

European Foundation for Quality in eLearning (EFQUEL)

EFQUEL Innovation Forum 2013

Barcelona

26-27 September 2013

Refocusing Quality of eLearning

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Introduction

Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić

It is a pleasure and an honour for Sir John Daniel and me to give the opening address at this important conference. Let us begin by congratulating EFQUEL on great work that it is doing to instil a culture of quality in of eLearning. The principal development in higher education this decade will be the increasing use of eLearning, so your work is central to the future of the academy.

However, universities that move online will not just put old wine into new bottles. Higher education is changing rapidly in its corporate structures, in its curricula and in the qualifications that it offers. Not only delivery systems but the whole higher education enterprise is being re-invented. Many of these changes present challenges about quality.

Our address simply adopts the conference title: *Re-focusing Quality of eLearning*. We shall concentrate on the questions you asked in the conference announcement. Which new and emerging issues are posing special challenges to quality development? Where do we stand today on quality development in eLearning? What is the orientation for the future?

Our address will be in four parts.

I shall begin by exploring some of the new challenges that higher education faces. My key point of reference will be the work of the new International Quality Group that was created last year by the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation, to which I am Senior Advisor on International Affairs. I shall also update you on UNESCO's plans to develop a global convention on the recognition of degrees, to complement the regional recognition conventions that have been in place for many years.

Sir John will present the second and third parts of the address. He will first talk about the trend to give students more flexibility in the design of their courses and programmes. After summarising the evolution of the Open Educational Resource movement that supports this trend, he will note that the Open Educational Resource university be launched at the end of this month.

In part three Sir John will ask where MOOCs are taking us and sift out the positive and negative aspects of this unexpected development. He will conclude that the chief impact of MOOCs will be to increase the offering of regular award-bearing programmes through eLearning in universities generally.

I will come back for part four to give our response to the question ‘where do we stand today on quality development in eLearning?’ I shall present a *Guide to Quality in Online Learning* that was published in English and Chinese in June. Sir John and I were involved as editors. The Guide references work from around the world, including EFQUEL, and copies are available for you at the conference. I shall summarise the highlights of the Guide.

However, since the Guide focuses mainly on fully structured online courses that include student assessment and the awarding of qualifications, I shall also evoke some new tools for quality and certification in various recent “post-traditional” forms of higher education that rely considerably on eLearning.

Part 1: Challenging times for higher education

So let’s look now at some of the challenges that make us rethink traditional notions of quality in higher education.

The key changes affecting higher education have three main causes:

- growing demand for higher education
- inability of the traditional sector to respond
- greater stress on employability and livelihoods

In response, different forms of competency-based education are emerging, often with much shorter cycles of study than we are used to.

The Community College model is well established in some countries but the competency-based principle extends to many alternative ways of learning, some of them offered online with private sector support. MOOCs and OER are other examples of these post-traditional approaches that provide easier access to learning to millions of learners around the world.

The mission of the International Quality Group (IQG) with which I work is the quality implications of such developments. Our provisional term to designate them is ‘post-traditional’ higher education.

To address these emerging challenges to quality the US Council of Higher Education Accreditation, CHEA, launched an International Quality Group (CIQG) in September 2012. Although organised from the US, it has a global outreach and is open to membership from a wide range of higher education stakeholders worldwide. I have the pleasure of being the Senior Advisor on International Affairs to this Group.

It aims to review different interpretations of quality assurance around the world and to respond to quality challenges posed by new forms of provision such as Open Educational Resources or MOOCs and new types of award such as open badges. It questions whether university rankings are a measure of quality, examines graduate employability through the lens of curricular quality and helps to develop benchmarks for cross-border higher education provision. Finally, it asks whether a set of international standards for QA is necessary in our world of growing interconnectedness.

In response to related challenges of change – the diversification of systems, providers and qualifications - UNESCO is now looking at the feasibility of a Global Convention on the recognition of qualifications, which could facilitate the sharing of good practices across the world and responding to the new requirements for credentialing.

For example, Allan Pall, former chair of the European Students Union, addressing the 2012 European Association for International Education Conference, suggested that liberate ourselves from the notion of the degree because employers need people with the right mix of skills and competences to match job requirements. Open badges, which developed alongside the open content movement, could be one new form of higher education qualification. However, so far Open Badges lack the element of quality assurance that is at the heart of our discussions today.

I will return to quality issues after Sir John has talked about OERs and MOOCs.

Sir John Daniel

Part 2: More power to students

Thank you Stamenka. I now ask: how can we give students more flexibility?

Choice of content

We shall look at three facets of this. The first is the idea that students can design the content of their courses and programmes themselves. The second is the open content movement. The third, which draws on both these concepts, is the MOOCs comet that is crossing the sky of higher education. Let's start with the idea of letting students design their own curricula.

