

A Case Study at the University of Brighton

Dr Barbara Newland and Dr Ming Cheng

October 2011

Introduction

The concepts of quality identified by Harvey and Green (1993) have greatly influenced people's perceptions of the meaning of quality since the early 1990s. They defined quality as: exception, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation. The notion of quality in the delivery of higher education is generally contextualised within the latter three definitions. Fitness for purpose has become the most often seen definition of quality in the higher education sector, and it is associated with the notion that the institution should fulfil its own stated objectives (Lomas, 2004). The quality agenda, as a result, has been involved with the quality assurance process, which is based on public accountability, such as accountability to a funding body; a desire to improve outcomes; being able to sustain programmes and activities; and an ability to demonstrate achievement against stated goals (Biggs, 2001).

There is increasing concern for the quality of e-learning, because it has been perceived as a discrete activity and its practice has evolved from conventional teaching and learning (Oliver, 2005). Different procedures implemented to assure the quality of e-learning at the national level. The Toolkit was designed by the QA-QE Special interest group in the UK, which aims to provide an insight into the issues of quality assurance/enhancement of e-learning at the national level. In order to explore the effectiveness and impact of the toolkit in e-learning programmes, a case study was carried out at the University of Brighton. It examined QA staff and academics' perceptions of how to implement a toolkit within the institution, in order to enhance the quality of e-learning. The University was chosen because of the following three main reasons:

1. The University offers a wide range of subjects with 6 Faculties spread across 4 campuses. There are devolved responsibilities at School level within the Faculties. It provides a good opportunity to explore which elements of the toolkit could be applied at institutional, Faculty and School level.
2. The use of e-learning is increasing with a move to blended learning. Currently, most teaching is face-to-face.
3. The University depends heavily on conventional, formal, degree quality assurance processes to ensure that e-learning meets the necessary standards.

Research methods

This research explored whether the use of the Toolkit would help academics, registry and learning technologists to measure what really happens in relation to QA with e-learning. There were two stages of data collection in the study:

Stage One:

Five interviews with eight university staff were carried out. They were selected according to their experience with QA processes and e-learning. Three interviewees were from Registry and the rest were from the Faculties of Education, Health, Arts, and Science and Engineering. This stage

explored the current institutional practice regarding the QA of e-learning and the staff's perceptions of how to implement the Toolkit at different levels, such as school, faculty and institution. Suggestions on how to improve the toolkit for future use were also examined.

The interviewees were given the Toolkit prior to the interviews. At the start of the interviews an explanation was given about the Toolkit and how it could be used.

Stage Two:

One discussion group with course leaders was held to increase the understandings of the effectiveness of the toolkit. It investigated how the course leaders understood the use of the Toolkit for re-validation of modules within the Faculty. Suggestions on how to improve the toolkit for future use were also examined.

At the start of the session an explanation was given about the Toolkit and how it could be used. Sections of the Toolkit were given to small groups to discuss amongst themselves before a general discussion of the whole group.

Content analysis and NVivo software were used to analyse the research data. The findings presented will focus on three main themes:

- an overview of the toolkit
- comparison of the attitudes of registry staff and faculty academics towards the toolkit
- suggestions on how to improve the toolkit for future use.

Overview of toolkit

Most interviewees expressed their view that the toolkit was helpful to some extent. However, they were concerned about its time cost, found it repetitive and not specifically related to e-learning. They also found some questions difficult to answer. Below are the quotes from interviewees.

Helpful

R1: But it also makes me think, and this is quite a big thing, that with some editorial changes, it could just be a toolkit for harnessing QA processes, without the e-learning focus.

R2: So it could cover e-learning, sustainable development, research informed teaching...

B: I find a lot of it really really helpful, so I wouldn't want it to be thrown in the bin. I suppose it would be most useful if it's integrated within our core procedures, rather than it being seen as an add-on.

Time cost

G: Who's going to analyse it – this huge amount of stuff – in our annual academic health report, we have programme leaders reports that feed into head of school reports and that task in itself is really difficult to do – for the whole school to assimilate and actually make coherent statements out of a number of maybe ten academic programmes and the head of school has to deal with so much detail in these ten reports, and you'd end up with exactly the same situation here – what would be the point, and how much time would go into it?

G: ...a bit stuck, but I think especially there we ought to be doing everything that's positive and their concept of finger wagging it's, it's counterproductive, it just feels a little bit, it's not finger wagging, but it feels a little bit like 'I haven't got time for this'. I looked at it and I thought what

value is it going to provide? And then that leads us to who's going to do what, many times over and who's going to do what with the results ...

