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Session 3: Human Resource Capacity Development

On-line distance learning - is it accredited?

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(Thursday, 8th September 2005, 8.15am – 10.00am)

E-Learning: Is it Accredited?

(Synopsis)

Self study, with courses from distance learning providers, had been with us for many years. Advancement in internet and communications technology has led to a quantum leap in the mode of delivery of these courses, popularly known as e-learning. This has led to a proliferation in courses offered and training providers, with different levels of support and quality, from across the globe.

The vast number of courses available online have increased considerably over the years and will continue to do so. Their popularity is due to the flexible studying schedule, enabling many in employment, or those unable to commit to full-time education, to take up courses for reasons ranging from personal enrichment to enhancing their careers prospects. Costs may also be a consideration to opt for e-learning.

The need for standards

Quality of these on-line courses varies and if these are to be presented as part of one's portfolio, either for seeking employment or for further studies, then they would need to be recognised for these purposes. Recognition of these courses may include accreditation by the government or NGOs, and would generally take into account the following:

1. Course Objectives & Outcomes
2. Course Contents
3. Publicity and Recruitment
4. Admission Procedures
5. Learning Support
6. Open Learning Centres
7. Learner Welfare
8. The Provider
9. Joint Provider

Adoption of commonly used and recognised standards will benefit the consumer - employers, higher education institutions - as well as those taking such courses. These standards will enable setting pay scales, promotions to higher positions, entry level to courses at higher learning or exemptions from some modules. For the student, assurance in time and money well spent. Accreditation by reputable bodies will further enhance the recognition process.

**National Summit on Information Society (NASIS), Brunei Darussalam:
Human Resource Capacity Development
(September 7-8, 2005)**

“On-line distance learning: Is it Accredited?”

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Appendix: General Guidelines

(Reproduced from Open and Distance Learning Council, UK., <http://www.odlqc.org.uk>)

1 Course Objectives and Outcome

<p>A. Each course includes a clear statement of what the learner can hope to achieve on successful completion of the course.</p> <p>B. Outcomes are of such a nature as to be attainable through open and/or distance study, augmented as and when necessary by face-to-face provision.</p> <p><i>Outcomes may be specified in terms of the development of specific skills, vocational or professional competences, the preparation for internally- or externally-assessed qualifications, the provision of job-related training, the imparting of information, or personal growth.</i></p> <p>C. The objectives of distance learning courses are demonstrably compatible with the objectives of comparable courses delivered by other means.</p> <p>D. Course objectives may vary from learner to learner but are, in all cases, clearly specified in the agreement between the provider and the learner.</p> <p>E. Where possible, the course is structured to include points for partial completion.</p> <p>F. Where time limits for course completion are imposed by the provider, reasons should be given.</p> <p>G. Any assessments, including examinations, set by the provider during or on completion of a course are adequate to ensure a proper assessment of the learner's ability and achievements to date.</p> <p><i>Examinations should be properly marked or assessed, with procedures for ensuring security in their setting and assessment, monitoring the quality of those assessments, and providing appropriate feed back to the learner. Learners should be made aware of the procedure whereby assessments can be challenged.</i></p> <p>H. Where appropriate, assessment is linked to accreditation by nationally-recognised qualification-awarding bodies.</p> <p><i>Where such links are not established, the provider should not make undue or unsubstantiated claims as to the level of skill or knowledge gained through successful completion of the course.</i></p>	<p>I. Documentary evidence of learning achieved is available where appropriate to all learners on course completion.</p> <p>J. Any certificate or diploma offered by the provider on completion of a course clearly indicates:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. the nature of the achievement recognised (eg course completion, or assessed qualification); 2. the name, nature, academic, vocational or professional recognition and other appropriate details of the awarding body. <p>K. Any certificate of course completion provided to learners clearly indicates that it recognises only completion of the course, and does not imply any internally or externally validated qualification in that subject. The criteria by which "course completion" is assessed are made known to the learner prior to enrolment.</p> <p>L. Where the outcome of a course is the declared competence to sit examinations offered, or be otherwise assessed, by another external organisation, the learner is informed of this and of the respective responsibilities of provider and applicant prior to enrolment.</p> <p><i>Whilst the provider takes responsibility to ensure that the course fits the currently declared curriculum of the awarding body, with other matters it should be made clear which are the responsibilities of the provider and which the applicant: who should ascertain, for example:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. the on-going availability of any external qualification; 2. the nature of any prior qualifications or other entrance requirements imposed by such an external organisation; 3. the currency of any qualification offered as outcome by an external organisation 4. how, where and when any external examinations or assessments can be taken; 5. what charges, if any, will be made. <p>M. The provider makes reasonable efforts to keep up-to-date with changes in the availability, entrance requirements or curricula of external examining or qualifying bodies and at no time misleads applicants or learners as to the provider's knowledge of or responsibilities in such matters.</p>
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2 Course Contents

