

## Practice experience concerns: tensions between national and local quality assurance

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### Abstract

The UK Open University is a national higher education institution which specialises in open and distance learning for mature students, operating through distance learning materials and a network of regional Centres. Among its offerings are a series of professional qualifications. Using nursing and social work as examples in this paper we discuss the constant balancing act required to resolve the tensions between national (both HEI and Professional and statutory body [PSB] concerns) and local Quality Assurance concerns. We focus on three areas and 'hold a conversation' between local and national QA interests, exploring both what is done and the implications of the complex arrangements. The examples are:

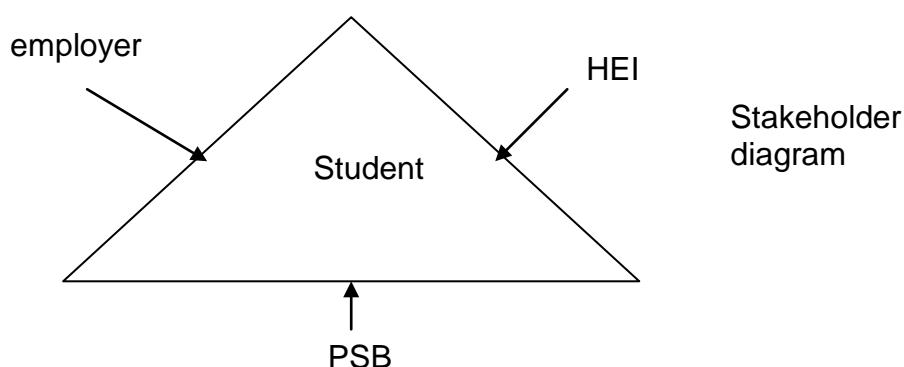
- *practice settings* where students are required by the PSBs to spend a certain amount of practice time during their qualification studies. An overall system ensures this happens but there are questions of the quality of individual practice settings, and how they are audited and the need to establish what opportunities a practice setting should offer up as this needs to be reflected in the teaching materials
- the *mentor system* required by PSBs is run by the OU nationally. Mentors work in local employer settings supervising and assessing students but not paid by the OU.
- a *portfolio* which is a required assessment feature of PSB educational requirements developed centrally at the OU and moderated through its examination system. This accompanies students to local settings and is filled in there under the auspices of the student's mentor.

### Introduction

Quality assurance is about ensuring and demonstrating that a product in its entirety is fit for purpose. Essentially this is done through internal and external audit procedures which are linked to processes where corrective action, when needed, can be taken quickly. Quality assurance does not mean that you have everything perfect but it does need you to show that you are 'on the case'. It is an activity which traverses stake holding interests through very different territories. The UK Open University is a useful organisation to examine QA of practice-based courses because of its particular structure as a national organisation with local delivery with its obvious need to offer up a transparency about its functions [i.e. it is not a federation of locally negotiated interests, it is essentially a fordist large scale production organisation whose products are sufficiently widely conceived to satisfy a very broad audience which used to be called one size fits all].

The entry of the OU into the professional qualification market in the health and social care professions has led us to explore in more depth who our QA

stakeholders are and where QA takes place. It used to be that by the end of their sojourn at the OU students were fit for award. All the QA for non-practice courses is around award. But qualifying students in professions need to be fit for purpose [what their employers want,] fit for practice [what the profession wants] and fit for award [what the HEI wants]. This extends the stake holding in QA as well as giving us some interesting questions to ask about the tensions between a nationally or generically conceived programme delivered locally in the territory of specific stakeholders. This triangle of employer, HEI and profession has required the UKOU to develop a blueprint for a quality assurance process which must address how a programme satisfies these three stake holding requirements.



To some extent all institutions experience a tension between the demands of generic systems, aspects and overarching frameworks of professional programmes, the local administration and individual experience of such systems. It is our belief that the conceptualisation and setting up of quality assurance systems must attend to all points in the system. For example in relation to the nursing diploma, which we are going to use as an example, most universities have placements criteria and schemata but they also have placement officers who can deal with the local contextualised issues that arise with individual employers and students. The UK Open University is a national organisation which operates the programme across 13 separate regions on a very large scale. We have over 1000 nursing students throughout the UK all doing practice placements, in cohorts of 16 or so working for many different employers. The courses are developed nationally, delivered locally and experienced individually and quality assurance mechanisms need to recognise this, and be refined and differentiated sufficiently to be functional in these three different arenas, national, local and individual. It is therefore not possible for the UKOU to take on the identification and management of placements across the UK and they have therefore had to work in a different manner to other HEIs.

