

CHAPTER 9

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH: A CASE STUDY IN CANADIAN PRACTICE IN QUALITY ASSURANCE IN A DUAL-MODE INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

The University of Guelph, a dual-mode institution in southern Ontario, Canada, has long had an effective and growing distance teaching programme which has been notable for, among other things, the establishment and maintenance of a comprehensive and very viable system of quality assurance. This programme has been set in its provincial context since the province of Ontario has, particularly during the 1990s, developed a network of agencies and regulations related to assuring the quality of its undergraduate and graduate programmes. This system is, under the influence of impending changes in the provincial post-secondary system, likely to be extended in the near future. Nevertheless, the University of Guelph has devoted considerable effort and resources to designing and implementing a system that best meets its own institutional needs and, more particularly, those of its students. This system is described, and a number of general lessons have been drawn out for the effective functioning of quality assurance policies and procedures. The success of the Guelph system is illustrated by reference to the growth of the programme's popularity among both on- and off-campus students and by the number of awards that the open learning programme has received in recent years.

1. BACKGROUND

In the introduction to an earlier Commonwealth of Learning collection on quality assurance (Deshpande & Muirgridge 1994), published over ten years ago, I quoted, by way of introduction, the comments of two Australian observers (Nunan & Calvert 1992): “It is hardly an exaggeration to say that, as funding issues dominated the past ten years, so quality issues will dominate the next decade’ (*The Higher*, 1991). The focus on

quality as the theme for the decade is an outcome of the redirection and restructuring of high education.” This prediction from two of the people most closely involved with the development of quality assurance practices in Australian distance education has, both for Australia and much of the rest of the world, proved to be correct as, during the second half of the nineties and the first years of the current decade, both institutions and the governments that fund them have increasingly relied on the development and operation of quality assurance practices to ensure that the services they provide to students are of the highest possible quality and to enable institutions and voters to be sure that funds allocated to post-secondary education are being used effectively.

So major a development as the widespread expansion of quality assurance practices in higher education has not, however, been achieved without controversy and heated discussion. The movement to assure and to be seen to be assuring quality has proceeded throughout the world so that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there are few jurisdictions, at least in the English-speaking world, that do not have extensive and perhaps growing agencies to deal with the issue in their own institutions. There are, of course, many different models for implementing quality assurance. In many cases, the initial impetus came from individual institutions that chose to follow their own paths to quality while, in many jurisdictions, provincial or national agencies have been established to ensure that uniform standards are applied. There may also be an argument for the belief of some in the field of distance education that distance teaching universities have been among the leaders in the establishment of effective quality assurance procedures, and it is, in any case, certain that the major distance teaching universities attempted from the outset to build quality assurance procedures into their institutions (see, for example, O’Shea & A. Downes 1997, and other case studies in Tait 1997).

The English Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education has developed extensive quality assurance procedures related to most aspects of higher education operations in England and Wales as have agencies such as the Australian University Quality Agency and the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit (Brennan et al. 1997).

In Canada, where the 10 provinces jealously guard their control over higher education, progress towards common systems of higher education has been by no means uniform across the country, and some provinces are well advanced in developing their own quality assurance systems while others have barely started. In Ontario, the province in which the University of Guelph is located along with 17 other public universities, organised attempts to establish and operate quality assurance systems have been in progress for some years. In one sense, however, one of the most significant occurrences was the establishment in 2001 of the Post-secondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB), an arm’s-length advisory agency set up by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to review applications from the colleges of applied arts and technology (CAATs), newly enabled to offer applied degrees, and from private, mainly extra-provincial universities and colleges, to offer degree programmes in the province. “Creation of the Board has led Ontario into some matters of quality assessment in which other jurisdictions have preceded it and from whose experience it has derived benefit, and into other matters that reflect local circumstances.” Thus, the Board “has had to define programs and degrees and what standards and benchmarks need to be brought to bear in their assessment” as well as working in several other related areas (Baker, 2002).¹ While,

1 This section of this study relies heavily on this paper, and I wish to acknowledge the help of its author, the Executive Director of the PEQAB, in making it available.

as the same author has correctly stated, the Board can “serve as a kind of ginger group, a bit of spice on the edge of the pan, whose flavour may gently suffuse some of the quality assurance thinking or standards in the whole postsecondary system in Ontario,” it is also the case that it has been able to build much of its work not only on previous efforts in other jurisdictions but also on earlier developments within the province itself.

