Chapter 1
The problem and its settings

1.1 Introduction

In Malaysia, the core activity of most higher education institutions is traditional delivery of courses. It is done either at campus or through agreement with its associate and other partner university. Nowadays, many education institutions, especially in the private sector, had widened the access to their courses through new methods of delivery i.e. via electronically mediated learning (e-learning).

With the recent growth of Internet and other distance technologies, e-learning has became an attractive option for expanding the education opportunity available for students. By establishing e-learning courses, higher education institutions can position themselves to eliminate the requirement to construct new or additional classrooms and support services to accommodate the increase in students’ enrolment.

Some of the phenomena that contributes to the rapid growth of information technology which effects the postsecondary education as reported by The Institute of Higher Education Policy, Washington DC in April 1998 are:

(i) *Lifelong learning concept*

As Lumby (2001a) noted the World Wide Web offers global knowledge to all those with access. The role of higher education institutions is to produce people who can manipulate knowledge, understand what it has been manipulated and continue to learn and adopt, long after leaving formal education. Formal education is becoming part of a wider learning context. Adult learning acted as a means of developing aspects of social policy as well as benefiting individuals. Hence, school is the starting point of a process that will continue into the future. People from different
ages, backgrounds and needs are entering into education. Hence, more diversified courses should be offered so that different level of education attainment are cater for.

(iii) *From teacher-centred to learner-centred approaches*

Silcock and Brundrett (2001: 39) defined learner-centred approaches as those who the tutors guide and facilitate the learners, rather than asserting control, towards targeted learning goals. Teachers-centred approaches allowed teachers to hold the power in the teaching and learning relationship. Learner-centred approach become practical as learning does not take place in educational institutions but it can occurs in any venue outside the institutions. Therefore, instruction is more self-directed and focused.

(iii) *The development of ‘knowledge media’*

The advancement of information technology and rapid expansion of the Web as a potential course delivery platform had provided an opportunity to change the emphasis from classroom teaching to individual learning. Computers are the central to the ambience of the classroom.

The advent of greater computing power has underpinned the emergency of multimedia as a potential teaching and learning tools in the higher education (Laurillard, 1993). It is evident in Malaysia that the use of online learning environment is becoming widespread both for public and private higher education institutions. The growth of e-learning programme has caused a concern about how to ensure that these programme delivered via telecommunication are of good quality.
In practice, not many higher education institutions have a mechanism to support quality assurance, although it is an important function of instructional management. It is the quality of the means that determine the quality of the end. The instructional manager has to identify and implement the quality causes and measures together with the standards for all its activities in order to roll quality performance (Malakolunthu, 2002).

For these and other reasons, analysis of quality assurance in e-learning is an issue for educational policy makers. It is important to identify a quality assurance mechanism in e-learning that fits the various stakeholders’ expectation.

1.2 Statement of The Problem

The educational literatures suggested that there are mounting pressure from customers of higher education, which include students, parents, alumni, employers and legislators to close the widening gap between their expectations of institutional performance and the actual performance (Brighman, 1994). Therefore, it is important that the higher education institutions to monitor the quality of education offered and committed to continuous improvements in effort to keep a good image in the eye of the public.

E-learning had become widely accepted mode of learning nowadays. However, the key question is whether students receive a quality education through e-learning format. While technology has provided meaningful tools for tracking, sorting and disseminating information, it has created unprecedented complexity as well as a concern for the value and integrity of that information (Karr, 2002). The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) addressed the following issues regarding e-learning effectiveness (Eaton, 2000):
- What is an effective framework for e-learning?
- How can quality be evaluated and insured?

Stephenson (1997: 88) suggested quality control mechanisms will work at several levels:
- at an institutional / organisational level
- at an administrative level
- at an academic level
- at a support services level
- at a community / national level
- at a student level

This study focused on assuring quality at the academic level. It is important to identify the key factors that would contribute to quality education offered to students. It indirectly would reflect on the quality of the courses that were being offered by the higher education institutions.

This study focused on identifying a quality assurance mechanism in the delivery of e-learning courses in one private higher education institution, which can fit the expectation from various stakeholders. The perception of academic team in this private institution, on issues related to quality assurance of e-learning will be used as the basis to develop the quality assurance mechanism.
1.3 Purpose and Objectives of The Study

The purpose of this study was to examine academic team's perception on critical factors that contribute to ensure quality of e-learning at one private higher education institution, which three of their branches are located in Kuala Lumpur, Melaka and Petaling Jaya. These branches were selected at random for the purpose of this study. Using the information obtained, a quality assurance mechanism was identified so that quality education can take place.

The objectives of this study were:

1. To examine the level of importance of the key areas related to the quality assurance of e-learning of private institution.

