



Australian Government
Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency

Occasional Forum Series: Quality Assurance of Online Learning

Melbourne – 27 November 2018

TEQSA

Overview

The Quality Assurance of Online Learning Forum (the Forum) was convened as an opportunity for higher education providers and TEQSA to examine the quality assurance landscape and emerging trends associated with online learning and its delivery in the Australian higher education sector. It was also an opportunity to discuss the role of TEQSA in supporting the quality assurance and enhancement of online courses.

The Forum was held the day before the annual TEQSA conference. Invitations were sent to all higher education providers and some international guests and more than 130 representatives attended this event. The Forum was recorded and a dedicated page will be created on the TEQSA website, with a link to the recording, the presentations and this report.

The Forum included an update from the TEQSA CEO, Anthony McClaran on the trends in online learning and the opportunities and challenges implicit in its quality assurance.

Presentations from TEQSA Commissioner Dr Lin Martin, Professor Gregor Kennedy from The University of Melbourne, Dr Grant Klinkum from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, Professor Michael Sankey from Griffith University and Dr Margot O'Neill from the International College of Management, Sydney all explored features of online learning such as the recent increase in demand, the current frameworks and opportunities available for quality assurance and experiences with quality assuring micro-credentials. Together, the presentations provided a comprehensive picture of a mode of learning that is rapidly becoming mainstream and despite some perceptions of low quality and high attrition rates, enrolment and progression rates for online and blended offerings are improving. Student satisfaction is also increasing, particularly for blended learning. Mechanisms to quality assure these new modes of learning already exist and can be deployed with minimum modifications.

The presentations were followed by a student panel discussion moderated by Professor Beverly Oliver from Deakin University, focusing on the opportunities and challenges experienced by students studying online.

Following the lunch break, Professor Belinda Tynan from RMIT University facilitated small group discussions which examined some of the issues raised by presenters.

TEQSA's Commissioners and CEO closed the Forum, reflecting on the matters discussed and acknowledging the valuable contributions from all participants, as higher education providers and quality assurance agencies continue to enhance the quality assurance of online learning.

Overall, 135 attendees participated in the Forum and over 85% of post-event survey respondents rated the Forum as Very Good or Excellent.

Presentations

Dr Lin Martin, TEQSA Commissioner

Online and Blended Learning enrolments in Australian higher education

Dr Martin provided statistics on the recent pattern of online enrolments at Australian higher education providers. Some of the statistics confirmed expectations, such as the growth of

online and blended learning which represented 12.2% of all EFTSL enrolments in 2016 and the fact that most online enrolments are in bachelor degree courses. Nevertheless, recent statistics indicate that whilst online learning suffers from higher attrition rates than face to face, students undertaking blended learning have lower attrition rates than students studying in face to face only environments. Student satisfaction with online delivery has been rising for several years and is now at similar levels to satisfaction with face to face learning.

Professor Gregor Kennedy, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning), The University of Melbourne

Setting the Scene: Global and Local

From both a domestic and international perspective, Professor Kennedy examined the challenges that providers face from the growth of online offerings, such as the uncertainty of what constitutes quality in the online space, the multiplicity of frameworks we might use to assure quality and whether the purpose of quality assurance is to accredit offerings or to enhance and improve them. Whilst existing frameworks could be adapted for online learning, features of online learning, such as micro-credentialing, the emergence of non-traditional providers and how to ensure student support and staff professional development demonstrate the complexity and the challenge of how to adequately assure quality offerings in this new, but increasingly mainstream space.

Dr Grant Klinkum, Deputy Chief Executive, New Zealand Qualifications Authority

Micro-credentials: Accreditation and Quality Assurance

Dr Klinkum focused on micro-credentials and the experience of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority in assuring the quality of this new breed of credentials. The disruptive trend of micro-credentials has been driven by technology and changing workplace requirements and now needs to be incorporated into the New Zealand Qualifications Framework. The challenge of this is that the online learnings associated with micro-credentials are offered by institutions outside the currently quality assured tertiary education organisations. Other implications include the emerging focus on the end user rather than the provider and whether the education system can be flexible enough to incorporate new offerings and new providers that don't quite fit into existing frameworks.