<p>A. Course contents are sufficient to achieve the course's stated objectives.</p> <p>B. Course materials are written with the needs, knowledge and experience of a target group of learners in mind.</p> <p>C. The provider takes all reasonable steps to ensure that course materials do not contain significant errors of fact, misleading or out-of-date information, concepts or approaches. Course materials are reviewed within specified time periods to ensure they remain effective and up-to-date.</p> <p>D. Course materials are designed for a specific and clearly stated level of learner support, and suitable opportunities for such support, where intended, are built into the material.</p> <p>E. Course materials are structured to facilitate individual study & the development of study skills.</p> <p>Typical features of good quality self-study course materials include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. appropriateness to the overall purpose of the course;2. able to deliver the declared outcome of the course;3. an appropriate and well-managed presentation;4. careful pacing;5. subdivision into appropriate units, lessons or modules;6. an indication of the time a learner of average ability might expect to spend on each unit;7. a sequential exposition, with new material building on previous material;8. the use of a variety of approaches, including summaries, visual material, and illustrative examples as appropriate, to illuminate particular concepts;9. regular opportunities for self-assessment;10. the inclusion of clear instructions to guide the learner through the material11. provision in an attractively presented and convenient-to-use format.	<p>F. The use of language in course materials is appropriate to the intended learners In particular, care is taken with language if courses are described as being appropriate to those whose first language is not English.</p> <p>G. A clear outline of the course as a whole is provided with the first set of materials.</p> <p>H. If materials other than those supplied by the provider are required, clear information as to where to obtain those materials is given, and their probable cost.</p> <p>I. Any technologies used are appropriate to the provision & used only where necessary or particularly effective either to the curriculum or to the needs of the learner.</p> <p>J. If a new course is introduced, or significant amounts of new material are introduced into an existing course, the effectiveness of such material should be properly assessed in advance. Where there is any doubt that such material can be adequately assessed by other means, it should be used in a pilot study or otherwise tested on potential students, with the latter's knowledge.</p> <p>K. Face-to-face or hands-on training is provided wherever it is a necessary component in achieving the stated outcome of the course.</p> <p>L. If any face-to-face or hands-on training is required, this is made clear to the applicant prior to enrolment, along with any attendance, residential or financial implications of such face-to-face provision.</p>
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3 Publicity and Recruitment

<p>A. No advertising and promotional material gives a false, misleading, or exaggerated impression of the provider, its personnel, its provision, the objectives and outcomes of that provision or the ease with which they can be obtained.</p> <p>B. Wherever possible, all publicity material:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. clearly identifies the provider;2. indicates that the education or training on offer is by open and/or distance methods;3. avoids any impression that employment is on offer or is in any way guaranteed.4. includes the ODL QC quality mark. <p>C. Testimonials or similar material are used only if they are current and with the author's prior consent.</p> <p>D. The provider and its representatives adhere to any relevant legislation on consumer protection.</p> <p>E. The provider takes full responsibility for the actions, statements, and conduct of its sales personnel.</p> <p>F. Staff or agents engaged in promotion are fully briefed in and adhere to the admissions policy of the provider.</p> <p>G. Staff engaged in promotion do not offer educational advice unless competent to do so.</p>	<p>H. Any published schedules of fees clearly state:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. what services are covered by those fees;2. what additional payments, if any, may be necessary to achieve the course outcome;3. what period those fees are valid for;4. the circumstances under which full or partial refunds, or transfers to other courses, are possible. <p>I. All enquiries from potential applicants are handled promptly and sympathetically by a person competent to do so.</p> <p>J. All direct communication with potential learners aims to give them the best possible basis for deciding whether the courses on offer match his or her needs, qualifications and aspirations.</p>
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4 Admission Procedures

