Chapter 1

Conceptualising Recognition of Prior Learning Processes in the Age of Open Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter interrogates what recognition of prior learning (RPL) can and does mean in the higher education sector—a sector in the grip of the widening participation agenda and an open access age. The chapter discusses how open learning is making inroads into recognition processes and examines two studies in open learning recognition. A case study relating to e-portfolio-style RPL for entry into a Graduate Certificate in Policy and Governance at a metropolitan university in Queensland is described. In the first instance, candidates who do not possess a relevant Bachelor degree need to demonstrate skills in governmental policy work in order to be eligible to gain entry to a Graduate Certificate (at Australian Qualifications Framework Level 8) (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013, p. 53). The chapter acknowledges the benefits and limitations of recognition in open learning and those of more traditional RPL, anticipating future developments in both (or their convergence).

INTRODUCTION

This chapter seeks to contrast the possibilities afforded by various means of open learning recognition with those afforded by innovative, but relatively traditional, recognition of prior learning (RPL) processes in the higher education sector, in an open-access age replete with a widening participation agenda and new regulatory frameworks. The phenomenon of increasingly available open educational resources (OER), including MOOCs (massive open online courses) and other open learning formats, presents challenges to the traditional role of the higher education sector in credentialing learning and has triggered many Australian universities to re-evaluate their stance with regard to RPL, particularly in relation to informal learning.
and non-formal learning. The chapter commences by examining two research studies related to open learning recognition and the OERu respectively, provides an example of a possible interface between OER and prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR), and concludes with a case study applying RPL in an ePortfolio method. The evidence gathered appears to affirm that the current options are somewhat polarised between credit recognition into open learning modes or RPL/PLAR, where the latter can be fine-grained and nuanced, but also labour-intensive and not particularly scalable.

The restrengthening of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Pathways Policy has also served as a catalyst to re-scrutinise institutional policy approaches to RPL and the availability of pathways into and through courses of study. This chapter will argue that open learning provides a certain means of assessing RPL (or more particularly, credit transfer) in a generalised way; however, more nuanced approaches are needed for assessing RPL for the purpose of demonstrating entry requirements into courses in a way that satisfies regulatory requirements such as those imposed by the AQF. The stance adopted is that open learning is not yet in a position to recognise highly personal narratives of learning but rather recognises more generic and standard patterns of learning. The chapter seeks to investigate in what way open learning could provide alternative and enhanced options for credentialing learning in a non-traditional situation in the future, and whether tools to recognise learning in flexible and non-formal contexts (like the Learning Passport and the Virtual Mobility Pass) could facilitate more effective solutions than currently exist. Simultaneously, it foregrounds the economic imperative associated with developing effective systems of recognition through open learning. It is likely that higher education will be increasingly pressured to shift towards competency-based models of credentialing (Hollands & Tirthali, 2014, p. 13). Already there is pressure on universities for learners to be able to earn degrees and just-in-time qualifications in a shorter time than currently available.

Recent Developments in Open Learning in Credentialing Learning: MOOCs for Credit

The American Council on Education’s endorsement of certain MOOCs for credit in 2013 was a watershed event in starting to bridge the gap between MOOCs and the credentialing system they purportedly disrupt (Kolowich, 2013). In the same year the first pan-European MOOC, backed by the European Commission and with eleven partners, followed suit. Sanctioned by the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), approximately forty courses spanning a wide range of topics were offered to learners free and in twelve different languages. Chair of the EADTU taskforce on open education and UNESCO Chair in OER, Professor Fred Mulder, declared Europe to be in the vanguard of opening up learning to capitalise on the possibilities created by the MOOCs’ revolution and place the learner at the heart of a more accessible system of higher education. Mulder commented: “The European MOOCs will provide quality, self-study materials and a bridge between informal learning and formal education [as] [s]ome of the courses attract formal credits which will count towards a degree …” (European Council for Business Education, 2013, p. 2).

The openness movement in education is thus gathering momentum, manifest in the myriad of OERs, open courseware (OCW) repositories and MOOCs being developed globally by universities and edupreneurs. Since students frequently access openly available resources in a general quest for knowledge or for personal reasons, some of the large players in the MOOCs’ arena (such as Stanford University, Harvard and MIT) avoid assessment, recognition and credentialing issues entirely. Nonetheless many learners are now seeking to have their achievements recognised - through online certificates, credits or