

Policy Brief

HAS QUALITY ASSURANCE BECOME OBSOLETE IN THE DIGITAL ERA?¹

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We live in an era where digital is the new normal: our devices are quickly becoming part of the internet of things (Wortmann and Flüchter, 2015); our communication has for some time taken place through social media platforms; email, of course, is now ubiquitous; and our data systems and repositories are becoming increasingly interoperable (Shiohira and Dale-Jones, forthcoming).

Our access to learning opportunities has also been expanding at pace. The open education movement, which has mirrored societal trends towards increased openness in developed countries (Vincent-Lancrin, 2016; Stella and Gnanam, 2004), has impacted hugely on how we think about education in the modern world and also in less developed parts of the globe. Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are now widespread (Music, 2016; Commonwealth of Learning, 2016), so too small private online courses (SPOCs) (De Leeuw, 2017), and in recent years, the more encompassing notion of digital credentials (Keevy and Chakroun, 2018).

This is the era in which artificial intelligence (AI) has become more prevalent and is increasingly replacing mid-level skills across both the developed and developing worlds (Majumdar et al., forthcoming). This is also the era in which data privacy is becoming more regulated and the ability of the individual to own his or her own data a reality through technologies such as blockchain (Verbert, Sharples and Klobucar, 2016).

In this new normal, we have to consider how learning, delivered through multiple platforms and modes, can be credible, authentic and transferable. Traditional forms of quality assurance, many of which are closely linked to the pervasive development of national and regional qualifications frameworks across most parts of the globe, have played a key role for the last 30 or more years (Allais, 2010; Allais, 2017; Allais, Raffe and Young, 2009; Allais et al, 2009; Braňka, 2016; International Labour Office, 2017; McGrath, 1997; Raffe, 2009), drawing on many decades of models and systems that preceded qualifications frameworks.

These forms of quality assurance share some common characteristics: a longstanding emphasis on the divide between formal, non-formal and informal learning (OECD, 2016a; 2016b); linked to this, a strong emphasis on the value of formal learning, sometimes at the expense of non-formal and informal learning, further evidenced through the development of recognition of prior learning (RPL) systems internationally (Werqu, 2010); external validation by independent quality assurance bodies; and also strong government control and sanctioning of quality measures in most parts of the world (Keevy and Chakroun, 2018).

This is the conundrum of the new normal. The very nature of learning is changing at a breakneck pace, while the systems we use to quality assure the learning are slow to adapt, slow to provide new proxies for what types of learning has value and even slower in their ability to shift the ownership of data to where

it belongs, the individual (Shiohira and Dale-Jones forthcoming). There are exceptions, notably the move towards a credential framework in the United States (Keevy et al, 2019, Lumina Foundation, 2015 and 2016) and the introduction of more detailed programme monitoring which unlinks the quality assurance of the institution providing the learning from the quality assurance of the curriculum and of the delivery of the learning (Klinkum, 2018).

Another exception is the nascent set of world reference levels, championed by UNESCO in partnership with the ILO and continental bodies from around the world (Keevy and Chakroun, 2015:160-161):

A set of world reference levels, with the clear purpose to describe levels of learning achievements across different types of learning on a global level in order to promote the recognition of learning in a context where both people and jobs have become, and will continue to be, increasingly mobile, has become a reality. The globalization of education and training, as well as the recognition of types of learning through open badges and other new approaches, creates a need for a reference point that can be used by different organizations across the world.

So where to from here for quality assurance? Research suggests that we need credentials that are granular, stackable, evidentiary, personalised and machine readable (Oliver 2016). These credentials need to lead to employment, i.e. be designed from a demand-side perspective, and should also be able to encompass soft skills, dispositions, values, 21st century skills, to mention but a few; and mostly, these credentials need to be better quality assured. This takes us back to the question being addressed in this brief: Has quality assurance become obsolete in the digital era?

The emerging view is that quality assurance is even more necessary in this new era of multiplicity and diversity, but also that it needs to evolve. The formal embedding of a micro-credentials system and new approaches to distinguishing between organisational quality and the quality of delivery at the level of programmes in New Zealand are encouraging; measuring quality before, during or after learning in the MOOC lifecycle (COL, 2016); so

too is the testing of blockchain technology in many parts of the world, from Malta (Cauchi, 2017) to South Africa (Samuels, 2018). The World Reference Level process is setting a proactive global measure in place, taking with it the bureaucracies of the world, while the credential framework in the United States is equally encouraging (Lumina Foundation, 2016).

Quality assurance in the new world will be more private sector-driven, more open and more digital. This will include industry and vendors as the supply and demand value chains are completed in more direct, and to some extent also unpredictable, ways than have been possible to date. The object of assurance will be less a qualification and more a credential. New quality dimensions that distinguish between presage, process and product will become commonplace (COL, 2016), so too quality labels that signal benchmarking through an emphasis on self-assessment, and lighter touch approaches (European Association of Distance Teaching Universities, 2016).

These new proxies will be more linked to demonstrated ability, extending beyond traditional knowledge, skills and competencies, to absorb even new jobs that do not exist yet (see Majumdar et al, 2019). The shift will be towards the learner. In fact, the gaze will shift from one that is towards the learner, to one that is from the learner and owned by the learner. Data standards and application programming interfaces (APIs) will help to ensure that a digital ecosystem expands beyond countries and regions, allowing for global interoperability of repositories that are increasingly decentralised (Shiohira and Dale-Jones forthcoming), while AI will penetrate all aspects of education and training, from design, to delivery, to assessment and certification (Chakroun, 2019).

This new world is fascinating, yet frightening. More attention will have to be paid to data protection where everything is interlinked, where credentials encompass a wide variety of learnings and experiences, and where digital is the new normal. Here, quality assurance will be even more important, but it will be different. More different than we can imagine.

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