Preface

The debates around credentialing and the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in the higher education sector have taken place over an extensive period of time and are ongoing. In Australia, beginning in the Australian Labor Government’s Whitlam era in 1972–75, there has been a substantial increase in the number of students accessing university education and a substantial change in the student profile of those entering universities. Supported by such changes as those contained in *A Fair Chance for All* (DEET, 1990), a government initiative to increase access, participation, retention and success in university programs for a number of targeted disadvantaged groups, universities have opened their doors to a more diverse student group, thus contributing to the legitimising of flexible pathways for university entry.

The expansion of teaching strategies available particularly through flexible learning initiatives, and the shrinking financial support from government, has placed growing demands on the university sector to find ways to address the equity issues that arise from having to meet the educational needs of a more diverse student body. Worldwide, the traditionally conservative higher education environment has been under considerable pressure from society to change: to become more accountable, more efficient and effective, and more relevant and responsive, as well as providing greater and more equitable access (Reushle, McDonald, & Postle, 2009). The shift in emphasis to lifelong learning has resulted in a growing interest in the challenge of credentialing. A proliferation of short-term specialised professional training programs aimed at meeting immediate occupational needs, the expansion of adult education and training opportunities, the growing importance of continuing education and an increase in the number of adult students studying part-time have all contributed to the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and credentialing debates. On the international scene, the recognition and credentialing of learning has taken on several guises including RPL, Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR). Friesen and Wihak (2013) have suggested that “some of the most popular approaches to OER and to credentialing, such as badges, personal learning environments and/or the use of course components for self-study are actually least compatible with PLAR assessment, and that emerging open course models and established standardized testing procedures actually present far greater possibilities for credentialing through PLAR” (p. 50).

In addition, society now has access to an ever-increasing range of sophisticated information and communication technologies that are utilised for educational purposes, impacting upon traditional education models and theory, and challenging the traditional roles of learners and teachers. These technologies have revolutionised not only the foundations of social and economic life, but also access to information, making it available - at minimal cost - to anyone with an internet connection. No longer is attending a traditional university the only or even the best way to acquire the skills needed to succeed in the new economy. As Pietsch (2012, para. 7) notes, “these developments pose a serious threat to universities’ mo-
nopoly on the credentialisation of knowledge”. Technological advances and changing societal, economic and political expectations are strongly influencing and encouraging the exploration of how educators and educational institutions can formally recognise the knowledge, skills, attitudes and expertise that learners possess when entering higher education. This book thus emerged in response to the “anywhere anytime” learning philosophy, enabled through open education practices (OEPs) and open education resources (OERs), which has increased the pressure on higher education institutions to acknowledge the relationship between a learner’s lifelong learning achievements and formal qualifications.

THE CHALLENGES AND SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS

According to Caudill (2012, p. 2), “the opportunity for anyone around the world to have access to lessons from the best scholars in any discipline anywhere in the world speaks directly to the core ambitions of educators everywhere.” OERs have attracted considerable attention for their potential promise to obviate demographic, economic and geographical educational boundaries and to promote lifelong learning (Yuan, MacNeill & Kraan, 2008). However, these informal and non-formal educational opportunities challenge established views about learning and teaching practices in higher education and require further work in order to reach their full potential. These challenges include:

- Formal recognition of informal learning.

According to Zaki-Dib (1988, p. 8), “the inadequacy and incapacity of formal educational models to meet the needs of individuals and of society at large must lead to the search for alternatives that escape that mould”. A student’s learning journey may include a mix of participation in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), formal and informal work-based learning (WBL), non-accredited short courses, the awarding of micro-credentials such as badges, formal enrolled studies (vocational and university) and so on. The increased accessibility of these learning opportunities is resulting in a greater need for competence-based educational frameworks to recognise and accredit student accomplishments (Yuan et al., 2008). However, there is a continuing reluctance on the part of universities to value the learning that students bring with them, which is part of a larger intellectual debate about whose knowledge counts and how it is to be evidenced (Open learning and recognition blog, 2013b).

The challenge for universities is to develop recognition practices that value students’ prior learning, which will involve articulating what equivalence means in the context of post-secondary credentials. Although this issue is yet to be adequately resolved, a new era of certified open education courses is underway. Stanford University was the first to offer an Artificial Intelligence course as a free MOOC, which attracted over 170,000 enrolments (Open learning and recognition blog, 2013a). However, despite their obvious appeal, these courses have not yet produced profound change, which is due in part to the fact that the majority of MOOCs do not offer credit nor lead to a degree. However, OER platforms are shifting to become providers of credentialized learning experiences. The content of courses tends to remain freely available but the testing and credentialing stages incur a small fee. In 2012, the University of Melbourne signed up to Coursera, a for-profit educational technology company, and became the first Australian institution to offer a MOOC course that allowed learners to obtain credit towards a formal degree (Palmer, 2012). Other Australian universities have since followed suit - La Trobe and Deakin...
in Melbourne, Victoria, offer MOOCs for a small fee, allowing the assessment and awarding of credit towards a postgraduate qualification.

