

NOTE:

This case study has been used to inform Chapter 7 of the book,  
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## Quality Standards for Consumer Protection

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There is only one set of global quality standards for eLearning that represent the consumer's point of view. These quality standards – the Open eQuality Learning Standards<sup>1</sup> (OeQLs) -- are important for two significant reasons. First, there are vast numbers and types of eLearning opportunities available to students, learning options that are highly variable and totally unregulated in terms of price, utility and quality. Purchasers need criteria and standards by which to make appropriate choices to maximize return on investment. Second, those who develop and offer eLearning – colleges, universities and private enterprise – need quality standards and certification in order to meet consumer expectations and to sustain the eLearning enterprise worldwide.

### Terminology

For purposes of this case study, the term **eLearning** is used to mean **learning using both a computer and the Internet**. The term eLearning is, in some senses, a synonym for Open and Distance Learning (ODL). eLearning products or services take various forms. They may be single courses and/or entire programs; entire courses and/or course units, lessons or components; or elements of an eLearning package, e.g., a learning management system or an ePortfolio tool. The eLearning may be:

- offered for credit at an education institution and/or for general interest without credit;
- aimed at individuals or entire groups in classes;
- targeted to specific age groups and/or any age group;
- offered by public and/or commercial education and training agencies.

From the purchaser perspective, the eLearning service may:

- provide instruction with or without various support services, such as access to a library;
- be very expensive or free of charge;
- be really effective or of questionable quality.

Both providers and consumers of eLearning want education and training products and services that are **effective and efficient**. The term **quality** is used to encompass these concepts.

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**Consumers** of eLearning may be individual students, schools boards, education and training departments of governments, corporations. **Providers** may be publicly-funded schools, universities and colleges, or they may be private enterprises producing portions of eLearning content, design and production, delivery and management of learning, and/or student management.

## The Quality Standards

The Open eQuality Learning Standards are available online from many sources.<sup>2</sup> The standards are consumer-oriented, comprehensive, consensus-based, adaptable, futuristic and recommended only. The entire set is lengthy and complex.

In brief, the standards begin with what is most important to consumers – assurance that they will learn content skills and knowledge that are relevant and recognized together with lifelong learning skills that are transferable and applicable. When consumers are assured their investment of time and finances will be rewarded with recognized competencies and credits, they then concern themselves with the details of student services and delivery – the teaching, learning, assessment and support processes and practices. When they are assured that teaching and learning are appropriate and effective, they finally concern themselves with the nature of the organization standing behind the learning service – the quality of staff, budgets and plans. In summary, the Open eLearning Quality Standards are comprehensive of all elements of the system: outcomes and outputs, processes and practices, inputs and resources.

## Context

eLearning is one of the primary new products/services in the global knowledge economy. Worldwide, businesses and public-sector agencies are producing and marketing eLearning products/services in a very competitive marketplace; and on a global basis, individuals, corporations and governments are using eLearning products at an increasing rate. According to Industry Canada<sup>3</sup>, there are approximately 5000 companies worldwide engaged in online learning. Brandon-Hall has determined that, in 2002, the eTraining industry in the US generated US\$10.3 billion in revenue, and it is expected to grow as much as 700% to US\$83.1 billion by 2006. In Canada in 2002, students could access 66,107 courses from 36 countries or 1,952 institutions.<sup>1</sup>

For all these courses and institutions, until now, there has been no quality assurance mechanism to protect consumers and students. Although many prestigious education institutions and businesses provide eLearning, there is no discernable or defensible connection between the institution's reputation and the quality of the eLearning. This is an enterprise that is changing rapidly, but which is totally unregulated. Buyer beware!

## Rationale

Faced with the variability of cost, quality and innovation in eLearning, FuturEd Inc.<sup>4</sup> hypothesized that consumer-based quality guidelines for learning technologies could be used by all stakeholders in eLearning.

