The virtual university and the quality assurance process: Recruiting and retaining the right faculty

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The paper commences with a brief summary of the literature on e-learning in higher education and the quality assurance process. This is followed by an overview of the Universitas 21 Global quality assurance framework. Within this framework there is particular emphasis on the process governing the appointment (and re-appointment) of adjunct faculty; a process that incorporates four discrete steps: (i) recruitment; (ii) training and accreditation; (iii) supervision and mentoring; and (iv) reflection and teaching performance evaluation. Importantly, the design of the framework ensures that this element of the internal quality assurance process provides, not only an enhanced learning experience for students, but also rich longitudinal data for the purposes of external verification of quality and standards. The paper concludes that while the online environment certainly presents new challenges for tried and tested quality assurance processes, it also provides opportunities to usher in new guidelines capable of bringing about a significant improvement in standards.

Keywords: quality assurance, teaching evaluation, e-learning

E-learning and the quality assurance process

As e-learning has gained wider acceptance within the higher education sector, it has become increasingly evident that quality assurance guidelines developed for traditional 'brick and mortar' academic programs need to be reassessed and adapted if they are to remain relevant in this new, emerging learning environment (Roffe, 2002). Many of the functions of an online university are similar to those found in a traditional oncampus setting, and they need to be monitored and evaluated in much the same way. Issues of concern to both include, for example, content and pedagogy, assessment practices, and faculty performance. The big challenge for the online university, however, is the maintenance of high standards across these functions in an environment characterised by a complex community of students and faculty spanning multiple time zones, cultures, nationalities and varying levels of technological capability and availability.

Indeed, quality assurance in e-learning is a topic that has received considerable attention of late fuelled, to a certain extent, by the e-learning sceptics. In response, there have been accelerated research efforts to counter this scepticism (see, for example, Attwell *et al*, 2004; Quilter & Weber, 2004). The aim of this paper is to contribute to this literature by discussing the issues surrounding quality assurance processes, specifically how they apply to the recruitment and retention of effective online faculty. The case study of Universitas 21 Global is used as the basis for this discussion which, as a newly instituted online graduate business school, has the advantage of being relatively unencumbered by historical practices as they have evolved in traditional universities.

An overview of the Universitas 21 Global quality assurance framework

Universitas 21 Global (U21G) is an online business school comprising of 16 member universities (McGill University, University of British Columbia, University of Virginia, University of Birmingham, University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, University of Nottingham, Lund University, University of Freiburg, University of Melbourne, University of New South Wales, University of Queensland, University of Auckland, National University of Singapore, University of Hong Kong, Fudan University) and the world's largest publisher, Thomson Learning. As long established and highly reputable institutions, the universities are particularly concerned with preserving their international reputations, hence, a separate external accreditation body, U21pedagogica (U21p), comprising representatives from the 16 member universities has been set up to monitor quality control.

Within the U21G quality assurance framework there is particular emphasis on the process governing the appointment (and re-appointment) of adjunct faculty. This process incorporates four discrete steps: (i) recruitment (ii) training and accreditation (iii) supervision and mentoring, and (iv) reflection and teaching performance evaluation.

Quality assurance step I: Recruitment

U21G adjunct faculty are appointed by the Dean on a part time basis to teach online subjects in the Masters of Business Administration (MBA) program. Contracted to teach subjects over a 12 week period, adjunct faculty lead and facilitate all aspects of instruction, including mentoring and monitoring student progress, fostering communication and collaboration, guiding and evaluating student project work and other assignments, as well as responding to individual student requests/queries, and similar functions. Candidates for adjunct faculty appointments are required to complete an online training program covering online teaching in general and U21G pedagogy in particular. Successful completion of this program is required for appointment.

To start off the adjunct faculty recruitment process, advertisements are placed in relevant channels (online, newspapers, journals), inviting candidates to submit a complete resume. Interested potential adjunct faculty members submit their resumes and the Internal Search Committee consisting of the Dean, the Faculty Affairs Manager, and the respective full time faculty members meet internally to review these resumes. The CVs are then ranked according to various subject disciplines, and the relevant members from the Internal Search Committee proceed to conduct a phone interview with the strong candidates. During the interview, certain information is elicited such as the candidates' online teaching experience, MBA teaching experience, use of a case study approach, subjects taught, profile of students taught, level of students taught, and so on. In addition, the adjunct faculty roles and responsibilities are clarified. Successful candidates are then invited to participate in the U21G Faculty Training Program (FTP), an online, instructor led, asynchronous training, to see how the candidate performs in the online environment.

Quality assurance step II: Training and accreditation

The FTP aims to familiarise prospective U21G adjunct faculty with the online pedagogy and to ensure that all participants have a thorough understanding of how to teach U21G subjects. To do this, faculty members are required to undertake a training program that simulates the instructor role, as well as the experience that their students will subsequently go through. The FTP is typically conducted once every quarter with about 16 participants world wide, facilitated by an instructor (usually a full time faculty member), held over a three week period and is designed to take the average user 30 hours in total (10 hours per week).

During the training, faculty members will, among other things, practice facilitating online chats, participate in threaded discussions, use features such as the grade book and section mailbox, access the online library, lead online learning, and experience producing (and grading) an online assignment. The program is designed to help participants achieve the following:

- Teach and communicate effectively online
- Navigate the U21G Learning Management System
- Work effectively in a multicultural learning environment
- Establish teams and team threaded discussions
- Use the problem based learning methodology effectively
- Participate with other adjuncts and with full time faculty members in online 'communities of practice' addressing issues related to online teaching.

