Repurposing MOOCs for academic credit: an investigation into the use of MOOC learning for APL/RPL purposes in English and Welsh Work Based Learning Departments

"..while in the first instance MOOCs will simply be for voluntary leisure learning, there is clearly the potential for these courses to be accredited and count towards degree programmes. A candidate who successfully completes a MOOC could pay a small fee in order to take an assessment and gain credit that counts towards a formal qualification. The intention would be that students could take a series of credits at very low cost before transferring to a full-cost course to 'top up' their qualification. This could be a very powerful way of delivering part-time distance learning at no extra cost to the state. The accreditation could either be done by the HEI that provided the MOOC, or it could be overseen by the Open University, since it is hosting the FutureLearn platform and has extensive experience in credit-based distance learning....We recommend that English HEIs should embrace the potential of new technologies by recognising credit from low-cost online courses so that they can count towards degree programmes. To make a start down this road we recommend that the Open University should accredit MOOCs provided via the FutureLearn platform so that they can count towards degree programmes offered by the OU itself and its partner institutions"

'*A critical path: Securing the future of higher education in England*' IPPR (2013, pp. 99-100)

This survey was conducted to test whether the recommendation outlined above is taking place in those parts of the English and Welsh Higher education system where it is most likely to do so. Work based learning (Wbl) departments are considered among the most innovative and flexible on campus and it is known from previous studies they are the most likely to accept claims for past learning (Pokorny 2011). On the website for the Centre for Work Related Studies at the University of Chester we actively encourage those who have completed MOOC courses to convert them into academic credit. The question driving this research is whether other Wbl departments are doing this and if so how?

The survey

The survey was conducted using a questionnaire (Appendix 1) between May-November 2015. 41 universities were contacted out of a total of 137 universities in England and Wales where it is believed some form of Wbl is practised. This probably understates the number who are as some Wbl is embedded in subject discipline programmes or may exist in wholly owned subsidiary companies. In all 26 responses were obtained, including the University of Chester giving an overall response rate of 63%. It is not known how many universities are engaged in some form of WBL although it is believed responses were obtained from the majority of the major providers.

The purpose of the survey was to identify whether WBL departments in English and Welsh universities are likely to accept the completion of an online programme of learning from a MOOC as evidence of past learning, either for the purpose of admission of for obtaining academic credit. The research was conducted at a time when there appeared to be considerable interest in the potential of re-purposing MOOCs for inclusion in formal academic programmes. Previous research has identified difficulties of integration into a traditional, formal taught programme (due to differing content, volume, learning outcomes, levels and so on) so there was an expectation that MOOC

learning may be better suited for conversion into academic credit where the opportunity exists via established APL/RPL procedures.

To date there have been no attempts to formally record all HE WBL departments, their nature and scale so data has been collected in this respect. It has also been necessary to record data on the more general use of online learning resources and APL practices in WBL departments.

The main finding is that there is little evidence that students are either presenting MOOC learning or that WBL departments are minded to consider it appropriate for admissions and/or the awarding of credit. If WBL departments are not doing this, it is difficult to believe it is happening in other parts of British higher education. Beyond that the study has revealed some interesting aspects of practice in WBL departments, suggesting that larger studies in respect of WBL and APL practices are long overdue.

In this report the results of the study are presented in simple frequency distributions and discussed in turn. The number of responses received (n) is indicated.

PART ONE: BASE DATA

Figure 1: The varieties of Wbl practices by university (n= 26)

Comment

There is no agreed definition about what Work based learning (WBL) is. Most of the definitions are concerned with approaches to pedagogic practices designed to capture practice based knowledge and translate it into academic credit and awards.

For the purposes of this research practices are defined in terms of conceptions of knowledge as expressed in curriculum design. The simple distribution frequency identifies the range of practices and indicates that many universities are engaged in multiple forms of WBL. What the table does not reveal is the extent of different patterns of provision. For example, for three of the universities WBL means work placements for full time students only- a definition consistent with that used in many North American universities. By contrast 12 of the respondents do not offer WBL placements for full time students so, presumably their provision is entirely for part time, adult learners.

Excluding those who simply offer work placements on an otherwise conventional full time programme of study, only two universities offered no negotiated programmes with employers and/

or individuals, indicating in most WBL departments there is flexibility in curriculum design. The majority of universities offering negotiated programmes are willing to include work based and subject discipline modules in the curriculum. However for four universities WBL is a programme of learning negotiated with employers and/or individuals comprised entirely of work based (ie experiential) modules with no named subject discipline modules.