<p>A. Prior to enrolment on a particular course, the prospective learner is made properly aware of all terms and conditions relevant to that course, either in the prospectus or similar material, by correspondence, or in discussion with the provider.</p> <p><i>These would normally include:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>the full extent of the course;</i> 2. <i>the likely number of study hours necessary for its completion;</i> 3. <i>the likely overall time span between enrolment and completion;</i> 4. <i>what time-limits, if any, are imposed by the provider for completion of the course;</i> 5. <i>the timetable for the provision of materials (whether all at once, or in stages) and whether this is linked to the schedule of fee payments;</i> 6. <i>the total fee payable to the provider in respect of the course;</i> 7. <i>the likely total costs to the learner, including as well as provider fees, the costs of necessary support materials, any likely travel & residential costs, and any examination fees payable to the provider or to other bodies;</i> 8. <i>the schedule of payment of fees (whether all at once or in stages);</i> 9. <i>the provider's policy on refunds;</i> 10. <i>the availability and extent of learning, tutorial and any other advisory support;</i> 11. <i>the availability and extent of vocational guidance</i> 12. <i>the means of delivery of materials and support (by telephone, post, fax, e-mail, or on-line);</i> 13. <i>any equipment (PC, videos etc) needed by the learner to study the course at home;</i> 14. <i>the timing and extent of any residential or face-to-face component of the course;</i> 15. <i>the stated objective of the course, and its intended outcome;</i> 16. <i>any qualifications required of the learner to undertake the course;</i> 17. <i>the currency (national or international status, recognition arrangements, and particularly license-to-practice implications) of any certificate, diploma or other qualification offered by the provider as the outcome of the course.</i> 	<p><i>If any of this information is not supplied by the provider, because for example it is deemed to be the responsibility of another, such as an awarding body, or of the learner himself, this must also be made clear prior to enrolment.</i></p> <p>B. Access requirements imposed by the provider for any course are kept to the necessary minimum and, wherever possible and appropriate, published.</p> <p>C. The applicant is made aware of his or her responsibility to assess their own needs and capabilities before embarking upon a course, and is offered an opportunity to discuss these matters with the provider prior to enrolment.</p> <p><i>Such issues may include:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>whether the course is suitable for someone with their level of attainment;</i> 2. <i>whether the applicant has the necessary levels of competence to gain full benefit from the course. These competences might include literacy, fluency in English, numeracy and computer literacy;</i> 3. <i>whether the applicant's own objectives can be realised through that particular course;</i> 4. <i>any special needs of the applicant.</i> <p>D. Appropriate opportunities are afforded to applicants to assess whether the course meets their needs prior to enrolment.</p> <p>E. There is a learning agreement between the provider and the learner which specifies:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. the nature and scope of the course; 2. the mutually-agreed anticipated outcome of the course; 3. the services to which the provider is committed; 4. any disclaimers which protect the provider against changes in external circumstances which prevent him from delivering those services or realising the intended outcome; 5. the rights, obligations and commitments expected of the learner; 6. the financial agreement between the learner and the provider; 7. any allowance for special needs. <p>The learner is made aware that this agreement may be legally enforceable.</p>
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5 Learning Support