Repetitive of existing procedure

C: The other thing that kind of put me off a bit is that there's an awful lot of questions ... and depending on the institution, they will be fulfilled by very different roles, so some of the questions in there I would hope the institution has already done for me, like making sure the technology they've offered is robust and appropriate, and it's not my job to validate the technology.

B: I really liked that as well, I like the whole structure of it, although I found some bits of it a bit repetitive, especially in the stage one, the planning and design bit. It felt, one section in particular that I found very repetitive of the previous section, so I thought it could be simplified a bit but I like the general structure of this.

Not specifically related to e-learning

B: I thought some aspects of the toolkit were quite generic and not particularly related to e-learning. I think one of them about, I've made a comment here about point 2.3 on p. 16, programme and course team meetings: 'ensure that meetings take place, agendas drawn up and meetings are properly minuted', why is that relevant for TEL as opposed to anything else?

R1: I saw in here about student engagement that made me think about it, obviously this toolkit's really really useful and it's got an emphasis on e-learning or technology enhanced learning but there are so many issues here that aren't just e-learning issues, they're issues for anyone who's developing a course or reviewing a course, like student engagement, it can be an e-learning issue or it can just be an everything issue.

E: ...it's the logical process – I mean the thing that struck me was it didn't have to be about e-learning or technology, as a QA model – so I was reading through, thinking, I would do these things as a matter of course, if I was designing a new course ... let's use a different example, you could use those headings for technology and learning, you could also use them for how is a student ... for a quality assurance process for a student who is doing a placement elsewhere, when the university is here – now that's nothing to do with technology, that's about saying what's the design? what are the safety nets? how can we make sure the student's supported? what happens if something goes wrong? what are the lines of communication? So the same headlines that are here about QA for technology you could just apply to almost QA for anything.

Some questions difficult to answer

G: Some of the questions are really hard to answer.

D: I was going to say, questions are good in a sense that they focus people on the issues that they probably need to concentrate on, but then I think they probably need examples of actually what the answers would be and where perhaps they might fit in to that. So they understand actually that is the question, these are some of the possible, not solutions, is the wrong word, but is there a pedagogic case for using TEL?

G: Yes I was going to say – is there a pedagogic case for using TEL – Yes – is there a business case for using TEL? What does that mean? is what most people would say. They may say what does that mean for the first point as well, even though they are actually using it all the time.

D: It might be useful to make them open questions, so that rather than is there a case?

What would your case be for a pedagogic use of TEL?

G: Everyone's totally committed to their students, you know, and loves teaching, gets great satisfaction out of all of the stuff that they do.

G: And then for instance, the second question here – is there a business case for using TEL? – people here *would* sort of say 'a business case?' we don't like commercially oriented language, ... so in a sense you have to be sensitive to the environment in which the toolkit would be done because I don't think a lot of people would understand what a business case was and they would see it as a threat - Business case – OK, so we have more e-learning, therefore we need less tutors – therefore there's an economic saving, therefore we don't want it thank you very much – so just ... I would urge caution and sensitivity in the terms used.

Attitudes to toolkit

Some attitudes to the Toolkit were shared amongst interviewees. For example, that the toolkit could be used not just for e-learning but as another QA process.

R1: But it also makes me think, and this is quite a big thing, that with some editorial changes, it could just be a toolkit for harnessing QA processes, without the e-learning focus.

R2: So it could cover e-learning, sustainable development, research informed teaching...

Other attitudes to the Toolkit were different in each faculty. One faculty was concerned at its time cost and described it as another audit. Another was more positive and thought parts of the Toolkit could be useful. Another faculty thought it could be used more broadly and not just for e-learning.

G: You know, it's like the feeling that they're inspecting us - just leave us to get on with our job – let's just get on with it and, you know, the carrot's more effective than the stick ... And again, the point I made earlier, I'll just say it again, that if everything is OK and the e-learning is there and it's fine, why make somebody go through an exercise which takes them away from improving it further, but looks like another inspection.

There were mixed attitudes of whether the toolkit could be used for course development. For example, Registry was supportive of this idea, but faculty staff were unsure. They thought the toolkit might be repetitive of the existing university procedures and so would not fit with course development.

R2: If there were a way of integrating these various toolkits, as you say, this has got quite a narrow focus but if it were to be implemented, it could be implemented within a broader framework of just support for course development.

E: You're probably aware, most course development is working round the edges, very, very seldom does one get the time to do a new course or redevelop an existing course – you know, they've got an existing workload and they can't fit it in, at the end of five years they go – arrggh when am I supposed to do that – and they do it round the edges. So in a way, they're not going to necessarily sit and work their way through something like that – they would need proper guidance to go through it in the same way, as I say we've got a course development handbook which you'd hope would then supply them with templates for their programme specifications.

