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IMPLEMENTATION OF A QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM FOR ONLINE UNITS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA

Kelvin Jackson and Nicholas D'Alessandro
Flexible Education Unit
University of Tasmania, AUSTRALIA
kelvin.jackson@utas.edu.au, nicholas.dalessandro@utas.edu.au

Abstract

The development and provision of standards for online units is becoming a common practice in tertiary institutions that provide online teaching and learning. The University of Tasmania is taking a further step in this regard by implementing a quality assurance system for online units to ensure a minimum level of quality and consistency across all online units. This involves sets of standards, checklists, institutional processes for data collection and unit release, and the provision of data to key stakeholders. The implementation of the system has been underway since 2001 and the system has been fully activated for the first time in semester one 2003. This paper presents an institutional and contextual background to the system; an overview of the system; current implementation issues/findings, and some of the lessons learned thus far.

Keywords

quality, assurance, standards, online, teaching, learning, system, LMS, WebCT

Background

The majority of higher education institutions in Australia have adopted a learning management system (LMS) to support online teaching and learning. In line with this centralised, corporatised approach to ICT systems and supporting infrastructure (Holt et al. 2001), the University of Tasmania (UTas) centrally supports WebCT Campus Edition - version 3.8. UTas staff utilise WebCT in their teaching in diverse ways:

- **Web-supported model:** In the majority of cases WebCT is used to supplement the main delivery strategy, whether it be face-to-face or by other means and there is no requirement on the part of students to access the online component.
- **Web-dependent model:** A smaller, but growing percentage of staff have integrated WebCT into their teaching programs and students must access the online component.
- **Fully online model:** A small number of units are offered to address a cross-campus or offshore teaching need and/or provide access for students unable to attend on-campus because of professional placements or other commitments.

As the sophistication in use of LMSs has grown and online teaching and learning becomes more widespread, increasing attention is being given to quality issues regarding students' online experiences - from the quality of the resources hosted on the LMS, management and effectiveness of online communications, to quality of support for students learning online, and so on. To quote Sims et al (2001): 'Rather than creating effective learning environments, many developmental initiatives have proven ineffective, with learning activities a confused labyrinth of information, links, colleagues, discussions and navigation' (p.517). Concern for quality at the institutional level has lead to the need for quality assurance mechanisms, as '..universities have been increasingly called upon to have demonstrable accountability measures and processes' (Reid, 2002, p.1). Among the mechanisms adopted has been the development

of quality assurance principles, standards or guidelines, often in checklist form (see for e.g. Edith Cowan University; Murdoch; University of Alberta; Herrington et al., 2001; Moran, 2002). However, numerous stakeholders are involved in the provision of quality online courses, and institutional quality assurance systems and processes need to reconcile the accountability needs of central executive with the needs and interests of faculty.

At UTas there are three 'players' or stakeholders in the QA process, and there is a need to respect and acknowledge the different responsibilities and roles they play and articulate their activities in a mutually supportive way.

- Teaching faculty has direct responsibility for the quality of online teaching and learning (and teaching and learning generally).
- Executive sets general policy, strategic direction, guidelines and procedural frameworks. These relate to flexible delivery in general, staff and student support for flexible delivery, and standards relating to online delivery.
- The Flexible Education Unit (FEU), a central support unit, has responsibility for implementing central policies and guidelines, and formulating a range of plans associated with online teaching and learning (for approval by Executive). The University has a QA Plan for Online Units that incorporates staff training requirements and other standards or benchmarks for units hosted through the central WebCT platform, and processes to assure quality in delivery. The Plan, first introduced in May 2001, is in the process of revision in light of current practice outlined below.

This paper outlines how UTas has put in place a QA mechanism that attempts to meet the needs of all three stakeholders and recognises their respective responsibilities and authority, and recognises the diverse way in which WebCT is used across the university.

The quality assurance (QA) process for units with an online component

Basically, the University has tackled this in two main ways:
1. **Development of QA Standards** applicable to the range of WebCT uses. These standards provide the framework for staff training and support and serve as reference tools for faculty.
2. **Implementation of administrative procedures** designed to focus faculty on the QA standards during online unit development and review.

