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# Quality Assurance for Distance Education: Distance Education 'Kitemarks'

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## Abstract

In an ever more competitive market, one which is global and cost conscious, those institutions which provide some aspect of Distance Education need to make their courses or faculties stand out from the rest. According to both leading theorists and practitioners, in commerce and industry, it is the quality of the goods which is paramount to success. If an academic institution is basing the quality of the educational experience as the 'goods' to be offered to students, then this has a different emphasis to that of a commercial producer. Not only is the emphasis different for 'traditional' educational provision, but there are other needs when applied to Distance Education. This paper looks at some of the methods currently available to Distance Education in ensuring the educational provision is a 'quality' provision. Included in this paper are a few of the International, European and United Kingdom based organizations offering 'quality' approval at the institution or course level. A brief comparison of the methods and process are also presented.

## Introduction

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAAHE), in the United Kingdom, provides guidelines (DQE234 11/96) in assessing the quality of provision. The guidelines were originally devised for conventional courses and did not take into account the diversity and differing situations that face a distance education provider. Taking this on board, the QAAHE in March 1999, developed a set of Quality Assurance guidelines for Distance Education. These focused on aspects that the QAA felt were likely to require particular attention when studying through distance education means (see Guidelines for full description). However, an approved 'kitemark' which can be put on the institution's headed paper or to quote in the prospectus and advertising literature could be of more value in the world of 'branding, and market segmentation'. If institutions want to stand out from the crowd, then being 'kitemarked' with renowned approval could be one way of gaining more of the market share.

I will discuss three currently available measures of quality for Distance Education provision in the United Kingdom (UK), but with some reference to those offered internationally. All lead to a recognised quality approval 'mark', or accreditation, or code of practice, and I will consider each of them, as methods of measuring the quality of the learning experience for students. Each leads to the recognition of 'quality', but with different emphasis due to the different approaches, content and delivery of the education. A comparison of each, and discussion surrounding applicability to providers will also be made, as will their applicability in an international forum.

More and more Higher Education (HE) institutions are looking at the methods used in distance education as a means of increasing their student numbers. The benefits that are seen by more traditional Higher Education institutions is that Distance Education (DE) offers an increased access for students, and it provides flexibility in study location, time and assessment. It is not only institutions which are looking at Open and Distance Education, but also individual courses. Many course providers will be satisfied with merely providing tutor notes on the Intranet (internal networked system), whereas others will wish to provide a total course using distance education methods such as the Internet. Other providers will produce teaching materials such as Computer Assisted Learning (CAL) packages for training purposes, and the quality of their education provision also needs recognition. This is a disparate group and it is obvious from this brief overview that many people and organizations are talking about different things when discussing their distance education provision. The problem is how to ensure the quality of the tuition and education offered via these means.

### **Distance Education Quality Assurance**

One of the reasons for the emphasis on quality in Distance Education, and particularly here in the UK, was that during the 1960s some correspondence courses had a poor reputation. It became paramount for providers to be assessed in an attempt to improve the quality of provision. Therefore assessment was well established in Distance Education, perhaps even more so than in traditional delivery. To achieve this aim the Council for the Accreditation of Correspondence Colleges came into being in 1969, and the next section looks at its evolution together with other organisations and their histories.

### **The Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (Council for the Accreditation of Correspondence Colleges)**

The Council for the Accreditation of Correspondence Colleges now known as the Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (ODLQC) was established in 1969 by the Dept. of Education and Science, and was grant aided by them until 1982. From the original name it is obvious that their roots originally lay in the Distance Education sector, and the original correspondence schools. ODLQC is a non-profit making educational charity and is supported by its accredited organisations, with no external funding. It was in 1995 that the Council for the Accreditation of Correspondence Colleges decided that its own name needed to reflect the developments that had occurred in distance education, and its title changed to the Open and Distance Learning Quality Council.