For many years, the Ontario Council of Graduate Studies (OCGS), an affiliate of the Council of Ontario Universities (COU), has been responsible for assuring the quality of graduate programmes in the province, having the mandate to review all new proposals for new graduate programmes and to review, on a seven-year cycle, existing programmes. At the undergraduate level, concerted action was slower in coming and may be said to have been stimulated more by the growing interest of the provincial auditor general in practice in the universities than by a collective desire to collaborate in developing a uniform system of quality assurance. Thus, in 1996–1997, the COU developed procedures to establish the systematic auditing of undergraduate programmes in all Ontario universities and placed responsibility for this activity with another of its affiliates, the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV). OCAV, in turn, set up an Undergraduate Program Review Audit Committee (UPRAC) which, since the late nineties, has moved to ensure that all undergraduate programmes in provincial universities conform to the minimum standards it has established and that all aspects of such programmes are in conformity with the institution’s mission and development plan. Following an OCAV audit, the institution has a year to respond by indicating the steps it has taken to conform to the audit’s recommendations. As the policy on undergraduate programmes at York University states, “the aim is to identify present strengths and weaknesses of programs, encourage and recognize quality, suggest possible solutions to existing or anticipated problems, and promote constructive change” as well as recognising that all programmes can be improved and that a major responsibility of departments and programmes is to ensure that thorough and regular review is carried out.

Thus, the province as a whole has made considerable progress in assuring the quality of both undergraduate and graduate programmes in its universities (see Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials 2002 for details of Ontario’s higher education quality assurance practices). This, as well as an appropriate insistence on continuing and developing the universities’ and the government’s approach to quality assurance, was underlined in a recent report to the provincial government that has become known as the Rae report, published in February 2005. In setting out priorities for development in several areas, the report recommends that the province should, “in co-operation with the institutions and the students, establish quality standards and measures to ensure improvements are made at the sector, institutional, program and student level. Improvements in the student experience would include the area of student services.” In recognising that quality assurance measures should extend to the entire operation of the universities, the report recommends the establishment of a council on higher education reporting to the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities. The council would be charged with collecting data and implementing measures to ensure the continuous improvement of university activities, with the anticipated result that there will be “expansion of quality measures—including the student experience—leading to a comprehensive framework for quality assurance” with “public reporting on sector, institutional and program-level quality and performance” (Rae 2005).²

2 The report’s author is a former Premier of the province of Ontario.

2. THE CASE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH (UOG)

2.1 *Course offerings and their quality*

The policies and procedures developed by the University of Guelph over the last 10 years should be seen against the provincial background outlined above. As noted in the title to this paper, Guelph is a dual-mode institution with a long tradition of offering courses at a distance in addition to its classroom-based programmes. The university operates on a three-semester system. Students blend their face-to-face courses with distance courses in the fall and winter semesters. Many degree students register for distance courses in the summer semester so they can keep up or move ahead with their studies. The summer semester is known as the “distance semester,” a phenomenon created by the students themselves. During 2004–2005, distance education registrations by degree students totalled 16,054, with approximately 5334 of these being off campus.

In addition to providing distance courses for residential students, the university offers an Open Learning Programme in which individuals not admitted to one of the university’s degree programmes have access to the degree credit distance courses. In 2004–2005, registrations in this programme were 2283, all of whom were off campus. Students enrolling in this programme may already have a degree and wish to update personal or professional credentials or they may wish to assess their ability to succeed in a degree programme. Students registering in the Open Learning Programme who achieve an average of 70 percent in four courses are guaranteed admission to the Bachelor of Arts Programme.