Suggestions

Apart from the concerns, interviewees offered suggestions on how to improve the toolkit. The main views were that the toolkit should not be seen as an audit tool, and that it should be integrated with existing university procedure, such as periodic review and student evaluation. There was also a view that the toolkit should be made more accessible to academics by someone in an institution owning it and connecting it to the existing institutional procedures. Questions could be answered at different levels such as institution, faculty, course and individual academic. This would mean that an academic would just work with a subset of the Toolkit.

Avoid being seen as a audit tool

G: It has to be divorced from that – that the toolkit is about the delivery of learning to benefit them and their students and not the political ...

Integrate toolkit with existing university procedure

C: I often, and something I've been trying to encourage, is to get more role guidance for periodic review teams, because you have the role of the chair, the role of the external, the role of the panel member, and often new panel members are unfamiliar with what is supposed to be going on, so that it would be useful to have guidance there, and it would perhaps be useful to have a sub-component introduced in the concept of what specific issues would be associated with the use of TEL.

B: I mean, most of our documentation has that formal bit and it has a guidance element, so I think it's about incorporating the information that we need to know in the proposal or template type document, and within the guidance, making reference to some of the links that are in here, which I haven't gone to all of the links but some of them sound really really interesting, that I didn't know were there, and I'm sure a lot of colleagues here don't know that they're there, a mixture of the two, that would be done through registry in terms of a revision to any of those.

R2: I think it would be helpful if it were provided as a support because as I said the process is actually quite broadly articulated so I think it would be more at faculty level that it were available as a link, a supporting document.

R1: To give to course development teams when they start out.

R2: Yeah. So best practice for the templates, documentation, background reading material, and then faculty officers would probably be quite actively involved in encouraging course leaders to use that material because it will make the whole process easy, quite streamlined... because I think course leaders would otherwise prepare quite lengthy documents so this would obviously support them through that. But we would normally just link to material, we wouldn't issue detailed guidance at this level.

Role/level break up

C: The thing I would probably suggest with it is that, as it stands, it is probably a very comprehensive source, whether it's accessible as it stands, I don't know, and how you make it accessible, might be something where it's sent to some person in registry whose job, for all the institutions who ... whose job it is then to divvy it up for all the institution's needs, or just to go through their own regulations and say, well actually do we already do this – you know, if this is best practice, are we already adopting this? And where there is an area of weakness, you may then well use the resource.

C: It probably would to break it up in a role based fashion, and you wouldn't necessarily need to distinguish between central QA and periodic review based QA because they are kind of merged anyway, so there might be a regulatory aspect but realistically what I'm doing is when I'm doing periodic review, I'm thinking about regulatory aspects too, so there's that sort of QA looking at what's going on perspective, versus the member of staff preparing material perspective, which is very, very different, versus the systems perspective, which no one normally other than systems think about. As to whether it's secure and can't be hacked, we wouldn't as academics or quality people ever think about that normally. That wouldn't be within our capacity to deal with.

Relate to student evaluation

G: At the moment, there's the talk about having an annual student evaluation across the university ... that's of students, so students fill out something, or online, whatever it is, presumably you could have a question in there that relates to them and their course about e-learning and their level of satisfaction with that ... you know, you could make that as detailed as was necessary, I'd suggest it shouldn't be too detailed but *if* then everyone came back saying 'we're happy, we're happy, we're happy', then there's one course somewhere where students weren't happy, *then* that's the time to focus in and say 'what can we do to help you here?' and it's done in a spirit of ...

Resources become outdated easily

C: And the thing that vaguely worried me was how fast would the resources go out of date and how would you maintain them.

Abbreviations need to be clarified

H: There is an assumption that people understand the abbreviations that you use in this – and not everybody necessarily will - Web 2 technologies I only know because I sat in something the other day and they were talking about it, otherwise I'm afraid it's sort of (makes whooshing sound)... over my head.

J: ... Web 2.0 - it means everything and nothing, why not call it web? If you mean social media then you may like to specify to your audience maybe so that ...

R2: What is IPR?

Comments on specific pages

Apart from the general comments on the toolkit, specific suggestions were given on how to improve it for future use. These will be listed by pages.

Introductory page

R3: I had one comment that actually maybe this front page would be a good page to say that developing a course and then periodic review, they're not quick processes, they do take a bit of time and I thought that might be worth warning people of that point, that rushing it through, there tends to be issues and things that crop up, so it's probably best to encourage them to take their time and to speak to the relevant people.

The contents page

R1: Yeah, looking at it again maybe it doesn't map quite as perfectly as I thought but in a general sense that's how I think of those three areas but I see that annual monitoring is under part three and I was thinking of AM as being part two.

