

6th International Conference on Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Africa

Accra, Ghana
15-19 September 2014

Quality Assurance in African Higher Education: What focus?

Sir John Daniel, OC
<odlsirjohn@gmail.com>

These are turbulent times for higher education everywhere and Africa faces special challenges. The address will explore these challenges and suggest that with the diversification of programmes and delivery methods quality assurance must focus particularly on student assessment and the credibility of credentials.

Introduction

It is an honour to have been asked to give a keynote at this 6th International Conference and Workshops on Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Africa. I begin by congratulating Professor Peter Okebukola and the organising committee for a wonderful job and I express my special gratitude to its members for the way they rallied around to ensure that I got my visa for Ghana. During my twelve years services at UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning helping people get visas became an increasingly challenging aspect of our work. It seems that visa requirements are becoming more and more onerous and are posing a real barrier to academic mobility, even for short meetings like this one.

I much regret that the Ebola epidemic forced a change of venue from Ghana to Burundi and made my attendance impossible, but I am pleased to see that most of the African delegates have been able to make the switch. Congratulations on getting together such a diverse group of eminent higher education experts.

Two years ago the Association of Commonwealth Universities, the ACU, which many of you know well, celebrated its centenary. To mark the event the ACU published a book called *Universities of for a New World: Making a Global Network in International Higher Education*. Your meeting represents one important facet of that network, the Global University Network for Innovation, which is led with great panache by Professor Peter Okebukola.

Another distinguished Nigerian colleague, Professor Michael Omolewa, contributed a chapter to that ACU book entitled *Out of Africa: The University Ideal faces Challenge and Change*. My colleague Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić and I also contributed a chapter to the book. Our title was: *Question: Will eLearning disrupt Higher Education? Answer: Massively*.

These titles of books and chapters remind us that higher education – and particularly higher education in Africa – is awash with challenge, change, disruption, and innovation. In keeping with the theme of these meetings I shall focus on the

implications of all this turbulence for quality assurance. My title is *Quality Assurance in African Higher Education: What Focus?*

There must often have been times when, viewed from Africa, higher education in the rest of the world looked remarkably peaceful and stable compared to academic life here. That situation has now changed dramatically. Gone are the days when western universities were supremely confident of the correctness – even the righteousness – of their approach to academic life.

I savour a quotation from Sir Eric Ashby's about colonial higher education in Africa. He wrote: 'the British had 'an invincible confidence in the efficacy of British education, not only for Englishmen but also for Indians, Africans, and Malaysians and—for that matter—Americans'.

Those days are over!

Facing turbulence and challenge everywhere, higher education is changing on many dimensions. What lessons can we draw for quality assurance in Africa?

A Crisis of Youth Employment

Many places around the world have not yet emerged from the global economic crisis that began six years ago. Perhaps the worst feature of this crisis is the high rate of youth unemployment. Last year *The Economist* newspaper devoted a major article to this topic. It gave some alarming figures.

This chart shows the millions of young people who are neither employed nor in education or training. It may not feel like it to you, but Sub-Saharan Africa is doing less badly than most other regions. About one fifth of your young people are inactive on these definitions. Only the OECD and the East Asia and Pacific region fare better. But that still makes for a lot of idle hands in Africa as elsewhere. *The Economist* calculated that the world total of inactive young people is nearly 300 million – or one quarter of the world's youth. Yet at the same time employers complain that they cannot find graduates with the right skills and competences. There is a serious gap between education and the job market.

Young people themselves know that the best way to avoid being part of this problem is to get as full an education as possible. The result is huge demand for higher education, which was identified as the greatest contemporary challenge at UNESCO's World Conference of Higher Education that our colleague Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić organised in 2009.

But *The Economist* believes that we can surmount these challenges. Its article concluded: "Policymakers know what to do to diminish the problem – ignite growth, break down cartels and build bridges between education and work. New technology gives them powerful tools too."

So what is higher education doing to build bridges between education and work and to use some of these powerful tools that technology provides?

The first response is diversification of providers and provision. The elite, so-called ‘world class’ universities, that we might like to see our own children attend are now a tiny minority of higher education institutions. Vibrant new providers more focused on developing skills and competencies are multiplying. The private for-profit sector is playing an increasing role and nearly all providers are engaged in teaching online, some of them across borders. We also see the emergence of less formal approaches that we shall call ‘post-traditional’ higher education. They offer new curricula and shorter qualifications to try and address directly the mismatch between higher education and the labour market.

These trends are strongly inter-related. Discussing any one of them leads quickly to the others. It is rather like pulling on one noodle in an overcooked bowl of spaghetti. But you have to start somewhere, so I shall start with the developing role of technology in higher education, not because technology is determining the nature of changes in curricula and qualifications but because it is speeding up these changes.

Opening up higher education.

We often think of technology as a new phenomenon in higher education that started with the Internet. But technology has been transforming higher education for years. It was 50 years ago this year that British Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced his intention of creating a University of the Air. Its planners decided to call it the Open University, stressing its purpose rather than its technology, and it opened for business a few years later.

Today the Open University has 200,000 enrolled students. Yet despite its size it ranks 5th, one place above Oxford, for the quality of its teaching. This table represents the final aggregate of ten years of assessment of teaching quality, discipline by discipline. Moreover, in last year’s nationwide survey of students’ satisfaction with their universities the Open University came top. It has never come lower than third in this annual survey. I conclude from the history of the Open University that you can use technology to deliver high-quality education to large numbers.

