
A Quality Assurance Framework for Recruiting, Training (and Retaining) Virtual Adjunct Faculty

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Abstract

The paper commences with a brief summary of the literature on the quality assurance process in e-Learning in higher education. This is followed by an overview of the U21Global 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 performance appraisal. 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.

E-Learning and the quality assurance process

As e-Learning has gained wider acceptance within the higher education sector (Stella & Gnanam, 2004), 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). Indeed, quality assurance in higher education is a topic that has received considerable attention of late (O'Neill & Palmer, 2004; Steyn & Schulze, 2003). In the area of e-Learning in higher education, this discussion has been 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).

Many of the functions of an online university are similar to those found in a traditional on-campus setting, and they need to be monitored and evaluated in much the same way. Hence, the successful implementation of quality assurance processes in an online environment requires the same management commitment as in a traditional university setting (Zhao, 2003). There is

little debate, for instance, that the quality of course delivery influences the quality of learning which, in turn, permits the identification of criteria for quality delivery (Hunt, 1998). In the online setting, therefore, it becomes a question of getting appropriate quality assurance processes in place and administering them correctly (Mayes, 2001).

Issues of concern for both on-campus and online delivery of courses include, for example, content and pedagogy, assessment practices, and faculty performance. The major 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.

The emergence of online education has induced various discussions about quality assurance in this environment and the inevitability of the development of some quality assurance principles, benchmarks and guidelines (see, for example, Clarke et al., 2004). To this end, there has been some early activity from the US Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) and the Quality Assurance Agency in the UK (QAA). The IHEP developed 24 benchmarks along the categories of Course Development, Course Structure, Student Support, Faculty Support, Institutional Support, Teaching/Learning and Assessment and Evaluation, all specifically for web-based quality assurance (IHEP, 2000). Meanwhile, the QAA developed guidelines along the categories of System Design, Program Design/Approval/Review, Management of Program Delivery, Student Development and Support, Student Communication and Representation and Student Assessment (QAA, 1999).

Quality assurance is the main driver for accreditation of on-campus programs by national and international accreditation agencies. In the management education sphere, for example, many business schools seeking international recognition aim for the so-called 'triple crown' of accreditation: the European Foundation for Management Development's (EFMD) European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) accreditation, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accreditation, and the Association of MBAs (AMBA) accreditation. It follows that the proper development and implementation of quality assurance processes are crucial to the successful accreditation of online programs (CHEA, 2002; Olsen, 1999). AACSB and EFMD are now moving ahead with this, although at this point AMBA has declared it will not accredit online programs. In the case of EFMD, the Certification of e-Learning (CEL) program has been launched; the fundamental objective being to raise the standard of e-Learning programs worldwide through the facilitation of standard setting, benchmarking, and dissemination of good practice. Acknowledging the variability in quality of 'both the products and programmes in the field of e-Learning', the EFMD believes it can help fill the void, declaring that there are 'no comprehensive e-Learning quality systems already in operation [and] no system designed to cover the multi-dimensional challenges of introducing and running e-Learning programmes in the field of management education' (EFMD 2004, p. 4).

Of the many quality criteria that EFMD (and others) consider, the qualifications and competency of those delivering online courses are deemed to be of critical importance; a position that receives broad support in the academic literature (see, for example, Caplan, 2004; Frydenberg, 2002; Yang & Cornelious, 2005). Indeed, commentators have pointed out that, while there are some transferable skills, it must not be assumed that faculty can move seamlessly between on-campus and online delivery without prior training (see Eaton, 2000; Rovai, 2003). Significantly, once trained, given the dynamism of the online learning environment, the proficiency of facilitators is something that requires continuous monitoring (Spector & De la Teja, 2001).

What sometimes gets overlooked, however, is the suitability of faculty for online delivery of courses in the first place. It is commonplace to perform 'user acceptance tests' (UATs) when introducing new learning technologies, yet no such tests are performed on those supposedly in charge of the technologies! The assumption (implicit or otherwise) is that a professor will always be up to the task. This, of course, need not necessarily be the case even after the completion of training. In some settings, this will make little difference as those using the services of the faculty in question may have little choice in the matter because of organisational constraints. In the case of the virtual university, where there is a reliance on adjunct faculty, there is no such restriction. Instead, the faculty recruitment process can become an integral part of the overall quality assurance process.