Several courses are grouped into a variety of certificate programmes, primarily for external audiences interested in professional development. These courses, however, also enable students to complete six certificate programmes at a distance as well as contributing to the completion of undergraduate degrees. In the case of the Certificate in Leadership, students are well positioned to meet the admission requirements for an online master’s degree in that field. Further, the university offers other graduate online degrees such as the MBA in Hospitality and Tourism and the MBA in Agriculture. Several others are under development.

Finally, the university offers an extensive continuing education programme with all courses and programmes being approved by the Senate Committee on Open Learning. Many, though not all, of these are offered through the Office of Open Learning. It should also be noted that the university offers several courses in an area entitled “academic preparation,” courses that provide an introduction to academic writing as well as one course in introductory mathematics. These are aimed at students entering or returning to academic studies to help them to succeed in their degree work. In other words, the programme described above provides an impressive array of programmes and courses, ensuring that its students have access to a wide variety of opportunities for undergraduate and graduate study as well as certificates, professional and personal upgrading and development in many areas.

The growth in student numbers is a tribute to the quality of the courses themselves and to the support that the Office of Open Learning and its associated academic departments provide. It should also be noted here that, in each of the six years from 2000 to 2005, courses developed by the office have received at least one, and in some cases as many as three, national quality awards from Canada and the United States. What follows is an attempt to outline the policies and procedures on which this success has been based.³

3 I would like to acknowledge here the very generous assistance of the Director, Office of Open Learning, Virginia Gray, in providing the materials, information and commentary that form the basis for this section of this study as well as reading and commenting extensively on a first draft of the study.

2.2 *The philosophy that guides distance education operations*

The fundamental document guiding the Office of Open Learning in developing and delivering the courses that it provides to students is an internal memorandum entitled *Best Practices in Distance Education*. This brief document addresses the fundamental philosophy underlying the office's efforts. It is worth quoting at length:

The Office of Open Learning of the University of Guelph is committed to providing the highest quality distance education courses. Within a learner-centred, research intensive environment, distance learning experiences should reflect the high pedagogical standards for which the University of Guelph is known. The following criteria have been developed to guide us in our development and redevelopment of distance courses.

Distance education courses should be learner-centred and:

- Reflect the highest levels of scholarship in discipline and subject areas;
- Utilize and provide access to current content, materials, and resources;
- Exhibit well thought-out aims, goals and objectives;
- Have pedagogically sound learning outcomes;
- Have a clear and logical structure and sequence of learning activities (learning plan);
- Disseminate current research findings and promote various forms of enquiry;
- Set realistic yet challenging expectations of learners;
- Promote active learning, independence of thought and, where appropriate, problem solving;
- Exhibit a clearly definable educational philosophy and teaching/learning strategies;
- Accommodate a variety of learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic);
- Utilize a variety of appropriate learning resources (print, video, CD-ROM, WWW, etc.);
- Link to University of Guelph Library, and to the Counselling and Student Resource Centre;
- Foster learner-instructor and learner-learner communication and interaction;
- Integrate appropriate technology into the course learning framework;
- Allow for frequent and meaningful feedback on learner progress;
- Provide for suitable assessment methods measuring success in accomplishment of course goals and outcomes;
- Exhibit sensitivity to learners of varying ages, backgrounds, and experience;
- Be appropriate for an international audience (awareness of and sensitivity to cultural differences); and
- Exhibit proper standards in the use of the language of instruction and the rules of grammar.

This full and emphatic statement of the university's philosophy on the provision of distance education and open learning programmes is supplemented by further memoranda dealing with such matters as university course signatures, creating a distance education course and design problems in open and distance education. In all of these, the theme of quality, articulated fully in the document quoted above, is reinforced repeatedly. It is perhaps best summarised in the conclusion of a document entitled *Creating a Course for Distance Education*: "Creating quality distance learning experiences for University of Guelph learners is our priority."⁴

