HIGHER EDUCATION OUTSIDE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES: HOW DO WE ASSURE QUALITY?

1. WHAT IS "EDUCATION OUTSIDE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES"?

The combination of a multi-year economic slowdown and Internet-based technologies has encouraged both traditional and new providers of higher education to offer new courses and programs in response to contemporary needs. In particular, the global crisis of unemployment among young people has spawned new types of qualifications (e.g., open badges), new types of informal short courses (e.g., Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs) and a stronger focus on competencies. An agreed generic term for these developments has yet to emerge. They are variously described as "non-institutional" (although many traditional universities are offering MOOCs), "post-traditional" (although new approaches are increasingly linked to conventional awards) or "informal" (although formal recognition of learning is often given).

This is not only a U.S. phenomenon, but also a worldwide trend. For example, the Europe 2020 Strategy calls for a transition towards learning outcome-based qualification systems and more validation of skills and competencies acquired in non-formal and informal contexts in the interests of employability.

No doubt an accepted descriptor will eventually emerge. Meanwhile, it is important to create quality assurance frameworks to give credibility to these developments in order that learners do not feel lost in a "free-for-all" of new higher education provision. The purpose of this policy brief is to propose how a suitable "quality platform" might be created.

2. WHY IS NON-INSTITUTIONAL EDUCATION IMPORTANT?

Non-institutional education is important because it may be part of a solution to the world-wide demand for greater access to higher education, as well as an effective response to the vital need to sustain and enhance equity in higher education. It brings education within the financial reach of potentially millions of students. Its online presence expands access as well. Non-institutional education may be part of the solution to the challenge of college completion, with its availability and lower cost making it easier for students to stay engaged in their study. It can enrich education for work and workforce development, meeting the needs of employers through the emphasis on short-term, flexible offerings and development of specific competencies.

3. WHAT ARE NON-INSTITUTIONAL EDUCATION'S LIMITIATIONS?

Non-institutional education, even at this early stage, has its detractors. Concerns are raised about the extent to which this education is both episodic and detached from what is considered to be the richer, fuller education experience associated with at least some on-ground education and earning a degree. The absence of attention to general education, to an ordering of the education experience that is part of a full curriculum and a focus on student persistence are all pointed out as problematic. There are criticisms of the extent to which non-institutional education is student-driven, bypassing the influence of academics in organizing an effective educational experience. Finally, there are criticisms that non-institutional education will aggravate what is already a polarization of higher education in a number of countries, with only affluent students able to obtain a world-class education and those with more limited means lacking access to this level of quality.

4. WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE QUALITY OF NON-INSTITUTIONAL OFFERINGS?

At present, quality review of non-institutional providers is carried out internally, by the providers themselves. There are few instances of some kind of formal external quality review or articulated expectations of quality from these providers, either by the higher education community, government or the public. Traditional quality assurance and accreditation does not address this sector and we lack other organizations external to these providers that are carrying out quality review.

5. ONE APPROACH TO QUALITY FOR NON-INSTITUTIONAL EDUCATION: A "QUALITY PLATFORM"

If the current interest in non-institutional education continues to grow, these providers may emerge as a significant sector or higher education, serving large numbers of students and society. Students, colleges and universities, employers, governments and the public will need reliable information about quality.

One approach to meeting this need is to create a "Quality Platform," an external review of the quality of non-institutional providers. This review would be voluntary and can be carried out by, e.g., accreditation or quality assurance bodies, higher education associations, companies created specifically for this purpose or others.

The Quality Platform would establish standards by which to review non-institutional providers. The essential core feature of the review would be attention to student achievement – what students learn and can do. The standards would also include attention to the capacity and resources of the providers, especially their levels of technology. Providers would demonstrate that they met the platform standards through scrutiny that would be carried out periodically, perhaps every three years, by experts in the area of the providers' offerings. Those that were successful would be designated a "Quality Platform Provider." Over time, this designation would be the predominant indicator of non-institutional quality – its performance and effectiveness. The review would include a strong transparency requirement, with reviews made publicly available and, over time, comparisons among similar types of providers readily available.

6. WHAT'S NEXT

Three activities are essential to move the Quality Platform forward. These are (1) ongoing research and analysis into the non-institutional sector, (2) development and piloting of initial Quality Platform reviews and (3) working with the quality assurance community, higher education and employers to build investment in assuring the quality of this emerging sector.

WHERE TO FIND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- "Open Educational Resource University is launched," *University World News*, November 1, 2013
- "Reinventing Higher Education: MOOCs, SPOCs and Hubs," *University World News*, October, 25, 2013
- "Course-Size Accreditation," *Inside Higher Ed*, October 2, 2013
- "Higher Education: New Models, New Rules," *EDUCAUSE Review*, September/October 2013
- "International Educators Debate the Future of Student Mobility," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 12, 2013