E-xcellence+:
European wide introduction of QA in e-learning; a benchmarking approach

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Introduction
The rise in initiatives aimed at promoting the internationalisation of higher education, in particular the rapid development of cross-border higher education, have underlined an urgent need to establish robust frameworks for quality assurance (QA) and the recognition of qualifications. Quality Assurance issues have become more important with the increased mobility of students, academic staff, as well as higher education providers resulting from the globalization of higher education. Quality assurance in elearning is especially of interest as e-learning has become the main instrument for generating cross border higher education.

The quality of e-learning in higher education is however not integral part of the current internal and external quality assurance systems. Still missing is the QA specific to e-learning like:
• criteria based on ease of access
• new forms of interaction (students and staff)
• flexibility, personalisation and other pedagogical aspects that are more relevant to e-learning

It is therefore of direct interest to EADTU and ENQA to define and determine the elements of quality in e-learning and develop strategies and processes of assessment and accreditation. EADTU and ENQA have therefore decided to start collaborating on the subject of quality assurance in e-learning and work towards models of e-learning quality assessment and accreditation across Europe.

Starting point will be the E-xcellence benchmarking in e-learning instrument that was developed by EADTU. This instrument is the result of a joint effort of a team of 12 European experts coming from open universities, traditional universities, the EUA as well as assessment and accreditation bodies.

From 2008 on, EADTU in cooperation with ENQA will further introduce and test this benchmarking instrument on quality assurance in e-learning throughout Europe.

The quality assurance approach of E-xcellence

Current QA systems cover the full organisational and content-related quality assurance of HE institutions and their programmes. However, few of these systems have so far developed a focus on the parameters of quality assurance governing e- learning. E-xcellence is specifically operating in this field of e-learning.

The E-xcellence instrument is a quality benchmarking assessment tool covering the pedagogical, organisational and technical frameworks with _special attention on accessibility, flexibility and interactiveness_. The instrument is supplemented by a full on-line manual, assessors' notes and glossary. All this is freely available under the "creative commons license" at www.eadtu.nl/e-xcellenceqs.

The aspects that are assessed are specific to e-learning and are related to categories of:

- o Curriculum design
- o Course design
- o Course delivery
- o Services (student support; staff support)
- o Management (institutional strategies)

Why benchmarking?
Working on the European level with different countries and different systems of higher education, setting standards for QA in e-learning seemed to be not only impossible but would also lack acceptance when introduced. It is therefore decided to work with benchmarking.

In our approach, benchmarking is an improvement tool; a process of comparing your organization's performance with best practices in the field of e-learning. This process guides universities in critically looking at their own business models and practices leading to identification of weaknesses and strengths in comparison to other universities. By offering also directions and examples of enhancements, users of E-xcellence are guided towards improving their e-learning performance.

A main benefit of working with benchmarks is its characteristic of working within dialogue. By stimulating dialogue in a collaborative process we create an environment of learning from each other. This also means that a certain level of trust and readiness of sharing must be guaranteed.

In a highly competitive market of higher education institutions this may not always be the case. E-xcellence therefore works in several phases with optional extensions in reaching out to other organizations.

Instead of identifying benchmarks in a group of universities representing several good practices, E-xcellence defined generic benchmarks in a setting of 12 European experts. E-xcellence therefore includes a European-wide set of benchmarks, independent of particular institutional or national systems, and with guidance to educational improvement. The benchmarks are in fact representing numerous best practices from all over Europe, differing from country to country and give valuable input for dialogue within your university.

This enables any university to do self-assessment in the privacy of its own QA-team and still have the input from other universities European wide.

Self-assessment (Phase 1)
The institution analyses the status of their e-learning practices using the electronic "self evaluation instrument". It operates as an on-line questionnaire.

The on-line questionnaire needs to be filled out by different disciplines in the university coming from management, course designers, tutors and students. It is therefore recommended to build a small team of people that correspond with these disciplines.

The result of the self assessment is an overview of weaknesses (and strengths) which leads to a roadmap of improvement. With the help of the E-xcellence manual, the institution is guided in formulating this roadmap and finding good practices as inspiration.

External review (Phase 2)

To test your self-assessment and worked out roadmap for improvement, the E-xcellence instrument works with e-learning experts in a review team. These are groups of 3 evaluators that review digitally submitted papers of the university's self-assessment with the E-xcellence quick scan, copies of documented proof and an outlined improvement route provided by the university.

The review is based on:
* current e-learning performance (should at least be threshold level e-learning)
* the thoroughness of the self-assessment report
* completeness of delivered proof
* the chosen path of improvement (adequate and realistic)

The review team provides:
• Review report
• Recommendations regarding the improvement route
• Instructions for cases that need to provide further details

Optional is still the full assessment on-site, with local oriented recommendations of improvement by the review team.

