

II. New Assessment Methodologies in Higher Education

THE QUALITY ASSURANCE OF ONLINE LEARNING

Karen Treloar
TEQSA, Australia

Abstract

Over 2016-2017 TEQSA has led an Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Quality Assurance of Online Learning project in Higher Education. This has involved active engagement with APEC members in the development of a discussion paper and toolkit on the quality assurance of online learning. This project has involved extensive engagement across many countries including: Australia, Chile, China, Hong Kong China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Papua New Guinea, The Philippines, Thailand, United States and Vietnam. The resulting Quality Assurance of Online Learning toolkit and discussion paper has been validated by APEC member countries and provides a sound basis to assist Quality Assurance Agencies and Higher Education Institutions to quality assure online higher education.

1. Introduction

In 2016 TEQSA, in consultation with APEC countries, developed a toolkit and discussion paper for the quality assurance of online learning for countries in the Asia region. The toolkit, discussion paper and accompanying workshops were the culmination of numerous discussions and research. This developmental work drew on the multiple tools and references on the quality assurance of online learning in higher education to develop a toolkit which is pragmatic and versatile enough to be used by both Higher Education Institutions and Quality Assurance Agencies in the quality assurance of online learning. The toolkit recognises that many countries are approaching online learning from different perspectives and have different levels of appreciation of online learning. The toolkit has been designed to assist at various different stages in thinking about and developing strategies and approaches to quality assured online learning. Participating countries included: Australia, Chile, China, Hong Kong China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Papua New Guinea, The Philippines, Thailand, United States and Vietnam.

2. Methodology

The project team developed an initial discussion paper which provided a snapshot on how the quality assurance of online education is managed around the world at a point in time. The discussion paper highlights the fact that many economies have different approaches to the quality assurance of online education and that there is no simple or prescriptive 'one size fits all' approach to the development of approaches to the quality assurance of online learning.

A toolkit was developed based on nine domains and these were validated at a workshop with strong engagement and representation from APEC countries. Further validation visits were then scheduled in Indonesia, Vietnam and Mexico and a final toolkit was then completed.

3. Toolkit: the framework and domains

The toolkit which was developed was based on nine domains. Each domain consists of principles, research findings, focus points and evidence. Each domain includes evidence of tools provided from the range of APEC countries involved in the project.

The toolkit is structured as follows:

- Domains – represent assessable areas of institutional practice
- Principles – provide a statement of good practice
- Research findings – summarise recently tried and tested quality models
- Focus points - challenge institutional practices
- Evidence - demonstrate the application of the principles in practice.

A list of the domains and the principle of each domain follows:

Domain 1: Leadership and Management

- Principle: Leadership and management actively support the realisation of quality online and blended education by developing strategic plans, creating performance indicators and by influencing quality within an institution.

Domain 2: Staffing profile and professional development

- Principle: Staff involved in the teaching, management and support of online and blended education have the appropriate qualifications, knowledge and skills required to support the achievement of student learning outcomes.

Domain 3: Review and improvement

- Principle: Performance data and a broad range of feedback from stakeholders, including students, are fed into planned cyclical reviews.

Domain 4: Resources and Information

- Principle: The necessary technical and digital infrastructure including clear information about online study is reliable, accessible and regularly updated.

Domain 5: Student Support

- Principle: Mechanisms to identify students who require additional technical, educational and personal support are implemented and monitored; and each student is aware of all support systems in place.

Domain 6: Student Experience

- Principle: Each student has the opportunity to interact socially and academically with staff and other students and feedback of student experience is acted on through monitoring.

Domain 7: Curriculum design

- Principle: Curriculum design is based on sound educational principles and provides a coherent and interactive series of learning experiences that develop knowledge and skills aligned to learning outcomes appropriate to the qualification level.

Domain 8: Assessment and Integrity

- Principle: A range of policies and mechanisms ensure that assessment tasks for students studying online are clearly communicated, effectively moderated, and allow opportunities for students to demonstrate the program learning outcomes.

Domain 9: Learning outcomes

- Principle: Learning outcomes for students studying online are equivalent to face-to-face cohorts for the same qualification level and are assessed with rigour.

4. Discussion

There are a number of key findings which emerged as the quality assurance of online learning project progressed which are now discussed in detail.

Approaches to the Quality Assurance of Online learning

There are significant challenges in achieving buy-in to online modes of education and managing change processes. This is different in every economy and each is taking a different approach to the development of approaches to the quality assurance of online learning. Acknowledging that every economy is at a different stage of development in the quality assurance of their online programs.

Student engagement

As with all modes of delivery of higher education, student support and engagement are important. There are different tools and processes which need to be developed and monitored in supporting students in an online environment. This was a key point of discussion at the workshop and in considering the implications of support for students in online environments. Most participants generally agreed that blended models of delivery where there is some face-to-face contact with students are most relevant and this was the model of delivery favoured by most economies. It was also recognised that access to education in regional and other remote locations through online learning needs to be supported if students are to be successful.