The performance of candidates is closely monitored during the program. After the program, participants have to submit their feedback and successful candidates' data is sent to U21p for certification. This process involves an in depth review of the candidate's curriculum vitae and their overall performance in the FTP. In the past, the FTP was conducted after the accreditation of adjunct faculty members. Currently, all candidates have to complete the FTP *prior to* accreditation, as this helps to safeguard against taking on seemingly well qualified instructors who do not possess the requisite online skills.

To date, U21G has applied highly stringent criteria in relation to adjunct recruitment, and this contributes greatly to the academic 'fit' of adjuncts that are finally appointed. Of all those seeking to become U21G adjunct professors, 80 per cent are rejected. Of those proceeding to the FTP, 60 per cent complete the program, of which 80 per cent proceed to the accreditation stage. U21G currently experiences a retention rate of 90 per cent of adjuncts who have been accredited.

Quality assurance step III: Supervision and mentoring

After accreditation, adjunct faculty members can commence teaching at U21G. Supervision of adjunct faculty is done through the lead instructor who, in most cases, is a full time faculty member. The lead instructor ensures consistent quality of delivery in teaching, which includes quality assurance after accreditation of an adjunct faculty member by U21p, and acts as subject supervisor and mentor. The lead instructor works closely with the adjunct faculty member on a variety of issues, including (but not limited to) the following:

- Quality assurance before a class commences
- Quality assurance during actual teaching
- Quality control for delivery after accreditation by U21p
- Future teaching assignments with U21G

Essentially, to ensure quality assurance across all U21G subjects before a class commences, the lead instructor is given the same view as the instructor, and he/she can assist in setting up the class by making announcements postings; creating section folders, threaded discussion boards; deactivating/deleting discussion boards; deleting postings (i.e. such a case would occur for inadvertent double postings or inappropriate postings such as political, sensitive or unethical postings); managing student grades and the grade book; accessing the section mailbox; monitoring team activities, and facilitating the administration of the peer assessment tool. The entire oversight process is invisible to students, the lead instructor only becoming visible if he/she needs to intervene in the class space.

Quality assurance during teaching (e.g. adjuncts' commitment, engagement, and responsiveness) is extremely important in the absence of face to face contact between lecturer and students. In instances where discussions do not get going, discussions go off track, an instructor does not reply to students' questions in the discussion boards, or an instructor is inactive or disengaged, the lead instructor who is closely monitoring the class can act immediately. These act as key measures of the quality assurance process. Specifically, this oversight process helped identify a number of initial teething problems when U21G commenced operations. These problems ranged from relatively minor incidents (e.g. an instructor overlooking an email) to quite serious problems (e.g. a general lack of instructor presence and interaction) and they were quickly tackled.

Quality control for delivery after accreditation by U21p is another important aspect of the lead instructor role. Not surprisingly, good credentials on paper, and 'brick and mortar' teaching accomplishments, do not necessarily translate into online teaching success. When confronted with the problem of a non-participating and inactive adjunct, the lead instructor is able to quickly identify the situation, and subsequently, a seamless and efficient replacement process can be implemented, hence maintaining quality in teaching and keeping student satisfaction high.

Quality assurance step IV: Reflection and teaching performance evaluation

Performance appraisal is conducted as an ongoing process of discussion and feedback aimed at continuous improvement and the adjunct's professional development. This normally involves the adjunct, the supervising full time faculty member, and the Dean. The performance appraisal process focuses on acknowledging strengths and excellence in teaching, as well as identifying and addressing opportunities for improvement. There is little doubt that U21G implements a stringent teaching performance evaluation process for adjunct faculty members, but for dedicated and highly motivated teachers, this is viewed as an opportunity not a threat. Sources for evaluation include the following:

- **Subject supervisor oversight**: The lead instructor assigned to oversee an adjunct faculty member's performance undertakes: (i) an ongoing review of faculty performance during a subject; and (ii) an end of subject evaluation of overall teaching performance. To this end, instructors who do not display keen engagement and interest in online teaching will not be recommended for future teaching

assignments. This quality assurance process is crucial for the maintenance of a high standard of delivery of subjects.

- **Student evaluation**: Adjunct faculty members are expected to solicit ongoing feedback from students. End of subject student evaluations of teaching are included in each subject and are evaluated by the Dean and the Director of Instruction and Assessment. Such evaluations are shared with the adjunct faculty member being evaluated (with student identities withheld).
- **Annual evaluation**: Each adjunct faculty member who has taught more than two subjects is evaluated annually by the Dean, who ultimately determines whether the faculty member is invited back to teach in subsequent years.

In summary, the teaching performance evaluation process provides clear definition and communication of U21G's expectations of its adjunct faculty members with respect to adjunct faculty conduct, skills, teaching quality, time spent online with students, rates of student participation, and adherence to the U21G's grade distribution and grading policies. There are also well defined measures for effective performance including students' overall performance, student completion rates, student evaluation of teaching, student satisfaction surveys, and records of student grievances.

Summary and conclusion

This paper presented an outline of the U21G quality assurance framework which aims to ensure, not only that there is an enhanced learning experience for students, but also a stream of rich longitudinal data for the purposes of external verification of quality and standards. It is acknowledged that while the online environment certainly presents new challenges for tried and tested quality assurance processes, it also provides opportunities to usher in new guidelines capable of bringing about a significant improvement in teaching standards and, by implication, the quality of the student learning experience. As one of the world's first truly global virtual universities, commentators with an interest in quality assurance in e-learning will no doubt closely monitor U21G's progress. With backing from 16 internationally renowned 'bricks and mortar' institutions, U21G has a quality assurance heredity that few other online institutions can draw on. It is also building on this 'pedigree' to set some new quality assurance standards of its own. In the process, U21G will be able to create a sustainable competitive advantage for itself in the e-learning space.

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