The Recognition of Open Learning – Two Approaches towards Quality and Transparency

The CIQG Quality Platform: Background and Context

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Introduction

It is a pleasure for Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić and me to be here in Crete for this Efquel-LINQ conference.

We are delighted to contribute to this workshop on two approaches to Quality and Transparency in the Recognition of Open Learning. She and I will divide our part of the presentation into two.

I will set the stage with some history of the openness movement in higher education and note briefly the two quality guides that we have helped to produce in the last year with Academic Partnerships. The first had its European launch at last year's Efquel conference and the new one is being launched here.

Stamenka will show how the move to greater openness is leading to the unbundling of higher education and talk about the Quality Platform for Post-Traditional Higher Education that is being developed by the International Quality Group of the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

Allow me first, as a forty-year veteran of open learning to recall a little history. I shall not take you back to the origins of open learning, which I identify with St. Paul's epistles to the churches around the Mediterranean in the first century. This workshop is about the recognition of open learning and St. Paul left the recognition of the achievements of those who studied his letters to God.

But formal recognition of open learning does go back a good way. Over 150 years ago London University created its External Programme, dubbed the People's University. To gain recognition all you had to do was challenge the examination. How you acquired the necessary knowledge was your business. Five graduates of the London University External Programme went on to get Nobel prizes, which is a strong endorsement of the combination of open learning and credible recognition.

We have come a long way since then. Another milestone in open learning was the creation of the Open University in 1969, with its motto of being 'open to people, open to places, open to methods and open to ideas'. In the late 1990s the Open University offered its first fully online course and since the turn of the century most universities have begun to offer some of their regular credit courses online. For most it was not a priority and they

did not do it very well. Nevertheless, growth was steady and by 2011 there were 6.7 million students studying online in the US. Putting it another way, studies estimate that 80% of US students will be taking at least one online course this year.

Stamenka and I both act as Senior Advisors to Academic Partnerships, a company that helps universities to take programmes online and to ensure that they are of high quality and can operate at scale.

In this context we edited *A Guide to Quality in Online Learning* written in South Africa by Neil Butcher and Merridy Wilson-Strydom. It was published in English and Chinese and its European launch was at the Efquel conference last year. It also respected the spirit of the times by carrying a Creative Commons CC-BY-SA license.

But of course, alongside the steady growth of online learning for regular courses there has been an effervescence of new developments, of which MOOCs are the most newsworthy but probably not the most significant.

The three most important drivers of these developments are technological – the innovative potential of new technology; societal – the global growth of unemployment accompanied by skills shortages; and financial – as institutions struggle to make ends meet using the old economic model of higher education.

We group these new developments together under the term 'post-traditional higher education' which is not perfect but we haven't found a better one.

Last year's *Guide to Quality in Online Learning* was very well-received around the world, but since its publication coincided with intense news coverage of MOOCs some readers asked us for another Guide to help them with the quality issues raised by such new developments.

Neil Butcher offered his services again and with co-author Sarah Hoosen wrote a new text that Stamenka and I have edited. This conference sees the European launch of this *Guide to Quality in Post-Traditional Online Higher Education.* Once again it has appeared simultaneously in English and Chinese with a CC-BY-SA license. Copies of the English version are available at this conference.

I said that the drivers of the new developments that we call post-traditional higher education are social, financial and technological. But idealism and principles are vital components too. The key principle is that education is a human right, which has been expressed in the long and increasingly successful campaign to emancipate the people of the world by making education available to all. This principle and this campaign are the foundations of the new paradigm of openness that is emerging in education.

Some of its expressions are open source software, open data, open access to research results, and open content available as open educational resources.

There is no doubt that the notion of openness has made huge strides recent decades.

Many Learning Management Systems are now based on open source software and rival the popularity of their commercial counterparts. More and more governments and funding bodies are insisting on open access to the results of the research that they fund. Open Educational Resources are multiplying and the trend to create open textbooks is gathering momentum.

But before we conclude that the battle for openness has been won we should pause to consider the arguments made by Martin Weller in his paper *The Battle for Open – A Perspective* in a recent issue of the *Journal of Interactive Media Education.* He agrees that many battles for openness have been won, but warns us against declaring victory in the larger war. He makes interesting comparisons with the green movement, pointing out that when green perspectives come to be taken for granted commercial interests move in and twist the language to serve their own purposes.

In a telling passage he says: 'There is a battle for narrative taking place which circles around the issue of openness. An example of this is the recurrent 'education is broken' meme, and the related Silicon Valley narrative for education. These both seek to position higher education as a simple content industry, akin to the music business, and therefore can provide a simple, technological solution to this supposedly broken system. These narratives are often accepted unchallenged and deliberately ignore higher education's role or simplify the functions of higher education.'

This quotation is a good lead in to this session on the recognition of open learning and a good moment to hand you over to Stamenka.

Stamenka

One of the most serious ways that current discourse simplifies the role and functions of higher education is by missing out a vital component. The hype about MOOCs is a good illustration. MOOCs are not really higher education. Higher education is not just about teaching and learning. Its essential feature is the assessment of students and the awarding of credits or credentials. The power to award credentials is the most important responsibility that societies give to their higher education institutions. But MOOCs do not yet lead to credentials in most cases.

