

Higher Education Standards in a Disaggregated Environment

Note: This project is not yet complete and this is a preliminary summary of progress to date. September 22, 2015

What is the case study about?

The project was expected to:

- identify emerging models of disaggregated, open educational process or informal opportunities for study that have implications for formal higher education.
- analyse the drivers influencing the speed and impact of these developments.
- summarise the challenges to academic quality assurance of these modes of student participation.
- identify the interaction between the Higher Education Standards Framework and quality assurance in these modes of student participation and areas in which future formulations of standards may facilitate effective responses, or in which current formulations may hinder flexibility and collaboration for disaggregated delivery.
- review current national and international approaches to compiling, verifying and assessing evidence of student learning outcomes and to credit mobility, and credentialling in disaggregated learning environments for credit towards formal qualifications standards.

What is the issue or need you are addressing?

The overarching issue is that technology not only has a stronger and more multi-potential presence in modern higher education but its capacity to drive “disruptive” innovation has significant implications for the business models of higher education providers and for the standards and regulatory processes underpinning them. Important innovations that promise to drive changes to business models are:

- Open education in its many forms including MOOCs and open access resources, and the potential to award credit for their completion.

- Digital badging, microcredentialling, nanodegrees.
- Unbundling of the components of higher education eg potential to divorce content design and delivery from assessment; student support from course delivery; subcontracting of services such as assessment of RPL.
- Technology enabled powerful statistical data that permits forensic analysis of student and course performance on multiple levels.

Issues & challenges

Quality assurance of open learning and technology mediated learning modes is well understood and addressed by most institutions and there is a wealth of material to support those efforts. The challenges derive from the variety of contexts in which technology mediated and open learning can be undertaken and the variety of purposes for which people choose to use it. Those challenges include:

- Fitness for purpose, a touchstone of quality assurance, is difficult to define when more individualised program construction allows a variety of potential purposes based on a variety of individual choices and needs.
- Unbundling course components poses a challenge to traditional concepts such as the coherence or integrity of a degree which assumes that the learning experience is purposefully designed rather than constructed post hoc from a variety of components. The HESF and AQF enshrine coherence and integrity of a program as core criteria against which TEQSA accredits programs of study.
- A similar challenge relates to the assumption of progressive levels of learning which is enshrined in the AQF. ‘Just in time’ knowledge and skills acquisition in the “real world” may not progress so neatly and, as more learners

pay for discrete learning units and then seek to credit them towards a credential the AQF and HESF may need to review some conceptual assumptions.

- There is universal acceptance of the fundamental principle that the degree awarding institution has the ultimate responsibility for academic standards and quality. However, there is potential for a considerable problem in developing scalable processes that allow evidence of achievement of outcomes to be assessed and documented in open or disaggregated environments.

Insights and Recommendations for National and/or Institutional Development

There is an opportunity for a national approach to refining and defining some core concepts that have underpinned higher education but that may need review in the 21st century.

Program coherence and integrity

One question that needs to be confronted and eventually addressed by the regulatory framework is “coherence in relation to what”? Much more debate on this point will be needed as business models for higher education evolve. A more sophisticated and up to date level of understanding of what higher education actually means, and the diversity of ways in which it will be accessed in the 21st century, is likely to be needed to ensure that qualifications frameworks and regulatory practices are not captured by rigid and outmoded models of program construction that stifle evolution and render Australian higher education uncompetitive.

The student experience

There may be a need to adopt a broader view of the ‘student experience’, which, even when interpreted for online students, makes several assumptions about the nature of effective education that may be

based largely on evidence from historically traditional student populations. Many time pressed mature learners already know how to engage, collaborate and define their own needs. For these people learning experiences that offer traditional modes of engagement, even if conducted in online chat rooms, may be a nuisance. More needs to be known about the effectiveness of different experiences for different types of learners, based not on traditional notions of 'learning styles' but on common sense notions of personal needs and preferences.

Academics as curators rather than content developers

In its submission to this project CADAD pointed out that the disaggregation agenda signals a significant shift towards ensuring program integrity through the ability to measure outcomes. This suggests the need to develop the abilities of academics to select and curate content from multiple sources and to design valid and robust assessment to assess learning outcomes from learning experiences developed elsewhere. It also suggests that the current and proposed HESF may need to provide more detailed information about what robust assessment practices will look like in this unbundled environment.

Assessment

Decades of research have established a good evidence base for the design of assessment in higher education. However, disaggregation raises the potential need for research into the types of evidence that are acceptable in determining achievement where the assessment process may have been divorced from the framework of a program of study that has been designed and accredited as an integrated whole. To some extent this problem is already being addressed (but with varying degrees of rigour and usually at small scale) in the process of recognition of prior learning. Feedback from the sector has indicated that there is currently insufficient guidance on RPL available in the Australian context (AQF and TEQSA guidance notes notwithstanding).

At this stage ways to assess achievement through completion of open resources still need further development. Portfolios of evidence against stated learning outcomes, and third party verification and interview to

support portfolios are possibilities. Digital badges and credentialing in an online environment are still in the early stages. "Challenge assessment tasks" could be used as de facto capstone assessments to determine proficiency in higher order integrative learning objectives. Designing challenge assessments that will be effective and valid in assessing knowledge and proficiency at higher levels of cognitive demand will in itself be a challenging task for many providers and probably requires academics with specialized skills or academics prepared to work with agencies with specialized skills.

Whatever modes are identified for assessment that is effectively uncoupled from the learning program itself there will need to be a sustained and targeted research and development program to ensure that they are rigorous, scalable, affordable and fit for purpose. This is a fertile field for national and international collaborative effort.

Authentication

Well established approaches to quality assurance and alignment of learning objectives and assessment are routine practice, however the online environment poses particular challenges. Those include the ability to authentically assess some learning outcomes online e.g. practical skills. There are also problems in ensuring integrity of assessment in online or unbundled settings, ensuring that those who are seeking the credential are actually those who have done the assessment. Awarding credit for work done and authentication of assessment are more difficult when the tasks are further removed from the institution. To some extent this problem is already being confronted daily in the processes of work-place learning or study abroad programs. The new features that open and disaggregated learning potentially bring to the task are the need to upscale considerably and to be able to cope with a potentially greater diversity of experiences and contexts. Some third party agencies are already offering their services in response to this problem. They are specialized, fee for service, and able to assist both learners and providers to assemble authentic evidence of achievement. While this is probably an

efficient and growing business model it nevertheless increases the distance in the relationship between the learner and the institution providing his or her credential.

Credit mobility

The variety of models of and purposes for disaggregation is considerable and it is unlikely that the current internal institutional policies and methods for credit recognition, credit transfer and RPL will be sufficiently and universally robust or sophisticated to cope with the likely demand in the medium to long term. As non-university higher education providers become more prominent, particularly if government policies of deregulation are enacted, there will be impacts on the business models of many universities such that their internal subsidies and cost structures may become less viable, leading them to seek ways to better define their core business. This may lead to new third party providers who specialize in providing quality assurance for RPL and credentialing but without actually delivering any programs themselves. One such example in the United States of America is Learning Counts (www.learningcounts.org) which helps students to build an undergraduate portfolio demonstrating expertise and knowledge acquired outside the classroom for use in gaining credit towards a formal qualification.

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