The majority of universities provide WBL in more than category although only four make provision in all categories. Within this general pattern there are some individual variations. In one university WBL is only offered as a 'top up' to complete the final level of a degree whilst at another, in addition at another WBL students are able to negotiate assignments on subject discipline assignments.

The number of respondents is too small to investigate patters of provision by institutional mission or any other possible explanatory variable.

A question for future research into WBL is its association with mission and subject discipline. The research did not explore this relationship but it is known that some of the responding institutions are associated with particular disciplines such as health, engineering and agriculture while others have an explicit multi and trans-disciplinary perspective.

Figure 2: Numbers of students engaged in Wbl by university (n=25)

Comment

The Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) collects information on the numbers of students and academic members of staff by subject discipline. There are debates about whether WBL is a subject or pedagogic method(s). HESA does not recognise it as a subject so there are no reliable figures on the number of WBL students. Respondents were asked to estimate the total number of WBL students so the data here cannot be relied upon. The most significant finding is that 11 universities

estimate they have over 1000 students engaged in some form of WBL. During the year of the study there were   students in HEIs in England and Wales so this is not a very large proportion. Nonetheless it is probably considerably more than many both inside and outside the field would expect and is an under-estimate since some of the main providers did not participate in the study, so it seems safe to assume there are over 10,000 students in England and Wales engaged in some form of WBL during 2015. This figure has to be interpreted with caution as at least some of those students will be engaged in full time study on an otherwise conventional programme. What can be said is that for an academic activity which did not exist twenty five years ago, WBL is becoming a significant element of British HE provision.

Figure 3: Estimated numbers of Full Times Equivalents (FTEs) in Wbl by university (n=25)

Comment

As with Figure 4, these are estimates provided by respondents so cannot be relied upon. Respondents were not asked to indicate whether students are full or part time but it is known that many students in Wbl are adults working full time, studying part time often for short awards so the number of FTEs is likely to be considerably lower than the total number of students. These estimates have been obtained at a time when adult recruitment to part time programmes is in serious decline following the raising of fees in 2012 (Hillman 2015). The present study was not designed to describe all aspects of practice in relation to Wbl but further research is clearly needed in this area.

Figure 4: Estimated proportion of students who are distance learners by university (n=25)

Comment

This question was asked since it was thought likely that universities engaged in significantly more distance delivery are more likely to use online learning materials than those engaged exclusively or significantly in face to face delivery. What the responses illustrate is that face to face delivery is associated with the smaller providers of WBL and those for whom it is part of a traditional pattern of delivery. By contrast larger providers tend to be more heavily engaged in distance delivery. This suggests there are two ways in which WBL as a practice can develop: either by integration into existing programmes or by deliberately targeting those who are unable to attend the university in person.

Figure 5: The production of online learning materials by university (n=26)

Comment

This question was asked to gauge how much academic tutors are actively engaged in the production of online learning materials. All respondents said they produced online materials but in two instances this means a reliance upon centrally produced materials. Six other departments claimed to rely solely upon the academic tutor team to produce their own materials without central support while the majority use a combination of departmental and central resources.

Figure 6: Online learning materials created by Wbl tutors by university (n=26)

Comment

The table illustrates that Wbl tutors are highly engaged in developing online learning materials for students as might be expected. Only two universities indicated they had not been involved in the production of any online resources and were exclusively engaged in traditional face to face delivery of content. What is interesting in the context of the study is that although the majority of Wbl departments use new technology the basic function of the tutor as a supplier of content remains unaltered.

Some of the responses in the 'Other' section refer to the development of study skills materials although these are probably best thought of as material to support the programme.

Figure 7: Responsibility for inducting students on the use of online sources by university (n=26)

Comment

As might be expected responsibility for induction into the use of online sources rests principally with academic tutors although in some instances responsibility lies with librarians or is shared. In one instance an administrator has responsibility and in three cases an IT specialist is responsible. As with the creation of online resources, induction into their use is still primarily seen as an academic responsibility.

Figure 8: Internal online resources students are directed to by university (n=26)

Comment

As with previous questions this one demonstrates that although tutors embrace the use of new technologies for delivering content, the pattern of referral is as might be expected, overwhelmingly directed to the use of internal resources in the university library.

Figure 9: External online sources students are directed to by tutors by university (n=24)

Comment

Figure 9 demonstrates that WBL tutors make extensive use of external online sources, especially those which are free. Respondents were not asked their views about the authority of the sources cited but it seems safe to infer that a referral implies a belief in the authority of the source.