The benefit of working with the E-xcellence instrument in combination with an external review team is that although it is a closed one-to-one benchmarking exercise, it actually is a multiple comparison as the E-xcellence manual fully represents the best practices of European universities in e-learning.

E-xcellence Associates Label: Incentives for follow up (Phase 3)

Benchmarking should be a continuous process of improvement and support universities in their goal of increasing quality. To stimulate universities to follow a path of continued improvement of their e-learning performance, EADTU provides a label.
The label is not an award for proven quality but a reward for following a process of continued quality improvement. It therefore is an E-xcellence *Associates* label.
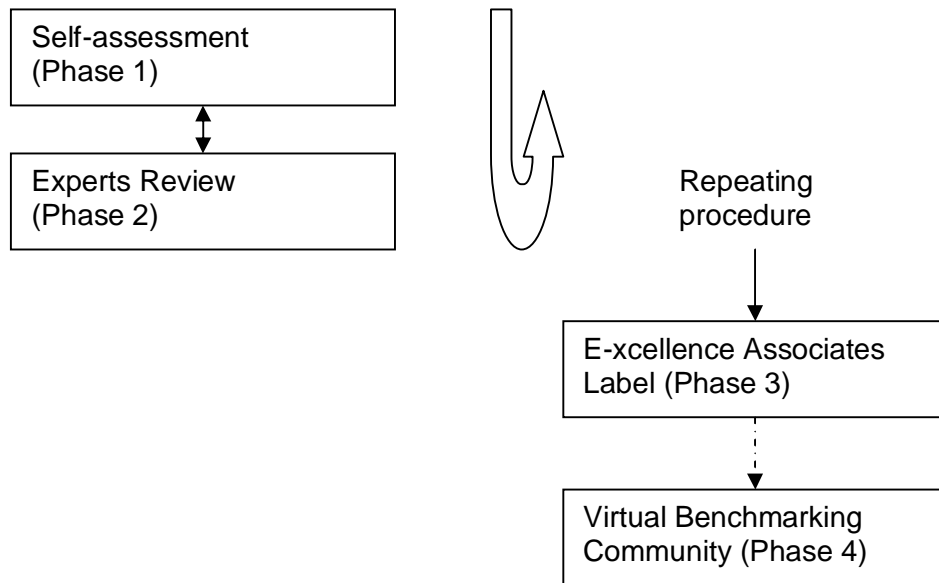
The label is provided by the E-xcellence review team and can be used on the institutions or faculty's website. All positively reviewed institutions/faculties are also displayed at the E-xcellence website.

The label of a programme or course needs to be renewed every 2 years, when a new self-assessment and path of improvement is presented. The procedure also includes the integration of (most) of the E-xcellence benchmarks in the internal quality assurance system. This to show the that the tool is integral part of the internal assessment rather than an isolated quick scan.

Virtual Benchmarking Community: Trust and collaboration (Optional phase 4)
A supplementary option offered as an extension to the benchmarking process of E-xcellence is the "E-xcellence club". In line with the principle of benchmarking, "members" are peer reviewers of fellow-members. This by blogs, discussion forums, flash meeting etc. Universities labelled as E-xcellence Associates have (as an option) access to this virtual meeting place on quality in e-learning. Openness is required and should be build on trust between club members. It is about sharing weaknesses and strengths by building networked meetings of improvement. It is a place to learn as well as present your expertise.

E-xcellence benchmarking approach in QA

Self-assessment (Phase 1)	
Experts Review (Phase 2)	

Repeating procedure

E-xcellence Associates Label (Phase 3)

Virtual Benchmarking Community (Phase 4)

Status to date

Executed pilots:
In the E-xcellence project 3 pilots were executed in Finland, Estonia and Italy.
The objective of these pilots was to try out in practice the quality care framework developed and evaluate the practical use of the E-xcellence instrument. Central questions in the pilots were: does the quality care system offer a sound and useful evaluation framework for assessing e-leaning quality, can the tool be used as a starting point for summative evaluation to advise organizations on quality improvement and can the tool be used as a frame of reference in a institutional review or a program review, in the context of accreditation.
The target group of the pilot were managers, course designers, educational technologists, tutors of institutions that offer programs based on open and distance teaching, using e-leaning as a tool for the realization of educational targets.
(The results will be presented in the paper presentation)

Making E-xcellence mainstream European wide
With E-xcellence+, EADTU started in 2008 on valorising the developed QA tools by further introducing E-xcellence on the local level with the support of ENQA. Within Excellence+ we investigate the possibilities of integration of the instrument in the institutional and national quality assurance frameworks. This exercise involves universities and quality accreditation agencies working together in supplementing the e-learning specific criteria to their current quality systems.

