

New Approaches to Quality and Standards for New Forms and Modes of Learning?



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Theme: Quality and Standards: Making a Difference in Higher Education

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Introduction

It's a real pleasure to be back in Canberra for the second time this year and a great honour to address an AQUA forum for the first time.

When they invited me the Forum Steering Group noted that I have had a life-long engagement with new forms and modes of learning and they asked me to elaborate on the forum theme from that perspective.

So my title is: *New Approaches to Quality and Standards for New Forms and Modes of Learning?* There is a question mark at the end of the title. Whether new forms and modes of learning actually require new approaches to quality and standards is a basic question. Some would argue that quality is quality and standards are standards; so that if you assure quality and measure standards properly new modes and forms of learning should not require new approaches.

Let's park that question for a moment. I want first to explain why it's a pleasure to be in Canberra again after a gap of only three months, and then to expand on the honour of addressing you at this AQUA Forum.

After that I will look at four new forms and modes of learning in order to ask whether they need new approaches to quality and standards. Those forms and modes are: first, degree mills; second, private for-profit provision; third, open and distance learning; and, fourth, open educational resources. But first, a few more words about Canberra and AUQA.

I was in Canberra in April for my first meetings with your new government, which were most encouraging. You need some background to understand my satisfaction with those meetings.

Australia and the Commonwealth of Learning

The Commonwealth of Learning, or COL, which I have the honour to lead, is an intergovernmental agency of the Commonwealth that helps the developing countries of the Commonwealth use various technologies, hard and soft, to increase the scope, scale and impact of learning at all levels.

It was set up 20 years ago by the Commonwealth Heads of Government because they believed - even two decades ago - that a communications revolution was under way and that the new media and technologies should be used for education as well as for entertainment. Distance learning was considered particularly promising since a number of open universities had been created in the 1970s and 1980s and were already operating at scale.

I was privileged to chair the planning committee for COL that was set up after the Commonwealth Heads of Government decided on its creation in 1987. Australia, represented by Professor Malcolm Skilbeck on behalf of what was then called the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau, AIDAB, played an important role in shaping the Commonwealth of Learning. Two models for COL's role were in contention.

The first was essentially a University of the Commonwealth that would beam out courses by satellite for the benefit of people and institutions in Commonwealth countries, particularly the developing countries. The second model was an agency that would help developing countries to establish their own indigenous capacity for using educational technologies to enhance learning at all levels.

Although some of the university members on my committee were attracted by the idea of a Commonwealth distance learning university there were several problems with it.

The first was that it would be perceived as a neo-colonialist operation: the rich world beaming university education to the poor world. A second was that the right to recognise universities and give them degree-awarding powers rests with national governments. International bodies like the Commonwealth and the UN do not - and in my view should not - have such powers.

With the benefit of hindsight we can see that there was a third problem with the model because the World Bank tried to create just such a satellite-based institution in the 1990s, called it the African Virtual University, and saw it fail spectacularly. At least one Australian institution was involved in that failure and should be ashamed of itself for the way it exploited Africa. It is interesting that people still hanker for the Global Virtual University of the Universe - not least some of the degree mills that I shall look at in a moment.

Fortunately COL never had the chance to experience the failure of the Commonwealth distance-university model because the development agencies on my committee led it to opt for the second model.

Governments endorsed the choice and so COL began - and continues - as an agency that helps countries apply technology to enhance learning, especially for purposes of development.

COL is supported by voluntary contributions from Member States and from the start Australia was one of the six major donors with a seat on the Board. That continued until just before my arrival at COL as president in 2004. When I got to Vancouver there was a letter on my desk saying that Australia was streamlining its support to the Commonwealth and would no longer contribute to COL's budget. I hasten to add that I do not think there was a link between that decision and my appointment as president.