Figure 10: Attitudes towards Wikipedia by university (n=25)

Comment

In contrast to attitudes towards many other online sources (such as the BBC) WBL tutors are more divided in their attitudes towards the use of Wikipedia by students. Although the largest response category was neutral in attitude three times as many respondents believe their department discourages or strongly discourages the use of Wikipedia as encourages or strongly encourages. Some respo0ndents indicated that they regarded it as a useful starting point for finding out information.

The reliability of Wikipedia is a hotly contested topic- indeed of all potential sources of information anywhere it seems to arouse the most scrutiny and debate, perhaps reflecting its near universal use, co-created nature and lack of identifiable authors. There are arguments either way: in its favour it has comprehensive articles on many subjects, it is peer reviewed and the articles are often accompanied by warnings if the level of veracity is low. By contrast the critics point to the variable quality of entries, the presence of 'editing wars' where two contributors continually attempt to edit the entry of the other and the unevenness of subject coverage.

To further explore this issue respondents were asked if they or their colleagues had ever written an entry for Wikipedia or another online source. Four respondents had, three for Wikipedia and one for a Blog. The latter respondent indicated that the experience had transformed their understanding of the value of blogs as learning tools and now referred them to students as useful sources of information. One of the respondents who had contributed to Wikipedia reported that it had greatly improved respect for it as a source and regarded it highly as a useful source for students. By contrast two of those who had/ colleagues contributed to Wikipedia did not report any change in attitude in respect of its value.

Figure 11: Use of free online books by university (n=14)

Comment

In recent years the flood of freely available information has included educational textbooks from a variety of sources. One university referred students to all the sources of free online books cited here. By contrast only four other universities direct their students to such sources, three for Google books and one for Bookboon. By contrast students appear to be finding Googlebooks and to a lesser extent Wikibooks. This suggests there may be more demand for such sources from students, especially distance learners than WBL tutors are aware of.

Figure 12: use of freely availability online educational videos by university (n=17)

Comment

In contrast to on-line, freely available books, online educational videos appear to be a more widely used resource, especially You tube, both as a result of direction by tutors and undirected by students. The only real surprise in the responses is the relative under-use of the Khan Academy, which unlike other sources is a purely philanthropic resource with thousands of videos specifically designed for educational purposes.

Figure 13: Use of other non-MOOC academic sources by university (n=18)

Comment

With the exception of Google Scholar most of these sources have little salience for WBL tutors and students alike although again one university refers students to all the named sources. MedEd is a specialist source only likely to be used by students in the medical sector. Perhaps the most surprising result is that few WBL departments or students are using Learning from WOeRK, an Open Educational Resource developed by JISC/ University of Plymouth (who did not participate in the survey) for WBL students. Jorum which claims to be the UK's largest repository for Open Educational Resources for higher and further education was not identified as an option for respondents and was not mentioned spontaneously. However anyone accessing the Learning from WOeRK site would be aware of Jorum since that is where the learning resources created for Learning from WOeRK are located.

**Figure 14: Use of MOOCs by University (n=20)**

Comment

Only 19 responded to this question but the responses to this question are very revealing from the perspective of the purpose of the survey. Only one respondent was able to recall a student referring undirected to a MOOC (Futurelearn) and there are few examples of direction by tutors. Most interesting of all is the low profile of the Saylor Academy, a philanthropic, not-for-profit MOOC which is not aligned with a university and is therefore not designed to market its courses or brand. Futurelearn, the Open University MOOC (and therefore UK based) was the most frequently cited. Futurelearn is especially useful for study skills but like most MOOCs are best thought of as 'tasters' or 'bitesize'. They are difficult to match against level descriptors and have insufficient content to have a significant credit value. The exception to this is Saylor which has clear learning outcomes and significant content making it ideal as the basis for claims for prior learning. Respondents were also asked whether they would accept a MOOC certificate as the basis for admission onto a programme and none indicated they would.

PART THREE: APL/RPL POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

The difficulty in undertaking a survey such as this is the large variety of terms used to describe essentially the same processes so respondents were supplied with a definition of terms used at Chester and then invited to record the terms used in their own university.

Unsurprisingly the commonest terms used are Accreditation of Prior Learning and Recognition of Prior Learning as generic terms. APL and its derivatives are used more commonly than RPL. The terms Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning and Recognition of Prior Certificated Learning where credit is awarded for past credit bearing learning; Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning and Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning where past learning is not credit bearing. For the latter no institution appears to make a distinction between Non-formal (structured, planned, unaccredited learning) and Informal learning which occurs on an everyday, unplanned, incremental basis (ie is directly experiential). One university reported that its institution's regulations did not permit the recognition of any form of prior learning.

