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The CHEA/CIQG Quality Platform Pilot: Some results

Why do we need a tool like the Quality Platform?

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Introduction

Good afternoon. It is a pleasure to make some concluding remarks about the Quality Platform following the interesting presentations by Professors Jianxin Zhang and Yan Jin. They talked you through the first - and successful - pilot of the Quality Platform at the DeTao Masters Academy in China.

I was not directly involved in that process, either as an advisor or an assessor, but I have been a keen observer of the development and implementation of the Quality Platform since it was first conceived in CHEA's International Quality Group by CHEA President Judith Eaton working closely with CHEA's Senior Advisor on International Affairs, Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić (CHEA, 2014).

My role today is to put this into a broader context and suggest why a tool like the Quality Platform is needed. And that is my title: *Why do we need a tool like the Quality Platform?*

Some of you were at the session at the CHEA conference two days ago when I facilitated a discussion session on *Technology and Higher Education: The Continuing Imperative of Change and Innovation* (Daniel, 2016). I shall not repeat my remarks at that session, but suffice it to say that even if we in the higher education community did not ourselves see change and innovation as an imperative, there are plenty of forces stimulating it from outside. Four of them are particularly ubiquitous: financial pressures, criticisms of graduate employability, changing government policies and the technological drivers that I spoke about the other day.

These are all spawning a healthy diversification of higher education. New types of institutions are emerging and new methods of teaching and learning are capturing the attention of students and teachers everywhere. It is most important that these new institutions and methods offer higher education of quality but it is also very difficult for quality assurance systems and agencies to adapt quickly.

Indeed, I would argue that they should not adapt too quickly because quality assessment processes operate in cycles. These are normally at least as long as it takes a student to

complete a degree programme. You cannot spin a QA system on a dime, as they say here in the US. Furthermore, if quality assurance is there to ensure that the higher education we offer is fit for purpose, we would not expect the fundamentals of QA to change with every innovation that comes along. Quality higher education is quality higher education, whatever the institutional structures or methods through which it is offered.

But the detailed implementation of a solid quality assurance framework should adapt to changing contexts. To give an obvious example, the quantity and quality of learning resources that can be accessed online will often be more important today than the holdings in the university library.

In 2013 our moderator, Stamenka, addressed this issue as Chief Editor of a *Guide to Quality in Online Learning* published in Chinese and English by Academic Partnerships and the Open University of China Press (Uvalić-Trumbic et al., 2013). That guide addressed what I will call conventional online learning, meaning online learning in credit courses leading to degrees and diplomas. It explored, for example, how new and sometimes better methods for student assessment are possible in the online world.

This Guide appeared, however, just as the MOOCs frenzy reached a crescendo. Some readers, in paying compliments to the Guide, said that they needed another guide to address issues of quality in more informal higher education offerings like MOOCs, Open Educational Resources, and Open Badges.

So Stamenka got to work again with her South African authors and in 2014 created a *Guide to Quality in Post-Traditional Online Higher Education* with the same publishers (Uvalić-Trumbić, 2013). After some difficulty coming up with a good name for this very diverse world of more informal higher education they settled on 'post-traditional'. This second Guide mentions that CHEA was developing a 'Quality Platform to provide and external review of the quality of non-traditional providers'. It was proposed that these reviews 'would judge the provision against its primary purpose: what is it offering to the student? Using peer reviews, standards can be used to judge the provider's success with regard to student learning and might benchmark the provider's capacity and performance in relation to comparable providers. A provider that successfully completes the review would be identified as a 'Quality Platform Provider', which could provide an indicator of quality to colleges and universities when considering the award of credit or recognition' (Uvalić-Trumbić et al., 2014).

Developing the Quality Platform has been a process of great relevance to quality assurance more widely. In order to assess new and diverse forms of provision we need to find criteria that are broadly applicable, which means that they must focus on the core issues. In the case of the Quality Platform that core issue is the outcomes of students' learning. All forms of higher education provision, formal or informal, in class or online, have the purpose of enabling students to learn knowledge and skills that they did not previously have.

Let me say that we could not have had a better lead-in to this topic than Dirk van Damme's brilliant introduction to our conference this morning, when he reflected on the joy and the pain of urging higher education towards a greater focus on student learning outcomes.

So the Quality Platform, as you have heard, zeroed in on four simple standards:

- Are learning outcomes articulated and achieved?

- Do they meet post-secondary level standards?

- Can credits be transferred?

- Is transparent information available?

The standards may be simple, but their application is not so simple. I had some opportunity to observe the Masters and staff of the DeTao Masters Academy as they grappled with them. At first there was a tendency, as in conventional QA processes, to want to talk about the processes by which courses were taught and assessed. These are clearly part of the story, but as the DeTao team came to understand that student learning outcomes really meant student learning outcomes they raised their game substantially.

It was probably an advantage that the DeTao offerings are closely mapped onto industry requirements so in many cases the results of the students' learning was not good performance in a written exam, although there was some of that. Often the outcome took the form of an artefact designed and built by the student, which leant itself readily to assessment by an expert practitioner.

All good quality assurance has a formative element and, as you heard, the process of going through the Quality Platform assessment led the Masters and their teams to put an even greater emphasis on student learning outcomes in future courses.

In conclusion then, this pilot of the Quality Platform has been a very positive process and being recognised by CHEA/CIQG as a Quality Platform provider has undoubtedly enhanced DeTao's image in the very conservative world of Chinese higher education.

What is needed, now that the pilot has been successfully concluded, is to extend the Quality Platform process to other innovative provision and to continue to refine it going forward.

My final comment is to emphasise the importance of this development to higher education more widely. Dirk Van Damme talked this morning about the difficulty of getting higher education systems to give serious attention to student learning outcomes.

Most of you know something of the work of Clayton Christensen on disruptive innovations. One of his findings is that disruptive innovations often begin in smaller organisations doing new things on the margins of their industries. We should not push any analogy too far, but I suggest that the adoption of the quality platform by innovative

providers like DeTao, could well become one mechanism through which the focus on student learning outcomes will make its way into the mainstream of higher education.

References

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