I accept that in the years prior to 2004 COL did not keep Australia as fully informed about its work as it should have done. Nor did the alarm bells ring when Australia did not send its governor to COL Board meetings for two years running. However, I still thought that it was inappropriate for Australia to pull out of the Commonwealth organisation devoted to distance learning, a phenomenon that was practically invented in Australia.

We have been trying to entice Australia back into COL over the last four years by regular visits to Canberra and, more significantly, by paying special attention to Australia's development priorities: the Pacific in general and Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands in particular. In this campaign we were strongly supported by the Australian higher education and distance education communities and I express my warm gratitude for that support to you today.

It is against this background that I was encouraged by my first meetings with your new government in April when I called on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and AusAID. I found a new spirit abroad: an emphasis on multilateralism and an approach to development based on partnerships. Furthermore, I spent several days in Papua New Guinea after leaving Canberra and was able to see for myself that these changes in emphasis by Australia are perceived as real rather than rhetorical.

I wrote to your Minister of Foreign Affairs after my visit suggesting that it would be timely for Australia to rejoin COL. I should note at this point that the number of Commonwealth countries contributing to COL's budget has risen from 20, four years ago when Australia left, to 38 this year. Australia's absence from the list of supporting countries now appears very anomalous, particularly since Australia is a thought leader in the areas in which COL works: not only distance learning but ICTs in education, quality assurance, open schooling and the fight against HIV/AIDS.

I am delighted to announce that last month Australia announced that it would contribute \$50,000 to sponsor delegates from the Pacific attending the 5th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning that will take place in London next week. The Minister informed me later that he is holding to the policy of not making voluntary contributions to our core budget; but I regard the grants for PCF5 as progress and express here my warm thanks to the Minister and to the Australian friends of COL, some of them in this hall, who have campaigned on our behalf.

I apologise for that long commentary on COL's relationship with Australia, but you brought me here to give an international perspective. I am pleased to be an eye-witness to the fact that the commitment of the Rudd government to multilateralism and international partnerships is having some policy impacts. That, it seems to me, is good news for the Australian university community.

The Importance of the Australian Universities Quality Agency

So it is a pleasure to be back in Canberra, which is a lovely city. It is also an honour to address the Australian Universities Quality Agency, which has a reputation as one of the most credible higher education quality agencies worldwide. That reputation and the high quality of this quality agency are particularly important assets to Australia for two related reasons.

The first is that, in relation to its size, the Australian university system seems to me to be relatively complex. You have long had a major component of distance learning since many institutions operate in dual mode: on campus and at a distance. Private institutions emerged here before they were common elsewhere. Your universities also have a large number of partnerships through which they offer Australian programmes in other countries. I understand that one-third of the foreign nationals studying Australian university programmes now so do by staying in their own countries rather than coming to Australia.

That is the second reason why you are fortunate to have a credible quality agency. Foreign students - or to be politically correct 'international education' - is relatively more important to Australia, as a source of national income, than to any other country that I am aware of. You know better than I do how fragile and changeable this important business is.

First, at the macro level, countries that used to export students or look to foreign providers to plug the deficit in their own tertiary education provision are now building up their own systems rapidly and aspiring to attract foreign students themselves. Malaysia is a prime example.

Second, at the micro level, institutional partnerships are inherently unstable and, in my opinion, should be unstable. By that I mean that a healthy partnership with an institution in another country should be seen as developmental. You are helping the institution to develop its own capacity to create and offer itself the programmes that you are offering through it. You should be aiming to make the partnership redundant, or at least to see it evolve into a much more equal arrangement through which programmes move both ways. Given the huge demand for tertiary education in Asia there will always be new partnerships to take the place of those that have matured to redundancy, but finding them requires your universities to stay on their toes.

Third, as you also know well, bad apples can spoil the barrel for everyone else. It only requires bad publicity in China about an Australian institution that reneged on its promises and commitments to send a chill through the whole system.

