

Ensuring Quality in Distance Education

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What is the value of a degree

- Does value lie in fitness for purpose
 - cash return on investment
 - access to networks of power and influence
- Does value lie in 'absolute' excellence
 - quality in academy itself
- Something else?
 - 'fun' of the experience itself



Does excellence always go with value?

- What if a social elite ‘appropriates’ an educational site and defines it as *a priori* excellent, whether it is proven excellent or not?
- Ultimately excellence is about
 - achieving standards
 - being recognised for this
- Excellence & Quality are educational and political matters



Distance Learning

- Just a way of patching up the main system?
- Can it achieve the same excellence?
- Associated with
 - professional updating ('bite size')
 - access and second chance
 - part-time study
- But ... Can universities do without these activities now?



Why do universities use technology in teaching?

- For staff & students
 - sources of information (even plagiarism)
 - better means of communication
 - multi-media learning packages
 - helps administration of teaching
- For staff
 - increased networking
 - virtual publications and conferences
 - increases capacity



Is Distance Learning different?

- Commonplace assumption that technology enhances distance learning more than face to face
- The real difference is collapsing, while the marker 'distance' remains as powerful
 - 'the distance between me and my computer is less than the distance between me and the front of the class'
 - 'distance education is second choice'



How do we assure excellence?

Two extremes

- 'Panopticon'
- Quality Enhancement

Models in practice

- UK Quality Assurance Agency
- US Middle States Commission for Higher Education Accreditation



Leveraging technology for excellence

The 'Panopticon' model

- The masters of the prison could observe everything without the prisoners being able to tell if they are being observed or not
- Applies to teachers and learners in the system
- Hugely enabled by use of virtual learning environments



Assuring Quality through surveillance

- Study material are transparent
- Track students interactions with the system and vice-versa
- Check web sources etc. and decide if they are plagiarism
- Check completion of activities set as formative assessment
- Verify quality of assessment marking



Should students have a voice in judging excellence?

- Should want their award to be excellent and of assured quality
- Evidence from student performance valuable
- Student feedback is valuable
- Needs to go beyond that – we should teach the ability to reflect on one's own performance and assess how it has been effected by teaching
- The skills of a member of a learning community



Quality enhancement

- Surveillance works privately; quality enhancement works in the open
- Create an ethos of improvement in the organisation in which goals – including excellence – are shared by students and staff
- Open the system beyond that to engagement by outsiders (rather than just inspection)



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Review of Student Support

- Team working
- Strategic use of ICT
- The ideals of the Learning Community



Distance learning, Quality Assurance & Excellence 1

- Are these words to bring together on one slide?
- Can 'leverage technology' to achieve this through
 - possibilities of surveillance & inspection
 - use of ICT in a much more positive way to create communities among students and staff committed to quality assurance, enhancement and excellence
 - 'self-surveillance' and analysis



Distance learning, Quality Assurance & Excellence 2

- Political battle remains, against those who believe that distance learning must be second rate
- Importance of external validating body, and that being the same for all universities
- Aim to insist on the convergence of 'traditional' and 'distance' learning



Distance learning, Quality Assurance & Excellence 3

- The overall aims
 - assurance of quality and excellence in the whole university sector
 - excellence in distance learning delivery of expanding access
 - remove false boundary between ‘distance’ learning and ‘traditional’ mode
 - create a unified Quality Assurance framework in which all are stakeholders

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