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Innovative forms of Quality Assurance for Innovative Programmes
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Institutions are being urged to innovate in the provision of higher education, notably through online delivery, while some governments are encouraging the emergence of new providers. Quality assurance systems have been slow to catch up, so this burst of innovation is being restrained by having to satisfy QA criteria designed for an earlier era.

We report on three initiatives that address this challenge. First, the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation, through its International Quality Group (CHEA/CIQG), has designed and pilot tested a 'Quality Platform'. This was expressly conceived for innovative higher education provision - variously described as 'non-institutional' or 'post-traditional'.

Although quality higher education is quality higher education in whatever form it takes, designing a QA system for innovative provision means focussing on the most essential criteria. For the Quality Platform these centre on the articulation and achievement of student learning outcomes. We describe the pilot implementation of the Quality Platform at the DeTao Masters Academy in China, an organisation conducting high-level training outside China's conventional higher education system.

The other two initiatives are guides of more general applicability written in the form of Frequently Asked Questions. One, *A Guide to Quality in Online Learning*[3]*,* addresses the use of online technology in regular credit programmes. The other, *A Guide to Quality in Post-Traditional Online Higher Education*[4]*,* addresses the challenge of QA for more informal approaches such as MOOCs and OERs.

After some comments about combatting corruption in higher education, which is becoming an increasing concern for quality assurance systems we end by citing the Seven International Principles of Quality developed by CHEA/CIQG.

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[4] http://www.academicpartnerships.com/sites/default/files/Guide-OnlineHigherEd.PDF

Introduction

The various ways in which higher education is innovating in its quest to reach larger numbers of learners and promote equity pose challenges not only to HEIs' established ways of operating, but also to the systems, both external and internal, that assure the quality of their provision.

Quality assurance systems, which once focussed mainly on inputs to HEIs and later evolved to include reviews of their internal processes for teaching, are now concentrating on the basics, which 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 vital question is, 'what can the students do now that they could not do before they took this course'?

Even that approach, however, 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 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 quality assurance needs to find news ways to adapt to innovative providers and programmes of higher education. This paper reports on four developments that relate to this need.

A Quality Platform for Innovative Providers: Focus on Learning Outcomes

The first project is a Quality Platform developed in 2013 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 (CHEA, 2015).

The Quality Platform was designed in 2013 as a tool to measure learning outcomes from MOOCs and other alternative providers. It reviews these providers for their performance and quality and it can be used both 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 enroll: 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: 1) Builds opportunity for student progression beyond its offerings as part of its curriculum development; 2) 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: 1) An aggregate description of the student learning outcomes that are achieved; 2) The results of comparisons of performance among similar types of non-institutional providers; 3) 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. This 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 whom 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.

DeTao applied to undergo the Quality Platform review in April 2015 and conducted a self-evaluation from June to September 2015, based on the standards of the Quality Platform. An expert team held a site visit in November 2015 and 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 (CHEA, 2016).

The Quality Platform process had proved to be very beneficial for the DeTao Masters Academy in a number of ways. First, conducting the Self-Review helped DeTao to develop a common framework for its 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 student evaluation.

On the basis of this experience, the CHEA/CIQG Quality Platform is now being piloted by the US Department od Education (USDE) as part of a new experimental programme, Equip (the Educational Quality through Innovative Partnerships), designed to counterbalance the "inflexible and unaffordable options" of traditional higher education for those who need it most, working adults and other non-traditional students.

CHEA will also be the evaluator for a partnership between the Dallas County Community College System and the company StraighterLine that provides low-cost courses across several disciplines. Together they will offer two associate-degree programmes aimed at students who have already earned some college credits (Blumenstyk, 2016).

A Guide to Quality in Online Learning

The 13th Babson Report on online learning in the US (Babson, 2016) concludes that distance education now 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 our second development, the publication of "A Guide to Quality in Online Learning" (Butcher et al. 2013). This Guide distils extensive experience and research into an easily readable format through 16 Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). FAQ 3: *What constitutes quality in online learning?* summarises key aspects of quality in the online experience under the headings of: institutional support (vision, planning &infrastructure); course development; teaching and learning (instruction); course structure; student support; faculty support; technology; evaluation; student assessment and examination security.

One of the concrete examples cited is the Quality Matters Programme (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 by the University of South Africa (UNISA). A 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 from 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), the editors were asked to commission another document to explore quality issues in less formal types of online learning than those covered by the 2013 Guide. In 2013-14 alternative, innovative or 'post-traditional' approaches to higher education continued to multiply. These included wider, more open and more equitable access to higher learning and a growing diversification of teaching and learning methods and content, such as MOOCs, OER, Open Badges, Experiential Learning, etc. This led to the 2014 Guide to Quality in Post-Traditional Higher Education. (Butcher et al, 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 use the quality assurance of MOOCs and OER as examples.

QA and MOOCs

The quality assurance of MOOCs is a very topical question in developing countries. Since learners are everywhere, countries want to know which MOOCs would be of

greatest value for them. But, because MOOCs do not offer credit and do not lead to qualifications, traditional quality assurance frameworks do not include them in their reviews.

A MOOC is a Massive Open Online Course and 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 and MOOCs are no longer just a North-American phenomenon. A range of MOOC providers has appeared around the world and MOOCs are now offered in many languages. European Multiple MOOC Aggregator (EMMA) and FutureLearn are just some examples of European providers.

How do 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. 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.

A recent publication by UNESCO and COL (2016), *Making Sense of MOOCs: A Guide for Policy-Makers in Developing Countries* addresses the issue of QA and MOOCs. It recommends including them in existing QA frameworks, especially those designed for ODL. Some European tools such as e-Excellence and OpenupEd are put forward as possible models. However, it is clear that this remains a challenge.

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, OERs Open Badges, and the assessment of experiential and prior learning.

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 (OECD, 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.

Quality and Corruption

Finally, we offer some comments on corruption in academic processes. Historically the risk of corrupt practices has not been a significant focus of either external or internal quality assurance. However, alarmed by the increasing frequency of press reports on corrupt practices in higher education, the International Quality Group of the US Council

for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA/CIQG) joined forces with UNESCO to convene an international expert group to review this threat in March 2016. Its Advisory Statement noted that: 'dishonest practices are undermining the quality and credibility of higher education around the world' (CHEA/UNESCO, 2016).

It is somewhat ironic to discuss corruption in this forum about open, distance and online learning because times have changed greatly in recent decades. Historically, conventional campus institutions used to accuse correspondence education, the older form of distance learning, of dubious ethical practices in areas such as fees policy and the verification of student identity. Today, however, the CHEA/UNESCO Advisory Statement on corruption makes little mention of distance learning. There are several reasons for this.

First, bribery and favouritism in admissions processes are a notable form of corruption in campus institutions. Many distance-learning programmes, both formal and informal, do not have selective admissions criteria, which eliminates this problem.

Second, all higher education institutions (HEIs) are now using online technologies, especially in student assessment. To the extent that ODL institutions 'got there first' they have a longer history of addressing the threats of dishonest practice that online technology makes possible. The guides to quality in online higher education, both traditional and post-traditional, which we cited earlier, address these threats in all aspects of the teaching and learning process.

We strongly suggest that ODL institutions check their operating practices against the matrix of effective preventive actions in the CHEA/UNESCO Advisory Statement, but well-run ODL institutions should not need to be defensive about the issue of corruption.

Conclusion: Quality rests with the Provider

In conclusion, promoting equity by 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 (CHEA/CIQG, 2015):

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 and promotes equitable access to greater number of learners.

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