The Open University was relatively conventional in its curricular approach: the academics designed the courses and the assessments. But today there are opportunities for students to design their own curricula and institutions offer them a variety of forms of assessment to match. This is not just a fancy liberal idea but reflects the flexibility that our times require.

New technology is unleashing a storm of ‘disruptive innovation’ that forces many workplaces to redesign jobs constantly. Higher education cannot adapt fast enough. Students alert to the changing world around them may be better than universities at seeing opportunities and identifying the skills needed to take advantage of them.

A particularly important tool for this purpose is 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 and in 2002 UNESCO held a forum to explore the implications of this for

developing countries. The Forum coined the term Open Educational Resources defined them as educational materials that may be freely accessed, re-used, modified and shared.

In 2012 UNESCO held a World Congress to mark a decade of OER. It approved by acclamation the Paris Declaration, which included a set recommendations on OER. The key recommendation – the punch line of the Declaration – encouraged the open licensing of educational materials produced with public funds. Some governments are taking the Paris Declaration and the economic benefits of OER seriously. For example, my own home province of British Columbia now offers free, online open textbooks for the most popular postsecondary courses. This saves students in those courses around \$150 a term.

Making sense of MOOCs

Open Education Resources were also the long fuse that detonated the MOOCs explosion, which caught the attention of the media more than OER themselves. What are we to make of Massive Open Online Courses?

In the beginning – which was only two years ago – some elite US universities began offering simple teaching videos over the Internet to very large numbers of people around the world. Their first courses often attracted over 100,000 learners each and the news media proclaimed a revolution in higher education. Although the term MOOC had been invented in Canada a few years earlier for a very different kind of free course that required intense online interaction between learners and much use of OER, the press focused on the simpler American version and introduced the term MOOC into the vocabulary of higher education worldwide.

This generated a remarkable copycat phenomenon. Since 2012 thousands of MOOCs have been developed by hundreds of institutions. However, with so many providers piling in to offer them, the definition of a MOOC has become much more fuzzy. Someone remarked that the meaning of every letter in the acronym MOOC is now negotiable! But in terms of the global economic and youth unemployment crises, this diversification is helpful. As MOOCs multiply they could reinforce some helpful trends. Many of those taking the early MOOCs already had university degrees, so they first provided informal professional development for well-qualified people.

Two things are needed to make MOOCs more widely useful. First, we need MOOCs in employment-related topics at all levels. Second, people need credible qualifications for successful study. Both are happening. The range of topics is diversifying fast and various bodies are giving recognition for MOOCs, even where they did not offer the course themselves.

The impact of MOOCs

Three trends are being accelerated by MOOCs.

The first is the move to online learning. Until recently online learning, like the rest of distance learning, was considered to be of low quality. Often this was simply a

dogmatic belief held by traditionalists. I showed earlier, using the example of the UK Open University that, done properly, distance teaching can be of higher quality than classroom lecturing. However, the rush of Harvard, MIT, Stanford and company into online learning has shaken the traditional belief that distance learning is inferior. Online teaching and learning is now part of the future of most universities.

The second trend is towards shorter courses. Online courses work best – that is to say students succeed better – if they are between five and six weeks in duration. This favours intense concentration on a particular topic.

We also note a third, related trend. The qualifications that define the output of higher education are evolving too. Let us remember that the most important privilege that societies give to their universities is the power to award degrees and credentials. A MOOC that does not lead to credits or formal recognition of learning is not really higher education.

New types of awards, such as Open Badges, are emerging. These badges, which are placed on the Web, 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. Some MOOCs now lead learners to some kind of credentials, although presently only the marketplace can determine their value or usefulness.

What about quality?

The contemporary challenge for higher education is to ensure the quality of these burgeoning online offerings and the qualifications attached to them. Like the rest of higher education, quality assurance systems have to move with the times.

Guides to Quality in Online Learning

Last year Academic Partnerships published a Guide to Quality in Online Learning in English and Chinese as an OER. Copies are available online. The guide was written here in Africa and Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić and I edited it. It drew on good practice from all over the world.

That Guide addressed quality issues in formal online learning leading to qualifications, but this year the same team has published another guide to the more informal types of learning, such as OERs and MOOCs, that I just mentioned. For want of a better term we are calling this ‘post-traditional’ higher education. This new guide is also an OER and is available to you online. Its title is *A Guide to Quality in Post-Traditional Online Higher Education*.

Concluding remarks

What do I conclude from these developments? The three essential features of the courses and programmes offered in higher education are teaching, learning and credentialing. We are seeing an increasing diversity of approaches to all three functions. Institutions are teaching through blends of online and classroom instruction

and learners can construct their own pathways to knowledge and skills using OER and MOOCs.

In this context I suggest that quality assurance should now focus primarily on enabling learners, employers and the public to have confidence in the credentials that institutions are issuing. As credentials diversify quality assurance must diversify too. To give just one example, the International Quality Group of the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is developing a ‘quality platform’ aimed particularly at post-traditional forms of higher education. Professor Peter Okebukola represents Africa on its Advisory Committee and Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić is guiding its development.

National quality assurance agencies will need to address the diversifying reality of higher education. Only in this way can we ensure that the growing numbers of students will find appropriate learning opportunities be able to present useful and credible certification of their achievements in the world of work.