Professor Michael Sankey, Deputy Director Learning Transformation, Griffith University

ACODE's Work on Benchmarking and the eMM Model for Universities

Professor Sankey looked at the ways in which levels of consistency for learning outcomes between face to face and online can be achieved. Approaches and techniques to achieve this

include benchmarking, Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) standards as well as frameworks that can assist in quality assuring online learning. At the institution level, ACODE benchmarks and the eLearning Maturity Model (eMM) can assist in achieving consistency and Professor Sankey demonstrated how the ACODE benchmarking activity has worked at Griffith University. Once internal self-assessment has taken place, a variety of opportunities exist using the ACODE framework to benchmark against other universities both in Australia and internationally. eMM is another framework that can be used for benchmarking, although assessments are kept confidential. A TEL framework has been developed and a group of seven universities will take part in a pilot in 2019.

Dr Margot McNeill, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching), International College of Management Sydney

Dr McNeill examined the ways in which private providers quality assure online learning and presented the results of a survey of Australian private providers undertaken in September 2018. The survey results indicated that deficits in support for online learning institutionally are often the result of resource constraints. For example, whilst professional development is offered by the majority of private providers, fewer providers have mechanisms in place to support students and private providers were more likely to have quality assurance processes at the unit rather than course level. As indicated by other presenters, blended learning is becoming increasingly popular, with 70% of respondents requiring students to engage with both online as well as on campus. Whilst the majority of institutions agreed that they were broadly satisfied with student outcomes, only one respondent strongly agreed, suggesting that there is still room for improvement in satisfaction levels. Most respondents reported barriers to good practice including lack of resources, time and professional development for sessional staff, suggesting the need for a strategy to underpin planning and resourcing. Examples of good practice in strategy and quality assurance were shared amongst respondents, which will assist those providers with fewer resources.

Alfred Deakin Professor Beverley Oliver, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education, Deakin University

Professor Oliver introduced the session with information on the characteristics of students who study online and their experiences with online learning, both positive and negative. Interesting statistics emerged on the profile of online students in Australia, including the fact that 67% identified as female, 13% were born outside Australia and 7% were more than 50 years of age. Professor Oliver provided comparative statistics on satisfaction levels for face to face learning compared to online. Online students who were surveyed expressed dissatisfaction with student and teacher interaction, difficulties developing written communication skills and a scarcity of student support, all challenges for this new mode of learning that will need to be overcome for this type of delivery to achieve equivalence in quality with face to face delivery. Professor Oliver went on to interview a panel of four students, all of whom had had very different experiences with online learning and held divergent attitudes to its usefulness and value as a learning channel.

Issues for students in online learning

The experiences of the students on the panel reflected the opportunities and challenges of online learning and also demonstrated the often anonymous and isolated nature of online learning for students. One of the students was grateful for the flexibility technology provides, without which he would not have been able to complete his studies. When work commitments prevented him from attending lectures and tutorials at one institution, he was able to undertake a course at a different institution that enabled him to study online. Conversely, another student stated that he did not receive value for money for his online course, where feedback was rare and there was a notable deficit in the student teacher relationship when it came to feedback and communication. Based on their experience, all students on the panel perceived online learning to be a cheap version of face to face learning and despite the flexibility it provides, institutions do not judge it to be important enough to devote the resources to it that they invest in face to face learning. One student noted that the barrier to online learning is created by academics and that the quality of online learning would improve, once that barrier, or attitude is removed. All students agreed that providers will need to embrace the technology that makes online learning possible and develop new techniques for online offerings such as training. The students welcomed the emergence of micro-credentials and the focus on enhancing skills and see this area as a great opportunity for growth and improvement. When asked where providers need to try harder, students suggested that the online environment should be designed to be as interactive as face to face learning and receive the same input into design as face to face learning. All students agreed that it is vital to incorporate the student voice into the design and delivery of online learning to improve the quality of the offerings.

Group discussion

In small discussion groups participants explored some of the issues identified in the previous sessions and examined the role of TEQSA, as well as the role of providers, in enhancing the quality assurance of online learning into the future. Three questions were posed to the groups:

- building on materials already developed, what support materials could be further developed?
- how do you as a provider quality assure and validate your online learning offerings?
- what role should TEQSA have in enhancing the Quality Assurance of online learning?

Professor Belinda Tynan and colleagues from RMIT University facilitated the discussion using GoSoapBox, a web based response device which captured instant feedback from the larger group to gain real time insight into the audience's responses to questions and gave all participants an opportunity to reflect on the issues and provide their views. This informed and stimulated discussion.

Feedback from questions posed to discussion groups

Building on materials already developed, what support materials could be further developed?