A good quality agency cannot change the inherent fragility of the international education business, but it can ensure that if you get sideswiped by change it is by secular trends with a medium-term impact rather than quality hiccups with a nasty short-term impact. To cite the theme of your conference, quality and standards make a difference in higher education - a difference that can have an economic impact.

I also commend AUQA for its international reach. David Woodhouse's election as President of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, INQAAHE, is a tribute to him

and to AUQA's global reputation. David and I work together within the Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity, GIQAC.

In that context I also see the positive influence of Australia because the Asia/Pacific Quality Network, with which AUQA is closely involved, is to my observation, the most organised and impressive of regional HE quality networks.

One of the benefits of GIQAC is that, by creating a degree of competition between the regional quality networks in capacity building, it helps to improve the weaker networks by exposing them to the work of the better ones. We all have an interest in the development of solid higher education quality assurance systems across the world and I commend Australia for its contribution to that.

New Forms and Modes of Learning

With that as background I shall now explore four new forms and modes of learning, starting with degree mills.

Degree Mills

You will say that degree mills are not new - scams have been around for a long time - and neither are they a mode of learning, but rather a way of paying to avoid learning. I accept that, but justify talking about them in two ways.

First, the Internet is giving degree mills new opportunities to con people and quickly to change the colour of their operations, like chameleons, when trouble hits. Second, although they are not a mode of learning, employers, most of whom are lazy about checking the credentials presented to them, believe that the holders of phoney diplomas actually have the knowledge and skills they seek. Phoney medical qualifications are particularly alarming to the public but all bogus qualifications are potentially a danger to society.

Lawyers like to define things before they campaign against them but I shall not try to define a degree mill. There is a continuum between the degree mill that gives you a Ph.D. by return mail in exchange for your CV and the low quality institution that requires you to do much less work than a serious programme. Inserting a tight definition somewhere along this continuum is tricky and unnecessary. What we need is a pincer movement. Governments should take action, through legislation and enforcement, to close the out-and-out scams. Quality agencies like yours should work from the other end to raise the quality bar so that poor quality institutions either improve or cease operations.

You are fortunate that one of the world's leading experts on degree mills, Dr. George Brown, is Australian and has worked on this issue for the AUQA. He did his doctorate on degree mills and is a member of an international working group on degree mills that met recently under the auspices of UNESCO and CHEA, the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation. I was most impressed by the range of his knowledge and the entertaining way in which he presents it.

Do we need new approaches to quality and standards to combat degree mills? My answer is basically no. What we must do is to use the tools we have more aggressively. There is bad news and good news.

The worst news is that in any domain where demand exceeds supply as dramatically as it does in higher education in the developing world, you will find people ready to make a quick buck. Many developing countries make the problem worse by refusing opportunities to increase supply. They could introduce fees in public institutions and so generate resources to expand them; or they could encourage private for-profit providers who would like to establish serious institutions of integrity. Few countries have the guts to do this.

The obverse of the coin is that deals are struck between the wide boys and people in power so that bogus institutions can claim political approval without bothering to present themselves to the national accreditation agency, even where one exists.

The other element of bad news is that the Internet allows the scams to be even more slippery than in the days of post-office boxes. It is easy to attempt to borrow credibility from international bodies such as UNESCO. However, the Internet is a game anyone can play and the worldwide quality establishment can do much more to use the Internet to steer people away from the scams. The international working group I referred to will probably try to catalyse some collective action in that regard.

That working group, which is an expression of a willingness to coordinate the fight against degree mills internationally, is part of the good news. Another element of good news is that governments are gradually waking up to the problem, notably the governments of those small or fragile states, such as St. Kitts, Vanuatu, and Liberia that have historically provided safe havens, or flags of convenience, to the dubious providers.

What has changed is that these countries now want to develop an indigenous capacity to offer higher education. They now realise that it was not a smart move to have allowed a foreign provider to appropriate the country's name for its local outlet, nor is it helpful when all qualifications emanating from the country figure on the informal blacklists of the more alert jurisdictions in the rest of the world.