Most of us are here because we believe that learning should be recognised if learners so desire. The challenge is to recognise learning acquired through processes that, in the spirit of the paradigm of openness, are inherently flexible and changeable.

But recognising learning does not mean that everyone has to get degrees. Indeed, at the 2012 conference of the European Association for International Education, Allan Pall, who was then president of the European Students Union, talked about the death of the degree. He argued that higher learning should focus more on validating students' learning outcomes so that employers have access to the right mix of skills and competences to match labour market needs.

In Europe, the Strategy 2020 places a special emphasis on education and training. The new Erasmus + programme has as its first objective to promote skills and competences for all programmes. In a similar trend, the UK QAA Quality Code has a special chapter on the assessment of prior learning and has set up a working group to look at how to assure non-traditional provision such as MOOCs.

The challenges posed by the recognition of post-traditional higher education link into the wider trend of the 'unbundling' of higher education. Different organisations can now take responsibility for the various components of the process of higher education. Teaching content is now widely available as Open Educational Resources and MOOCs, various organisations offer learning support, both in person and over the Internet, while a wide range of institutions provide credentials in recognition of competence.

New types of awards are emerging. One example is Open badges, which are placed on the Web, and carry more information about what was studied and how it was assessed than the usual university transcript. They allow learners to get recognition for short-cycle studies on economically relevant topics and to aggregate a series of badges into a conventional qualification such as a degree or a diploma.

Open badges are being adopted in other parts of the world and a private company, the DeTao Masters Academy in Beijing is developing its own Open Badges as a credential for two innovative courses that began being offered last semester in partnership with the Shanghai Institute of Visual Arts.

Which brings us to another trend - partnerships between the public and private sectors.

One example of a private company active in such linkages is Academic Partnerships, which is active in two areas. Sir John noted that they help universities to take high demand programmes online. They are also promoting 'specialisations' as a new global qualification. The concept brings together the previous trends we have mentioned. Specialisations are short online programmes leading to credentials closely aligned to labour-market needs. The specialisations are developed by well-known institutions and can be offered locally by partner universities around the world.

Obviously this process of diversification in higher education poses challenges for quality assurance. How can students be sure that the services they are paying for are reputable and effective?

We have already mentioned the *Guide to Quality in Post-Traditional Online Higher Education* that is having its European launch here. The Guide stresses that

quality assurance for Post-Traditional Higher Education – like its various manifestations – is a work in progress. It is too early for hard and fast rules.

Nevertheless, we need to take this very seriously. Fraudsters either operating bogus institutions or accreditation bodies or offering counterfeit certificates of legitimate credentials are already a plague on traditional formal higher education. The diversification of credentials offers even more scope for such criminals to deceive people.

Some years ago UNESCO worked with CHEA, the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation, on a document aimed at discouraged degree mills. Today I am working as Senior Advisor on International Affairs to CHEA. In this capacity I helped CHEA to launch an International Quality Group last year. Although organised from the US, it has a global outreach and is open to membership from a wide range of higher education stakeholders worldwide. Brochures about the International Quality Group are available at this conference.

Under the leadership of CHEA President Judith Eaton, CHEA's International Quality Group is addressing the quality assurance of informal online offerings such as MOOCs, OERs, experiential learning and other innovations that we call post-traditional higher education. It believes that both new course formats and new qualifications require fresh approaches to quality assurance.

The primary mission of CIQG is to promote policy dialogue on these emerging challenges to quality assurance in an international perspective.

One important function is the publication of its newsletter, *Quality International*. Another is developing policy briefs on topical issues in quality assurance and accreditation worldwide.

In addition, annual meetings, organised as a back-to-back event with the CHEA Annual Conference offer a dynamic forum for exchange on cutting edge issues around the world. Last year's meeting addressed current global practices in quality, the future of quality assurance as well as emerging issues such as OER, MOOCs and Open Badges. The 2014 annual meeting focused on the theme "Imperatives for quality assurance: international standards and innovation."

A highlight was a session devoted to quality assurance of post-traditional higher education with Ulf-Ehlers, Allan Pall and higher education lawyer Mike Goldstein. The session stressed that post-traditional higher education is characterized by more individualised study trajectories for students, which requires greater openness on the part of the institutions.

This challenges conventional approaches to quality assurance and therefore the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is developing, through its International Quality Group a "quality platform" to review the quality of post-traditional provision.

The overall aim is to facilitate judgements on the performance and effectiveness of post-traditional higher education. Such provision has diverse aims so these reviews would begin by judging the provision against its primary purposes: what is it offering to the student? Is the aim the award of degrees or not? Is the learning experience at the appropriate level?

They could use standards to judge the provider's success with regard to student learning and might benchmark the capacity of the 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 to the Quality Platform in reviews of these providers that they might conduct.

The CIQG Quality Platform is very much a work in progress. We shall shortly be piloting its use in a diversity of institutions, among which I note the DeTao Masters' Academy in China where we will look at the use of Open Badges as mentioned earlier.

I very much look forward to the discussion of this alongside the project of the Learning Passport in order to explore the possible complementarities and suggest improvements.