Figure 15: Currency of allowable APCL/RPCL by university (n=24)
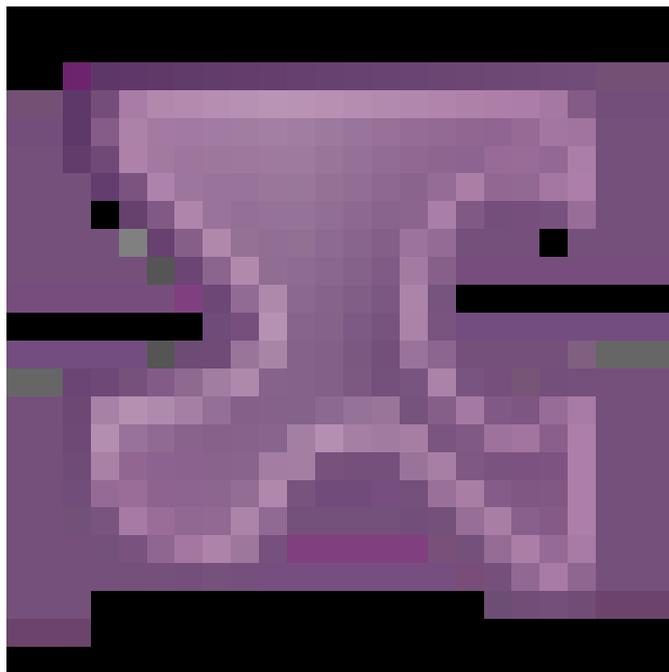
Comment

In some ways the range of responses is quite surprising. Although the majority of universities (14) allow APCL claims for credit up to five years old as expected, it was not anticipated that so many universities (five) place no upper limit on the age of previously obtained credit. Nor was it anticipated that there are still some universities, as in two cases, where no prior learning even if certificated is permitted.

Figure 16: Methods of assessment for APCL/RPCL claims out of time by university (n=24)
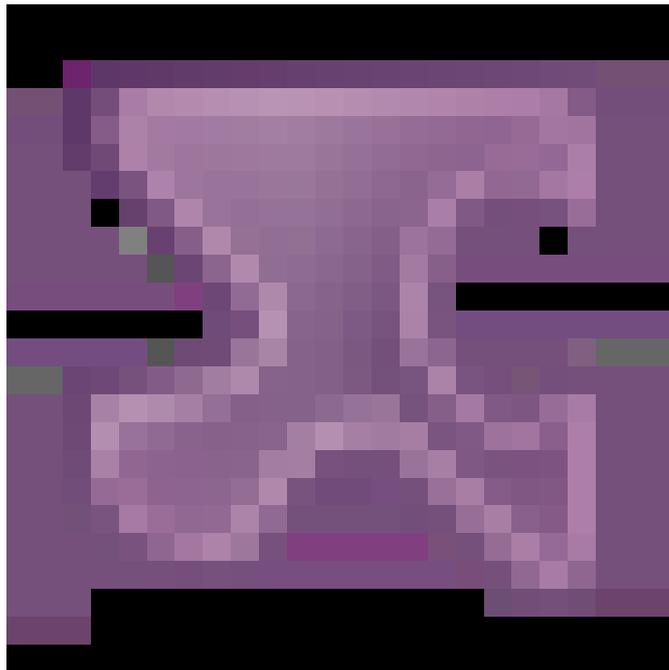
Comment

This reveals a surprising degree of variations in practice. Three respondents simply do not allow any past claims while the most flexible allow students to either demonstrate application (ie experiential) as well as update their formal knowledge. For other universities currency can only be given as a result of application, in most cases as reported by the student or as in one case by a line manager.

