Quality Insights Digital Conference: Engaging Students and Connecting Curricula in a Digital Future

Key messages from the 3rd Quality Insights Conference, February 2021

QAA welcomed over 250 delegates to our Quality Insights Digital Conference: Engaging Students and Connecting Curricula in a Digital Future. Sharing ideas and practice from around the UK and across the world, this event explored the post-pandemic future of higher education through two keynotes, 12 breakout sessions and two panel discussions focusing on three themes: the connected curriculum, student engagement, and the future of digital pedagogies.

Our keynote speakers were Professor Beverley Oliver, Australian National Teaching Fellow and Professor David Carless, University of Hong Kong.

> "Will microcredentials be a disappointing fad or a reimagination of lifelong learning?
> *Professor Beverley Oliver*

Connected curricula

- The sector is seeing an explosion in the micro market: approaches are emerging beyond modular part-time study as a pathway to a full degree programme. Industry clients are pressing providers to develop a wide range of smaller courses across multiple levels, some using credit, some not – which leads to approval challenges.

- Many different courses are covered by the 'microcredentials' label. Definitions need to include a range of defining characteristics to enable a common language – they need to be comprehensible to learners, employers and providers.

- There's a place at universities for microcredentials that are connected to value for the learner and employer:

  ‣ Employers are looking for easy access to qualified talent and providers need to win the trust of employers by providing authentic assessment of microcredentials

  ‣ Learners need to take account of cost, convenience and time.

- The underlying principles for providers of microcredentials are robust quality processes, financial sustainability and the need to be disruption proof.

- Moving beyond the metrics is important in establishing a full picture of student achievement and, to date, the NSS has been part of this. Students are recognised as having different relationships with the survey, with some feeling disengaged and disempowered, while others have worked in partnership with their HE providers to enhance practice.

- Being able to articulate and evaluate all of the elements that make up a higher education experience is important – not only counting those aspects for which there are ready metrics. Four assets can be identified which are difficult to measure but are valued about HE:

  ‣ Building effective relationships (between students and staff, and between staff)
  ‣ Transformational impact of a higher education on students
  ‣ Wellbeing of students and staff
  ‣ Student engagement

  Having the tools and processes by which the value and impact of these 'intangible' assets can be evidenced is central to providers fully realising and sharing the nature of their offer.

> ❛ Co-creation needs positive relationships; co-creation builds positive relationships. ❜
> *Dr Cathy Bovill*

Student engagement in digital education

- The move to digital delivery has accelerated the pace of some developments that were already in progress, providing additional opportunities to adopt a student-focused (user first) approach to learning. There has been positive feedback for greater flexibility in provision and online exams. Some gaps have also been identified, notably around informal opportunities for discussion with peers and social contact.

- Taking steps to create a sense of belonging for students is important, particularly in digital delivery. Seemingly small examples, such as informal conversation starters using the chat function, making the effort to learn students' names and asking people how they are feeling can all contribute to the creation of an open and transparent approach.

- Developing core values is crucial – around student experiences, diversity and justice, and putting relationships first. Developments now are focused around breaking down barriers and redefining 'contact time', as well as encouraging peer group meet-ups and embedding communications technology within field trips to share experiences with other students.

- Students need to be involved as co-creators of good assessment design and feedback. Different digital platforms provide opportunities to engage students in their assessment. We need to understand assessment on students' terms, with new paradigms that explore feedback as self-generated by students, using social media platforms to enhance their understanding of feedback literacy.

- Positive approaches to assessment include:

  ‣ Tasks engaging with students' everyday lives

  ‣ Enabling students to submit assessment using memes, blogs and vlogs with summative written or oral assessment

  ‣ Design more ways to provide interaction in assessment – writing and rewriting is key to the academic process but is less often found in the undergraduate experience where students may be in greater need of that kind of practice

  ‣ Help students to develop their evaluative expertise so they establish a sense of what high quality is

  ‣ Exemplars can be helpful for learning, particularly sharing examples of differing quality

  ‣ Too much variety in assessment can counteract the ability to give coherent feedback and disrupt students' ability to become skilled in one format.