<p>A. Learners are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning.</p> <p>B. The provision of study materials to learners is prompt and timely.</p> <p>C. Guidance on study skills is provided for all learners.</p> <p>D. If a significant element of the provision is technology-based, the provider ensures that the learner understands the system requirements.</p> <p>E. Tutorial support is normally integral to all provision. Where this is not the case, the course material or other provision is capable of achieving its stated outcomes without such support, and the absence of such support is clearly indicated in all publicity and course material.</p> <p>F. Any tutorial support offered is of sufficient quality to meet the reasonable needs of learners.</p> <p><i>Tutors will:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. have a sound understanding and up-to-date knowledge of their subject; 2. know how learners learn, and help their students to learn how to learn; 3. communicate enthusiasm for the subject, and for learning, to their students; 4. show sensitivity to individual differences in ability and learning styles; 5. understand the special requirements of open and distance learning; 6. communicate clearly, consistently, conscientiously, constructively and quickly with their students; 7. encourage their students at all times; 8. provide feedback on overall progress in relation to the agreed outcome of the course; 9. make effective use of feedback from learners to enhance their own performance as tutors. <p>G. Access to tutors is on a sufficient, regular and, wherever possible, individual and flexible basis, which is known to both tutors and learners.</p>	<p>H. Appropriate schedules for the submission and return of tutorial assignments are adopted and communicated to learners. Turnaround times are kept to a minimum.</p> <p>I. All enquiries from learners are handled promptly and sympathetically by a person competent to do so.</p> <p>J. All learners are encouraged to complete their courses.</p> <p><i>Providers are encouraged to investigate cases of withdrawal.</i></p> <p>K. Learner progress is monitored on a regular, on-going basis, and learners are provided with prompt, helpful and encouraging comments on their progress in relation to learning expectations and goals.</p> <p><i>In particular:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Early contact with a learner is initiated by the provider whenever difficulties occur arising from the non-submission of assignments by the appropriate deadline, or the submission of unsatisfactory work. 2. Care is taken to support and encourage learners who submit unsatisfactory work; learning support is only withdrawn after all reasonable efforts have been made to overcome their problems. 3. If the provider has significant doubts that the learner is ready to undertake a particular examination or piece of practical work, the learner is advised of those doubts. In cases where any risk to third parties is involved, the provider must reserve the right to prevent the learner from undertaking that piece of work, and the learner must have been informed of that right prior to enrolment. <p>L. Resource centres of supplementary materials are made available wherever possible.</p> <p>M. Peer group interaction and support for distance learners is encouraged and facilitated wherever possible through newsletters, new technologies or other means.</p>
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6 Opening Learning Centers

<p>A. The open learning centre identifies one or more groups of users for whom it is intended.</p> <p>B. The use made of an open learning centre is monitored on an ongoing basis to see if this identified group of users changes over time.</p> <p>C. The resources provided are sufficient to meet the needs of its identified users.</p> <p><i>Such resources should normally include:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><i>1. clear and comprehensive catalogues of what is available;</i><i>2. relevant courseware, books and other printed materials;</i><i>3. where possible, tapes, videos, computer work-stations, CD ROMs and on-line access;</i><i>4. learning support;</i><i>5. indications of appropriate links to other learning opportunities.</i>	<p>D. The resources are regularly reviewed to ensure that they continue to meet the needs of users.</p> <p>E. The access and facilities provided at the centre are suitable for its users.</p> <p><i>The centre should, as far as possible:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><i>1. provide suitable facilities for individual study;</i><i>2. be conveniently located for easy access by users, and by staff;</i><i>3. be conducive to individual study;</i><i>4. be open to users at clearly specified and appropriate times (which take into account any special needs of its users);</i><i>5. have a person (a "Centre Manager") who has overall responsibility for running the centre.</i> <p>F. Learners are supported by suitably qualified staff at all times it is open.</p> <p>G. Any booking conditions relating to personnel or equipment are clearly set out and made known to all users.</p>
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7 Learner Welfare

A. Learner records are sufficient, accurately maintained and up to date.

Records should include, amongst other information, details of all payments received and/or refunds made, details of any special agreements on learning outcomes between the provider and the learner, and information on student progress such as records of all tutor-marked assignments. Records should be maintained in a secure place, for as long as they are likely to be needed.

B. Learners' concerns about the confidentiality of their records are respected.

C. Appropriate administrative and academic advice and guidance is available to all learners.

D. The provider has adequate procedures to handle any difficulties which may arise between the learner and the provider, and learners are made fully aware of all the avenues open to them to resolve those difficulties.

For example, if difficulties arise between a learner and a tutor, and an alternative tutor is available, this alternative is offered to the learner. Similarly, wherever possible, a learner has more than one point of access with the provider (for example through a tutor, or through an admissions officer or the principal), so that difficulties between particular individuals, should they arise, do not impede the learning process. In cases of serious difficulty, if no alternative is available, ODL QC can act as an access point.