2.3 Specific quality assurance strategies in practice

These, however, are the paper guidelines; and it is not, of course, unknown for these to be quite different from what actually happens when courses are developed and delivered. Guelph has set out to ensure that this does not occur and that the office meets its mandate. In the area of implementation, the Office of Open Learning has thus developed strong procedures for the development and delivery of courses that are intended to ensure that the high standards espoused by the office's guidelines are met. At the university level, the Director of the Office of Open Learning reports to the office of the Vice-President, Academic. The Vice-President, Academic, chairs the Senate Committee on Open Learning, which is composed of the Associate Vice-President, Academic, the Secretary of Senate, the Chair of the Board of Undergraduate Studies, the Chair of the Board of Graduate Studies, the Director of the Office of Open Learning, a librarian and one faculty member of Senate from each college. In addition to recommending the award of grants from the Provost's Distance Education Development Fund, this committee oversees and approves the development or the adaptation of courses into a distance mode and advises the Director of the Office of Open Learning on matters of concern to the university. It also assists in the development of policy as it relates to the university's strategic directions in open learning. The Office of Open Learning is responsible for administering student surveys in courses offered in its programmes and for ensuring teaching quality in these courses. These surveys, which are shared with the committee as well as with the faculty and departments involved, aim to provide continuing comment on the Office and its performance and to provide inputs into necessary changes and enhancements. Taken together, these provisions ensure that the office and its work are regularly discussed and reviewed widely and at the university's highest levels.

In addition, the committee ensures that the Office of Open Learning establishes and maintains appropriate partnerships within the university. Two examples of this indicate separate aspects of the office's practice and its emphasis on quality. First, in developing and delivering courses, the office works in partnership with academic departments that provide the academic expertise required for effective development and delivery, thus ensuring that these two activities are driven by the requirement for appropriate pedagogy in all courses. Second, the office has set up and maintains a close relationship with the university library (as suggested by the best practices document) such that library staff can work in close support of students and can even, if students need help conducting a literature search, take control of the student's computer to provide necessary assistance. Thus, in these areas and in relationships with other university departments, the office attempts to carry out the exacting mandate laid down for it.

⁴ The documents cited are internal documents only but the theme of consciously promoting quality in development and delivery is further emphasised on the Web-site of the Office of Open Learning (www.open.uoguelph.ca).

A further senate committee is involved with the office's activities. The Senate Committee on Internal Reviews, a sub-committee of the Senate Committee on University Planning, reviews each department regularly, paying particular attention to how departments are performing with respect to the university's strategic directions, one of which relates to open learning. As part of this process, the Office of Open Learning is asked to comment on each department's performance in open learning with special emphasis on the quality of its offerings.

2.4 Quality assurance in the development and delivery of courses

In course development, the Office of Open Learning operates in the following way. Distance learning specialists from the office are assigned to course development projects and each of these specialists has a portfolio of courses, usually from one academic department but also reaching into others, for which he/she carries responsibility through both development and delivery. The specialist works with a department and with an individual course writer to establish appropriate pedagogy and learning outcomes for a particular course (as prescribed by the best practice document quoted above). The first stage, following completion of this exercise, is to develop a first pilot unit for each course, which is then exhaustively tested. If testing is satisfactory, the rest of the course is developed and offered. Having been offered, each course is reviewed every time it is taught and, in discussion with the course instructor, the specialist makes changes as necessary. Thus, while departments schedule their own courses, the specialists oversee all aspects of development and offering including, where necessary, training of online instructors. During the review and revision of courses, a further perspective is provided by an online editor who, again in conjunction with the specialist, checks each course to ensure that standards are consistent with other courses and that the changes proposed are appropriate. Finally, the Manager of Distance Education and Learning Technologies in the Office of Open Learning has general oversight of new and continuing courses in order to provide different insights into their pedagogy by ensuring that the specialists and course developers are kept abreast of current developments in educational technologies so that courses may incorporate such advances where useful.

Thus, in its development and delivery of courses, the Office of Open Learning has evolved a process of careful and continuous review as its courses themselves evolve, a process that provides for continuous oversight of course materials and pedagogy from a variety of perspectives. It should be noted that the office has no policy in this area beyond the very general one that the processes described here should be meticulously carried out. This is done in the belief that the essence of its system is that the bar of quality must be raised continuously, and that this implies change and innovation as this becomes necessary.