- Students and purchasers could use them to make informed choices.
- Producers of eLearning could use them to develop, evaluate, improve and market their products and services.
- Policy makers would use them to understand the needs and perspectives of the public, and the fit between what is needed and what is available.
- The ODL community could use the quality standards to ensure quality in transnational learning products and services.
- The international marketplace could use Canadian standards to appreciate Canadian quality values in technology-assisted learning products and services.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.FuturEd.com](http://www.FuturEd.com), [www.lif-fia.org](http://www.lif-fia.org), [www.eife-l.org](http://www.eife-l.org), [www.eQcheck.com](http://www.eQcheck.com)

<sup>3</sup> At [www.Schoolnet.ca](http://www.Schoolnet.ca)

<sup>4</sup> Complete information is available at [www.FuturEd.com](http://www.FuturEd.com)

The impetus behind this eLearning quality initiative has been a concern for sustainability of the eLearning enterprise. In the view of FuturEd, eLearning has the capacity to radically and positively transform education and training. As eLearning evolves, learning systems will move towards the promise of learning-centred learning, i.e., towards:

- new forms of edu-employment,
- genuinely lifelong and lifewide learning,
- learning communities and collective human initiative,
- the recognition of all forms of learning and age-irrelevant learning,
- a truly seamless and sustainable learning system.

There is much more at stake than just eLearning courses or businesses. Quality must be assured in eLearning to ensure that the promise of eLearning is achieved.

FuturEd has, for many years, promoted “transformational tools” that help improve quality through the following process:

1. Establish consensus-based quality standards including provider and consumer;
2. Give consumers tools to make informed choices; and
3. Give producers standards as guidelines for production and evaluation.

It is a model in which consumer pressure and knowledgeable producers simultaneously ratchet quality to higher levels and promote substantial, systematic change. Most importantly, it doesn't require the cost, time or contentiousness of regulation, legislation and/or enforcement.

### **Development Process**

Under FuturEd leadership, beginning in 1998 with funding from the Canadian federal government, eLearning experts in Canada began work on quality standards. In 2002, FuturEd and the Canadian Association for Community Education (CACE) produced the Canadian Recommended E-learning Guidelines<sup>5</sup> (CanREGs) - the precursor to the OeQLs.

To develop the consumer-based CanREGs, FuturEd undertook five steps.

1. The first was to assemble an expert panel representing a balance of consumers and providers from seven national and international organizations, including Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), SchoolNet (Industry Canada), and the Commonwealth of Learning.
2. The second was an extensive literature search for both complete sets of guidelines and individual quality indicators for distance learning, education in general, and the use of learning technologies, resulting a background paper<sup>6</sup> and draft standards for consultation purposes.
3. The third step was a national consultation process including workshops and an on-line workbook.
4. The fourth step was refinement of the standards into the form of the CanREGs, based on consultation input, with experts from the field.
5. The final step was creation of a Consumer's Guide to eLearning<sup>7</sup> based on the CanREGs - providing potential purchasers with the questions to ask in order to identify quality eLearning and make informed choices.

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<sup>5</sup> Copyright: FuturEd and CACE, 2002

<sup>6</sup> At [www.FuturEd.com](http://www.FuturEd.com)

<sup>7</sup> Available at, e.g.,

- <http://www.col.org/newsrelease/0206ConsumersGuide.htm> (Commonwealth of Learning)
- <http://www.amtec.ca/site/publications/reports/canregs.html> (Association for Media and Technical Education in Canada)
- [http://www.cade-aced.ca/en\\_link.php](http://www.cade-aced.ca/en_link.php) (Canadian Association for Distance Education)

To disseminate and implement the CanREGs, FuturEd and CACE provided access to the standards on copyright-protected basis, encouraging development to the quality standards. In May 2004, the CanREGs became the Open eQuality Learning Standards and copyright has been transferred to the Open Commons. The OeQLs were launched in the European Union by the European Institute for eLearning (EIfEL)<sup>8</sup> and the Learning Innovations Forum d'Innovation d'Apprentissage (LifIA),<sup>9</sup> and responsibility for maintaining the open source standards has been handed off to a joint EIfEL - LifIA international committee. The joint eQuality Committee will meet annually and focus on maintaining the currency of the quality standards.

### Challenges and Issues

Although the development of the CanREGs was supported by government, there was no support for the promotion or implementation of the standards. While FuturEd and CACE had been granted the copyright on the CanREGs, the standards were in the public domain because they had been developed with public funds. FuturEd has always been committed to consumer protection and consumer confidence in learning innovations, and it seemed neither effective nor efficient use of public funds to just post the standards to the Internet and hope there was uptake. In the absence of other options, FuturEd President Barker launched a separate corporation to promote and utilize the CanREGs. QualitE-Learning Assurance Inc.<sup>10</sup> was created to assess and certify the quality of eLearning products and services against the CanREGs, now OeQLs; those that meet the standards earn the use of the “eQcheck” certification mark. The eQcheck is being franchised throughout the UK, the EU, and beyond. Developed wholly as an eBusiness, there have been considerable challenges and barriers to the systematic implementation of the CanREGs and the eQcheck.

