OPENING UP HIGHER EDUCATION: QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR INNOVATIVE APPROACHES

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Opening up Higher Education

The rapidly changing world of the 21st century is putting ever-greater pressure on people to acquire the knowledge and skills that will help them live productive and fulfilling lives. Young people realise that higher education is the key to good work opportunities and those already employed understand the need constantly to upgrade their competencies. All this is creating both challenges and opportunities for higher education institutions (HEIs), which are adopting innovative approaches in order to open up to these new demands. HEIs are becoming more 'open to people, open to places, open to methods and open to ideas', in the words of the slogan of the first open university, established almost 50 years ago.

The various ways in which HEIs are opening up pose challenges not only to their own established ways of operating, but also to the systems, both external and internal, that are in place to assure the quality of their provision.

A first way that institutions are opening up is by relaxing, if not completely eliminating, their historic requirements for admission. This is particularly true for admitting older students already in work. It has been proved abundantly that an adult who is determined to acquire new knowledge and skills can very quickly make up the background that was once a pre-requisite for entry to the programme. In such a case older forms of quality assurance, which used the entry qualifications of incoming students as a measure of quality, are clearly irrelevant.

A second avenue for opening up higher education is the adoption of new methods. Distance education is not new, but the Internet, and the new technologies that it spawns almost monthly, have the potential to make it vastly more ubiquitous and effective than it was in the 20th century. Yet older criteria for judging quality, which looked at the facilities on HEI campuses, such as library holdings and laboratory facilities, are much less relevant to this new world.

The curriculum is the third area where HEIs are opening up their provision. The skills and knowledge required for work in the 21st century are constantly changing. In order to prepare their students for these evolving demands HEIs need to engage people from the workforce, who are competent in those areas, to teach them. The great importance of these part-time

instructors means that another traditional criterion for measuring quality in higher education, the qualifications of the full-time academic staff, no longer have quite the same importance.

All this is leading quality assurance systems, which once focussed mainly on inputs to HEIs and then evolved to include reviews of their internal processes for teaching, to focus on the basics. These basics are the students' learning outcomes. No matter what the students' earlier academic backgrounds, no matter what methods were used in the teaching/learning process, the question is, 'what can the students do now that they could not do before they took this course'?

But even that does not capture the full scope of the innovation that is taking place. While all teaching has a purpose and aims to give new skills and knowledge to students, some innovative approaches do not verify what students have acquired in any formal way. Open Educational Resources (OERs) enrich the universe of accessible knowledge in remarkable ways, yet they do not carry external assessment. Similarly most MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) include informal tests and quizzes but most students do not seek to acquire any formal certification of what they have learned. Yet those who produce OERs and MOOCs would like to be able to assure the public that their offerings have been developed in a serious and systematic way and represent the state of the art in the subjects they purport to teach.

All this means that innovative approaches to open up higher education also require new approaches to quality assurance. This paper reports on three projects that respond to this need.

A Quality Platform for Innovative Providers: Focus on Learning Outcomes

The first project is a Quality Platform developed in 2012 by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation/International Quality Group (CHEA/CIQG) as a form of external review of the quality of alternative/innovative providers of higher education that are not part of the traditional higher education systems or quality assurance frameworks. The Quality Platform reviews these providers for their performance and quality and it can be used nationally and internationally. The Platform is designed as a response to an emerging new sector of higher education, offerings from private companies and other organizations, often online, now available alongside the provision of traditional colleges and universities. The primary intent of the Quality Platform is to assure and improve quality as this sector develops and serves more and more students. It is an outcomes-based review using standards established by the Platform, a self-review by the provider and peer (expert) review. If successful, the provider is designated as a *Quality Platform Provider* by CHEA/CIQG for a three-year period.

The Quality Platform is based on four simple standards, summarized as follows:

1. Learning outcomes are articulated and achieved: The provider organizes its work, determines the content of offerings and sets expectations of rigor based on anticipated and actual results for students who enrol: information about gain in skills, competencies or other attributes resulting from a learning experience.