The quality assurance standards

The University provides two sets of QA standards:
1. **Base QA Standards for Units with an Online Component**: a set of 11 major standards targeted at the web-supported model of use, which set out minimum, realistically achievable criteria to be met by unit developers/coordinators. These standards address the University's obligations with respect to copyright, web accessibility, as well as staff and student training and support, information that ought to be provided online to students (e.g. unit outline), and inclusion of communication tools etc. Each standard is supported by an accompanying rationale and further support resources. In addition, the Base Standards are intended to provide some consistency in, and quality of, the presentation interface for students. See: http://www.utas.edu.au/teachingonline/policies/qualityassurance/base_standards.html

2. **Exemplary QA Standards for units with an Online Component**: These standards are targeted at the web-dependent and fully online models of online engagement, and provide a set of benchmark statements of recognised 'best practice' in online teaching and learning through WebCT. They are intended as a developmental guide for online developers, and as an evaluation checklist of best practice for schools, faculties and individual developers. Developers select and refer to only those standards applicable to their proposed use(s) of WebCT. See: http://www.utas.edu.au/teachingonline/policies/qualityassurance/exemplary_standards.html

Administrative procedures

Having standards is one matter; seeing them implemented and followed in a university setting is another. UTas has put in place a set of procedures to support faculty in this regard (at present, restricted to implementation of the Base Standards).

1. **Notification about the Standards**: Online developers/coordinators submit their requests to the FEU for setting up a new online component via a web form that directs them to the base QA Standards. The Base QA Standards are also promoted during introductory WebCT training programs.
2. **A checklist procedure**: Online developers/coordinators need to authorise and submit an online QA checklist to the FEU in order for the unit component to be released to students. This checklist records compliance with each of the 11 standards (and where non-compliant, reasons for non-compliance). Submission of the checklist is a pre-requisite for unit activation; however full compliance with the standards is not a pre-requisite. The checklist thus functions as a faculty tool for QA - responsibility for QA is still in the hands of the unit coordinator.
3. **Reports for faculty generated through the checklist process**: Information gathered from the submitted checklists is entered into a database from which semester reports are generated for faculties and Heads of School. These reports feed into the standard course and unit review processes carried out by faculty.

Evaluation and ongoing issues

The full set of QA and online activation processes have only been in place since semester one, 2003, so we are early in the implementation phase. Issues that have emerged concern both the standards themselves, and the administrative processes in place.

The QA Standards: Both sets of standards were released in early 2002, following university-wide consultation, and have been modified and refined a number of times since then. The Base Standards, because of their perceived compliance implications, still generate some debate within the university community about the general applicability of particular standards across all modes of WebCT usage. Conformance to web publishing and web accessibility guidelines are two such issues. A regular review process involving university-wide forums and other feedback channels is currently being put in place. The aim is to continually improve the standards by refining the description, rationale and supporting information for each. (For example, the accessibility requirements have been simplified and streamlined with introduction of UTas's own web accessibility site.) It is imperative that each standard is as easily understood and easily applicable as possible by minimising the volume and complexity of information and jargon.

QA processes: Teaching faculty generally feel pressured by the growing administrative demands on their time, and the QA process is seen by some staff as overly bureaucratic and burdensome. Some staff also feel that it infringes on their academic autonomy and responsibilities. Some faculty staff have suggested that a designated support officer in each school be assigned to support and administrate the QA process on their behalf.

Another key finding is that the QA process needs to be as streamlined and time-efficient as possible. Complex procedures are seen as a significant barrier by staff and are resisted with some vigour. At UTas a number of processes have been trialed using paper-based and online tools/instruments. The current system uses a fully online approach that is centered around the QA checklist - which is an online form. From this single form staff can access all the base standards, access extra information/assistance, and record and submit their compliance information. This central document is proving to be much more efficient than having multiple online and print documents to accomplish the same outcome.

Awareness of the procedures is also an issue. Some staff are still unaware of the unit activation process (but become quickly so when their unit is held back from release to students). There was still approximately 10% of checklists outstanding come the start of first semester, until unit coordinators realised the problem. Therefore staff need to be kept continually informed of the QA process, the steps they need to undertake, and critical dates each semester to ensure that online components are released in time for the students.

Promoting the purposes and advantages of the QA process to faculty is an ongoing imperative for the FEU, as is the need to make it clear that compliance is rightfully a faculty responsibility, not the FEU's.

Summary/conclusions

Implementing quality assurance processes in organisations as complex as universities is not an easy matter - the political dynamics between the major stakeholders needs to be recognised and handled adroitly, and any central system has to be seen to be efficient, effective and as non-intrusive as possible to academic staff. By and large, the process put in place at UTas seems to have been generally accepted by faculty. Time will tell, and no doubt there will be further refinements to the standards, administration and strategic direction as feedback from stakeholders comes in. Of critical relevance will be feedback from students and whether the system is in fact delivering a better or more satisfying online experience.

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