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Quality assurance and online teaching and learning: first steps

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Quality Assurance and Online Teaching and Learning: First Steps

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Abstract

In the late 90's the University of Wollongong recognised the need for the establishment of flexible course delivery. The increasing globalisation of the world of tertiary education has added to the pressure for all institutions to address issues associated with the delivery of a quality education. Many systems have been developed internationally, but to be truly useful in changing the process and ensuring the students (the clients) are happy, quality assurance has to have a local component.

To address the issue of QA and online teaching and learning we are looking at a two phase process, the first of which is the development of an initial audit tool examining online technical aspects followed by the collaborative development of a peer review process centred on pedagogical issues. To help inform the process and provide a 'user's view of quality', surveys were conducted of student and staff users of WebCT.

Introduction

As early as the beginning of 1998, the University of Wollongong began conducting trials to test the capabilities and feature sets of web-based course delivery tools. Throughout that year pilot subjects were delivered to students and evaluations of the outcomes were conducted. Late in the year a formal Working Party was established to investigate the offerings available and make a recommendation as to which system the University should adopt. That system was WebCT and is the system that is currently in use. By the end of the first teaching session in which the system was in use (mid 1999) there were 108 subjects with a WebCT site and 4300 student licences issued. For the same session in 2002, there were in the order of 700 WebCT sites with in the order of 15,000 student licences issued.

The University of Wollongong has had as part of its last two Enterprise Agreements (1996 - 1999 and 2000 - 2003), sections that relate to flexible delivery.

... flexible delivery means an approach to education which allows duration, intensity, place, method, delivery, and media of instruction to change to reflect the learning objectives, the needs of the student, the subject

and course requirements and the judgement of the teacher.

(University of Wollongong (Academic Staff) Enterprise Agreement, 2000 to 2003)

One of the early imperatives for the introduction of the online/WebCT environment was that the University was opening new campuses and access centres away from the main Wollongong campus. Methods of delivering to students at those centres needed to be found such that the students received a similar learning experience to those at the Wollongong campus, including having direct contact with their peers and teachers. The outcome, now into the third year of this program, is that many different approaches have been taken, involving diverse teaching strategies including; the use of intensive sessions, videoconferencing, visitations and so on - but all have included the use, to varying extents, of WebCT.

As a support to the teachers involved in the take up of flexible delivery, the University has provided, through its Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources (CEDIR), academic staff development, educational design support as well as production support for the development of teaching resources that might be required as part of a flexibly delivered subject. Resources to assist these processes have also been developed and made available, for example, the *Flexible Delivery* site (<http://cedir.uow.edu.au/programs/flexdel/>) and resources for students such as the *UniLearning* site (<http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/>)

With the formal establishment of the *Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA)* in March 2000 in mind, the University of Wollongong is continuing to fine tune aspects of its online delivery environment. To this end, during 2000 two surveys were conducted that specifically sought feedback from both staff and students on their experiences with WebCT environment.

Benchmarking and Quality Assurance

With the realisation by many institutions both in Australia and elsewhere that failure to address the issues surrounding the provision of 'quality online product' to their clients could mean a reduction in student enrolments and the associated loss of funding, steps are being taken to explore what has been done in the area of benchmarking with the view to implementing Quality Assurance processes for the online teaching and learning environment.

A number of organizations world wide have developed sets of principles, guidelines and benchmarks in an effort to ensure 'a quality learning experience'. The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) based in Washington DC, initially produced a set of forty-five 'benchmarks' for quality distributed learning which have since been reduced to seven.

The IHEP Benchmarks

The seven broad benchmark categories include; institutional support; course development; teaching and learning; course structure; student support, faculty support and evaluation and assessment. (IHEP 2000) Each of these has descriptors provided.

QA for online environments at the University of Wollongong

Developing and implementing a process for Quality Assurance of materials which involve the IP of another individual in the current climate is fraught with dangers and up until recently so difficult as to result in the process being placed in the 'too hard basket'. While for many academics the reluctance to share or have others in a position to make judgements on the teaching and learning materials they produce remains strong, there has been a growing realization among academics at the University of Wollongong and indeed many Australian universities, that some form of 'external evaluation' would be advantageous to both themselves and their students. This is particularly so with regard to 'technical quality assurance', involving such aspects as the general interface design/functionality, and W3C compliance. Such judgements may need to be made mandatory in order to ensure quality and avoid the increasingly litigious attitude of consumers in the education market. Quality Assurance from a pedagogical point of view is much more difficult and needs to involve a 'peer review' component.

A working party was briefed to develop and implement a campus wide 'baseline' audit of online subjects from a technological standpoint, looking randomly at subjects offered online within each faculty. Initially, it would be carried out centrally and restricted to a total sample of approximately 25% of all online subjects Pedagogical issues would be handled by a later 'audit' based on a process of peer review and the responsibility for its conduct devolved to the appropriate faculties.

The first step

A campus wide student survey on the use of WebCT for the deployment of online subjects was developed and carried out in late 2001. There were two questions in particular which were critical in terms of forming a sense of the students impression of what constitutes a 'quality learning site'.

The first asked students to rate various components of the WebCT sites in terms of usefulness to their learning experience. In response, a large number suggested that their experience would be greatly enhanced by the adoption of a more consistent approach to site development/function across campus. Many students believe that the essential features of all WebCT subject sites should be; the availability of lecture notes, assessment/practice facilities and more use made interactive components. Above all, students believe that their subject sites should support face to face teaching, not replace it.

The second question asked them to comment on how they thought the online learning experience could be improved. The most commonly mentioned issues centred on: Quizzes/Assessment, Subject sites (Design/Quality/Usage issues), Support/Training and Access.

Developing the baseline technical audit

Examination of best practice examples worldwide led to the development of a tool that utilises six basic categories for quality assessment from a technical standpoint and each of these contained a check list of between 6 to 13 key indicators. The resulting tool provides a mechanism for the reviewer who has limited time to make an assessment and then report in a relative way.

Conclusion

The next step in assuring quality online teaching and learning resources at UOW is to develop and implement a process for a peer based pedagogical review of online subjects.

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