The aim of the ODLQC is to accredit institutions who provide tuition by open and distance learning methods and to ensure the quality of the education and/or training which is provided by the institution. The ODLQC sees the benefit of accreditation with them as the ability to use the ODLQC 'kitemark' which guarantees to clients, professional bodies and funding agencies the quality of the services and standards of the institution. Their emphasis

is based on 'fitness for purpose', in that it focuses on the basis of 'does the course fit its aims'.

In the UK it is not only ODLQC who offer institutions a 'kitemark'. The British Association for Open Learning has recently developed its own 'Quality Mark'.

### **The British Association for Open Learning**

The British Association for Open Learning (BAOL) was originally founded in the Open Tech programme which ran from late 1984 to 1987, and formed BAOL in 1990. The growing concern for establishing the quality of open and flexible learning led BAOL in 1998 to launch its 'Quality Mark'. The quality accreditation system is based on a framework of criteria adapted from the Business Excellence model promoted by the British Quality Foundation (BQF) and the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM). The framework for BAOL's Quality Mark involves self assessment through two criteria usually referred to as 'enablers' and 'results'. Enablers includes Management, Policy and Strategy, People Management, Resources and finally Processes. The Results criteria covers Customer Satisfaction, Impact on Open Learning and Results. This is a self assessment process which is verified by external assessors. Currently there are only three categories: Materials development; Advice and Guidance; and Learner support. The BAOL Quality Mark is available to any institution wishing to receive accreditation of one aspect of its provision through external scrutiny. Within higher education in the UK there is also external scrutiny from governmental agencies, one of which is the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

### **QAAHE (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education)**

To try to ensure that all education for which it provided funding is of a satisfactory quality or better, the Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFC) needed to encourage improvements in the quality of the education offered. In 1997 to bring together the Higher Education Funding Councils and the Higher Education Quality Council, a new agency was formed called the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAAHE). The QAAHE had continued until 1999 to treat the assessment of Distance Education in the same ways as those for 'traditional' modes of delivery. However, the guidelines developed for distance education place emphasis on certain aspects of the cover: system design; academic standards and quality in programme design; quality assurance of programme delivery; student support; student communication; and student assessment.

The three organizations mentioned above are primarily interested in the accreditation or the quality assurance of UK based institutions or courses, but for wider recognition some institutions may need to gain approval from a European or International group. In the next section is an overview of some of the international groups offering recognition of 'quality' educational provision.

### **Association of European Correspondence Schools (AECS)**

The Association of European Correspondence Schools (AECS) was established in 1985 through a merger between the European Council for Education by Correspondence (CEC) which came into being in 1963 and the European Home Study Council (EHSC) which was founded in 1968. Therefore the AECS has a long history of working with correspondence schools, however in 1998 the Association decided that a change of name was necessary to reflect its current involvement with newer forms of distance education. A survey of

members found that the most popular name for the new association was the European Association for Distance Learning (EADL), and after ratification in June 1999, AECS will change its name.

AECS provides Quality guidelines for its members, and are currently being considered for re-write. AECS has specifically developed the guide for the management of Distance Learning Institutions. Their guidelines are based on the Total Quality Management system provided by the EFQM. AECS advocates a self appraisal model and provides detailed information on self appraisal from the European Quality Mark. AECS does not accredit its members, it sees self appraisal as the tool to use which will help to improve the quality by focusing attention on the areas that need improvement. They do however, advocate that the first appraisal requires a project team and it is estimated by them to take between 6 months to a year to complete.

