Foreword

Open learning and formal credentialing are exciting areas that have been emerging, gaining momentum, and frequently changing forms and scope within higher education for over 30 years. The nature of open learning and formal credentialing reflect substantial needs among traditional consumers of higher education, practitioners, and institutions to cope with our changing world. *Open Learning and Formal Credentialing in Higher Education: Curriculum Models and Institutional Policies* is a profound, but readily accessible, presentation and discussion of the issues, development, policies and trends in these areas. This volume is much needed to support academics, administrators, and policy makers in rethinking their institution’s complex roles in formal education worldwide.

As stated, open learning has had a changing definition or understanding (D’Antonio, 2009). Several chapters in this volume advance the understanding of open learning substantially. At this point, one may begin by considering that the open learning concept initially addressed the self-directed, or self-regulated, aspects of learning, such as note taking, researching, and reading, that is, those aspects of learning, whether in formal or informal education, which a teacher did not necessarily prepare or guide.

However, there is another, very recent, and, now, familiar use of the term which derives from a 2002 UNESCO effort that discussed Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s (MIT) then new OpenCourseWare. It was this UNESCO group that developed the term “Open Educational Resources (OER)”. As seen below, the definition incorporates a “noncommercial purposes” clause.

*The open provision of educational resources enabled by information and communication technologies, for consultation, use and adaptation by a community of users for noncommercial purposes. (UNESCO, 2002, p. 3)*

A third development in the commonly understood definition of open learning is that it usually scaffolds technology capabilities to provide access to higher education instruction to more people. This three-fold definition more fully encompasses the MIT project and the later development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as it refers to e-learning, which is freely available to all eligible individuals.

The growing interest in open learning eventually led to the need to wrestle with credentialing. It is a difficult issue that has many economic and political dimensions. Several of the chapters in this volume address credentialing and open learning, as the contributors help to stretch our understanding. These chapters discuss several different types of credentialing and the related policy issues.
Foreword

Since 2012, while attending any higher education conference related to instructional technology or e-learning, the program has included several sessions on the topic of MOOCs. Is it that every higher education institution believes MOOCs are a viable vehicle for course delivery? Of course they do not. However, most academics and administrators realise that, as a popular open learning format, MOOCs raise scores of difficult questions that need to be explored. Discussions regarding policy, access, quality control of instructional materials, and assessments (to name a few major areas) have been the focus of attention.

MOOCs are an example of how open learning has the potential to turn higher education inside out. These free, large, online courses open the academic flood gates and eliminate the traditional rules of institutions determining who will have access to higher learning. Many people treat MOOCs as so controversial that it appears they could singlehandedly topple the walls of every ivory tower! MOOCs are a prominent, contemporary example of open learning’s potential to challenge our perceptions, assumptions, and practice of higher education. What are some of the wall-shattering issues related to open learning? Consider the new decisions that admissions committees and academic advisors must now navigate regarding whether or not to grant credit for successfully completed MOOCs. How do institutions assess the level of study of the MOOC (undergraduate, graduate, beginning, intermediate, advanced)? How do institutions assess the content alignment of the MOOC? Are the grades comparable to the institutions’ requirements? How can the assessment of MOOCs fit into the more familiar Prior Learning Assessments (PLAs) systems?

These questions are but a few of the credentialing issues being encountered worldwide due to the broad based social adoption of this form of open learning. Institutional responses being developed include various options for credentialing (certificates and badges) and new crosswalks for articulation between MOOCs and credit bearing courses. MOOCs are certainly pushing forward a transformation in higher education, but are the walls tumbling down?

Yet the issues of higher education transformation extend beyond the media-dominating MOOCs. Accrediting issues are major concerns when considering transforming higher education institutions. One might recall that, while we have been employing e-learning practices for more than 20 years, it is only recently that many agencies have begun to respond with substantial changes to accreditation policies, standards and expectations. Whether or not it is the MOOC, open learning, including Open Educational Resources (OERs), open publishing, personalised learning, self-regulated learning, recognition of prior learning (RPL) and prior learning assessment (PLA), are all services increasingly expected by current and prospective students. Therefore, institutions need consistent ways to respond. Once institutionalisation occurs in enough places, open learning will eventually “come of age” and rise to the attention of accrediting agencies as well. And when accreditation becomes involved, institutions must often reduce their creative efforts in order to follow more uniform policies and practices.

When considering open learning and formal credentialing, the definitions alone are complex, but one must also cope with an abundance of variations, opportunities, needs, limitations and policies. This volume provides a one-of-a-kind guide to essential research, case studies, and policy discussions on these trends, which will continue transforming learning in higher education today and tomorrow. In the midst of this transformation, continuing, and emergent change, all of us in higher education need forward thinking, well-informed, critical perspectives to help us understand the current and future landscapes.
The discussions of research, cases, examples, and policy impact make it a superb read and resource for academic students at the graduate level, faculty, practitioners, administrators, and academic researchers alike. We await your response to opening learning and formal credentialing and encourage you to participate in the transformation of learning in higher education.

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REFERENCES