Figure 17: The uses of AP/RPL by university (n=22)
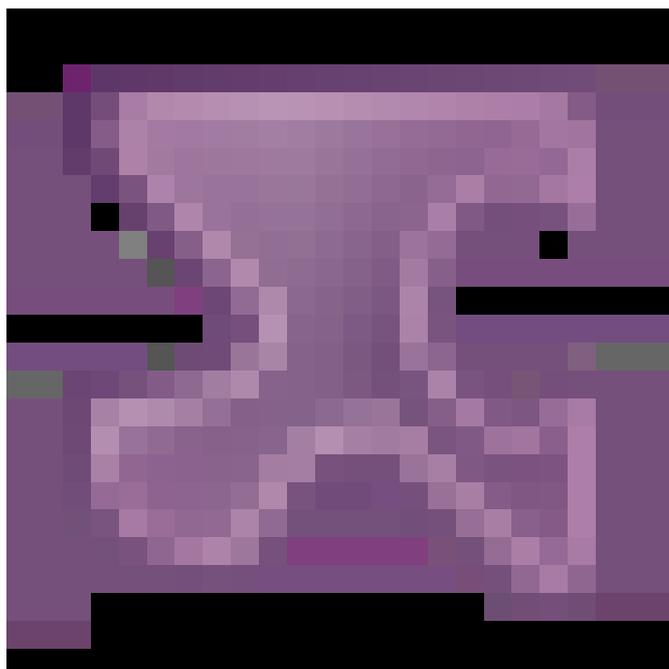
Comment

APL/RPL procedures were first used in the USA in the 1930s for admissions purposes so it is interesting to find that two WBL departments are still using it for this reason only. For the largest group APL/RPL is used for both admissions and credit purposes and in six departments where presumably there are no formal entry requirements it is only used for the purposes of awarding credit.

Figure 18: Estimated number of students admitted on the basis of APL/RPL claims by university (n=15)
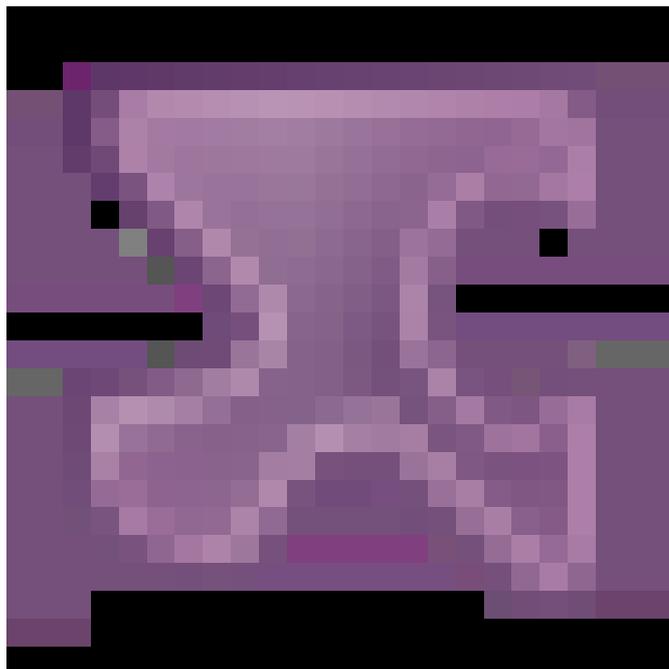
Comment

Where APL/RPL is being used for admittance purposes it is clear it is quite extensively used

Figure 19: Evidence of APL/RPL as the basis for admissions purposes by university (n=19)

Comment

WBL departments who use APL/RPL for admissions purposes do not rely solely upon experience when admitting students onto their programmes but instead use a variety of methods- sometimes more than one method in the department. Having said that the most common method is the portfolio- either on its own or with an interview or reflective review.

Figure 20: Assessment of APL/ RPL claims by university (n=19)

Comment

This aspect of practice relates to the way APL/RPL claims are assessed for credit. What is interesting is the split between those departments who grade APL/RPL claims and those who do not. The majority do not grade claims under any circumstances but some grade against subject specific modules and one university grades generic (ie purely experiential) claims.

Figure 21: Estimated number of students making APL/RPL claims as part of their studies (n=24)
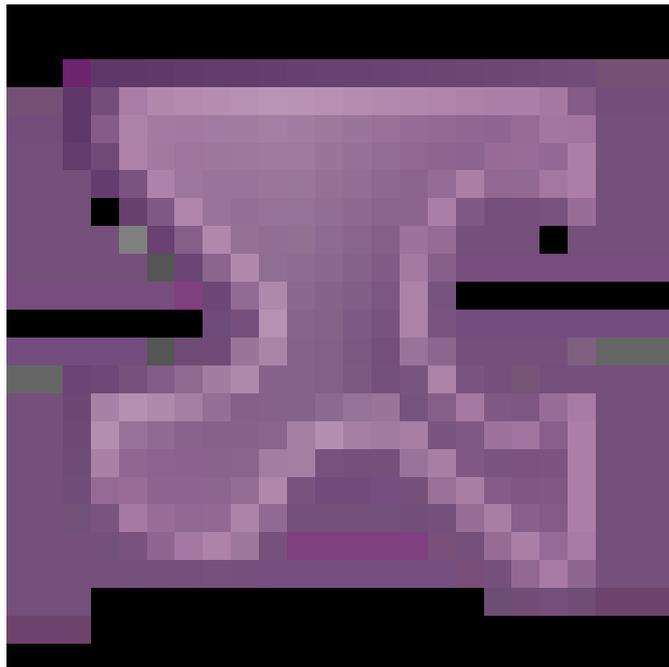
Comment

