ECU Quality Assurance Guidelines for Online Delivery

PURPOSE
The purpose of these guidelines is to encompass and improve ECU’s existing minimum standards for online units, and to extend ECU’s quality assurance processes for online delivery. This will contribute significantly to the achievement of a number of ECU’s teaching and learning goals in relation to quality online delivery.

SUMMARY
This document specifies 10 quality assurance guidelines for delivery of all ECU online units.

1. **Student orientation and unit information**
   - Provide a unit orientation to familiarise online students with the unit and online learning, and make sure compulsory unit documentation can be easily located by students.

2. **Learning outcomes**
   - Provide students with the learning outcomes for the unit, including those that are specifically attained (and assessable) through online learning.

3. **Teaching staff responsiveness and availability**
   - Give clear details on the availability of teaching staff in the unit, and response times.

4. **Assessments and submission**
   - State assessment policies, strategies and marking criteria or rubrics before assessed work begins, ensuring strategies are appropriate to an online environment.

5. **Learning design and delivery**
   - Design learning activities and assessments that encourage student interactions with content, teaching staff and each other, choosing online tools that suit the intended learning activity.

6. **Communication**
   - Facilitate efficient and respectful communication between students and teaching staff, and among students.

7. **Learner supports and resources**
   - Provide a supportive learning environment for online students, giving details of different avenues of technical and learning support available.

8. **Student motivation and engagement**
   - Facilitate the creation of a learning community and apply techniques to encourage online participation.

9. **Structure, navigation and accessibility**
   - Ensure the site has a logical and consistent structure, is fully functioning and up-to-date, and conforms to ECU’s accessibility standards.

10. **Cycle of improvement**
    - Undertake regular evaluation of the unit and its delivery, integrating results and feedback into planning for continual improvement.
DEFINITIONS

- **Online learning** - Learning at a distance facilitated by technology.

- **Learning design** – a range of activities associated with better describing, understanding, supporting and guiding pedagogic design practices and processes. See [http://www.slideshare.net/pmundin/r-what-is-learning-design](http://www.slideshare.net/pmundin/r-what-is-learning-design)

- **Accessibility** – Refers to required practices that ensure websites are accessible by everyone, regardless of disability. These include making web pages readable by screen readers used by users with visual impairment, providing alternatives to audio-visual materials that rely on sound for message delivery, and paying due attention to good on-screen readability. See [http://www.w3.org/WAI/](http://www.w3.org/WAI/)

- **Evaluation** – a process of assessing the effectiveness of teaching and learning projects and practices and/or their impact on student learning.

THE GUIDELINES

**GUIDELINE 1: STUDENT ORIENTATION AND UNIT INFORMATION**

Provide a unit orientation to familiarise online students with the unit and online learning, and make sure compulsory unit documentation can be easily located by students.

Students should be encouraged to look at orientation information in the unit site before the commencement of the teaching period. This information should give students a clear idea of the online learning experience, including the following aspects:

- What the unit will involve;
- Who the teaching staff and their classmates are;
- How the site is organised;
- Which tools will be used (and why);
- Where to find instructions/support for using the various tools; and
- What they need to do to succeed in the unit.

Evidence that this guideline is being followed:

- Students have access to the Blackboard site at least 2 weeks prior to semester start.
- The site includes specific orientation and/or introduction pages.
- The site includes an induction to online learning.
- Downloadable copies of all compulsory materials are provided such as unit outline, unit plan, cover sheets, and referencing guides.

Suggested good practices:

- Make students aware of why the technologies are being used and how they support learning.
- Give a clear indication of requirements for student interaction.
- Give details of the minimum technical skills expected to complete the unit and make students aware of where to find instructions and support for using various technologies.
- An initial activity is set for students to practise using online tools applicable to the unit, e.g.
introduce themselves online in first few weeks through a blog or journal entry, discussion posting, audio file, video.