In the 1970s, at the same time that the UK Open University opened up access, the great American educator Ernie Boyer, then Chancellor of the State University of New York, set up Empire State College with the aim of opening up the curriculum. It allows students to work with mentors to invent their own courses of study, captured in its slogan 'my degree, my way'. With sound mentoring students can design credible programmes for themselves.

In the last ten years the tools available to students for doing this have expanded dramatically. One reason is the emergence of the open content movement.

The principle of openness is gaining increasing acceptance. Three key steps were the open source software movement, the campaign to give open access to the results of research conducted with public funds and, most recently, Open Educational Resources.

The notion of making academic content freely available for re-use and adaptation made news in the late 1990s when MIT started putting its lecturers' course notes on the Web.

UNESCO held a forum in 2002 to explore the implications of MIT's initiative for developing countries. The Forum coined the term Open Educational Resources (OER) and defined them as educational materials that may be freely accessed, re-used, modified and shared.

Ten years later UNESCO held a World Congress on which approved the Paris Declaration on OER. Its key recommendation is to urge the open licensing of educational materials produced with public funds. Some governments are already taking the Paris Declaration and the economic benefits of OER seriously. For example, my home province of British Columbia will now offer free, online open textbooks for the 40 most popular postsecondary courses.

Clearly, the open availability of a huge pool of quality academic content makes it much easier to achieve Ernie Boyer's dream of a world where students designing curricula to suit their particular needs.

Now a global mechanism to facilitate this has emerged, the Open Education Resource university. This is a partnership of institutions committed to creating pathways for learners using OER and to gain academic credit in the formal education system. The original set of founding partners is steadily growing. Newer members are giving it increasingly global coverage – although it clearly needs more European universities – Its launch event will take place in Canada at the end of next month.

Part 3: Whither MOOCs?

I now move to the third part of our talk: Whither MOOCs? This is a hot topic. We shall be brief and take a position.

The question 'what's a mook?' was asked in Martin Scorsese's 1973 film *Mean Streets*. "Mook" is an obscure English slang term referring to "a foolish, insignificant, or contemptible person". Calling someone a mook in the film led to a punch-up in the bar. The emergence of MOOC as an acronym for Massive Open Online Courses has not quite created a fight among universities but it has certainly spurred competition as universities rush to join the herd.

MOOCs have generated plenty of news media interest in using technology in higher education. The question for us today is how MOOCs will contribute to the

development of online learning generally. Already, as institutions around the world pile in, the definition of a MOOC has become much more fuzzy. One joker commented that every word in the acronym is now negotiable! Let's recall a little history.

The term MOOC was invented in Canada in 2008 to describe an open online course at the University of Manitoba. 25 fee-paying students took the course *Connectivism and Connective Knowledge* on campus and 2,300 other students from the general public took it free online.

The emphasis was on communication and participation and so 'all the course content was available through RSS feeds, and learners could participate with their choice of tools: threaded discussions in Moodle, blog posts, Second Life and synchronous online meetings'. Such courses were a logical development of the Open Educational Resources movement.

These early MOOCs, which are now called cMOOCs (for 'connecting' MOOCs), are very different from the next phase of MOOCs that hit the headlines last year. These are called xMOOCs after edX, the MIT, Harvard and UC Berkeley consortium that offers them. Those first xMOOCs did not have the liberal educational philosophy of the cMOOC courses. Someone said they represented the intersection of Wall Street and Silicon Valley. But MOOCs are now evolving rapidly and we see blending of the cMOOC and xMOOC approaches. How should we think of MOOCs now?

The reason that MOOCs made news was that they were offered by prestigious US universities. You all know that many organisations have been offering MOOC-like learning for years. Open universities in India and China have enrolments in the millions. But those are open universities – when Harvard opened up it was news! The irony of seeing universities with highly selective admission suddenly offering open enrolment intrigued the media. Putting it another way, it was a surprise to see institutions with scarcity at the heart of their business models suddenly embracing openness.

The key issues about MOOCs stem from that fundamental contradiction. Last year no universities gave degree credit for the successful completion of a MOOC. They did not want to decrease the rarity value of their degrees.

This leads to some silly situations.

MIT's first MOOC received a lot of scrutiny. There was much criticism of the enormous dropout rate. Less than 5% passed the course. Anant Agrawal, the course leader, said that the final exam was 'very hard'. He pointed out that although very few people passed the MOOC, it would take 40 years for that number of students to pass the course on campus.