2. Learning outcomes meet postsecondary expectations: The provider demonstrates that the articulated and achieved student learning outcomes are consistent with expectations of student learning at degree-granting colleges and universities.

3. Curricula provide opportunities for successful transfer of credit: For the provider's offerings intended to be used for credit or credentialing at a college or university, the provider: (a) Builds opportunity for student progression beyond its offerings as part of its curriculum development; (b) Organizes offerings into a coherent learning experience that can be sustained across multiple providers of higher education.

4. Transparency is maintained and comparability is established: The provider develops and provides reliable, easily accessible and readily understandable information to the public, at least annually, about its performance: (a) An aggregate description of the student learning outcomes that are achieved; (b) The results of comparisons of performance among similar types of non-institutional providers; (c) An aggregate description of the uses of the offerings to students, for example, advancing toward an educational goal, employment.

The self-review by the provider is based on a template providing evidence that each of the four standards have been met. The self-review is the basis for an external review and a site-visit by a team of experts. The acceptance of the report by CHEA/CIQG is the basis for the award of the Quality Platform Provider Certificate.

Colleges and universities could use the Quality Platform designation as an indicator of quality when considering the award of credit or recognition. Quality assurance agencies could refer the Quality Platform in reviews of these providers that they might conduct.

The Quality Platform was pilot-tested in 2015 with the DeTao Masters' Academy in Shanghai, China. DeTao is a private company set up in 2012 with the aim of developing innovative educational programmes, which go beyond conventional educational approaches and are not part of the traditional higher education system in China. The programmes are designed and implemented with the guidance of teaching staff, most of which are from outside China (designated as *Masters* by DeTao) with distinguished academic or industry backgrounds in a wide variety of disciplines. DeTao works in partnership with the Shanghai Institute of Visual Arts (SIVA) by providing Advanced Classes to a selected number of students. Since DeTao Advanced Classes do not lead to a degree but can be thought of as an enriched major to programmes offered by SIVA, they are not covered by traditional QA frameworks in China nor are they part of the traditional higher education system.

In order to acquire recognition of the quality of their offerings, DeTao applied in April 2015 to CHEA/CIQG to undergo the Quality Platform review. A self-evaluation was carried out by DeTao from June to September 2015, based on the standards of the Quality Platform. After the examination of the Self-Review, an external review team of three members, one from China and two from outside, was set up for the site-visit. Their expertise covered quality assurance processes, learning outcomes and the Chinese evaluation systems. The expert team reviewed the DeTao Advance Class Offering in November 2015 and interviewed different

stakeholders: Masters, teachers, coordinators, students and administrative staff. The expert panel also had an opportunity to see students' work in the exhibition hall of the DeTao building before beginning the interviews and interact informally with students and staff prior to the official review, which proved beneficial. Two members of the panel interviewed one of the leaders of the Shanghai Institute of Visual Arts (SIVA), a partner institution to DeTao Masters' Academy and an external partner to get views from different stakeholders.

The expert team produced a report with recommendations to CHEA. After reviewing the report in December 2015, CHEA awarded DeTao Masters Academy, a Quality Platform provider certificate at a ceremony during the CHEA Annual Conference on 26 January 2016.

The Quality Platform process proved to be very beneficial for DeTao Masters Academy in a number of ways. First, the Self-Review helped DeTao develop a common framework for the Advanced Classes based on learning outcomes. Second, it introduced the concept of learning outcomes as a new approach in China that may well have an impact on future developments in the more traditional approaches to evaluation.

On the basis of this experience, the Quality Platform is now being piloted by CHEA/CIQG with other providers, some of them offering programmes online.

A Guide to Quality in Online Learning

The 13th Babson Report on online learning in the US (Babson, 2016) concludes that distance education is clearly becoming mainstream because more than one-quarter of higher education students are now taking a course online. In addition, one of the positive consequences of MOOCs – and the fact that elite universities around the world engage in them – is that the perception of the quality of online learning is changing.