- Provide information on how to use the site (see Learner Supports and Resources).
- Include an introduction and welcome message from the Unit Coordinator (preferably in audio or video format).
- Send an email to students at least 2 weeks prior to semester start with an introduction to self, including a photo, the unit, the textbook, and the Blackboard site (including how to access the site and where to find important information e.g. Unit Plan).
- In your email and introduction video, encourage students to submit an introduction of themselves (photo optional) and their interest in the subject using the Discussion Board, a Blog, or a Wiki at least a week prior to semester start. This is a very useful initial activity which can allow them to practice with the online technologies. Model this by providing an introduction to yourself first.

GUIDELINE 2: LEARNING OUTCOMES

Provide students with the learning outcomes for the unit, including those that are specifically attained (and assessable) through online learning.

Students should be given a clear description of the measurable learning outcomes they will attain on successful completion of the unit.

Evidence that this guideline is being followed:

- It is clear how the learning outcomes can be assessed.

Suggested good practices:

- Make sure the Unit Outline and Unit Plan are easily located within the site.
- In lesson, week or module content areas clearly link the learning goals of that section of the unit to learning outcomes for the whole unit.
- Specifically include relevant learning outcomes in instructions for learning tasks so that students may clearly see how the outcomes are to be achieved.

GUIDELINE 3: TEACHING STAFF RESPONSIVENESS AND AVAILABILITY

Give clear details on the availability of teaching staff in the unit, and response times.

Conveying clear guidelines on preferred communication methods, availability and reasonable response times reduces student uncertainty over when to expect responses by, and introduces efficiencies in managing the frequency and volume of communications.

Evidence that this guideline is being followed includes notification of the following:

- Turnaround times for emails and discussion board posts.
- Turnaround times for provision of feedback and assessment marks.
- Level of participation of teaching staff in specific Discussion Board threads.
- Preferred method(s) of contact for each of general, personal or urgent issues.

Suggested good practices:

- Provide specific details in an obvious location of preferred methods of contact and teaching staff availability and response times (e.g. a permanent Announcement, or on the Staff Info or Email tool pages). Some suggested instructions might be:
  - “All unit-related questions should be posted to the appropriate discussion threads in the
Discussion Board and will be responded to within X days.”
- “Discussion posts on Topic X will be monitored and general comments will be posted by your tutors at the end of each discussion period.”
- “Marks for Assignment 1 will be entered into My Grades within X weeks of the due date.”
- “Emails to your tutor should be sent on personal or very urgent matters only – all other questions/comments should be posted to the Discussion Board.

GUIDELINE 4: ASSESSMENTS AND SUBMISSION
State assessment policies, strategies and marking criteria or rubrics before assessed work begins, ensuring strategies are varied and appropriate to an online environment.

Students should have clear details of policies and procedures around submitting assignments electronically, including location, as well as a clear understanding of the basis on which their work will be assessed. Rubrics can be very effective in building student motivation when they know exactly what is required.

Evidence that this guideline is being followed:
- Details of assessment policies and strategies are easily found within the site.
- Submission details/instructions are clearly detailed.
- Assessment types are varied in nature.

Suggested good practices:
- Provide students with detailed marking criteria or rubrics.
- Incorporate opportunities for formative assessment into the unit design.
- Include peer- and/or self-assessed learning activities in the unit.

GUIDELINE 5: LEARNING DESIGN AND DELIVERY
Design learning activities and assessments that encourage student interactions with content, teaching staff and each other, choosing online tools that suit the intended learning activity.

Learning activities in an online environment should foster positive interactions between students and the teaching staff, students and the unit content, and among students. These interactions should be appropriately scaffolded, and facilitated through the use of appropriate online tools that are suited to the learning activity. Unit content should be closely aligned with the learning activities and be varied in format.

Evidence that this guideline is being followed:
- The learning pathway provides some flexibility for students.
- Learning activities are task-driven and require regular interaction with resources, teaching staff and peers within the site.
- The online tools in use support or facilitate communication, engagement and active learning.
- Online activities that require higher-order thinking skills, e.g. critiquing, analysing, reviewing, justifying, are embedded in tasks.