3. TOWARDS A CULTURE OF QUALITY

In the introduction to his collection of case studies, *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Selected Case Studies*, published by the Commonwealth of Learning in 1997, Alan Tait argued strongly that the context of a quality-assurance system is all-important, and that systems must be tailored to the institutions in which they operate if they are to be truly effective. In this context, he notes that "any 'off-the-shelf' solution from the latest management book or passing consultant will not provide such background. While their remedies may seem superficially attractive, in the form of instant programmes that can be globally applied, such approaches are unlikely to do anything but give quality assurance a bad name" (Tait 1997: 4). During the almost 10 years since this warning appeared, it

has been demonstrated repeatedly to be correct as successful systems of quality assurance have been developed as part of the institutional culture of individual institutions. This has been the case at the University of Guelph as it has in many other institutions.

Because quality assurance systems should be designed with a particular institution in mind, it follows that the primary requirement for an effective system is institutional commitment and support. Without such widespread and thoroughgoing support, coming from the institution as a whole and from its departments, any system is doomed to failure. In a dual-mode institution such as the University of Guelph, this means that distance education is seen as a vital component of institutional activity, that distance teaching is not less than or subsidiary to face-to-face teaching. This, in turn, is shown in several ways such as the inclusion of assessment of distance courses in formal reviews of academic departments and the provision of incentives and funds to departments to offer distance programmes. An essential component of institutional commitment is that faculty participating in course development have this recognised as a scholarly activity, that those teaching at a distance do so as part of their regular teaching load and that there are award programmes for courses of excellence.

This overall institutional commitment needs to be buttressed by other measures. It seems now to be generally recognised that it is necessary to set up a specialised and dedicated central unit that can work with departments and faculty to ensure that they are freed from the technical aspects of distance development to concentrate on course content and learning objectives and outcomes. The unit's specialists are expected to work with faculty to acquaint them with and guide them in the use of effective course design and delivery methods including use of media. Given the comments made above, it follows that the unit provides regular inputs for faculty training on distance education and on development and facilitation of distance education courses. Part of this training is the provision of a clear statement of best practices in distance education so that faculty can be in no doubt about the factors that underpin their work. Finally, the unit is committed to continuing consultation with faculty and departments to improve the quality of the support provided to them by the central unit.

The features of the central unit noted in the previous paragraph are basic requirements of its work but there are a number of subsidiary activities to which an effective quality assurance system should pay close attention. Among these, the provision of effective support to students should be prominent. The literature of distance education is filled with discussions of effective student support, and this testifies to its paramount importance. Thus, the unit needs to pay attention to student needs both in the design and delivery of courses so that the level of student performance improves and instructors and advisors provide guidance, support and encouragement throughout the process. Students also need to be assured that their feedback on courses will be taken into account when those courses are revised.

Finally, the central unit also undertakes several other activities to assure the quality of its courses and programmes. Courses will be subjected to continual review to ensure that their content is current, that assignments are kept congruent with content and that presentation and delivery of courses are enhanced. On the technical side, the unit ensures that technology is used not for its own sake but as a tool to enhance a course's pedagogy and to facilitate effective delivery, that the institution has a stable technical infrastructure and that students' and instructors' needs for technical support and help are well provided for.

The development of distance education over the last 35 years has seen a conscious attempt on the part of both single- and dual-mode institutions to embed in institutional

practice clear and effective quality assurance systems possessing the features described above. This determination has helped the best of the single-mode institutions to establish development and delivery systems that have demonstrated the effectiveness of distance education, a proposition that was considerably in doubt when the exemplar of dedicated distance teaching universities, the Open University of the United Kingdom, was founded in 1969. The same has happened in dual-mode institutions throughout Canada and elsewhere as distance education practices have been implemented and have, in turn, helped to enhance teaching practice in the classrooms of those involved in distance education and others. The success of this exercise at the University of Guelph is perhaps best illustrated by two statistics: first, that the average annual enrolment increase in the last few years has been around 20 percent and, second, that retention rates in this growing enrolment have remained at about 90 percent. These figures, allied perhaps to the awards secured by many of the university's courses, as stated earlier in the text, indicate the success of the procedures for quality assurance described here.

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