The major challenge has been presented by the processes of quality assurance in education in Canada. There are no quality standards for higher education in general or ODL in particular. The current quality assurance mechanism includes peer review of programs and, in some cases, provincial and professional regulation of curriculum. In particular, there is an absence of a “consumer” orientation – with publicly-funded higher education institutions retaining almost total autonomy for decision-making and production of programs and services. This leads to the quality paradox – i.e., the fact that providers of any product or service must assure quality but they can't provide quality assurance. Quality assurance must be:

- Objective – incorporating both provider and user views
- Professional – conducted by quality assessors
- Credible – against standards of excellence
- Reputable – using processes and standards recognized by others
- Iterative - process-oriented
- Continuous – ongoing and built in to the organizations funding and planning strategies.

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- <http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/epic/internet/incts-scf.nsf/vwGeneratedInterE/sl00180e.html> (Industry Canada)
  - <http://www.canlearn.ca/planning/pro/support/pdf/GuidelinesLearning.pdf> (Human Resources Development Canada)
  - [http://teleeducation.nb.ca/english/article.cfm?sbsec\\_ID=64&sec\\_id=9](http://teleeducation.nb.ca/english/article.cfm?sbsec_ID=64&sec_id=9) (Telecampus)
  - [http://eduspecs.ic.gc.ca/Addressing\\_Concerns/description.html](http://eduspecs.ic.gc.ca/Addressing_Concerns/description.html)

<sup>8</sup> See [www.eife-l.org](http://www.eife-l.org)

<sup>9</sup> Complete information at [www.lif-fia.org](http://www.lif-fia.org)

<sup>10</sup> Complete information at [www.eQcheck.com](http://www.eQcheck.com)

Quality assurance claims that come from HE providers alone are subjective and questionable at best. However, objective, professional quality assurance through the eQcheck certification mark provides for a win-win-win scenario. Students win with credible, consumer-oriented information to make informed choices. ODL providers win with objective evidence to enhance their reputation and create competitive advantage – the consumer quality mark. And the eLearning enterprise wins with substantial effort directed at quality, return on investment and, ultimately, sustainability.

Are ODL and Higher Education (HE) ready for consumer empowerment? Dr. Abrioux, former President of Athabasca University (AU) thinks so. He asserts that students are the AU customers, and customer satisfaction is AU's first priority. He has formally encouraged other universities to adopt the approach of the Consumer's Guide based on the CanREGs. This doesn't mean that other universities and colleges agree; many are stuck in the paradigm of a captive audience, based on the current reality in Canada that there are more potential students than available seats. It is just this situation that will drive students to look to ODL, possibly from institutes outside Canada. Simultaneously, it is a worry to governments at all levels that students are leaving HE with substantially increased student debt loads, causing both HE funders and students themselves to become more discerning investors. Students are beginning to question the return on their substantial investment, and a small number are becoming empowered consumers of HE products and services of all types. It will, indeed, be student pressure that addresses the historical autonomy and academic tradition that causes HE institutions to promote the status quo over positive, consumer-oriented change. The OeQLs are a common criteria for the comparison of online and onsite teaching and learning, with a view to legitimate comparison and improved quality in each. These are all issues that support the implementation of informed choice and consumer pressure for assured quality. In a world where there are increasing numbers of dedicated online learning providers, it is essential to provide consumer protection and consumer confidence in both online and onsite learning.

It has been a long, hard road to implementing the CanREGs, now the Open eQuality Learning Standards. The Canadian experience, vis-à-vis quality and ODL has challenged the maxim that built Canada, i.e., "build it and they will come" doesn't necessarily apply to innovations in learning systems. Without government assistance of any kind, and at enormous expense, FuturEd has continued to promote the CanREGs and the consumer-orientation to quality assurance. A small number of champions have stepped forward – Athabasca University, Open School BC, Odyssey Learning, eTraffic Solutions, EIfEL, LIfIA and others – but more will be needed.

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<sup>1</sup> Premier's Council on Technology (2002). *ELearning and an Online Learning Industry in British Columbia*.