As Schnitzer and Crosby (2003) point out, 'recruiting, hiring and developing adjuncts for a distance learning program is no easy task', but nor should it be if an institution is genuinely committed to educational quality and the formulation of a strategy to retain good adjunct faculty. The operational process of screening, recruiting, training, hiring, mentoring, and evaluating can be a long (and sometimes torturous!) process, but as this paper aims to demonstrate with reference to the case study of Universitas 21 Global (U21Global), the end product is a key factor in the development of a durable and versatile model for online delivery of education.

An overview of the U21Global quality assurance framework

U21Global is an online graduate school owned by 17 member universities within the Universitas 21 (U21) consortium (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 Melbourne, University of New South Wales, University of Queensland, University of Auckland, Korea University, National University of Singapore, University of Hong Kong, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and Fudan University) and one of the world's largest publishers, Thomson Learning.

As long-established and highly reputable institutions, the universities are particularly concerned with preserving their international reputations, hence, a separate external quality assurance body, U21pedagogica (U21p), including representatives from all the 17 universities has been set up to monitor standards. This has had a very strong bearing on the direction taken by U21Global. Thus, in the case of entry standards to programs, the authoring of course content (produced and double-blind refereed by senior academics), and the creation of the online material (according to international standards and conventions) by the U21Global learning design team, there has been no compromise on quality. The same can also be said of the process for the appointment of adjunct faculty to deliver U21Global courses. In this instance, however, there was little in the way of guidance from U21p (other than the adjuncts should be PhD qualified with a good record in research and teaching), nor was there any internationally accepted practice to follow. As a result, U21Global had to devise its own quality assurance framework.

Indeed, one of the benefits accruing to U21Global as a result of it being a newly formed institution is that it is relatively unencumbered by historical practices as they may have evolved in any of the U21 universities. This has allowed U21Global to develop a quality assurance framework unimpeded by entrenched views, vested interests or political expediency. This framework provides the scaffolding for a process governing the appointment (and re-appointment) of adjunct faculty that is quite unique. This process incorporates four discrete steps: (i) recruitment; (ii) training and accreditation; (iii) supervision and mentoring; and (iv) reflection and performance appraisal.

Quality assurance step I: Recruitment

As Puzziferro-Schnitzer (2005) has observed: ‘virtual adjuncts, “cyber-faculty”, are becoming a highly valued and precious resource for distance learning, and the stigma once endured, is diminishing’. Adjunct faculty are certainly considered precious at U21Global and, from the outset, there has never been any stigma attached because these people form the life-blood of the organisation. Contracted to deliver subjects over a 12-week period, adjunct faculty lead and facilitate all aspects of student learning, 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. Appointed on a part-time basis to facilitate the delivery of online subjects in the Master of Business Administration (MBA) program (and associated programs), candidates for adjunct faculty positions are required to complete an online training program (covering online learning in general and U21Global pedagogy in particular), and successful completion of this program is required for appointment. Before they reach this stage, however, candidates first have to negotiate the initial screening process.

To start off the adjunct faculty recruitment process, advertisements are placed in relevant channels (i.e. various Web media, newspapers, journals), inviting candidates to submit a comprehensive résumé. Interested potential adjunct faculty members are then screened by the Faculty Recruitment Committee comprising the Chief Academic Officer, the Faculty Affairs Manager, the Human Resources Manager, and the relevant full time faculty member (usually the Subject Area Coordinator of the discipline in question). The candidates are then ranked within the various subject disciplines.

Of course, good credentials on paper, and ‘brick-and-mortar’ teaching accomplishments, do not necessarily translate into a similar level of success online (McDaniel, 2004). To this end, ‘The Four-A model’ developed by Rahman (2001) (see Table 1) certainly helps in identifying potential faculty members. Professors who are technology averse and have a research emphasis are generally not suitable for online programs and part of the ‘Avoid’ group. It may be possible to lure those who are technology oriented with a research emphasis (the ‘Attract’ group), and those who are technology averse with a teaching emphasis may be brought up to speed with appropriate training (the ‘Attend’ group), but it is the teaching emphasis and technology oriented faculty members who are more suitable for online delivery. These people are identified as the ‘Acquire’ group.