Reporters discovered that among the 340 people who got a perfect score in the exam was a 15-year old Mongolian boy. He has now been admitted to MIT as a regular student. I was at MIT for a conference in June and I asked if he would be given credit for the

course in which he had gained full marks. They told me that he would have to take the course again because ‘studying on campus was different’. Do you find that reasonable? It seems ridiculous to me.

All MOOCs have high dropout rates and very low pass rates. The figures may improve over time but it is a serious problem. Of course, a key reason for these dismal figures is that the courses are open and free. But another reason for high dropout was that unlike the cMOOCs, which were all about student participation and connectedness, the early xMOOCs adopted an old-fashioned teacher-based behaviourist pedagogy using short videos and quizzes.

One reporter who took a MOOC said: ‘it seems pretty obvious that no one who had any working knowledge of research in pedagogy was deeply involved in the creation of the course’ That was because constructing the courses like this with little videos made fewer demands on the research-focused academics at these universities. You all know that producing good distance learning courses and supporting the students who take them is a lot of work.

Another paradox is that, so far, there is no business model for MOOCs. They cost money to produce, even when done cheaply. Universities must pay to put them on robust servers, since the systems required to manage tens of thousands of learners are beyond the capability of most institutions. But since MOOCs are free to learners there is no direct revenue stream for the universities. The elite universities that began the MOOCs craze have large endowments and deep pockets, but even they – and to an increasing extent their academic staff – are now asking why are doing MOOCs. Professor Tony Bates, an astute observer of the educational technology scene, predicts a shake out in 2014.

So where will MOOCs lead higher education? There is good news and bad news. Positive aspects are that the press coverage of MOOCs and their offering by elite institutions has created greater public awareness of open, distance and online learning. A new pedagogy is emerging to replace lecturing. The bad news is that few people complete MOOCs successfully and that even they do not get credit. Furthermore, without a revenue stream, the universities offering them have little incentive to make their courses better.

These pros and cons bring us back to the fundamental contradiction of MOOCs. This is the tension between offering online learning openly while recruiting regular students selectively. The key to graduating with a degree from elite institutions is to be admitted at the start. It is more difficult to get admitted than to exit with a degree. To adopt the opposite open-university principle of open admission and rigorous exit requirements would require a tremendous paradigm shift.

So how do we exit from the MOOCs maze? It seems to us very simple – and it is already happening. MOOCs should be seen as a pilot project for the offering of regular credit programmes online at scale. eLearning has been spreading steadily for years and its

growth has been well documented by Tony Bates in his annual surveys of the scene. He believes that 2013 is a breakthrough year for both the volume and the quality of regular online offerings.

We don't have precise figures for the students taking courses online because many universities do not report them separately. However, it is likely that 80% of US students will take some of their courses online next year. So in the world as a whole the number of students taking regular courses online is probably already larger than those taking MOOCs, although the MOOC numbers attract most of the attention. Furthermore, the transition from MOOCs to offering regular courses online seems to be happening already. Some of the new MOOCs players offer a different experience. Most are rather secretive but here are some.

FutureLearn is the ambitious British MOOCs platform that was launched last week. It claims to bring much better pedagogy to MOOCs and will also give credible recognition to student learning.

OpenUpEd is a venture of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities and offers 60 courses in 12 languages. We presume that some carry credit.

Schoo is a Japanese MOOC platform, funded with venture capital, which aims to have one million learners by the end of December.

Open2Study is a partnership of eight Australian universities offering an eclectic range of courses.

Veduca in Brazil offers a MOOC from the University of Sao Paulo and curates educational videos from the US, with subtitles in Portuguese.

Iversity offers ten MOOCs in Germany and gives prizes for the best proposals.

NPTEL, in India, brings together the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology and Science (IITs and IISc). It already offers 200 courses, has 1,000 planned and will certify students on a large scale.

So let me end by asking what must happen for MOOCs to stimulate rapid developments in the teaching of regular programmes online?

The simple answer is that universities must develop policies for doing that and execute them determinedly. Most MOOCs universities have partners, either commercial organisations such as Coursera or non-profit bodies or consortia such as edX and FutureLearn. They need a partner because operating MOOCs at scale requires IT systems that no single university, except possibly the larger open universities, can handle. When an institution offers regular programmes online with course enrolments in the thousands rather than the tens of thousands such partnerships may not be required – but may be desirable anyway. I hand you back to Stamenka to talk about that.

Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić

Part 4: Quality development in eLearning

Various organisations partner with universities to help them offer courses online. We are both advisors to one of these, Academic Partnerships or AP. We took on this role because AP's mission to increase access to quality higher education at low cost matches our own values.

AP's aim is to lead students into online award-bearing programmes and have them graduate at rates at least as good as those of the students on campus. The foci of AP's contribution are quality and viability. This means the quality of the transformation of courses into online formats, the effectiveness of the organisation of student support, and the viability of a model with lower tuition fees and larger enrolments.

