

**The Creative Destruction
Of Higher Education by Technology**
Impact on Quality and Certification

Contact North | Contact Nord's Address to
The Council For Higher Education Accreditation
International Quality Group
Washington DC
Thursday, January 29, 2015

Before we can analyze together the impact on quality and certification as suggested in the title for this session, let's first together reconsider the very premise of our dialogue this afternoon:

“A creative destruction is happening in higher education with technology as the trigger and the driver.”

Does the idea that technology is leading to the transformation of higher education match with our experience of the post-secondary system in the developed world?

- **We do not see a real transformation of programs through technology.**
 - While blended learning is growing, it is not fundamentally changing timetables, program design, use of physical space, collective agreements or the way in which academic staff are hired, supervised and supported.
 - There has been no substantial unbundling of programs and courses.
 - There are only modest moves to transfer credit, PLAR and work-based learning accreditation taking place. Yes, the use of “badges” is out there, but it does not threaten the building blocks of the present system in any fundamental way as of now.
 - We do not see serious and substantive shifts in public policy, public funding or the emergence of public/private partnerships.
- We do not see transformation of program and course requirements such that students can mix and match courses from a range of institutions, countries or system.
- We do not see transformation of student assessment.
- We do not see the boundary between colleges and universities become blurred or transparent, so that mobility between these two solitudes becomes commonplace, both ways.
- We do not see MOOCs being accepted for credit in many institutions.
- We do not see a rapid growth of competency based assessment.
- We do not see a real growth in PLAR or work-based learning accreditation – indeed, we do not hear of any significant discussion of work-based learning accreditation at all.
- We do not see students demonstrating for technology enhanced learning or petitioning the Senates and Academic Councils of our institutions for a different model of teaching and learning.

What we do see are student concerns about:

- The quality of the learning they are experiencing – whether online or in the classroom – relative to the cost in time, opportunity and money to receive it. That is a concern with the return on their investment.
- The flexibility afforded to them by institutions in terms of when and how they study.
- The lack of transfer credit.
- The desire to reduce redundancy and duplication in learning.
- The lack of a clear mechanism for supporting different kinds of students working at different paces and places.

True: technology is sneaking into the nooks and crannies of the post-secondary system, but it is not producing transformative change.

There are five reasons for this lack of transformation in the systems in which we function:

1. The **nature of government funding** is based on a specific model of student behaviour in time and in space – known as the Carnegie unit, it still drives a great deal of post-secondary behaviours.
2. The **nature of quality assurance (essentially a form of accounting regulation aiming to ensure compliance to a model)** is such that being “outside the box” means “staying out in the cold” – doing things radically differently is not supported by the governments, institutions and our systems of QA. Quality is key to our system, but how we approach quality needs to change.
3. The **nature of post-secondary collective agreements** – is such that significant change would be seen as a threat to employment and tenure, both of which require “protection”. Such protection inhibits transformative change. This is further reinforced by international rankings of institutions, which are based on specific notions of teaching, learning and the student experience and not on the vision, values and strategy of each institution.
4. The **nature of leadership** is such in our institutions that the model of success each leader seeks to emulate is that of the “best in class”. Sadly, the best in class usually means exactly that “in class”, not online or competency based accreditation.
5. Our **faculty** – who are the sources of innovation and transformation – are working under such workloads that the time for innovative approaches to analytics, assessment or unbundling is simply not available to them. Nor are the supports – the instructional design, technology supports, professional development investments, time and money – available for innovation and change.

Quality is Part of the Problem and a Key Part of the Solution

We have mentioned that we see our approach to quality as both a necessary condition for an effective system, but as something that needs to change.

Let us say more:

1. **Our notions of quality are very much focused on inputs and a limited range of outputs.**
 - a) We are concerned about quality of students admitted.
 - b) We are concerned about the qualifications of faculty.
 - c) We are concerned about the design of the program and its “equivalence” to other similar programs already operating.
 - d) We are concerned about the management of processes within a program – assessment rubrics, appeals, academic integrity, academic governance.
 - e) We are concerned about the rigour of marking.
 - f) We are concerned that the outputs match the intended outcomes of the course.
2. While formal quality assurance regimes have increasingly focused on the student experience, they have not made **student engagement a key driver for quality**.
3. Nor do they look at whether the program is innovative, flexible, making great use of technology for learning analytics and assessment and is engaging students with potential applications of that learning.
4. Quality assurance regimes do not look seriously and critically at **learning impact over time – impact on career, impact on lifelong learning, impact on community resulting from that learning** - nor do they look at student engagement and faculty satisfaction as drivers of quality.

If we want to see quality as a lever for transformation rather than as a barrier to it, we need to start rethinking our approach to quality.