Suggested good practices:
- Organise your unit by modules, encompassing 2 or more weeks, or by topics, instead of single weeks. Provide clear reasoning for why modules are organised as they are and how/when they will be released.
• Make the first module available 2-3 weeks prior to semester commencement.
• Design tasks for each module/topic to ensure students understand and can apply/practice knowledge and skills (in place of workshop/tutorial activities).
• Provide worked examples for specific tasks (e.g. case study analysis, article review).
• Encourage thoughtful discussion posting through the use of task verbs that require higher order thinking skills, e.g. critique, review, justify, solve.
• Encourage responses to unit content through learning activities such as:
  o Writing text in response to the content – requiring the student to confront their own learning and organise their thoughts (can be an open-ended question requiring a response – a blog post is ideal).
  o Answering multiple choice questions - a form of self-testing which can be constructed to provide immediate feedback and is easily facilitated through Blackboard.
  o Constructing and discussing an opinion – constructing a statement of opinion to be read by peers (a posting to a discussion board provides a threaded topic within the class - this is active collaborative engagement with a topic as discussion texts are co-constructed).
• Choose unit materials from a variety of sources (including online sources external to the site), and in a variety of formats including multimedia (if possible), to accommodate different learning styles, backgrounds and cultures.
• Provide short, chunked, accessible, and high quality lecture recordings based on best practices for recorded lectures.
• Provide essential texts in a downloadable format (e.g. assignment documents) or clear instructions for students to locate them (e.g. readings, case studies, etc.).
• Use electronic textbooks when possible.
• Ensure unit materials contain sufficient breadth, depth and currency.
• Explain the relationship between unit materials and the learning activities.

GUIDELINE 6: COMMUNICATION
Facilitate efficient and respectful communication between students and teaching staff, and among students.

Open and inviting communication channels are vital to online learning environments where students can otherwise feel isolated, excluded, or even disadvantaged compared to face-to-face classmates. Communication is also an essential aspect of many learning activities.

Evidence that this guideline is being followed:
• Clear guidelines have been given on how communications with teaching staff and peers should occur.

Suggested good practices:
• If group work is required, facilitate the exchange of student emails or create groups and/or group areas in Blackboard.
• Explain or discuss netiquette.
• Encourage use of the discussion board for unit-related questions (questions only have to be answered once and students often help each other).
• Post announcements in a timely manner on such things as topical events, reminders, updates on assignments and exams, reviews of the past week, overview of the week ahead etc.
• Send vital notices via email to all students (don’t rely on Announcements alone).
• Discussion boards:
o Have separate forums for different categories of discussion e.g. introductions, unit questions, topic discussions, assignment questions.
o Divide large classes into smaller groups with separate forums.
o Check discussion posts regularly and respond promptly to questions directed at the lecturer.
o Moderate discussions and deal promptly with inappropriate or offensive postings.

GUIDELINE 7: LEARNER SUPPORTS
Provide a supportive learning environment for online students, giving details of different avenues of technical and learning support available.

Students should feel supported during their online learning experience if they are having difficulties other than those that are subject-related. Teaching staff should be mindful of signs of need or difficulty evident in a student’s presence (or lack of) within the site, as well as use the various tools available for spotting low levels of participation or performance.

Evidence that this guideline is being followed:

- Students have been provided with clear guidance on where to go for various types of support relevant to their studies and the unit.
- Student participation is monitored.

Suggested good practices:
- Give clear details of where students can go for Blackboard support (Ask Us website).
- Provide links to support avenues and resources in an obvious and accessible location, including technical, library and learning support services.
- Provide a page of links to helpful resources such as referencing guides, software downloads, e-Reserve, study skills guides, technical information, online tutorials/instructions.
- Provide a disability statement and link to Disability Services for students.
- Give details of provision for difficulties with auditory or visual content.
- Check in with all students around week three to ensure they have been able to do everything online that is required of them so far.
- Use such tools as the Early Warning System, Performance Dashboard or Course Reports in Blackboard to monitor students who are not accessing the site, submitting assessments, or participating in discussions.