This reveals quite an interesting divide in the numbers of APL/RPL claims being processed in different universities. As might be expected the departments with the largest numbers of students are also those most likely to be processing the largest numbers of APL/ RPL claims although the relationship is not completely uniform suggesting that some universities are incorporating a larger proportion of past learning into their programmes.

Figure 22: Programme adapts to APL/RPL or APL/RPL adapts to the programme by university (n=22)

Comment

This is one of the most interesting findings from the survey. Andersson, Fejes and Ahn (2004) identify two approaches- 'Procrustean' and 'Trojan horse'. In the former the students claim for prior learning must be consistent with programme and module learning outcomes, while in the latter case the programme is able to adapt to the learning achievements of the student. Previous research has identified the lack of flexibility in programme design (the Procrustean approach) as a major reason why there is still relatively little use of APL/RPL in universities (Cooper and Harris 2013; Hurlimann, March and Robins 2013; Whittaker et. al. 2011). Although they were not asked to do so some respondents also indicated that the same lack of flexibility extends to modules as well as programmes. It was expected that WBL departments would tend to flexibility so the finding that only four are able adapt their programmes to the learning achievements of their students came as something of a surprise.

Figure 23: Permitted APL/RPL for named awards by university (n=22)

Comment

The interesting feature about these responses again is the variety of practice. It was anticipated many universities allow up to two thirds of credit for a named award to be obtained through APL/RPL. What is surprising is that three universities allow a whole award to be obtained through this means. French universities by law are required to award degrees on the basis of APL/RPL only but the awards are generic so that they can accommodate the learning achievements of individuals. All three of the universities in this survey who have the ability to grant named awards on the basis of APL are among those who require APL/RPL to be consistent with programme learning outcomes. As previously observed this effectively prevents many students from making APL/RPL claims so it would be interesting to know how many students have been able to obtained awards by this means.

Figure 24: Varieties of acceptable APL/RPL by university (n=21)

Comment

Three of the universities will only accept Certificated Learning (ie credit bearing) as evidence of past learning. One of these indicated that any claims must be accompanied by evidence of work experience. None of the three are among those who permit a named award to be obtained solely by means of APL. Most institutions (18) of those responding accept Certificated and Experiential Learning for the purposes of obtaining academic credit. A further question revealed that all accept both Non-formal learning (planned, structured non-credit rated) and Informal learning (unplanned, unstructured, incremental, experiential).

Figure 25: APEL/RPEL for specific and non-specific credit by university (n=18)

Comment

Most universities responding allow APEL/RPCL claims to be made for subject specific modules and as claims for generic credit, indicating in this respect a high degree of flexibility. By contrast in two universities claims can only be made to meet the learning requirements for subject specific modules or for non-specific credit.

Figure 26: Acceptable sources of Non-formal learning as the basis for APEL/RPEL claims by university (n=20)
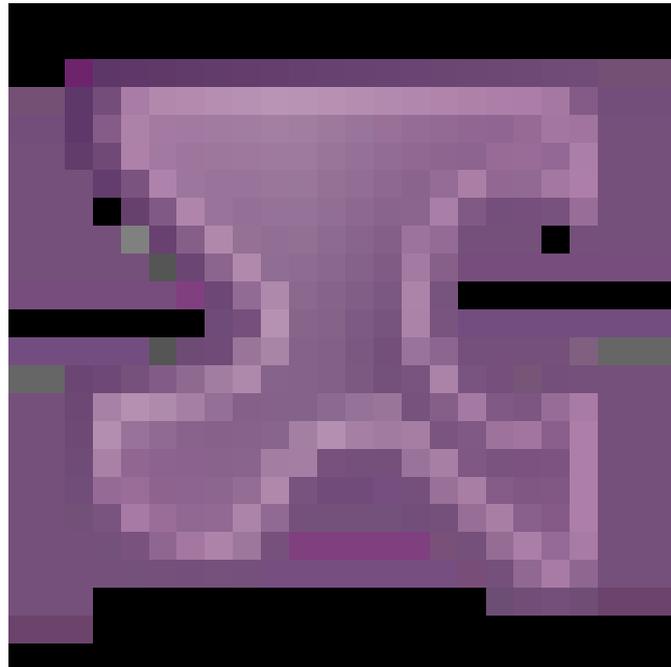
Comment