In view of the above, assuring the quality of online learning is a continuous challenge. This inspired the second project that we report on, the publication of *A Guide to Quality in Online Learning* (Butcher & Wilson-Strydom, 2013) by Academic Partnerships. This Guide distils the extensive existing experience and research on the topic in an easily readable format through 16 Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). FAQ 3: *What constitutes quality in online learning?* summarizes key aspects of quality in the online experience under the headings: institutional support (vision, planning and infrastructure); course development; teaching and learning (instruction); course structure; student support; faculty support; technology; evaluation; student assessment; examination security.

One of the concrete examples provided is the Quality Matters Program (https://www.qualitymatters.org) in the USA, which has established national benchmarks for online courses. Central to the QM is the concept of alignment, which is evident when learning objectives, measures and assessment, educational materials, interaction and engagement of learners, and course technology ensure the achievement of learning objectives.

A strength of this Guide is that it provides other numerous examples from around the world: benchmarks of the Australasian Council on Open Distance an e-Learning (ACODE), guidelines to improve the quality of online offerings by the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) and useful approaches for staff development in support of online learning such as those used by the University of South Africa (UNISA). A very useful Annotated Reading List on Benchmarks further reinforces this Guide to Quality in Online Learning.

A Guide to Quality in Post-Traditional Online Higher Education

Reactions around the world to the 2013 Guide to Quality in Online Learning were very positive. However, since it appeared at a time of intense press coverage of massive open online courses (MOOCs) there was demand to prepare another document to explore quality issues in less formal types of online learning than those covered by the 2013 Guide. In the year that followed alternative, innovative or 'post-traditional' approaches to higher education had continued to multiply. These include a greater openness in access to higher learning and a growing diversification of teaching and learning methods and content, such as MOOCs, OER, Open Badges, Experiential Learning. This led Academic Partnerships to commission the 2014 Guide to Quality in Post-Traditional Higher Education (Butcher & Hoosen, 2014).

The Guide looks at what is meant by post-traditional higher education and reviews the main manifestations of *openness* in higher education before addressing the issue of assuring quality. We shall now look how approaches to the quality assurance of MOOCs and OER in more detail as presented in this Guide and other literature.

QA and MOOCs

The quality assurance of MOOCs is a very topical question, especially at the receiving end in developing countries. Since learners are everywhere, countries want to know which MOOCs would be of greatest value in their contexts. But, because MOOCs do not offer credit and do not lead to qualifications, traditional quality assurance frameworks are not interested in them and do not include them in their reviews.

A MOOC is a Massive Open Online Course. Open Educational Resources were the long fuse that detonated the MOOCs explosion. The fuse was lit when MIT started putting its professors' lecture notes on the Web in the late 1990s. Meanwhile, the University of Manitoba, Canada, first used the term MOOC for a course called *Connectivism and Connective Knowledge* in 2008. Two thousand members of the public took the course free online.

But MOOCs really made news in 2012 when elite American universities like Harvard, Stanford and MIT offered MOOCs based on a very different educational philosophy and pedagogy. Since then there has been a stampede to join the MOOCs craze.

One development is that although they originated in North America, MOOCs are no longer just a North-American phenomenon. A range of MOOC providers is appearing around the world and the languages in which MOOCs are offered are diversifying. European Multiple

MOOC Aggregator (EMMA) and FutureLearn are just some examples of numerous European providers.

Let us now look at how MOOCs – and online learning generally – challenge traditional practices of internal and external quality assurance and accreditation. There is bad news and good news.

The bad news is that since most MOOCs are shorter than normal courses and do not carry credit, most universities have only skimpy academic procedures for giving approval to offer them to a department or an individual. Moreover, since they essentially by-pass internal QA processes, external QA systems have also taken little interest in them – at least so far.

The good news, of course, is these relaxed approval processes give institutions a chance to test innovations without having to submit them for approval to conservative academic governance bodies and engage in the standard intra-institutional bargaining needed to get new initiatives going.