GUIDELINE 8: STUDENT MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT
Facilitate the creation of a learning community and apply techniques to encourage online participation.

Student engagement in an online learning environment does not happen by itself, and while many strategies are recommended to encourage participation and engagement, ultimately the motivation has to come from the students themselves. This motivation often comes naturally when students feel they belong to a community of learners within the common unit.

Evidence that this guideline is being followed:
Deliberate and ongoing attempts have been made to create a learning community with teaching staff acting as facilitators.

Techniques have been employed to encourage participation.

Suggested good practices:

- Create a learning community by using strategies such as introductions, group assignments, projects and activities.
- Provide regular and constructive feedback on group and individual performance.
- Encourage students to introduce themselves online in the first few weeks via something like a blog entry, discussion posting, audio recording, or video.
- Negotiate guidelines for online interaction and communication with students.
- Use group contracts to enable students and teaching staff to develop a formal, written agreement about learning objectives, assessment measures, or methods of conflict resolution.
- Assess participation in order to:
  - Recognise students' workload and time commitment.
  - Encourage students to participate.
- Provide evaluation criteria in order to:
  - Contribute to students' extrinsic motivation.
  - Clarify tasks and deadlines.
  - Improve performance and learning outcomes.

GUIDELINE 9: STRUCTURE, NAVIGATION AND ACCESSIBILITY

The site has a logical and consistent structure, is fully functioning and up-to-date, and conforms to ECU’s accessibility standards.

Student dissatisfaction and anxiety can be greatly decreased by minimising confusion and cognitive overload in a unit website. A unit site should be easy and intuitive to use, with no accessibility barriers.

Evidence that this guideline is being followed:

- Naming of the menu items clearly indicates the nature of the particular area (with no redundant items).
- The visual and functional appearance of all pages is consistent and easy to read.

Suggested good practices:

Usability:

- Organise content as simply as possible and present it in manageable and logical segments, e.g. topics, weeks, modules.
- Make connections and associations between related information within the site explicit through course links within the content, not duplication.
- Include links to related information or resources outside of the unit as much as possible.
- Enter information and instructions into the site pages rather than upload documents.
- Break up longer sections of content where logical with headings and subheadings.
- Make sure all links work.
- Minimise file sizes in both embedded content (graphics, video, audio, animations etc) and downloadable documents.
- Limit the number of font varieties to three (too much variation is unpleasant to read), and use sans
serif fonts only.

- Limit the number of colours used.
- Be consistent in the use of heading styles.
- Ensure that page content contains plenty of white space (around text and graphics) for easy readability.

Accessibility:
- Provide multiple formats of downloadable documents (e.g. PDF, RTF, DOCX, PPT).
- Replace hard copy textbooks with e-textbooks.
- Use good contrast in text and graphics – dark on light is best (this can be checked by printing pages in black and white).
- Avoid the use of red and green text or illustrations - (10% of male populations have colour deficient vision).
- Avoid scanned documents saved as images in a PDF (these cannot be read by screen readers).

GUIDELINE 10: CYCLE OF IMPROVEMENT
Undertake regular evaluation of the unit and its delivery, integrating results and feedback into planning for continual improvement.

In order to ensure the quality and effectiveness of online delivery regular and systematic evaluation should occur and the findings used for future planning for improvement.

Evidence that this guideline is being followed:

- A unit evaluation plan is in place to ensure planning for continual improvement.

Suggested good practices:

- Use evaluation approaches that incorporate at least one alternative to UTEI, e.g. peer review, focus groups, teaching staff or student surveys, analysis of site use and statistics, interviews.
- Provide opportunities for students to give feedback to staff about the unit design, delivery and content using the Blackboard Unit Evaluation Quiz - ideally at different points throughout the semester.