The data presented here is central to this investigation because it reveals how many universities are likely to accept a MOOC certificate alongside other types of Non-formal learning. It is important to be clear that respondents were not asked whether they would accept completion of the various certificates described in return for academic credit but as the *basis* for an APEL/RPEL claim. NARIC is the national body for determining the value of HE awards obtained outside the European Higher Education Area so that any award they recognise as valid could be viewed as the basis for an APCL/RPCL claim. However only a minority of universities in the survey (seven) are prepared to accept a university award not recognised by NARIC as the basis for an APEL/RPEL claim. NVQs are outside the National Qualification Framework and therefore also cannot be used as the basis for an APCL/RPCL claim. Although a larger number of universities (13) will accept a higher level NVQ as the basis for an APEL/RPEL it is still only half of those who participated in the survey. Higher level NVQs are as acceptable as Accredited Professional (14), Unaccredited Professional (12) and Industry specific qualifications (13). Employer specific qualifications are slightly less acceptable (11) suggesting that for most WBL departments qualifications obtained from corporate universities do not provide the basis for awarding formal academic credit. Even less acceptable is evidence of learning from a MOOC, as indicated by the possession of a Certificate.

Figure 27: Acceptability of a certificate obtained via automated assessment as the basis for an APEL/RPEL claim by university (n=19)
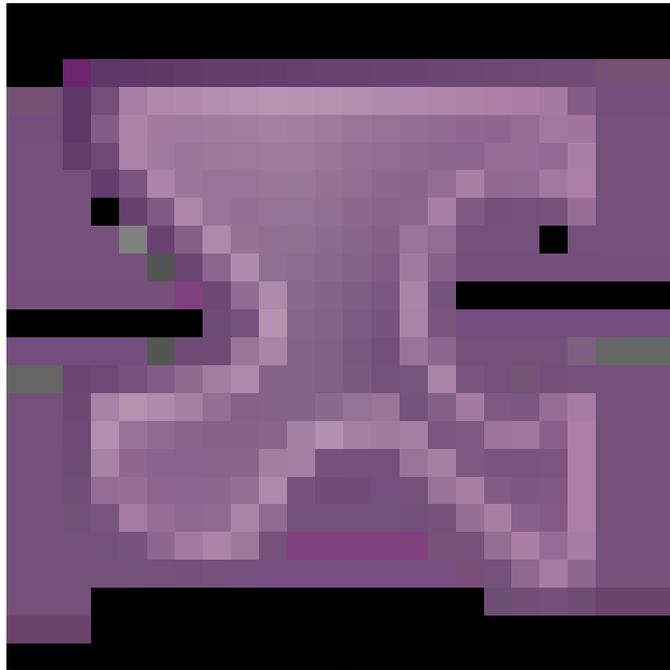
Comment

The response to this question is interesting because of the various categories of Non-formal learning only MOOCs are likely to use automated assessment methods. The responses indicate that many Wbl departments have not completely closed their minds to the automated assessment as being indicative of learning.

Figure 28: Acceptability of a certificate obtained from an entirely online source as the basis for an APEL/RPEL claim by university (n=20)

Comment

As might be expected responses for this question are broadly similar those in Figure 26 although slightly more departments indicate that they would accept evidence of learning from an online source- five as opposed to three.

Figure 29: Acceptability of a Non-formal qualification obtained in a language other than English as the basis for an APEL/RPEL claim by university (n=18)

Comment

As with much else presented in this survey the data in Figure 28 indicates a range of flexibility practices. Some respondents indicated that they would make a judgement on educational rather than linguistic grounds in all cases while some indicated they would accept any form of qualification in a foreign language as the basis for an APEL/RPEL claim.

This is a curious approach since universities with provision in their regulations to accept APL claims are obliged to regard formal qualifications obtained in the European Higher Education Area (which has 50 member nations) in the same way they do UK based, English language qualifications.