Ensuring that an institution is recognised on a global scale or international market is problematic. Many of the countries with potential students and also in the countries where an institution maybe recruiting, have their own quality standards, guidelines and methods of assessing quality. Making providers accountable to such diverse practices can be difficult. Harman ([Harman 1998](#)), suggests a number of criteria which are highly desirable as well as illustrating national and institutional quality assurance systems. His recommendations include clear reporting arrangements, self and peer review, and guidelines for review. A number of agencies throughout the world are considering the practicalities of a set of criteria, guidelines or code of practice for Distance Education providers on a global or regional basis. Setting up such guidelines has its own problems and difficulties, but listed in the following section are a few of those quality assurance guidelines identified from around the world.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an intergovernmental organisation which was established in 1987 by the Commonwealth Heads of Government. It is a small agency which works on behalf of member states across all sectors of education from basic literacy to continuing education. It aims to use distance education methods to assist member Commonwealth countries to meet the demands for access to a quality education and training. As can be seen from this very brief outline, COL has a very wide mandate which covers numerous parts of the world each with differing needs, and different sectors' aims for educational provision. COL includes countries such as Australia, Canada and India, who each have different economic needs, population distribution and differing problems of access to quality education. COL is therefore looking at developing a very broad and all encompassing code of practice. As can be heard here at this conference COL have already established a 'benchmarking club' where institutions can draw on their peers for information on best practice in their management processes.

It is not only the British Commonwealth and Europe, but also the US where the importance of ensuring the quality of distance education is being considered and reviewed.

In America, the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) accredits institutions, thereby ascertaining that the institutions achieve certain standards. DETC was formerly known as the National Home Study Council, and was established in 1926. It now accredits a wide range of institutions from Military colleges to those allied to medicine. Institutions can voluntarily approach DETC after two years of operating experience (unaccredited), and are accredited through self-evaluation reports. The self-evaluation, and surveys etc. are reviewed prior to accreditation, but DETC expects only one in four to achieve accreditation.

Re-examination is conducted every five years, and any new courses offered by the institutions during this period must be reviewed before gaining DETC approval.

The Global Alliance for Transnational Education (GATE) provides quality assurance certification for transnational education programmes. Transnational is seen as any form of teaching or learning in which the students are in a different country to the one where the provider is based. GATE defines itself as having the primary purpose of addressing and improving the quality of education that crosses national border. To achieve this aim GATE has developed a code of practice containing a set of principles for transnational education. An institution can request GATE to review their transnational education programme, after which certification can be achieved. GATE suggests that certification offers not only individuals but also governmental agencies a check on the quality of the education being exported or imported.

The growth of international and global educational provision through satellite ([Thomson & Jelfs, 1997](#)), and Internet communications allows purchasers and providers world-wide access (see Bears Guide). This in turn leads to the need for assurance of the quality of provision. The difficulty in designing a kitemark to suit all, is the fact that there is no consensus on what is being 'quality assured'. For some institutions it is a course or courses, for others it may be the need to assure the quality of the whole institution, in some cases it is the quality of the materials provided, and finally it may be some aspect such as the counseling and career guidance provision. At the moment there is no one set of guidelines suitable for all, and students are still left with the perplexing problem of knowing when something is of good or high 'quality'.

## **Conclusions**

Distance Education provision is diverse. It can range from Computer Based Training to degree level courses. It can be the provision of a needlework course or an engineering course. Therefore when a 'kitemark' is reviewed by an institution, they need to know what is being 'quality assured'.

ODLQC, BAOL and DETC look at accreditation, whereas the QAA in the UK and AECS provide Quality Assurance guidelines. Although there are some similarities between AECS and BAOL, in that they both draw on the European Quality Foundation Mark. There are similarities between AECS and COL who are looking at the quality of the management processes, whereas an institution can gain certification through GATE and COL use their code of practice. What the Distance Education provider needs is to assess the extent to which each of the agencies meet their needs.

There appears to be a period of flux in the world of Distance Education and quality assurance. Many of the organisations mentioned in this paper are reviewing and re-writing their quality assurance guides and/or codes of practice. Part of this reviewing activity is coming about through governmental pressure, particularly here in the UK. Some of the emphasis is coming from the growth in the number of institutions offering distance education courses, and the need to establish that students are receiving a 'quality' opportunity for learning. And still further is the pressure placed on institutions by the diversity of the needs of distance education students over 'traditional' students. Perhaps during this period of change, there is the opportunity to review the mechanisms and to have some agreement on who assures what, when, where and how.

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