2. To examine the presence of the quality benchmarks in e-learning of this private institution.

Whenever Web technology is used in education settings, it is vital to reflect on how this affects students, faculty members, courses and institutions (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Furthermore, several different agencies such as American Council on Education, the Council of Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the National Education Association, the Global Alliance for Transactional Education (GATE) had developed wide variety of guidelines, principles and quality benchmarks to ensure quality in distance learning. Common strategies included factors such as course development, faculty training, student service, learning resource, infrastructure and assessment of outcome. These strategies existed in various forms for a number of years.
Two organisations, the National Education Association (NEA) – the largest professional association of higher education faculty in US and Blackboard Inc. – a widely used platform provider for online education in US jointly commissioned The Higher Education Policy to conduct a case study to validate those benchmarks that have been published by these various organisations which focused on the Internet based distance education.

Therefore, it would be appropriate to use these validated benchmarks i.e. management support, coursework development, teaching and learning process, course structure, student support, academic team support, and lastly evaluation and assessment in this study.

This study would identify some additional benchmarks that can contribute to the quality assurance of e-learning.

1.4 Research Questions

This study would attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. How important is the quality assurance in e-learning based on the academic staff perception?

2. What are important quality benchmarks that present in the e-learning management?

3. How suitable are the quality benchmarks suggested in the model for this institution?

4. What are the additional benchmarks suggested by the academic team that can contribute to the quality assurance of e-learning?
1.5 Conceptual Framework of The Study

The benchmarks were divided into seven categories of quality measures. The design of this study was to determine the degree of importance the benchmarks based on the academic team perception. In addition, it also investigate to what extent were these benchmarks are included in the private higher education institution.

![Diagram showing the conceptual framework]

**Figure 1.1** Conceptual Framework on Quality Assurance Model of E-learning (adapted from Institute for Higher Education Policy USA, 2000)

*Management Support*

It involved practices to ensure the proper environment to develop quality of e-learning. It addressed the technological infrastructure issues, technological plan and professional incentive from the management.
Coursework Development

It involved development of coursework by the subject experts (individual or team of academic staff) available in the institution.

Teaching & Learning Process

It ensured quality in pedagogy or art of teaching. This included interactivity, collaboration, and modular learning.

Course Structure

It involved proper procedure that supports the teaching and learning, including the availability of library resources, type of material provided to students and response to students and student expectations.

Student Support

It involved services provided by the institution for students, including the admission, student training and assistance while using the Internet.

Academic Team Support

It involved activities to assist the academic staff in teaching online and continuous assistance throughout the teaching period.

Evaluation & Assessment

It involved procedure that addressed how the institution evaluated its e-learning courses.

1.6 Significance of The Study

There are many studies on quality done in the area of education by organisations aboard. Inman & Kerwin (1999) reported that in academic perception on the quality of distance learning was low compared to the traditional classroom learning. The concern regarding the concept of quality in higher education was expressed by Barnett, 1994; Tam 2001; Kaplan & Norton, 2001. The key issue was the abilities of quality concept to facilitate the
perspective of a range of stakeholders who have different views on the concept of higher education and how the quality was being defined. Yorke (1999) discussed the issue on quality assurance in higher education.

However, there is limited in quality assurance on the e-learning in Malaysia, especially for private higher education institution. There were many innovations devised by these institutions to gain competitive advantages. Therefore, Ministry of Education had formalised the inception of TQM (total quality management) in Malaysian education system in 1996. In view of this, the National Accreditation Board (Lembaga Akreditasi Negara or LAN) was set up to control the standard and quality of education provided by higher education institutions. Hence, this study would provide vital information about quality assurance in private institutions in the local context and a mechanism to ensure quality in the e-learning environment.

This study investigated the academic team perception on the seven benchmarks of quality assurance of e-learning. The result of this study could be used to improve the quality of e-learning on the academic perception.

1.7 Scope and Limitation of The Study
This study was conducted by taking a small sample of academic staff. Hence, the findings can be true to the context within this study. Any findings from this study cannot be generalised to another private institution. The academic staff who was involved directly or indirectly in this private institution were identified as the respondents in this study.
1.8 Definition of Terms

Academic Team
A group of academic staff, whose tasks were lecturing, developing the course material and conducting assessment either in the traditional classroom or e-learning environment.

Benchmarking
A process, which involves making comparison within the higher education institutions or with other higher education institutions. It also involves examining the critical activities to improve performance and therefore increase effectiveness. (Kelly, 2001)

E-learning (Electronically-mediated Learning)
A term covering a wide set of applications and processes, such as Web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual classrooms, and digital collaboration. It includes the delivery of content via Internet, intranet/extranet (LAN/WAN), audio- and videotape, satellite broadcast, interactive TV, CD-ROM, and more.

Private Higher Education Institution
The Malaysia private higher education institutions offer a wide range of courses leading to the awards of certificate, diploma, bachelor and post-graduate qualifications. They are self-funded and play a major role in providing tertiary education. The medium of instruction is English. The National Accreditation Board (Lembaga Akedritasi Negara or LAN) is a statutory board, which is responsible for governing the standard and quality of education provided by private higher education institution.
Quality Assurance

A system based on examination on the aims, content, resource, levels and projecting outcomes of courses (Cryer, 1993). It is a process of determination, by inspection, of standards and methods (Murgatroyd and Morgan, 1993). It is a measure of the extent to which practice meets certain standards.