Table 1: The Four-A model

Faculty Matrix		
	Research emphasis	Teaching emphasis
Technology oriented	Attract	Acquire
Technology averse	Avoid	Attend

Source: Rahman, M. (2001). Faculty recruitment strategies for online programs. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration* , IV(IV).

Successfully screened candidates are then invited to participate in the U21Global Faculty Training Program (FTP) to see how the candidate performs in the online environment.

Quality assurance step II: Training and accreditation

The FTP aims to familiarise prospective adjunct faculty with online pedagogy and to ensure that all participants have a thorough understanding of how to deliver U21Global subjects in particular. To do this, candidates are required to undertake a program that simulates the student experience, as well as the professor role. The FTP is typically conducted once every quarter with about 20 participants world-wide, facilitated by a professor (usually a full-time faculty member), 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 get to navigate the U21Global learning management system (LMS) using tools such as the grade book, section mailbox, and online library. They also familiarise themselves with the case-based, problem-solving approach favoured by U21Global through practicing the facilitation of asynchronous discussion and online chats, and participating in threaded discussions themselves in the learner role. Indeed, sampling the student experience is considered particularly important in order for them to develop empathy for the on-line student. Aside from playing the part of discussion board contributor, FTP participants submit mini-case analysis assignments, and also get to work on a team assignment across different time zones. Another important activity is the grading of an assignment as a professor. Generally considered a straightforward process by experienced academics, this often presents the greatest challenge because of the multiplicity of grading systems and grading standards around the world. A 70 per cent mark in India , for example, has a significantly different meaning from a 70 per cent mark in North America . Observing U21Global defined grading standards – an amalgam of several different systems – can be quite difficult for some because it means ‘unlearning’ a behaviour practiced over many years.

By the conclusion of the FTP, the participants should be able to:

- recognise the importance of maintaining a presence online;
- demonstrate the ability to communicate effectively online;
- manage a multicultural learning environment effectively online;
- employ a number of techniques for encouraging online discussion and peer learning;
- grade according to U21Global guidelines to achieve consistency across subjects; and
- participate with other adjuncts and with full-time faculty members in online ‘communities of practice’ addressing issues related to online learning.

The performance of candidates is closely monitored during the FTP by the facilitator in accordance with these learning objectives. At the end of the program, participants submit

feedback on their experience and a report is compiled on each of the candidates' performance. Those adjudged to have successfully completed the program will have their data sent to U21p for the certification process. This process involves an in-depth review of the candidate's curriculum vitae and the candidate's overall performance in the FTP. Additionally, three referee reports have to be submitted. (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 faculty who do not possess the requisite online skills.)

Table 2: Overview of the Adjunct Faculty recruitment process

Pipeline success	Stage in recruitment process	Average number per recruitment round*	Total number to date
	Applications		
	↓		
100%	Interviews	50	450
	↓		
40%	Invitation to FTP	20	180
	↓		
28%	Completion of FTP	14	126
	↓		
22%	Submission to U21p	11	97

			
20%	U21p approval	10	92
			
18%	Retention of faculty	9	86

* 9 rounds as of 31 December 2005 ; 86 active adjunct faculty (6 contracts terminated). 20 in accreditation process for round 10.

To date, U21Global has applied highly stringent criteria in relation to adjunct recruitment, and this contributes greatly to the academic 'fit' of adjuncts who are finally appointed. Of all those seeking to become U21Global adjunct professors, 80 per cent were rejected in 2003. In 2004, this rate was reduced to 60 per cent and in 2005 to 40 per cent as applications appeared to be more focused on the qualities required to become an adjunct faculty member at U21Global. Of those proceeding to the FTP, 70 per cent complete the program, of which 80 per cent proceed to the accreditation stage. U21Global currently experiences a retention rate of 90 per cent of adjunct faculty who have been accredited (see Table 2).