There was a recognition from participants that support materials have already been developed that can be adapted for online delivery, but there is also a need for specific material to support online learning quality. Providers suggested that simplified templates, good practice examples and guidelines would be useful, as well as academic integrity guidelines for online delivery. Some providers suggested that there is a need to streamline and synthesize existing standards and suggested that TEQSA might be able to provide a central repository for such materials. Several providers pointed to the need for professional development models to improve the quality of teaching online modules, particularly for sessional staff, as teaching online requires a different set of skills and knowledge that needs to become a component of staff development. Given the emergence of micro-credentials, one provider suggested that content needs to be customised to meet specific industry needs. Industry links are also considered important to enable education specific interaction technologies. The new technology should be able to support the development of a framework to go back into newly designed subjects after the first or second launch to capture evidence early and resolve any issues as quickly as possible. Noting the feedback from the student panel, participants agreed that there is currently a paucity of one on one student teacher communication in the online learning space and this needs to be addressed.

How do you as a provider quality assure and validate your online learning offerings?

Providers use a range of devices to quality assure their online offerings. Several institutions have implemented quality assurance frameworks such as Quality Matters and benchmarking tools provided by TELAS and ACODE, whilst others use a variety of devices such as student feedback and evaluation, iterative design and analytics. Providers also rely on QILT, COPHE benchmarking and external audits to ensure quality. To ensure equivalency of outcomes and the student experience participants agreed that it is important to hold all modes of learning to the same standards and whilst approaches may differ, content and the information to students needs to be the same. TEQSA has stated in its TEL Guidance Note that, **"Providers should note that the requirements of the HES Framework must be met and continue to be met irrespective of the modes of delivery and participation adopted by a provider."**

What role should TEQSA have in enhancing the quality assurance of online learning?

Feedback from participants suggests that there is a role for TEQSA in the quality assurance of online learning. There was general consensus that a new set of guidelines is not required, that online and face to face learning share enough commonality so that existing frameworks can be used, with some modifications, to meet the quality assurance needs of online learning.

Participants suggested that TEQSA could provide resources such as good practice notes and examples to guide and assist providers navigate this new landscape. Several participants suggested that TEQSA could organise benchmarking events, where providers could network and share information on their experiences. Given the perception that much of online learning is of poor quality, there was some suggestion that TEQSA could advocate for equivalence of delivery modes and support the credibility of online learning.

There was some discussion regarding the role of TEQSA in compliance as the regulator and whether its remit should include quality assurance, which involves advice. One participant suggested that TEQSA could provide a soft audit of quality assurance during the mid-accreditation period, in much the same way that the Australian Universities Quality Agency did.

Wrap up

TEQSA's CEO Anthony McClarlan, Chief Commissioner Nick Saunders and Commissioner Lin Martin closed the forum, reflecting on the input the group provided in this emerging area of higher education. Australia has a long history of offering distance education and it was generally agreed that Australia currently offers a robust range of online courses. Nevertheless, greater demand for a range of offerings, which now includes micro-credentials means that higher education providers will need to develop and embed more structure in their quality assurance frameworks to protect the quality of online learning. Professor Nick Saunders noted that TEQSA has now entered a phase where it is sufficiently resourced and well placed to be more supportive of quality enhancement in this area. The agency wants to protect providers, but also seeks to encourage them to embrace the changes required of the sector to respond to the needs of students and implement new modes of teaching and learning. In addition, TEQSA does not want regulation to stifle the growing emergence of online learning and will continue to work with the sector to support innovation and ensure quality in this space.

For further consideration and next steps

The following recommendations, based on the feedback received from during this forum, will be shared with TEQSA's Commissioners and Senior Management Team, and be considered as part of TEQSA's forward planning:

1. TEQSA will consult with the Department of Education and Training on the definitions of online learning and the inclusion of relevant data in future higher education data collections.
2. TEQSA will discuss with the Australian Qualifications Framework Review Panel issues around the regulation of online learning, including micro-credentials.
3. TEQSA will consider the further development of a survey of the independent providers, organised by Dr Margot McNeill, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Learning and Teaching), International College of Management Sydney. This second round of the survey will be sent to interested parties, requesting information that could be used to identify and develop approaches to good practice.
4. TEQSA will provide advice to the Minister of Education on its planned approach to quality assurance measures which will ensure that Australian students can be protected in studying international higher education qualifications online.
5. TEQSA will continue to engage in discussions on online learning with its international partners and other international quality assurance agencies and governments.