

AN EMERGING NON-INSTITUTIONAL SECTOR: WHAT COUNTS AS QUALITY?

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First it was community colleges. Then it was online learning, followed by for-profit higher education. Now it may be non-institutional education as the next emerging sector for higher education.

“Non-institutional” is a way of describing the recent emergence of massive open online courses (MOOCs) such as Coursera or Udacity, digital badges from companies such as Mozilla and private non-educational providers of courses such as StraighterLine or Saylor. Non-institutional offerings vary greatly, but they have a number of features in common. They are mostly online, noncredit, unconnected to a formal sequence of courses or a degree program, low-cost or free and unaccredited. They are often international, with providers and students from a range of countries. Some refer to these emerging providers as “post-traditional.”

Non-institutional offerings may have two different purposes. Students use them as a post-traditional pathway to credits for a degree. Alternatively, students use them as a learning opportunity unconnected to credit and degrees. MOOC offerings that are considered for credit by colleges or universities are examples of the first purpose. Individuals enrolling in a MOOC or obtaining badges for evidence of competencies to employers are examples of the second purpose.

Non-institutional offerings are sometimes seen as part of the solution to the challenges of college access, affordability and completion. These offerings can enhance access through their online availability. The low cost or free access can assist with affordability. Using non-institutional offerings to obtain credit can increase completion of educational goals. Offerings can enhance links with the labor market, perhaps more even responsive than degrees with regard to specific skills and competencies. Non-institutional offerings are sometimes seen as desirable innovation, posing a challenge to the traditional higher education sector to consider whether some additional shift from its longstanding academic and business models is desirable.

Non-institutional providers represent a disaggregation or distribution or dispersal of academic functions, all heretofore within the control of a college or university, across a number of providers. This includes curriculum development, course offerings, counseling and advising, grading and credentialing. It is the unbundling phenomenon about which much has been written. The non-institutional sector offers courses, provides advising and counseling, awards grades and certificates. It is about experiencing college outside of college and a potential reduction of the scope of authority of higher education institutions. Colleges and universities now have competitors for their basic academic functions.

This disaggregation and the resulting non-institutional sector challenge quality review. Accrediting and quality assurance organizations are the primary means of addressing quality in higher education and are focused on institutions and programs. These organizations typically do not review academic functions distributed among a range of providers, some of which are higher education institutions and some of which are not. Accrediting and

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quality assurance organizations often do not review courses at all nor do they examine other organizations that provide for amassing competencies and earning badges.

However, if the non-institutional sector is to play a significant role in higher education, we need to know what counts as quality. We need to know who is to judge quality. There are several options. One alternative is for current accreditation and quality assurance to expand their purview and review these offerings. Another alternative is to rely on colleges and universities to examine quality as they make judgments about the credit-worthiness of non-institutional offerings. A third alternative is to develop a capacity for a separate quality review process, focused explicitly on the non-institutional sector.

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is exploring this third alternative, examining the feasibility of developing this capacity, a “quality platform,” that can be used to review the performance and effectiveness of non-institutional providers. To begin, a review can be based on judging a provider against its primary purposes, offering either education that can ultimately be part of earning a degree or education that satisfies the interest of a student independent of degree acquisition.

The review could then include standards developed for the non-institutional sector intended to examine, first and foremost, the success of the provider with regard to student learning. Standards, in addition to student achievement, might address the capacity of the provider, its transparency and how well it performs in relation to other comparable providers. Reviews would be conducted by peers with significant expertise in the non-institutional sector. A provider that successfully completes the review would be identified as a “Quality Platform Provider.”

The information that a non-institutional provider has met a test such as a CHEA-designed Quality Platform would be useful to many national and international stakeholders, including students and the public, colleges and universities, accreditation and quality assurance organizations, employers and policymakers. For example, students will have a public and respected affirmation of the quality of the provider with which they have taken courses or been tested. Colleges and universities can use the Quality Platform designation as an indicator of quality when considering the award of credit. Accreditation and quality assurance organizations can rely on the Quality Platform if they chose to review non-institutional providers. The Quality Platform can be used internationally as well, based on consultation with higher education and quality assurance colleagues as non-institutional providers emerge.

As higher education outside colleges and universities is increasingly available and attractive to students and the public, conceptualizing a capacity for rigorous quality review will be essential. A Quality Platform can provide this review and serve the public interest.

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