Similarly every HEI has to conform to the Professional Statutory Body requirements for what mentors should be able to do and every institution has a template for a portfolio. In such a complex world institutions develop generic processes and procedures which can accommodate local differences. That said each student is different and whilst there is the need for each student to experience a programme that meets consistent quality standards it

is important that this is in keeping with their unique circumstances. Good quality assurance, we believe, is something like a conversation between these three different locales.

Quality assurance has to be able to move between the elements of the stakeholder triangle to ensure the needs of all parties are met. While distance education is conceived of generically and delivered locally, the contingent local circumstances are as structurally part of the entire programme as are the generic materials. Each element of the system, whether local, national or individual is connected with the rest and adjustments in one area frequently have ramifications for the rest of the system. In the rest of this paper we are going to just explore a few exemplars of how QA is part of the intricate web of how a practice programme actually works and how perhaps, even more than in a traditional academic programme, it is vital that it is a functional part of the ongoing conversation about the programme and not an add on. The areas we will examine are QA of practice, mentors and the management of portfolios. All these areas are interlinked and are illustrative of the tensions between local and national requirements in UKOU practice-based programmes.

### **QA issues around the development of practice**

The issue of genericism is acute for the UKOU because we operate both at a central location and through thirteen regions where the OU basically becomes a 'terrestrial place' for the students. The programme, designed for part-time study in that students continue in employment throughout the course, is conceived and produced and administered centrally and students receive materials and much of their tuition through the post or online, but 'local' for them is the regional office, which is their first point of contact and where their tuition is managed. Tuition is complex in that much is contained within the teaching materials themselves and is mediated by the tutor, some is delivered online or by post in the form of the comments accompanying the mark for assignments and tutorials themselves may be face to face, online or telephone – or a combination of these delivery methods. In the case of the professional qualifications there is another element of 'local' and this is the place of employment and/or the location for practice placements. In the case of nursing, students spend half of their entire programme in practice settings and therein lies the first issue. The materials/courses need to acknowledge and build on this experience without precisely knowing what it is.

Practice settings require an educational richness to be effective – auditing assures and records the extent to which this is fulfilled. The UKOU works in partnership with health authorities and local employers to locate and assure placements rather than using its own placement officers because the programme is produced nationally. Placements and mentors are identified by partners under the formal collaborative agreement with the HEI, which is itself quality assured through a series of tripartite meetings between employer, health authority and the UKOU. This can give rise to tensions around the initial audit and the effective QA by the UKOU – in a recent Review several issues were raised:

- the danger of variability between regions
- the risks of employers failing to supply the necessary conditions to identify employee practice as part of their placement when carrying out placements within their normal place of work and not being given the necessary learning opportunities
- the need to identify problems within placements at an early stage.

The UKOU has addressed these issues by developing a system of locally appointed UKOU programme tutors who liaise with partners and oversee development of practice through a series of tripartite meetings with mentors (appointed by employers) and students. During these meetings the programme tutor facilitates the agreement of a learning contract at the first meeting and subsequently produces intermediate and final progress reports. The programme tutor's role is to oversee the student's development in their practice setting. This bridges the gap between national and local as the programme tutors are appointed and managed by the UKOU, but at a local level to ensure the relevant local knowledge and support in their work, which is by necessity located in a specific geographical region. Programme tutors are required to have local knowledge and to be qualified clinical practitioners. Part of their role is to support the mentor and employer in fulfilling their roles, which includes quality assuring the student's access to appropriate learning opportunities, their progress and conduct as well as their assessment in practice. In addition the UKOU staff tutor, based in the local regional centre, liaises with the employer and supports the programme tutors based in that region. Both staff tutor and programme tutor are responsible for liaising with the partner if there are problems with the quality of a placement or with student conduct and resolution of these may be achieved locally, but ultimately will go to a national level. Nationally the UKOU programmes in Nursing and Social Work hold regular meetings with partners at both national and local level. Programme Committees have representation from employer sponsors. The central programme team also works with the UKOU's central functions to resolve disciplinary issues. This network of locally based UKOU roles, locally based partners and the nationally based UKOU programme works effectively and has been tested over time – the last annual Professional Statutory Body (The Nursing and Midwifery Council in the UK) accreditation process commented on the exceptional quality of the placements and the very satisfactory level of achievement overall.