There is still a way to go, but I hope we can place this issue on the agenda for next year's Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers. The attack on degree mills requires joined-up government. Education ministries must have accreditation systems, Trade Ministries must not give business licences to higher education institutions without reference to those systems, and Heads of State and Government should be more careful about giving photo opportunities to smooth-talking con artists.

It is the role of agencies like the AUQA to start from the credible end of the continuum between established universities and degree mills and extend the proportion of credible institutions. The key is to instil a professional quality assurance culture that obliges institutions to internalise their quality processes. All branches of government must back these agencies and see that their remit covers all higher education institutions, private and public.

Once countries know which institutions on their territory are credible and which are not they can place those lists on the portal that UNESCO is creating of legitimate accredited institutions.

Private For-Profit Provision

My second new form and mode of learning is private, for-profit provision. By this, of course, I don't mean degree mills but provision that wants to operate within the higher education framework of its country in a transparent and sustainable way. I say 'wants to operate' because some governments are still very chary about for-profit provision.

In the countries where it is an issue I do not see much point in labouing the distinction between private non-profit and private for-profit institutions. This distinction is perhaps useful in countries that have an effective tax system and a clear and enforceable legislative framework for educational charities. In the USA, the University of Phoenix, which distributes profits to shareholders, is considered to be different from Harvard, another private university.

However, some wag once noted that you can make more money out of a non-profit operation than a for-profit operation and I remember a scandal some years ago at the private non-profit Stanford University when the institution bought a pleasure yacht out of research funds.

In most developing countries the situation is even muddier. When a private college is run by a non-profit family foundation how many family members can legitimately be supported from the surpluses generated before it should call itself a for-profit operation?

Developing countries with Age Participation rates in higher education that languish around 10% will never achieve the 30-40% figure considered necessary for sustained development without encouraging the private, for-profit sector to expand. The solution surely is to encourage this sector but to subject it to the same quality assurance processes as everyone else in a spirit of complete transparency. This will get some useful questions on the table.

I remember when I was at the UK Open University our Validation Services would hold informal discussions with potential candidate institutions in order to get any issues that might prove be show-stoppers out in the open before any formal process started. One show-stopper was the Open University's requirement that the academic staff had a proper degree of individual and collective influence over the shape and content of the curriculum. Institutional owners who wanted to dictate the curriculum themselves had to go somewhere else.

Different jurisdictions will have different takes on this particular issue but you get my general point.

By putting all types of public and private institutions within a common national quality assurance framework a country can have a proper debate about what constitutes legitimate quality higher education.

Open and Distance Learning

My third new form and mode of higher education is open and distance learning. Again, this is not very new. The UK Open University will be forty years old next year. Before it was created its founders came to Australia to be inspired by practice at the University of New England in Armidale, which already had a respectable history. In another sense however, distance learning is a new mode, in the French sense of *à la mode*, as eLearning has made it the flavour of the decade.

When I joined the distance learning movement thirty-five years we could hold our international meetings, if not in a telephone booth, at least in a small conference hall. Now this is a big business with conferences every month, including a world summit of open university presidents to be held in Thailand in September to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University.

In terms of quality and standards distance learning is an easy issue to address. You do not need new approaches to quality and standards for distance learning or, if you do, it is because your quality assurance processes are based too much on input measures and therefore probably inappropriate for the times anyway.

It is actually much easier to assure and assess quality in distance learning than in classroom instruction. That is because the materials of distance learning are tangible and its systems explicit. I realised that very clearly when I moved from Canada to the UK as Vice-Chancellor of the UK Open University in 1990. I arrived there just as the UK embarked on a major reform of higher education and spent the decade overdosing on quality assurance and assessment.