- Positive learning and teaching approaches don't have to involve formal grading. Students can be encouraged to reflect on their own work and on their reading. Students can also be prompted to engage in periodic self-assessment which might involve grading their own work. This opens a conversation between student and teacher about the student's learning process and engagement with learning.

'' Audio/video feedback modes enable rapport and nuance – you can talk faster than you write! ''
Professor David Carless

The future of digital pedagogies

- The pandemic has prompted a shift that causes us to question how we deliver higher education. It places a focus on pedagogy that hasn't been quite so sharp for some time, if ever.

- We are moving from a discourse that disruption is brought about by technology and moving towards an experience driven by critical thinking about what we want to do next – and it is vital that HE defines this, so others don't step in and define the future for HE.

- Engaging students *through* the screen and creating a humanising digital pedagogy requires a focus on the lived experience of students.

- The 'Hyflex' model combines face-to-face with synchronous and asynchronous digital delivery where, crucially, the student (and not the staff) chooses which model they follow, not only at course or module level, but down to individual lectures. In practice, the majority tend to participate onsite, but students do move between the three models across a course:

  - High-quality, reliable technology is a crucial enabling factor

  - Course design really matters

  - The same teaching materials are available across all modes

  - Students generate additional content through their engagement, and it is important to capture this.

- Social media is increasingly used in academia, and there are benefits – such as enhancing a sense of community. While there are risks associated with top-down standardisation, there are also challenges associated with the current ad hoc approach. We cannot assume students are familiar with social media or its use in particular contexts so should provide support if we want to use it as a mechanism for student engagement.

- We shouldn't simply transpose traditional approaches to teaching or assessment into the digital environment – we need to think bravely and creatively.

> ' We must begin to imagine better, more critical, digital pedagogies. Behind the screen are students who have experienced the pandemic from diverse social locations. If we respond to their very human experience by building airtight rubrics, by implementing remote proctoring – all in the name of preserving education – we are prioritising institutional practices instead of students' realities.
> *Sean Michael Morris* '

Where do we go from here?

- The last year has highlighted the strength and resilience of the higher education sector and our students. The experience gained during the rapid online pivot is likely to shape the future of the sector through new digital practices, alongside a recognition of the value of more traditional practices that we want to ensure will return.

- Student communication, consultation, engagement and partnership remain key. This doesn't only involve staff communicating with students, but also engagement with the community and between peers. In engaging with students, we must recognise the diversity of the student population and ensure our practices are inclusive.

- We may increasingly think of designing higher education for a new and inclusive type of student mobility, where there is teaching on and off campus in synchronous and asynchronous formats perhaps for the same cohort. Technology may help to reduce the friction between attending and not attending a physical campus. We should also consider what it means to be part of a campus community you might never physically attend.

- There are factors which limit our ability to design new approaches to higher education and may need re-examination, for example, the academic calendar. We should ask how governance and regulatory frameworks can enable more multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary provision.

- Higher education providers will increasingly be porous with strongly community links and non-academic partners having space on campus or a recognised place in a shared digital environment. External partners will have a role in sharing teaching and setting projects. We should ensure our quality arrangements are ready to embrace these wider engagements.

- Student pathways will become increasingly flexible as we find ways of including learners with different characteristics and ambitions. In thinking about blended or flexible approaches, the idea of equivalence – not equity – is important.

- Having the tools and processes to evaluate our strategies and practices is fundamental – as is having the right evidence and using it to ensure we understand and report on the aspects of higher education that we value most.

> ' We are at a point of pause where we should consider what we want from digital technology and how we want higher education to be defined around it. '
> *Dr Sian Bayne*

→ What happens next? →

- This conference was hosted for our Quality Insights Members who are drawn from the four nations of the UK and cover all types of HE provision, from specialist providers to universities and colleges.

- Our membership programme offers a range of activities – including close engagement with the governments across the UK – to influence policy, strategy and practice in each of the conference strands.

- To find out more, contact us or sign up to our weekly newsletter and avoid missing out on our exciting suite of events and resources.

'Whatever the future, we must not forget the 'why'. How can we do more to engage with students and hear their voices in the most authentic way?
Hillary Gyebi-Ababio