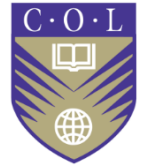


Quality Assurance in a Digital Age



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Distinguished colleagues, thank you for the invitation to be part of this important discussion on 'Trends and Directions in Accreditation in Pre and post Covid Stretch'. My topic today is 'Quality Assurance in a Digital Age.'

But first a word about my organisation, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). We work in 54 countries that span all regions of the globe. COL is an intergovernmental organisation with the mission to help Member States and institutions to use distance learning and technologies for expanding access to education and training. COL promotes learning for sustainable development. This means that learning must lead to economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation.

In this presentation, I will begin by outlining some of the key issues of our time and their impact on education, especially during the pandemic. I will then look at the emerging landscape of higher education and the implications for quality assurance. Finally, I will conclude with some of the concrete steps that suggest a way forward.

Let us first look at two key issues that impact education in both developed and developing countries. These are the delays in achieving SDG 4 and the disruptions caused by the pandemic over the past two years.

First, as we know, SDG4 aspires to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030. Even before the pandemic, it was clear that the global community was far from achieving the targets it had set for itself. Targets include ensuring i) equal access to affordable and quality tertiary education, and ii) that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development. Is higher education achieving these objectives and how do we measure success?

Second, as the pandemic engulfed the world, we found the greatest challenge related to digital infrastructure — lack of access to devices, connectivity, electricity. Teachers were not prepared for the sudden transition to online learning. Existing inequalities were further exacerbated. Most institutions had to pivot to emergency remote teaching. Many did not have adequate technology infrastructure. The mobility of international students plummeted with countries losing large revenues from student fees. Budget cuts were imposed by governments — research reliant on practical work and external collaborations suffered most.

A learning crisis was reported in most countries. A study in the Netherlands, records a learning loss of about three percentile points with higher losses among students from less-educated homes.

How did the higher education sector respond to the pandemic? What were the trends?

Due to closures, institutions adopted different approaches to reaching learners. We have seen the rise of hybrid learning where some learners can study in person while others can opt for an online mode. Blended learning is a combination of online and face-to-face interaction and e-learning refers to the use of any digital device or multi-media for teaching and learning. We have also seen that purely online options do not work for everyone. The future will be a blend of online and in-person approaches, using a range of technologies that are affordable, accessible and available.

Research shows that even in countries like the US and Canada, over 50 per cent of teachers required training on how to support remote students.

One silver lining at this time has been the global acceptance of distance and online learning. A study in the UK found that the majority of HE students rated the quality of online learning as excellent.

During the pandemic, we have seen another phenomenal increase in MOOC enrolments not just of global brands, such as Coursera, but also universities which had hesitated to offer online courses, came forward to offer MOOCs especially for professional development.

Open Educational Resources (OER) were in high demand as teachers looked for quality digital content. In a North American study conducted during the pandemic, 44 per cent of administrators were positive about faculty use of OER, while a quarter of teachers believed that OER could contribute significantly to teaching and learning.

Formal assessments and proctoring systems suffered major setbacks during the pandemic — where institutions adopted innovative approaches to build flexible models and make assessments more authentic. UNISA developed app-based assessments; Griffith University, Australia used oral assessments for the business programme and India introduced open book exams at scale.

The recent Educause Horizon report sums up six new trends in higher education: the widening of the digital divide; increased use of hybrid learning; demand for new skills; a focus on sustainable development and a decrease in funding.

How will we factor these developments into quality assurance? Quality Assurance (QA) has been implemented in structured contexts — how will it embrace the growing trend towards openness? How will QA and accreditation systems recognise new ways of teaching and learning? What changes will be needed in internal and external QA processes?

Let us look at the implications of these developments for QA. Traditionally, QA has focused on inputs, process and outputs — the kind of resources that are invested in institutions, the teaching and assessment practices adopted and, finally, the credentials awarded. QA has mostly been institution-centric — the focus is now shifting to learners and the learning outcomes they achieve.

According to Sir John Daniel, the four pillars of QA in DE are: personal support to each learner, high quality multi-media materials, efficient administration, and teaching rooted in research. Since the pandemic has made everyone pivot to distance education, these parameters will be applicable to all education whether distance or in person.

Additionally, we have seen the emergence of OER, MOOCs and Micro-credentials. What are the implications for QA? Do we need different quality criteria? In OER, since anyone can adapt the content,

who is responsible for the quality of the repurposed material? How do institutions ensure the integrity of their credentials? And what is the role of QA agencies?

