

Expert Workshop for Quality Assurance in Cross-Border Higher Education

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**Are MOOCs cross-border higher education
and does their quality matter?**

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Introduction

It is a great pleasure for me to be here among colleagues and friends and make this presentation. I have entitled it “*Are MOOCs cross-border higher education and does their quality matter?*”

The quality assurance of MOOCs is a very topical question, especially at the receiving end in developing countries. Since learners are everywhere, these 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 recent survey of US accreditors has demonstrated this, as did a Seminar organized by ECA-NVAO in The Hague last week.

What is cross-border higher education?

When we developed the UNESCO-OECD Guidelines on quality provision in cross-border education we defined cross-border as “higher education that takes place in situations where the teacher, student, programme, institution/provider or course materials cross national jurisdictional borders. Cross-border higher education (...) encompasses a wide range of modalities, in a continuum from face-to-face to distance learning (using a range of technologies including eLearning)”.

What are MOOCs?

So what are MOOCs, are they a new form of cross-border higher education and what about their quality? First, I will ask the question whether MOOCs are higher education. Second I will explore how the quality of MOOCs can be assessed in the larger context of what we call “post-traditional higher education”. A MOOC is a Massive Open Online Course. We shall be brief about the history.

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. You know that UNESCO played an important role in the subsequent development of OERs. First, it held a forum in 2002 to explore their implications for developing countries. That forum coined the term OER and defined what they were.

Ten years later, last year, UNESCO held a World Congress on OER. I was deeply involved in developing, through a series of regional policy forums, the Paris Declaration on OER that was approved by acclamation at that Congress.

MOOCs: a brief history

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 last year when elite American universities like Harvard, Stanford and MIT offered MOOCs based on a very different educational philosophy and pedagogy.

I use the first MIT course, *Circuits and Electronics*, as an example. It was massive, attracting over 150,000 learners. It was open, meaning free and without admission requirements. It was online worldwide and attracted learners in 160 countries. You might question whether it was really a ‘course’ because if you passed the computerised tests you could buy a certificate of completion but you could not receive credit for use to study at MIT.

That was last year. Since then there has been a stampede to join the MOOCs craze. This is a copycat phenomenon. Few universities have a clear idea of why they are offering MOOCs. The honest ones admit that they are simply following the flock of other institutions. Although, since they are called MOOCs, a herd of cattle may be a better analogy!

MOOCs are not higher education!

However, despite all the hype, I suggest to you that 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. MOOCs do not have this feature, as I just noted in the example of the MIT course.

So we can predict a shake out in MOOCs next year as evaluation results come in and university financial officers start to ask harder questions about cost and benefit. Why are their institutions paying out money to offer free learning opportunities that do not bring in revenue from students or governments? That shake out has already started. With so many providers now piling in to offer what they call MOOCs, the definition of a MOOC has become much more fuzzy. One joker remarked that the meaning of every letter in the acronym MOOC is now negotiable.

The diversification of MOOCs

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. With the exception of India, however, the knowledge and translations are mostly based on

content produced in Western countries. This led Phil Altbach, the well-known researcher from Boston College, to warn in a recent article that MOOCs are in danger of becoming a form of “neo-colonialism”. The solution, of course, is for more developing countries to produce their own MOOCs.

Beneficial effects of MOOCs

As MOOCs multiply they could reinforce some helpful trends. Many of those taking the first MOOCs already had university degrees, so they provided informal professional development for well-qualified people. The involvement of elite institutions is also promoting the legitimacy and reputation of online learning.

However, as I noted earlier, people need credible qualifications for successful study. Various bodies are now giving recognition for MOOCs, even where they did not offer the course themselves. This is an example of the wider trend of the ‘unbundling’ of higher education, with different organisations handling different parts of the process. Examples exist in the US: The American Council for Education (ACE) is developing a system for offering credit for MOOCs. Similarly the Education Testing Service (ETS) will soon be offering exams for those having taken MOOCs.

MOOCs and quality assurance

Let me 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 a department or an individual 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.

Post-traditional higher education

What is new is that MOOCs are not the only innovations enjoying this flexibility. Post-traditional higher education includes other trends besides the move online. One trend is shorter courses. Online courses seem to work best – that is to say students succeed in them better – if they are between five and six weeks in duration. This favours intense concentration on a particular topic. Most MOOCs fall within this category but credit-bearing online courses are also increasingly adopting short formats.

A second and related trend is new awards. The awards that recognise the output of higher education are being put into new bottles. 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.

A third trend is that 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. I am a senior advisor to one of these commercial partners, Academic Partnerships or AP. It works mainly in the area of traditional online programmes, assisting institutions with the transformation of their courses into online formats, the organisation of student support, and the management of a model with lower tuition fees and larger enrolments.

Guides to Quality in Online Learning

To help its partners AP commissioned *A Guide to Quality in Online Learning*. Two distinguished South African experts, Neil Butcher and Merridy Wilson-Strydom wrote the Guide, which I co-edited with Sir John Daniel. It was published in June in English and Chinese. We are 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.

In the light of the success of this Guide to formal online learning, and given the steady growth in post-traditional forms of higher education, the same team is now engaged in preparing a guide for quality in online learning of this type, covering topics such as OERs and MOOCs.

Quality assurance in post-traditional higher education

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. In this context I should mention my work as Senior Advisor on International Affairs to CHEA, the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

CHEA: International Quality Group

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 of CIQG are available here today. CIQG’s mission is the quality implications of the post-traditional developments in higher education that I just mentioned. It 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

I conclude by saying that although MOOCs are crossing borders by their very nature, they fall within a wider category of "post-traditional" higher education providers such as competency-based education, shorter courses, open badges, and experiential learning. The unbundling of higher education needs to be accompanied by an unbundling of quality assurance. I have tried to give some possible examples how this may develop.