provision, assessment support, local accreditation, distribution of materials, trouble shooting) together with monitoring of performance and remedial action is needed.[†]

3.4   Tutor Responsiveness, Preparation and Updating

This is known to be a key area for success and poor performance by some HEI partners could adversely affect the reputation of the UKeU and indeed the UK. Accordingly we need to see standards for tutors: for the time to respond to requests from students; the accuracy, intelligibility, and usefulness of response; and knowledge and understanding of the technology and its use. Equally important is monitoring and remedial actions and their triggers.

To support this we will be providing training material in "e-tutoring" and in the UKeU platform.[‡] To this needs to be added further "trainware" in the subject material, in the supporting material, and in the subject generally.

3.5   Assessment

This is another area where student expectations have to be carefully handled and where poor performance by an HEI can adversely affect the rest of the community. We need HEIs to have standards and procedures for timing and extension granting, deadline reminder procedures for learners and for assessors, monitoring and the iden-

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[*] The 7x24 support, data centre and help desk was felt by many within UKeU to be one of its quiet successes. It is hoped to publish more on this in the not too distant future.

[†] See Report 09 for much more on this topic.

[‡] A suite of online training material for online students and online tutors was developed for UKeU by the innovative Milton Keynes based company Learning Materials Design (LMD), announced in 2003 at http://lmd.co.uk/UKEU.shtml. It is hoped to publish a version of this in the not too distant future.

For more on the issue of tutor support of e-learners in this context, see the report of the eLearning Network meeting on "Tutor support issues in e-learning" in January 2003 (http://www.elearningnetwork.org/reports/report18.doc).

tification of rogue assessors, moderation, quality of feedback and methods of returning work to learners. The UKeU will be providing a marking tool for use with essays etc. as well as facilities for common assessment types including self assessment.*

There are often issues round plagiarism, auto-feedback and dummy submission: students also need the ability to "recall" submitted work under certain circumstances. Learners need to know what is expected of them in each assessment situation and the norm will be to make available good answers to previous assessments.

Administrative processes for grading, borderlining, moderation of alternative assessments, discretionary procedures and appeals are all likely to be required. This leads to the administration of the assignment of credit where again appropriate aggregation, timing, appeals, and discretionary procedures are needed.

Training and updating for assessors is needed.

Above all appropriate monitoring, reporting and escalation procedures must be in place.

3.6   Administration

Here the problem may be one of having no service (levels). These are needed for the processing of acceptance, change of status, withdrawal, recording assessment results, for responsiveness to student queries, and for the production of relevant monitoring data and summaries thereof. Communication with HEIs will use standard fields for student, assessment and financial data and the specification will be made available to the HEI early in the process.

Change control procedures should be in place for all changes to the system including interactions with the UKeU systems. These must cover the handling of changes to course material, both regular and exceptional e.g. when a mistake is found, as well as version control procedures including handling runoff students on old versions.

3.7   Reporting and Escalation

It will be clear from the above that this is an important facet of the CAQ philosophy. Clear procedures for monitoring service levels from tutors, partners, own staff, platform, and administrative functionality in all facets of delivery, methods of obtaining and responding to student feedback, methods of liaison with other stakeholders such as corporate customers are at the centre of UKeU quality as they are with HEIs. This is supplemented by timely analysis of data, procedures to be followed when standards or service levels are not met and a sharing of performance data, in confidence, between HEI ands UKeU with a view to improvement.

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* A comprehensive assignment handling system was developed based on best practice in the HE sector; and the multiple-choice question system WebMCQ was bought from an Australian company (http://www.mcqi.com.au/mcqi/shwaa2/eim2/website/news/assessment/article.html?id=1033).

4.   Granting of Awards

Awards correspond to programmes and often have their own separate approval procedures within HEIs including matriculation and other relevant procedures. Should the award involve any Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), the procedures therefore need to be clear and timely with an appropriate degree of authentication and security.

Clear rules for an award, and for a classification within it (if relevant), intelligible to the student and based on a credit system in line with current best practice, are required together with methods for handling concessionary evidence,[*] informing professional bodies if relevant, and handling of discretionary evidence and appeals are needed.

There will be a number of regulatory issues such as number of attempts at assessments, intermission procedures, and the shelf life of credits that will be essentially up to the institution. UKeU will need to know should these be significantly out of line with emerging good practice.[†]

Service levels for the administration of the process should also be provided including handling of relevant learner records and the dispatch of any paper certificates etc. It will also be necessary to meet relevant (not just UK) Data Protection requirements and report results to appropriate stakeholders.

Each year a review of the monitoring report will be discussed between the HEI and UKeU and any agreed changes will be approved and reported to the CAQ structure. It will cover the delivery including award of credit, and, if relevant, the award granting.

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[*] This is presumably a reference to the "extenuating circumstances" (illness, etc.) that students put forward to award boards.

[†] The sharp-eyed will notice some similarities between some of this material and that in the very useful WUN guide "Good practice guide for Approval of Distributed Learning Programmes including e Learning and Distance Learning" (http://www.wun.ac.uk/elearning/papers/qaguidelines.doc).