E. Career counselling and placement services, if offered, does not make exaggerated claims.

F. The provider can show, through sample checks, questionnaires or other means, that:

1. a high proportion of learners are satisfied with the training or educational service provided.
2. appropriate retention and completion rates are achieved.

8 The Provider

<p>A. The provider demonstrates a high commitment to educational values.</p> <p><i>This should be evident in any mission statement, corporate objectives, or strategic goals the provider adopts, and its actions should at all times be compatible with those values. The provider should also be committed to the continuous professional development of its staff and tutors.</i></p> <p>B. The provider is financially responsible and can meet its obligations to learners.</p> <p><i>It should have a corporate plan for its business and professional development. Where the provision is embedded in a larger body, this plan may be for the body as a whole, but should nevertheless refer explicitly to the provision.</i></p> <p><i>Its financial resources should afford all enrolled learners a reasonable prospect of completing their studies. It should also have adequate insurance to cover its liabilities and responsibilities to learners and third parties, and appropriate contingency and disaster recovery plans.</i></p> <p>C. The provider adopts widely accepted norms of good business and employment practice.</p> <p><i>For example, the provider:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>1. has a clear, fair and effective procedure for dealing with complaints;</i> <i>2. has a clear, fair and effective policy on refunds, which is made clear to the learner prior to enrolment</i> <i>3. has reviewed its use and storage of data and has registered with the Data Protection Registrar if appropriate;</i> <i>4. has reviewed its use of copyright material and, if appropriate, has registered with the Copyright Licensing Agency or reached agreement with the copyright holder;</i> <i>5. does not discriminate, directly or indirectly, on grounds of gender, sexual orientation, race, colour, nationality,</i> 	<p>D. Where the provision occurs in another country, the provider ensures adherence to all relevant legal requirements.</p> <p>E. All staff are suitable for the positions they hold, and possess appropriate qualifications and experience.</p> <p>F. All tutor support is of high quality. Where a provider employs more than one tutor, steps are taken to ensure that tutor support is consistent throughout the provision.</p> <p><i>Such measures may include:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>1. the development of normative schemes for marking and assessment;</i> <i>2. guidance notes for tutors;</i> <i>3. regular meetings of tutors;</i> <i>4. newsletters or other ways of sharing good practice, problems and solutions;</i> <i>5. ongoing monitoring and review of tutors work, including sampling of tutor marking and comments;</i> <i>6. an appraisal system for tutors;</i> <i>7. guidance for new tutors in the special requirements of open and distance learning.</i> <i>8. providing adequate administrative backup for tutors.</i> <p>G. Sufficient resources are available to ensure that every learner receives an adequate individual service.</p> <p>H. The provider adheres to all ODL QC Standards in Open and Distance Learning.</p> <p>I. If the provider has adopted its own set of standards by which its performance can be assessed, these standards are compatible with ODL QC or other appropriate standards and seek, wherever possible, to strengthen those standards in ways appropriate to the particular provision in question. The provider has its own internal systems for monitoring performance against those standards.</p> <p><i>Such systems and standards may for example:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>1. identify & select suitable tutors and authors of course materials;</i> <i>2. monitor and review the continuing competence of all staff on a regular basis;</i>
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<p><i>ethnic origin, or religious or political belief.</i></p> <p><i>6. has adequate premises, space and equipment to conduct its business.</i></p>	<p><i>3. set time limits for responding to external approaches, marking and returning assignments to learners, or reviewing course materials</i></p> <p><i>4. seek and encourage feedback from tutors, staff, learners and other customers on evaluating and improving materials and services;</i></p> <p><i>5. measure outcomes, and use those measurements to enhance provision.</i></p>
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9 Joint Provision

A. Any provision delivered by two or more organisations is covered by a written agreement which clearly specifies the respective rights and division of responsibilities between the partners.

B. One organisation (the “principal provider”) has legal responsibility for delivery of the provision, and the learner is made aware of this.

C. The principal provider has in place procedures which ensure that all aspects of a provision meet ODL QC standards.

This applies, for example, whenever:

- 1. the provision is offered by a provider as, or equivalent to, its own, in its published lists or prospectus, whether offered in or developed through partnerships with other bodies or not;*
- 2. part of the provision is delegated to a third party (such as an overseas agent);*
- 3. the provider is acting as agent for courses offered by another*