In this spirit AP commissioned *A Guide to Quality in Online Learning*. Two distinguished South African experts, Neil Butcher and Merridy Wilson-Strydom wrote the Guide, which Sir John and I edited. It was published in June in English and Chinese. We are very pleased that it carries a Creative Commons CC-BY-SA licence. So it is an OER that you can translate, adapt, distribute and use as you like. Copies are available to you at this conference.

A Guide to Quality in Online Learning

Let me give you a brief overview of the Guide

It is structured in the form of answers to 16 Frequently Asked Questions, followed by an Annotated Reading List giving Benchmarks for Quality in Online Learning and some 95 endnotes.

Online learning can be defined in various ways and often refers to any learning that involves the Internet, ranging from iTunes university content, digital textbooks, and video or audio materials, through informal teaching (such as Massive Open Online Courses – MOOCs) to fully structured online courses that include assessments and the award of a qualification. This Guide focuses on structured online learning that includes student assessment and awards.

We noted that institutions often enter into partnerships with commercial enterprises to support their online learning programmes. The MOOCs universities, for example, partner with companies such as Coursera, Udacity, FutureLearn or U2 Global. For universities that decide to offer a selection of their regular programmes online, companies such as Academic Partnerships offer services from course conversion, through student recruitment and mentoring, to technical support. The Guide stresses, however, that in all these partnerships the higher education institution that offers the course must take full responsibility for its quality.

The Guide proposes that quality in online learning is a process of co-production between the online environment and the student, with the student perspective taken as the starting point of quality development. Assuring quality requires, first and foremost, institutional vision, commitment, leadership, and sound planning. The online learning policy must match the overall vision and mission of the institution and this must also embrace any partnerships involved.

The Guide quotes various benchmarks for institutional policies on online learning such as the Australasian Council on Open, Distance and eLearning (ACODE), the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) and the University of South Africa, UNISA. The Guide urges the creation of structures for both quality assurance and the continuing professional development of academic and other staff involved in online operations.

One section of the Guide suggests criteria that students can use to judge the quality of an online course before they decide to enrol in it. Issues of most importance to students are tutorial support, reliable technology and clear information.

OERs can be a source of quality content on many topics. For example, OER Africa offers good materials in agriculture, health and teacher training. Other collections of OERs are IGNOU's FlexiLearn repository and the Open University's OpenLearn.

Audio-visual media can improve quality and facilitate learning and retention. A rich pool of resources is available on YouTube, iTunesU, OpenLearn, the Khan Academy, TED talks and so on. But such media must be fully integrated into the course design – not just used as a non-essential addition to entertain the students.

Assessing student achievement is a basic component of structured online learning. It should be aligned with the learning outcomes in the instructional design process. Examination security is important in quality online learning, although it is also a challenge for classroom instruction. There is now a range of technologies to assist in this, such as web cameras, computer identification, and finger scans. Various software programmes can detect plagiarism, although it is better to prevent it rather than checking to detect it. Online assessments can be designed to reduce plagiarism.

Interaction with and among students is important in online learning. The Guide provides techniques for creating a sense of community using such tools as Facebook, Google docs, Twitter, blogs and wikis. Effective interaction requires clarity of purpose, small groups, monitoring and support from the institution and a policy on etiquette.

We summarise all this by saying that in online learning, more than in classroom teaching, the responsibility for quality must be shared right across the institution. The extensive literature referenced at the end of the Guide provides ample material for further reading.

What about the quality assurance of informal online offerings such as MOOCs, OERs, experiential learning and other innovations that are emerging worldwide? We believe it

that both new course formats and new qualifications require fresh approaches to quality assurance.

As Open Badges become a new way of credentialing, these and other aspects of post-traditional education require new tools to assess quality. As post-traditional approaches grow they may emerge as a significant sector of higher education serving large numbers of students. Students, colleges and universities, employers, governments and the public will need reliable information about quality.

The US Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is looking at developing a “quality platform” to review the quality of post-traditional provision. Such reviews would begin by judging the provision against its primary purposes: what is it offering to the student? They could use standards to judge the provider’s success with regard to student learning and might benchmark the capacity of provider and its performance in relation to comparable providers. Peers with expertise in this non-traditional sector would conduct the reviews. A provider that successfully completes the review would be identified as a “Quality Platform Provider.”

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.

Conclusion

We shall leave it there. We have avoided excited talk about a revolution. Evolution rather than revolution is the historic pattern for universities. Nevertheless, as higher education reaches a larger proportion of a growing world population it is effervescing with new approaches. Today we have been concerned with new quality assurance mechanisms that can give them credibility necessary for students can try them with confidence.