The reform creating higher education funding councils and a quality assurance body. The Open University campaigned, with success, to be fully integrated into this structure and subject to the same criteria for funding and quality assessment as the rest of the system. Whether this obliged the quality agency to focus more on outputs and outcomes than it would have done anyway I don't know, but we found the methodology used fully appropriate.

In particular the system of assessing teaching quality by discipline was very helpful to the Open University. After a decade, when you aggregated the scores for teaching quality across all the disciplines assessed and rank ordered the universities, the Open University came out in 5th place, just above my own alma mater, Oxford. This is the last such table I can show because at that point the research universities campaigned successfully to have the teaching assessment system terminated to avoid further embarrassment.

The main reason that the Open University did well in the QA programme was that it is a quality institution. One element of that quality, which Walter Perry, the founding Vice-Chancellor considered to be the OU's major innovation, was the development of courses in teams. A second reason for the very favourable quality judgements was that the OU's teaching and learning system is so transparent and tangible. All learning materials could be examined, all systems reviewed, and the work of tutors sampled.

But is that still true as distance learning has morphed into eLearning? Has this not made distance learning less tangible and transparent because learning materials are in a constant state of change?

Open Educational Resources

Let me close by looking at this question through the lens of an extreme case, the phenomenon of open educational resources.

One can get very scholastic - I use the word in the medieval sense - about open educational resources and how open they are. I will spare you a disquisition on the various kinds of Creative Commons licence and simply assume that an open educational resource is a learning resource that individuals and institutions can use and adapt freely. How do you quality assure such academic putty? It seems to me that the focus has to be on the process rather than the product.

There also has to be a strong element of 'buyer beware' (caveat emptor) or rather, since no money changes hands, of 'borrower beware'. Users must exercise the same caution that they would in taking articles from Wikipedia.

The protagonists of the freedom culture, of which Wikipedia is the most famous expression, are convinced that democracy will yield truth. In other words that the examination and collaborative revision of an article on, say, Canberra, by all who might have views and knowledge about Canberra, will produce an accurate and reliable statement on the city. Whilst this might be true in many cases, academic quality assurance can hardly be based on such an act of faith.

You will all be aware of the problem that the Vice-Chancellor of Griffith University created for himself recently by quoting an article in Wikipedia about Islam without due care and attention.

I am all in favour of online collaboration, and COL is thoroughly engaged with it in the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth that we are coordinating on behalf of 30 ministers of education.

However, to be sure that the product of such collaboration is academically solid the process must have some of the checks, balances and processes that have been developed through the course team approach in more traditional distance education. We would be unwise to rely on a free-for-all of contributions by enthusiasts.

Throwing the question of quality back to the process may sound like a cop out. Is it really impossible to kite mark open educational resources and eLearning materials directly, without having to go back and make judgements about the way they were produced?

I am pleased to say that COL's unit in India, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA), is making an attempt, working with experts in India and Malaysia, to develop a quality kite mark for multi-media materials. But even if this proves possible, any such kite mark would have to carry a 'best before' date, as our Indian governor pointed out at our recent COL Board meeting.

Of course, you could say that any QA approval based on process must also be limited in time, to avoid institutional backsliding. But first, the shelf life of institutional quality approval is likely to be longer and second, it is almost certainly more efficient and economical, in terms of time, effort and simplicity, to

quality assure institutions rather than individual learning materials. However, watch this space. We shall see how CEMCA gets on.

Meanwhile, I believe that the challenge is to incorporate some of the discipline and organisation of the course team process into the creation of open education resources or, as the UK Open University has done with its OpenLearn website of OERs, to put the course team discipline in first and then make the result available.

Conclusion

Those, all too briefly, are my thoughts on whether new approaches to quality and standards are required for the new forms and modes of learning represented by: degree mills; private for-profit provision; open and distance learning; and open educational resources. My conclusion, in a word, is that they are not. If our current approaches to quality and standards are solid we should be able to adapt them successfully to the new manifestations of learning that appear.