Another example of the way the UKOU quality assures practice is the position of the mentors, which is also a role which operates in a local environment [e.g. on a ward] and where the portfolio, the instrument by which the student performance is both supported and assessed by the mentor, is endorsed. All professional qualifications use some kind of concept of mentor/assessor/supervisor. That is someone who is recognised as an effective worker [a qualified, experienced professional who meets the criteria laid down by the PSB, abiding by the professional code of conduct and registered with the PSB], and who both supports and assesses [makes judgments about] student performance. In the case of the OU, since we don't pay these people, the quality assurance has to be in the form of a prior endorsement of their integrity and efficacy [that is we assume that through

quality assuring them that their actions are quality assured - this is really an offshoot of the idea of licensure. By recognising a person as competent and capable of making professional judgments we then assume that the judgements they do make are effective]. This is again an obvious area for potential tensions partly because of the scale of the operation and partly because the UKOU does not control the appointment of mentors, although the collaborative agreement specifies that they have to meet PBC standards. UKOU has approached this in several ways:

- Use of a national database
- Mentor induction and training
- Central collation of mentor feedback on the UKOU provision and support

To further quality assure the mentor, the UKOU tracks and records them on a live list on a UKOU database through agreement with the partners, who update it regularly. Through this the UKOU is able to provide quarterly reports to regional staff, who can confirm accuracy and currency. [In future it is planned that this responsibility is being transferred to partners and health authorities, who will give access to key UKOU personnel]. UKOU provides mentor induction and update training which is tailored to meet local needs using a range of strategies including one-to-one updates and small on-site group sessions – the feasibility of supplying mentor preparation and updates via the internet is currently being explored. On a broader scale the UKOU is developing a recognised mentor qualification which will be offered nationally and used locally to ensure health authorities and employers have adequate access to training. This is in response to an issue that has been nationally recognised. UKOU has also distributed a mentor questionnaire in order to standardise the evaluation process – the results are triangulated with feedback from the programme tutors and fed back into the design of materials and the programme of induction and training provided for mentors.

### **Portfolio assessment**

So far we have looked at issues around practice placements but there are also issues around the materials themselves. Materials too should give students a capacity to find the educational richness that good placements provide. The job of the HEI is to develop materials which enable students to negotiate and develop their competence between local circumstances, professional obligations and academic principles. Centrally developed materials are designed to accommodate local needs and variations – drafts are tested with critical practitioners and students from a variety of locations across the U.K. to ensure their relevance and effectiveness and are updated frequently during presentation. Courses are divided into those which are assessed academically and those which directly link the practice with assessment. These require students to link theory and practice and to reflect this in the form of assessed activities which are presented through a portfolio.

They are therefore a template for students to 're-present' their practice experience [that is, of course by definition both individual and local] in such as

way as to indicate that it was competent/proficient. This is usually a process which is done in conjunction with mentors/assessors who endorse the practice work that the student has done as being of a suitable standard meeting professional requirements using the portfolio. The portfolio is also part of the examination system and fits into the normal OU QA system. They are of necessity large documents containing both evidence and reflection and the assessment of these has been problematic simply because of the scale as the portfolios have to be submitted as hard copy and sent to a central Examinations office. When the programme started and numbers were low it was feasible for whole portfolios to be sent in and assessed centrally, but this has become an increasingly difficult process. The UKOU Social Work programme, which shares many of the same QA features, had resolved this by developing a system whereby a summary of the portfolio is used for assessment after the whole has been verified by the programme tutor – this will now be adopted in the Nursing programme. The local verification process allows this to be a robust and acceptable way of dealing with portfolio assessment at a national level. A sample of complete portfolios is also made available to the Award Board and the External Examiner.. The use of ePortfolios is also being explored but these present problems because of the need for verification, the different types of evidence and reflection and the requirement for access by both employer (via the mentor) and the UKOU so the use of paper portfolios is likely to continue for the immediate future.

## **Summary**

Essentially the concept of audit becomes ‘everyone’s business’ if you move outside the notion of audit in a narrow industrial sense. Audit is what the materials should do, the assessment should do, the mentors should do, the students should do and all of this needs to show up at various points in the system. The examples given in this paper illustrate the particular issues that a work-based programme delivered in this way present in terms of the constant balancing act required to resolve the tensions between national (both HEI and Professional and statutory body [PSB] concerns) and local Quality Assurance concerns.