The provision of information to students, including marketing and enrolment practices for online courses also needs to be considered and be transparent. For example, students should be given appropriate information before they start an online program, and this like any program information needs to include information on learning outcomes and assessments that are appropriate to online environments.

An emerging issue is the importance, regardless of the mode of study, of maintaining a focus on the student as well as on the student-teacher relationship, and that this responsibility is as much about the student interacting with the teacher as the teacher interacting with the student. Online education does not diminish this focus but uses different tools and approaches for teachers to work with students.

Monitoring and design

As with any form of higher education delivery, monitoring and managing metrics such as progress and attrition are important. Different forms of deliver, such as online delivery, require the use and development of different measurement tools. This is particularly the case when thinking about such issues as academic integrity and technology. It is recognised that different online modes of delivery require the development of different monitoring and student supports as a student progresses.

An exploration of the use of inclusive or adaptive design in course development is preferable to make technology accessible to a broad range of people. In any mode of delivery the correct design parameters are to be considered and developed. In particular, it is important to recognise the correct tool for the correct mode of delivery. It was also very aptly highlighted that instructional designers need to work in tandem with discipline experts in order to develop curriculum for online delivery and these materials will be different to those used for traditional face-to-face delivery.

Future focus

Overall, there is a range of different approaches to online learning and the quality assurance of online learning across economies. A range of political and economic drivers are often in play in the consideration of online learning and its take up in different economies. The roll out of approaches to online learning has a tremendous reach, enabling access to higher education and this is becoming increasingly appealing in some economies where there is a need to up skill a workforce that is already technology enabled through everyday connectivity. At the same time, there are societal perceptions that the completion of a qualification online is of lesser status. The importance of a strong approach to the quality assurance of online learning should underpin the quality of online programs and assist in changing perceptions over time.

Further, at the more developed end of the online learning spectrum there is an emerging need to consider the disaggregation of degrees, micro-credentialing and the provision of credit for Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). It is recognised that the world of online learning will continue to develop, and it is important that the quality assurance of approaches to online learning also continues to evolve.

5. Application of the toolkit

It is anticipated that the final toolkit that has been developed is of relevance to a range of stakeholders from governments and international Quality Assurance Agencies and through to Higher Education Institutions in considering the quality assurance of online learning activities.

Overall the development of the toolkit highlighted the need for openness and transparency about how governments quality assure degrees, and the power of online delivery can be used by governments to reach the poorest members of society and the non-economic benefits of online education.

Workshop discussion highlighted the range of perceptions of online learning and of the different levels of development in online learning capacities across economies. In some cases participants are grappling with low societal perceptions of the quality of online learning and how to change perceptions. Approaches to this issue include working with partner economies, being aware of and responding to global trends, and sharing developments across economies to change perceptions.

It was noted that some economies are very focused on the quality of traditional delivery and this is the primary driver for them before starting the journey to online education. Discussion also focused upon the indicators that governments will use to measure success in the future and how this differed across economies. Again there was considerable interest in indicators, including the establishment of relevant frameworks and infrastructure to support online learning. This includes the development of regulations that build confidence and support distance education, ultimately resulting in increases in the number of students accessing online learning.

At an institutional level issues explored included collaboration between online or technical and discipline expertise, and consideration of a student's digital footprint to help identify cheating and breaches of academic integrity and a consideration of online learning accessibility is important and an increasingly personalised approach to online learning is being developed in many economies.

It was acknowledged that there are numerous regional and political challenges in developing and regulating approaches to quality assurance and every country is at a different stage of development. Some economies are focused on establishing strong qualifications frameworks for higher education; others are interested in how to up-skill staff to operate in online environments, and others are undertaking integrated approaches to the quality assurance of online learning alongside face-to-face modes of delivery.

6. Conclusion

It is recognised that the APEC Quality Assurance of Online Learning project, with its outputs of a toolkit and discussion paper provide a strong foundation upon which both countries and institutions can consider and validate their approaches to the quality assurance of online learning. Some countries will use these resources and Toolkit to begin a discussion about how to develop approaches to the quality assurance of online learning in their specific country or region. Other Higher Education Institutions will use the toolkit as a good practice guide in quality assuring a Higher Education Institution's online learning capacity across a range of courses and online learning activities.

The next steps in this project are the development of an online tool to assist users in considering approaches to the quality assurance of online learning.

Within an Australian context, a further workshop is to be conducted over 2017 to develop a tool which is integrated with the 2015, Australian Higher Education Standards (threshold standards) and which allows for an integrated approach to the quality assurance of online learning within the context of the requirements of these threshold standards.

References

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