Institutions offering MOOCs – and sometimes also those offering traditional online learning – often partner with external enterprises (both for-profit and not-for-profit) to help them. MOOCs require IT systems that can cope with very large number of learners and those offering traditional programmes online may need help with setting up distance learning systems.

Fresh approaches to quality assurance are needed for the emerging innovations that we call *post-traditional* higher education. These would address innovations such as MOOCs, OER, Open Badges, and the assessment of experiential and prior learning.

To respond to this need, a new initiative has recently been launched: the European Alliance for Quality of Massive Open Online Courses – MOOQ. The main objective of MOOQ is to develop a quality reference framework for the evaluation of MOOCs by integrating different quality approaches.

Quality and OER

The issue of assuring quality of OER is even a greater challenge.

The 2014 Guide begins by quoting Wiley (2013), to the effect that the open licence does not necessarily guarantee that an OER will be *fit for purpose*. The decentralised nature of OER creation remains a major challenge. Key issues are how to make the process more transparent and how quality can be maintained over time. The openness and flexibility of use, modification and re-use of OER further exacerbate this challenge.

Recent research (Orr, Rimini, & van Damme, 2015) demonstrates that different institutions and networks have tried to address the quality assurance of OER. A key requirement seems to be the development of relationships of trust between the producers and the users of OER. Another solution, used by the UK Open University is to release "beta content" and revise the

OER after feedback. Others argue that creating collaborative communities to improve quality and relevance of OER is an efficient way of assuring quality through peer review. The need to adapt learning materials to specific educational contexts is also proposed as a quality requirement.

Aligning OER with common learning standards used in educational systems is another approach used by institutions. One example is the Dutch repository of educational materials, Wikiwijs, which is aligned to learning outcome plans. Another example from the US is the Common Core State Standards, which refer to the expected outcomes in mathematics and English, used, among others, by the Khan Academy's repository for educational resources. A project at the University of Leicester uses fixed quality criteria for OER as does, more comprehensively, the Tidewater Community College in Virginia. The College's policy is based on the requirement that academic staff cannot develop or teach an OER-based course unless they have undergone training and learning outcomes have been specified. Furthermore, any changes of up to 10% of the content of an accredited course require a new quality assurance review.

Despite the practices noted above, concerns about quality remain a barrier to using OER. There is an urgent need to rethink quality assurance mechanisms so as to make them more open and to apply standards for ensuring that what is learnt using OER is recognised in formal education.

Conclusion: Quality rests with the provider

This brings us to our concluding remarks. Opening up higher education has posed challenges to quality assurance and even to the definition of quality in higher education. However, certain fundamental principles underpin all forms of higher education, no matter what the curricula or delivery mode. Seven International Quality Principles were articulated in 2015 by CHEA/CIQG as follows:

1. Quality and higher education providers: Assuring and achieving quality in higher education is the primary responsibility of higher education providers and their staff.

2. Quality and students: The education provided to students must always be of high quality whatever the learning outcomes pursued.

3. Quality and society: The quality of higher education provision is judged by how well it meets the needs of society, engenders public confidence and sustains public trust.

4. Quality and government: Governments have a role in encouraging and supporting quality higher education.

5. Quality and accountability: It is the responsibility of higher education providers and quality assurance and accreditation bodies to sustain a strong commitment to accountability and provide regular evidence of quality.

6. Quality and the role of quality assurance and accreditation bodies: Quality assurance and accreditation bodies, working with higher education providers and their

leadership, staff and students, are responsible for the implementation of processes, tools, benchmarks and measures of learning outcomes that help to create a shared understanding of quality.

7. Quality and change: Quality higher education needs to be flexible, creative and innovative; developing and evolving to meet students' needs, to justify the needs of society and to maintain diversity.

Two principles particularly resonate with the topic of our paper. First, principle 1 states that "assuring and achieving quality in higher education is the primary responsibility of higher education providers and their staff". This applies both to face-to face and online provision of higher education. Quality assurance will have to adapt and become more flexible and creative – as stated in principle 7 – to keep abreast with the dynamic diversification of higher education provision as it opens up in multiple ways.

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