In particular, we should ask ourselves about:

1. **The How? How do the students experience their learning?**

Is it the best experience it could be, given the resources available to the institution, the faculty member and the learner? Were real attempts made to engage the learner with other learners worldwide, with experts worldwide and with their faculty member? How satisfied is the faculty member with their conditions of practice? Are they optimum for the learning opportunities they need to provide to truly engage learners? Do faculty feel that they “own” the learning agenda and their teaching? Do faculty feel that they have a genuine voice in the governance of programs and courses?

2. **The What? Focus on outcomes in more depth.**

What matters most is what the student can do or understand now, which they could not do or understand when the program / course began.

3. The So What?

Focus on impacts of the learning in practice, not just immediately, but over time (e.g. in the workplace, in the community).

4. The Then What?

After the learning has occurred, what changes are made to the design, deployment and delivery of the program the next time it is offered? If there are no changes, why isn't this program a "learning program"? Is it housed in an organization which is no longer a dedicated learning organization?

We need to escape from the "ISO 9000" thinking about quality, which so informed the quality movement in the 1980s, and move to a much more **experiential** and **outcome view** of quality if it is to be the engine of transformation.

About Technology

A wise colleague once said that "if technology is the answer, we must be asking the wrong question"!

- Technology can support and help learning, but we do not yet have a learning engine that learns for us – *we still have to do the work.*
- Technology can provide "big data" and analytics – *but someone still has to make decisions and take appropriate action.*
- Technology can support teaching, but cannot replace the human work of engagement – *machine and artificial intelligence are tools for engagement, but what students look for is genuineness, empathy and warmth from their faculty members (and sometimes tough love!).*

People go to universities and colleges for different reasons. Some want to fast track through and get their "credential". Others want to think, engage and learn through discourse, dialogue and challenge. Technology can help with all kinds of aspects of learning, but in the end, the key is relationships:

- Relationship between the student and the knowledge base
- Relationship between the student and his or her faculty member
- Relationships between the student and other students
- Relationship between the student and others in the same area of study
- Relationship between the knowledge and skills being developed by the student and the real world uses or applications of that knowledge
- Relationship between the faculty member and the knowledge base
- Relationship between the faculty members and his or her peers in that discipline
- Relationship between today's knowledge and the creation of tomorrow's wisdom
- Relationship between the faculty member and those who can support the work of teaching and learning for that discipline

A real quality assurance system for post-secondary education should focus on these relationships, not selected inputs and some outputs.

So where are we?

We are at a very early stage of unbundling of our learning system. This is as much driven by changing demography, austerity and the reduced role of the sector in the funding of post-secondary education.

Students, by their behaviour, demand:

- Quality programs which have meaning and value
- Quality faculty members defined by how engaged the faculty member is in supporting the learning needs of students
- Flexibility in how, when and where they study
- Affordability
- Recognition of their learning (past and present) by post-secondary institutions and employers

Students are **not** demanding the application of technology; they are seeking greater flexibility in how, when and where they study and technology is one enabler of this. This is an important point - technology is a component of a solution to the challenge of providing flexibility.

Flexibility is the key to our future and is the driver for the work of unbundling. It could involve:

- Faster, better, smarter assessment of prior learning using competency based and outcome based assessment rather than the current cumbersome comparison of one course with another.
- More ready acceptance of learning undertaken in the workplace – professional development programs, short courses, expert knowledge programs – as credit worthy.
- An international transfer credit system in which credits offered by one institution are immediately accepted by any other accredited institution – learner mobility is key.
- A national e-portfolio in which the student carries his learning outcomes, credits and others in his personal file.
- Reducing the “residency” requirement (number of credits, which must be earned within an institution so that it may award a credential) from an agreed national standard of 50% to 20% so as to encourage unbundling and promote flexibility.
- Much more substantial use of open education resources and a national MOOC system for the “gateway” courses, which almost all degree and diploma programs require – Malaysia’s public universities are already doing this.

- A national credit assessment agency for all undergraduate first and second year courses so that anyone in Canada (whether or not they have a high school diploma) could challenge for credit and be assessed whenever they are ready.

We could go on, but these kinds of developments would be truly transformative. All of them require technology, but much more fundamentally, all of them require a shift of attitude, funding and practice. I see little sign of these occurring.

Where we are is “stuck” in an old paradigm.

Whereas, we are in looking at a different future in other sectors – book publishing, private sector learning, travel, banking, manufacturing using 3D printing. But post-secondary education (at least in the developed world) is “stuck”.

To become “unstuck”

To become “unstuck” we should stop focusing on technology or institutions, but instead focus on what it is that students need and want. If we want to have a quality, flexible and affordable system then we need to create a quality assurance mechanism that encourages and enables flexibility.