Similarly, the OERu (http://oeru.org/) is conceptually a virtual institution designed to provide free learning opportunities for learners using courses based solely on OERs. To obtain formal assessment and accreditation for courses provided by the OERu, students will pay a fee significantly smaller than the cost of full tuition fees. Students who obtain credentials have the option of using these credentials as credit towards formal qualifications offered by OER Ten institutions (group of institutions that support the OERu) (Murphy, 2013). The decision to use these courses as credit towards a formal degree is monumental and highlights the progress being made in terms of the recognition of prior learning.

- **Sustainability:** The sustainable production of OERs and the sustainable sharing of resources.

Institutions are grappling with the potential social, cultural and economic implications of OERs and the changes that need to be made to current strategies and policies (Murphy, 2013). According to Koo-hang and Harman (2007), there are several issues related to the sustainability of OERs including, but not limited to, instructional design and presentation (the value of OERs can be measured by how well they are designed and presented); cost of production and maintenance (many OER projects are funded by private institutions. What happens when the funding dries up?); and support of OERs (a mix of support is required including funding, technical, content and staffing support).

Issues of design and presentation can be minimised by considering user interface design components such as simplicity, navigability, user control, readability, recognition and consistency. In terms of cost, there is an inverse relationship between scalability and costs of production and maintenance. An OER should be functional, but not necessarily contain all the features available via a commercial product (Koo-hang & Harman, 2007). Finally, one approach pertaining to support of OERs (Atkins, Brown & Hammond, 2007; Yuan et al., 2008) is to encourage institutions, rather than individuals, to buy into the OER concept, which would enhance the provision of institutional resources to sustain involvement with the OER movement. Olcott (2012) similarly notes the importance of institutionalising the management of OERs within current infrastructure and learning and teaching systems.

- **Quality assessment.**

In the age of OERs, teachers, students and self-learners looking for resources are unlikely to have difficulties locating them. However, the rapidly growing number of learning materials and repositories makes the issue of how to determine the quality or relevance of a given digital resource a pressing one (Yuan et al., 2008). There are three possible ways to approach the issue of quality with regards to OERs. The first involves the use of the brand or reputation of the institution to persuade users that the materials located on the website are of good quality. The second involves a peer-review approach similar to the one used for open access journals to decide which articles should be published (Yuan et al., 2008). This is one of the most commonly used quality assurance processes in academia and could be used for OERs to guarantee the quality of a repository’s resources. A third possible approach is to let individual users decide whether a learning resource is of a high quality. This could be done by letting users rate or comment on the resource, describe how they have used it, or by showing the number of downloads for each resource on the website (Hylen, 2005).
• IP and copyright issues.

IP issues are at the heart of OERs. It has been suggested that issues of copyright and ownership of material inhibit both academics and institutions from making more educational content freely available online (Hylen, 2005). The author or publisher must firstly ensure that they have the right to use this content before publishing educational resources that make use of third-party materials (Yuan et al., 2008). Although many academics are willing to share their work, they are often hesitant as to how to do this without losing all their rights (Hylen, 2005). There is, moreover, a continued expectation for academics to publish in top-tier journals that are not necessarily open. It has thus been suggested that institutional policies and incentives are required to enable educators to excel in the provision of OERs (Yuan et al., 2008).

GOALS OF THIS BOOK

In essence, the goal of the book is to explore the ways in which new models of open and informal learning are challenging the traditional ecology of higher education institutions, while examining the possibilities of a learner-focussed approach that values all lifelong learning achievements. This book explores the philosophy, politics, theories, debates, curriculum models and assessment practices associated with the development of formal credentials in response to open and lifelong learning. It documents advances and innovations in the design, implementation and integration of curriculum models that include recognition practices and credentials for open and lifelong learning. These advances include, but are not limited to, the emergence of digital badges, credit pathways for open courses such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), learning pathways for lifelong learning, innovative recognition pedagogies that formalise open education practices, assessment practices responsive to prior informal learning, and strategies such as the use of ePortfolios for credentialing purposes.

In this book, readers will discover the unique dynamics of the open education movement and the issues attendant with open and lifelong learning as a basis for formal credentials, as well as the difficulty of assessing the quality of freely available resources. Due to the diversity of topics covered in the book, it is relevant to a wide audience that includes researchers, tertiary teachers and senior management in higher education institutions, policy makers, open learning designers, professional accrediting associations and government qualification recognition bodies.

