1. Introduction

The European Association of Distance Teaching Universities - EADTU is Europe's leading association for *Lifelong Open and Flexible (LOF) learning in distance Higher Education (HE).* (www.eadtu.nl). As well as e-learning, the model of LOF learning embraces the characteristics of open learning, distance learning, online learning, open accessibility, multimedia support, virtual mobility, learning communities, dual mode (earn & learn) approaches, and the like.

The focus of this manual is Quality Assurance for e-learning in Higher Education. It is the main product of the E-xcellence and the E-xcellence+ project, undertaken under the auspices of EADTU and involving a pool of experts from altogether 20 European institutions with a stake in e-learning developments.

In a first stage (2005-2007), the E-xcellence instrument has been developed. In the second stage (2008-2009), E-xcellence was updated with the involvement of some 50 universities and 10 assessment and accreditation agencies in intensive local seminars (national level). Also, the instrument was finetuned to blended learning situations (in cooperation with ESMU).

Quality Assurance in HE has received much attention at the institutional, national and European level through validation centres, universities (and their umbrella organisations), quality agencies, national ministries of education and the like. These have established systems to cover the full organisational and content-related quality assurance of HE institutions and their programmes. However, few of these systems have so far developed a focus on the parameters of quality assurance governing e-learning. This has therefore been the objective of the E-xcellence project.

It has not been the intention of the project to interfere in any way with existing systems of quality assurance, and this manual is not a comprehensive guide to QA procedures even in the context of "pure" e-learning provision. It is assumed that institutions and regulatory bodies will have a defined set of processes which provide for the development, monitoring, evaluation and enhancement of HE provision. This manual offers a supplementary tool which may be used with these QA processes to allow the consideration of e-learning developments as a specific feature. An important aspect of the E-xcellence project is that it offers a European-wide standard, independent of particular institutional or national systems, and with guidance to educational improvement.

1.1 Purpose of the manual

The primary purpose of the manual is to provide a set of benchmarks, quality criteria and notes for guidance against which e-learning programmes and their support systems may be judged. The manual should therefore be seen primarily as a reference tool for the assessment or review of e-learning programmes and the systems which support them.

However, the manual should also prove to be useful to staff in institutions concerned with the design, development, teaching, assessment and support of e-learning programmes. In providing a set of benchmarks, quality criteria and notes of guidance it is hoped that course developers, teachers and other stakeholders will see the manual as a useful development and/or improvement tool for incorporation in their own institutional systems of monitoring, evaluation and enhancement.

1.2. Context

It is intended that the manual will be relevant to a wide range of e-learning contexts, including blended as well as pure provision. Where e-learning is offered alongside other forms of learning as part of an integrated or blended learning programme it is important that the evaluation of these components takes place alongside those delivered by other means so that the relative merits of

different teaching/learning approaches and the role of e-learning in overall provision can be determined. A set of performance indicators, both qualitative and quantitative, chosen to reflect the effectiveness of the programme as a whole, need to be employed.

One of the characteristics of an e-learning environment is the sheer amount of monitoring information which may be made available relative to more traditional methods of learning. Most e-learning platforms provide for an extensive level of monitoring and feedback, and student learning behaviour is usually more easily tracked and recorded in an e-learning context than in a traditional classroom. Also, external reviewers are able to gain access to the full range of course materials and to sample the delivery of the programme directly. This has obvious advantages for evaluation but also certain potential disadvantages associated with the sheer volume of data and opinion available. It is hoped that by focussing on specific benchmarks and criteria, institutions will be able to develop performance indicators which are fit for purpose in their own context.

1.3. Feedback

EADTU is committed to supporting the continuous improvement of e-learning programmes and intends to produce a web-based supplement to the quality manual giving examples of good practice identified by contributing organisations. EADTU therefore welcomes feedback from any organisation which may be able to contribute to the good practice guide.

1.4. Organisation

The manual is organised into six sections covering strategic management, Curriculum design, Course design, Course delivery, Staff support and Student support. Each section follows a similar format setting out benchmarks, critical factors, performance indicators, and assessor's notes.

The benchmarks provide a set of general quality statements covering a wide range of contexts in which programme designers and others work. It is intended that the benchmarks will be relevant to virtually all e-learning situations. These benchmarks might usefully form the basis for institutions' quality self assessment where the full range of criteria and performance indicators are not judged relevant to the institutional context (*e.g.* in situations where e-learning developments are confined to a minority of courses or to specialist areas of the institution's work).

The critical factors and performance indicators which follow then focus on particular topics relevant to the benchmark statements. Not all the critical factors will be relevant in all situations and several will be seen to cut across more than one benchmark statement. Thus there is not a one-to-one relationship between the benchmarks and the critical factors since they are pitched at different levels of analysis. Performance indicators relating to the critical factors have been developed at both general and excellence levels.

The Assessors notes provide a more detailed account of the issues and the approaches which might be taken to meet requirements in each situation.