A European seminar as kick-off for the local introduction in 13 countries was organized in Madrid on 12-13 June 2008. (more on this at http://www.eadtu.nl/e-xcellenceplus/)

The introduction of the QA instrument of E-xcellence is now foreseen in the following universities of 13 different countries:
• OULU-University (Fin)
• Open Universiteit Nederland (NL)
• the Open University (UK)
• UNINETTUNO (IT)
• Estonian Information Technology Foundation (EE)
• Hungarian e-University Network (HU)
• NSHU (S)
• Universidad Nacional de Educacion a Distancia (UNED) (ES)
• KU-Leuven (BE)
• Czech Association of Distance Teaching Universities (CZ)
• University of Hradec Králové (CZ)
• Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava (SK)
• Moscow State University for Economics, Statistics and Informatics (MESI) (RU)
• Universitäre Fernstudien Schweiz (CH)

The introduction of E-xcellence is based on Local Seminars. These 2-day events start with a meeting of the university staff on the first day. Our aim is to analyse a course or programme on e-learning performance and stimulate dialogue, discuss improvement opportunities and share expertise and experiences for educational enhancement and innovation.
Main theme of the Local Seminars is the fine-tuning of the e-learning benchmarks to the institutional quality system. This is followed by a 2nd day meeting with involvement of the external quality assessment bodies to further determine the extension of e-learning specific criteria to the current quality assurance system.
The Local Seminars are coordinated by representatives of the E-xcellence+ core group.

Recent developments of introducing E-xcellence in internal QA systems

*Uninettuno (by Mr R. Sepe, Rome, Italy)
In compliance with the obligations identified by the national management boards involving the quality assurance of the university system, the International Telematic University UNINETTUNO has provided itself of a survey tool designed by the University Board of Evaluation aiming at understanding the quality level perceived by the end-users of the study courses: the students. The guiding elements that allowed them to identify this tool are mainly derived from E-xcellence, that is to say the enhancement and innovation of e-Learning through self-evaluation, external evaluation and validation of the results obtained.

The tool devised by the Board consists of a questionnaire whose questions are meant to monitor the factors that define the didactics delivered by e-Learning modes compared with the ones delivered through traditional systems, as well as students' perception of the quality of the didactic organisation, of the online tutoring and of the multimedia technologies used.

*Oulu University (by Mr P. Kess, Oulu, Finland)
The Open University at the University of Oulu has been a pioneer not only in using elearning but also in taking the quality aspect to be part of the management system. As part of this continuous quality improvement one course was analysed using the E-xcellence methodology including the self assessment and the external audit. The audit gave good credits to the work done so far and at the same time helped the Open University improve the course and at the same time improve their management practices related to e-learning.
The evaluation created a very lively discussion inside the university. In all the experience was very useful to most people participating internally in the evaluation:
-        new ideas were created to the course design

- new foundations were found to justify some decisions regarding the course design and delivery experience exchange between the evaluators and staff at the University of Oulu was extremely valuable.
- new working methods were also discovered practical knowhow how to use and utilize the e-Xcellence methodology and the tools.

Next to these very concrete new practices the KU-Leuven in Belgium started to use the E-xcellence instrument as part of the university's QA system. Also the external QA agencies have started to extend their QA-system with e-learning specific criteria from E-xcellence. More universities and QA-agencies follow this approach within the E-xcellence+ project as we have in total 13 countries covered in this project.

Barriers and problems encountered when implementing new practice

The introduction of E-xcellence as an extension to the existing QA-systems has the benefit of adding a new building block without interference with the existing systems. This was developed this way on purpose as to stimulate acceptance of this supplementing tool.
On the other hand, many QA bodies believe that already too many criteria are currently used and rather see a reduction of the number of criteria. However, all realize at the same time that we cannot just skip e-learning specific criteria as this has become a fundamental bases for offering quality education.

This can be underlined by the fact that in implementing E-xcellence now in 13 different countries we have not received one rejection. All believe in the necessity of this extension and are very constructive in finding ways of introduction. Some countries will add the E-xcellence benchmarks as a whole to the existing system, others will pick and mix.
For those countries that like to keep or reduce the number of quality criteria we are looking for possibilities of rephrasing the current definitions of criteria to include e-learning specific elements from E-xcellence.

In reference to our main goal of improving e-learning performance we want to be as flexible as possible and support all three approaches.

Key issues
-E-xcellence and how to come from a project to mainstream implementation?
-fine tuning the E-xcellence instrument to the local context. (Alternative) approaches of introducing E-xcellence in the current internal and external QA systems
-local extensions and national law/policies
-E-xcellence offering a supplement to the ESG.
-what is the value of (another) label?
-how open can universities be? What is the potential of benchmarking as a QA instrument in HE?
-a virtual benchmarking community on QA in e-learning. An essential facility for improving e-learning performance?