Quality assurance step III: Supervision and mentoring

After accreditation, adjunct faculty members are free to commence work at U21Global. Quality assurance then becomes the responsibility of the subject area coordinators (SACs) who, in most cases, are full-time faculty members. The SACs are charged with the responsibility of ensuring consistency in service delivery before a class starts, during the class, and immediately afterwards. This supervisory role they perform focuses not just on the individual adjunct, but on all adjuncts delivering classes in a given subject, ensuring that the standards set by U21Global are observed in an orderly manner.

As Tobin (2004) observes, while a lot of research has been conducted in recent years into the effectiveness of online education, most efforts have focused on the ways in which faculty can best assess student performance. The amount of research into how administrators can best evaluate the performance of the faculty delivering courses is of a much lower magnitude (Mandernach, 2005). It is within this context that U21Global has developed its model for the supervision and mentoring of adjunct faculty. The model continues to evolve with the benefit of experience, and while SACs will monitor performance on many different fronts (sometimes at a very micro level), measurement of the rigour and quality of service provision on the part of adjunct faculty is predicated on what U21Global refers to as its Four Key Principles of online delivery. These principles are highlighted during the course of the FTP, and they are emphasised and re-emphasised before and during a class. Succinctly, the advice to adjuncts is as follows :

1. **Maintain a presence** : Let the students know you are there. Logging in and working 'little and often' is the key; e.g. regular entries on the Announcements page, and interventions on the Discussion Boards.
2. **Value-add** : Students want the professor to profess. Take students beyond the subject content by providing anecdotes to illustrate key concepts; i.e. tell a few 'war stories'! These are invaluable to the student learning experience.
3. **Grade to U21Global standards** : Adhere to U21Global standards, not your own! The first set of assignment results must be saved but not published in the event moderation is required after consultation with the SAC.
4. **Encourage peer interaction** : While the regular presence and value-add activities of the professor are important, coaxing students to learn from one another by inspiring their interaction on the discussion boards also serves to enhance their learning experience.

To ensure quality assurance across all the subjects for which he/she is responsible, the SAC is given the same login view as the adjunct. A junior member of the full-time faculty performs the role of Section Leader (SL) and attends to most of the administrative duties such as setting up the class (e.g. creation of folders, discussion boards, study schedules), and the monitoring of day-to-day activity, but it is the SAC who ultimately takes responsibility for smooth operation of the class. This responsibility is exercised in the majority of cases through the mentor-mentee relationship that the SAC looks to establish with the adjunct professor. In such circumstances, the SAC plays a largely 'hands-off' role, where they remain completely invisible to the students. On occasion, however, direct intervention may be called for, especially if a speedy response is required and time zone constraints preclude action on the part of the professor for several hours. The deletion of an 'inappropriate' posting to a discussion board, for example, may require urgent attention if there is a danger it will cause offence. Similarly, if there is a problem with the Grade Book or the peer assessment tool, the SAC can act decisively when immediate action is called for in order to pacify anxious students.

In all of the instances described above, the SAC will remain invisible to the student body as it is not important for the students to know that someone other than their professor is operating in the class space. It is only when an adjunct becomes indisposed (involuntarily or voluntarily) that more drastic action is required. If a professor has an urgent personal crisis to deal with, for example, then the SAC will take over the management of a class. Similarly, if the mentor-mentee relationship breaks down (or fails to establish) with adverse (or potentially adverse) consequences for the students' learning experience, this also constitutes grounds for intervention on the part of the SAC. Such an eventuality is very rare given the stringent recruitment and accreditation process, but it is important that the U21Global model for the supervision and mentoring of adjunct faculty is able to accommodate the termination of a professor's contract at short notice with minimal impact on the student body.