For OER, quality dimensions of content, such as accuracy, relevance, currency, pedagogic effectiveness in terms of learning design would apply just as they would to any content. However, areas in which OER quality measures will be different would relate to reusability and openness. Is the content accessible, even to learners with special needs; can it be localised to suit other linguistic and cultural contexts: are there any barriers related to technology such as bandwidth or software requirements?

Today the situation is changing, as governments develop accreditation and recognition systems for MOOCs. India's MOOC platform Swayam provides a centralised directory of courses, and institutions decide which courses they will provide credit for. Up to 40 per cent of credits are transferable across institutions and the host institution sends the grade directly to the students of the participating institutions.

This shows how learners completing Malaysian MOOCs can both acquire credits and transfer them across institutions.

After wide consultations, COL has developed Guidelines for QA and Accreditation of MOOCs. Clearly one size does not fit all, and localisation for specific contexts is important. QA Agencies need to consider how credit equivalence and transfer will be provided.

Third, because of the new ways of learning, it is now possible to offer micro-credentials. Micro-credentials provide options for low-cost flexible learning. MIT has already introduced the MicroMasters programme which can prepare the learner for employment or further qualifications.

Micro-credentials are leading to unbundling of courses and programmes into shorter, just-in-time courses that allow learners to continue as per their convenience at a fraction of the costs. Can micro-credentials be stacked to lead to macro-credentials? How will micro-credentials be recognised across institutions and national boundaries? COL has developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework and UNESCO brought out a publication on 'Digital Credentialing: Implications for the Recognition of Learning across Borders' that can address this issue.

Within national jurisdictions, the question is, "who regulates quality"? What are the standards of curriculum, what type of learner support is provided and how does assessment and certification take place? What about the quality of faculty involved?

Institutions have had to improvise many processes in the last two years. How can we build on existing experience to re-think quality in education?

First, we need to harness the potential of technologies. As we know, Learning Analytics can help create a more personalised learning experience by providing continuous and instant feedback resulting in improved outcomes. Because of this, predictive systems can be developed to identify potential dropouts and provide the necessary support to help them overcome their difficulties.

A popular example of AI in education is a Virtual Teaching Assistant at the Georgia Institute of Technology. This chatbot named Jill Watson offered personalised assistance to learners in an online course in computer science by using text. We know how important it is to give instant feedback to our learners.

Blockchain, a major development in the area of financial technology, is, in effect, an open-source online register. A learner can have a distinct, persistent ID in this space. It is important to note that the records cannot be modified at all.

Blockchain will challenge paper credentials and paper certificates that are the norm today. Instead of the manual authentication of portfolios, institutions will be able to carry out this process online. This will make it difficult for digital diploma mills to thrive. COL is already supporting the University of Hyderabad, India to use blockchain technologies for tamper-proof certification.

Second, the other consideration for quality is whether our graduates are employable and ready for the world of work. COL has developed employability pathways which can be integrated into different programmes and progress tracked.

COL has also developed Employability Guidelines for institutions which can be integrated into QA frameworks.

What can we learn from MOOCs? MOOC platforms allow us to offer free online courses to thousands of students around the world and are an important platform for lifelong learning. A study of a Coursera MOOC platform indicates that MOOCs provide many tangible and intangible benefits. For example, 26 per cent found a new job, 9 per cent started their own business, and 62 per cent improved their skills in current job roles. Is this the way forward for employability?

The third aspect of improving quality is building the capacity of teachers. Teachers are critical to quality teaching and learning, are producers of knowledge, developers of new pedagogies and those who motivate and inspire learners. A targeted approach to teacher development will be key.

Finally, how do we ensure that no one is left behind? In Kyambogo University, Uganda, when a student does not come for the tutorial sessions for two consecutive weeks, the tutor gets on her bicycle and travels for miles to find out what the problem is. This culture of care is what really constitutes the culture of quality.

Prof Koul and I edited a book on 'Towards a Culture of Quality.' We found that a culture of quality as an institutional culture that promotes the introduction of an internal QA system where everyone takes ownership; values capacity building for implementing QA; stresses accountability to stakeholders and focuses more on learning rather than on instruction alone.

UNESCO's recent report on reimagining our futures together stresses the need for collaboration and the principles of equity and inclusion. Pedagogy must move from emphasising individual achievement to accomplishment that benefits society, and teaching must become a collaborative endeavour. This is a valuable blueprint for higher education for the future and a roadmap for transforming existing QA policies and processes.

With that let me thank you for your kind attention.