ORGANISATION

The book is organised into 14 chapters that examine opportunities and challenges associated with recognition of prior learning (RPL), in the broadest sense, and its attendant offshoots, such as Work Based Learning (WBL) and self-directed, personalised learning. To further assist the readers of this book, each chapter contains an additional reading section for further study and a list of key terms and definitions.

In Chapter 1, Elizabeth Ruinaid and Judith McNamara broadly interrogate the meaning of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) practices in the open learning age. The authors present a case study relating to an ePortfolio-style RPL that is required for entry into a Graduate Certificate in Policy and Governance at an Australian university. The RPL portfolio is an essential part of the design of the course, which is
targeted at experienced public servants with little or no prior formal academic qualifications, who need to obtain a formal qualification in order to progress their career.

The difficulty of the assessment of prior knowledge and credentialing open learning policy and practices are explored in Chapters 2 and 3. In Chapter 2, Tim Pitman and Lesley Vidovich look generally at the low acceptance of non-formal and informal RPL in Australian universities due to prevailing beliefs that RPL practices challenge the power dynamics of traditional academic culture, while in Chapter 3, Xenia Coulter and Alan Mandell focus on the recognition of skills acquired in settings other than the university and explore educators’ opposition to recognising knowledge that originates outside the scholarly realm.

Chapters 4 and 5 consider the concept of inclusivity; in the former, Nick Kelly, Rory Sie and Robert Schuwer discuss quality and inclusivity in the context of MOOCs and Open Education Resources (OERs), while in the latter, Yianna Vovides and Sarah Inman look specifically at how MOOCs have expanded access to quality experiences for those whom formal educational opportunities are a barrier. With course dropout rates in the US at an all-time high, the authors of Chapter 5 contend that RPL could be used as a means of assessment and propose a conceptual model that enables curriculum mapping within a MOOC platform. However, despite the high uptake of MOOCs (as evidenced by huge enrolment numbers), the authors note that there are a number of problems that are yet to be resolved; namely retention, assessment and access. They claim that the majority of MOOCs retain only 10% of enrolments for the duration of the course, which may be due to the fact that many participants who enrol in MOOCs do so merely to enhance their resume.

In Chapters 6, 7 and 8, specific examples of pedagogical innovation used at various higher education institutions are explored. The authors of Chapter 6, David Lyon, Lynette Steele and Cath Fraser, propose that the Graduate Certificate in New Zealand Immigration Advice (GCNZIA) is an exemplar of innovative solutions to course delivery. In Chapter 7, Jon Talbot similarly focuses on a UK university where a unique work-based learning (WBL) program was developed that takes higher education out of the classroom and into the lives of adults in the workplace. The author contrasts this WBL approach, which allows an award to be conferred where up to two-thirds of the credit can be obtained through the Accreditation of Prior Learning, with MOOCs, which are good at providing content but assessment practices are often problematic.

In Chapter 8, Darryl Bravenboer and Barbara Workman address an innovative approach to credentialing and recognition of prior learning at Middlesex University’s Institute for Work Based Learning. The approach credentials learners’ previous and current experience and provides learning opportunities that are relevant to learners’ life circumstances.

Chapters 9 and 10 explore the possible use of ePortfolios in RPL within higher education contexts. While Roslyn Cameron and Linda Pfeiffer in Chapter 9 present the results of an extensive content analysis of journal articles published in the International Journal of ePortfolio (IJeP) and papers presented at the ePortfolio and Identity Conference (ePIC), LLoyd Hawkeye Robertson and Dianne Conrad in Chapter 10 consider the potential for self-affirmation that accompanies the development and presentation of a learning portfolio.

Chapters 11 and 12 consider recognition practices as they relate to credentialing. Chapter 11, written by Robyn Smyth, Carina Bossu and Adrian Stagg, builds on the premise that the value of a degree should not be determined by the amount of knowledge gained but, rather, the ability to apply it to add value professionally and to society. Merilyn Childs and Regine Wagner present Chapter 12 as an imaginarium that documents the experiences of a fictional character as she enters undergraduate studies.
In Chapter 13, Xiang Ren reviews four types of innovations in open publishing in terms of quality control and discusses how these quality measures for open publishing might be used to develop solutions and models for MOOC assessment and credentialing. Luke Van Der Laan and Liz Neary, in Chapter 14, consider how open education aligns with the mega-drivers of contemporary higher education. The authors adopt a critical perspective in their exploration of the factors, such as regulation and academic dogma, which frustrate and inhibit the promotion of open education practices.

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REFERENCES


Preface