For the most part, quality assurance during subject delivery is a relatively straightforward process. On the few occasions a contract termination has been necessary, the SAC has been able to draw on their tried and tested pool of adjuncts and the transition has been relatively seamless. To date, only 6 adjuncts from a total of 92 (or 6.5%) have not been retained. Significantly, most of these terminations occurred in the early days of operations when quality assurance processes were still being bedded down. The large majority of adjuncts show the level of commitment,

engagement, and responsiveness that is required in the absence of face-to-face contact between professors and students. On the odd occasions when discussions board activities do not get going or go off-track, or an adjunct does not respond to students' questions in the discussion boards expeditiously, the SAC takes the appropriate action and the potential student unrest is averted. Students always find something to complain about, of course, but it is telling that in the first two years of operations the aggregate average student evaluation of faculty (SEF) score was 4.1 out of a possible 5.0, an 'approval rating' of 82%. This measure alone is not sufficient to make any objective assessment of the success or otherwise of the U21Global quality assurance framework – much more longitudinal data (quantitative and qualitative) needs to be collected and analysed – but to get such a high level of student satisfaction with faculty performance so early in the life of the institution would likely be judged a positive indicator by most commentators.

Quality assurance step IV: Reflection and performance appraisal

Performance appraisal is part as an ongoing process of discussion and feedback integral to the mentor-mentee relationship referred to above. The main aim is quality assurance, but as the mentor-mentee relationship strengthens, there is scope for quality improvement. Most obviously, this will be manifest in the adjunct's professional development, but as the individual closest to the 'virtual chalk face', the adjunct faculty member is in a position to provide valuable feedback in the opposite direction that assists with the improvement of processes and procedures. This is done informally in an ongoing fashion, but formally at the completion of the class through the Evaluation of the Subject by the Faculty (ESF) and Subject Area Coordinator Evaluation of Faculty (SACEF) questionnaires. The completion of the ESF and SACEF forms is a condition of the adjunct faculty contract.

The ESF is a one-way mechanism for the adjunct to provide feedback on issues including, for example, the quality of subject content and assessment items, professor and student workloads, the level of academic and technical support, the usefulness of the learning tools and user guides, the overall quality of the students, and the experience of working at U21Global generally.

The SACEF is two-way feedback mechanism which also provides an opportunity for the adjunct to reflect and respond to the written evaluation of their performance by the SAC. The SAC's evaluation will generally make reference to the Student Evaluation of Faculty (SEF) questionnaire results and pick out a couple of student comments that sum up the students' view of their performance. The SAC will also comment, among other things, on the responsiveness of the adjunct, their communication style, and the extent to which they observed the Four Key Principles. Once this step is complete, the adjunct faculty member responds in a separate field in the SACEF form where there is an opportunity to reflect on the SAC's comments and indicate how they might do things differently the next time they deliver a subject for U21Global. The SAC then signs off, ticking a check box that indicates whether the adjunct should be reappointed and under what circumstances. A good performance means 'definite reappointment' and the adjunct is added to the 'star professor pool'. Someone who performs less well means they 'could be reappointed' and they are added to the 'development pool'. A poor performer is 'not reappointable' and their association with U21Global will be allowed to lapse. The latter decision is exceptional and the SAC will make this recommendation in consultation with the Director of Pedagogy and Assessment who is the last person to sign off on the SACEF form.

In summary, the performance appraisal process provides clear definition and communication of U21Global's expectations of its adjunct faculty members with respect to adjunct faculty conduct, their facilitation skills, and adherence to the U21Global's policies. It should be noted that the

appraisal process focuses on acknowledging strengths and excellence in the adjunct's performance, as well as identifying and addressing opportunities for improvement. There is little doubt that U21Global implements a stringent performance evaluation process for adjunct faculty members, but for dedicated and highly motivated teachers, this is viewed as an opportunity not a threat. Indeed, while many academics are attracted to the flexibility and autonomy of adjunct faculty work, there is always a danger of disengagement or lack of institutional loyalty unless there is culture of quality assurance where high standards of work are valued and recognised accordingly. As Schnitzer and Crosby (2003) observe, 'excellent, committed, quality instructors are retained by excellent, committed, quality faculty support.' This is implicit at U21Global through the quality assurance framework, but it is also made explicit through performance related pay and through annual prizes for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning.

Summary and conclusion

This paper has presented an overview of the U21Global quality assurance framework for the recruitment, training and retention of adjunct faculty. This framework aims to ensure not only that there is an enhanced learning experience for students, but also that there exists 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 U21Global's progress. With backing from 17 internationally renowned 'bricks-and-mortar' institutions, U21Global 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.

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