'Good practice and case studies and resources' should conform to our one

R 1: On good practice and case studies and resources, the third column, thinking with a narrow view of this institution, we were wondering how it might pose a few problems or it might be confusing to a course development team who are developing a new course or reviewing a course, and then to look at a form for university of X or something, multiple versions of good examples of other institutions' forms, I would think that would be misleading because we have a prescribed set of forms here in this university we want people to stick to.

Page 3 Establish link to our template

B: so here the approval forms could link like you say to our ones.

R2: And as I say there are templates which are approved at committee level, so it's quite formal and procedural.

Page 4 Comments on technology as affiliation in C&T

H: On page four under the process of course design, there is a question how should existing course design processes be modified for technology enhanced learning and the actions to be taken are to ... provide a range of good models and templates, and I would like to go back to the first sentence you had on your question ... What technologies will be used and what role with they play in your course....

J: ...because there is a presumption there that we will adopt these technologies – there's an absolute there that says we will adopt these technologies, it's not a question of do we think it's appropriate to adopt these technologies? And this one here that says how should existing courses be modified? There's a presumption there that we will modify our courses for technology enhance learning and it seems to be a little bit of a binary there in that you either do it or you don't. So the first question that arose from this is why are we adapting our courses? Who are we doing it for? Are we just doing it to meet the needs of fashion for Web 2.0 technologies that are driving this? And the second part that comes from that then is will this be organic, will departments be allowed to develop this? Or will it be top down, and everybody does it en-masse?– so it might be a consideration for the panel that's actually going to take this on.

Pages 6-7 Assessment risk

R1: Assessment is a really tricky one. There's so many broader issues around assessment, the timing, load of assessment, not just method of assessment, you know what happens, they all seem very interrelated, so again to focus on one element, e-learning, e-submission, e-assessment, would appear to miss the bigger issue...

R2: Absolutely, there are databases out there that are not supported.

R2: ...if the internet is slower or if there were technological problems...

R2: So you're really looking at things like centres.

R1: ...with e-submission?

R3: But I think also now it might be incorporated into whatever contract they sign when they accept a place on the course, that all work would be their own and so it might just be a way of covering that so I'm pretty sure there was something about it.

Page 8 Plagiarism

R1: Just on academic misconduct and plagiarism, to be very, very careful to...

R1: ...with anything regulations, I guess to make sure it's pertinent to this university.

R2: No, it's a bit like using various e-submission software, so not necessarily all the same and people have developed their own practice. I think that XX is looking at academic misconduct and plagiarism within regulations and how to frame that at an institutional level.

Page 8 Digital literacy

J: ...suppose I would rather reword the question as 'do students possess the necessary digital literacy skills to make effective use of the education resources that you, yourself, specifically ask them to make use of?' And I think if you are going to show them a film, or ask them to contribute to a blog, you need to know that they can do that ...

Page 12 Section 1.3 is repetitive

B: So in section 1.3, which is validation, and it talks about for example, 'do teaching staff have the necessary skills to implement it' and then, 'what steps have been taken to support digital literacies of students', that overlaps with section 1.2, so for example you go to p. 8, 'do students possess the necessary digital literacy skills'.

Page 12 Validation: members may not have expertise of e-learning

R3: I've just picked up a comment on page 12 about the validation, and there's an action suggesting that a course leader ensures a validation panel has members with appropriate expertise in e-learning or enhanced learning. And I don't know what the situation will be for all universities, but in our one the chair is usually a dean of a faculty or some other appropriate person. So quite often there isn't really much choice in who is going to run a validation. So I don't know how they could ensure they've got appropriate expertise but I'm sure not necessarily everybody on the panel will have to have expertise. They could still have valuable input in the validation event, so I don't know if suggesting that ensuring the validation panel is the right way of wording that, but I guess asking...

Page 18 Use course representation to let students raise the issue

R2: I thought the course representation was quite interesting on page 18. The idea of how to engage students who are not on site.... , they train them and they support them throughout, in fact we've got a new course rep system that was implemented really only this year and it involves a lot of work with the SU, they run school forums and they get all the course reps together at different sites and get them to talk through issues and pick out common themes and raise them at committees, and support them through raising them at school and course board levels, so that there's more engagement and students feel more empowered.

R2: For annual monitoring, we have a theme, and it's very much around look at your course in light of this theme, just to provide some kind of focus for discussion at the annual workshop, but I think the idea is very much with course representation is to allow students to raise the issue.

Conclusions

Overall, it was perceived that the Toolkit could be useful. QA staff were more positive towards it than academics and there was a difference in attitude between academics in different faculties. The main conclusion from the case study is that for the Toolkit to be useful in an institution someone or some department needs to take ownership of it. The person or department would

be responsible for adapting it to the institution and its current procedures, leading on its implementation and analysing the results of using it. Without this intermediary stage academics are not willing to engage with it.