Figure 30: Responsibility for deciding the admissibility of Non-formal learning as a suitable basis for APEL/RPEL claims by university (n=21)

Comment

There are two interesting observations to make about Figure 30. The most observable feature is that there is no consistent pattern. Decisions about what is admissible varies between universities. Given the dispersal of responsibility it is not surprising that decisions about what is permissible is also highly variable. The second observable feature is that decisions about what is permissible is largely viewed as an academic matter so that in no instance is responsibility devolved solely to a Quality Assurance unit.

Figure 31: Practices for assessing the potential of Non-formal learning as the basis for APEL/RPEL claims by university (n=26)

Comment

It is quite difficult to interpret this data since some respondents clearly regarded this as an 'either/or' choice while others indicated multiple responses. For example here is no contradiction between consulting with an external body and assessing each case on its merits. It is slightly surprising that only three universities have compiled a list of qualifications they are likely to regard as legitimate, given that this can save a lot of time.

Figure 32: Methods for assessing APEL/RPEL learning by university (n=20)
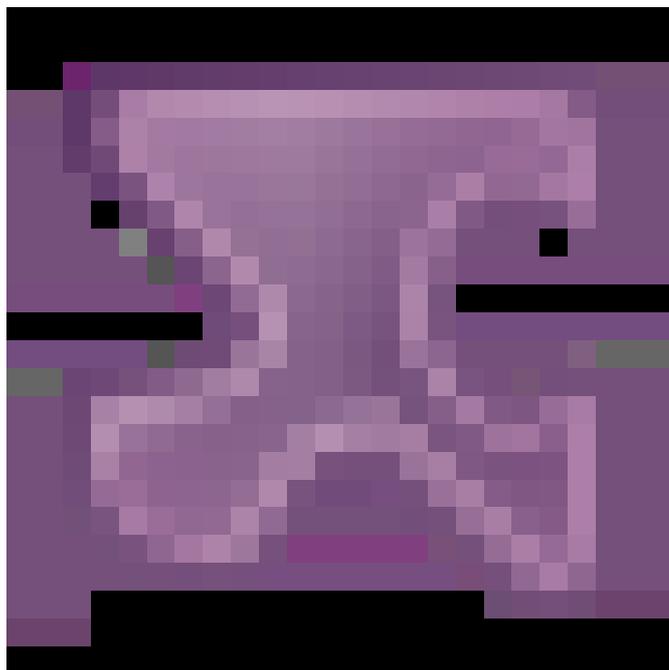
Comment

Since no universities have separate procedures for assessing Non-formal and informal learning the data presented here demonstrates how both are assessed. It has long been recognised there are two approaches to the ways in which experiential learning can be translated into academic credit. In the 'Exchange' model credit is awarded in exchange for evidence of professional attainment. This is the model practised in seven of the university departments represented here.

A second approach is the 'Development' model where experience is assessed in terms of the learning derived from it. The Development model is essentially a critique of the Exchange model and is founded upon W. Edwards Deming's (undated) famous maxim that 'Experience by itself teaches us nothing'. The Development model is more complex but it has some advantages over the Credit exchange model. The main advantage is that it requires the student to demonstrate not just professional attainment but also formally identify learning from the experience. There are varying degrees of sophistication in the extent to which this is conducted as is evident in Figure 33.

Using a Development approach also makes it much easier for the university to translate Non-formal into academic credit. Many Non-formal learning programmes include a great deal of content, summarised as with formal learning in a certificate. Unless universities have the capacity to allow a single certificate to constitute a 'portfolio' they are likely to regard such a certificate as only part of a greater learning achievement.

For these and other reasons the majority of universities actively engaged in APEL/RPEL use the Development model. In ten cases here there is a requirement for a portfolio of evidence and a reflective review. Two universities represented here do not require any direct evidence of experience but instead require either a reflective review or other form of written assessment.

Figure 33: Content of reflective reviews by university (n=13)

Comment

These categories of data are not mutually exclusive so that including a statement of professional attainment for example does not preclude the use of academic literature. What is interesting is that for some universities a reflective review does not include engagement with formal literature or a statement of planned future actions. One university does this but only for students at higher levels of learning. Without engagement with academic literature and some indication of revised future actions it is difficult to see how new learning, in the sense of being exposed to new ideas as the basis for revised future actions, based upon exposure to leading literature and lived experience, can occur.

Summary and discussion

It has been assumed that the advent of MOOCs will result in demand from those completing MOOC courses to convert their learning into academic credit and awards. For example a recent UK government report states:

"The burning issues for MOOCs are the exploration of a viable business model and the accreditation of MOOC learning… Accreditation is discussed in the literature mostly to the extent that it offers a route to revenue for US MOOC platforms and possibly for colleges. This debate has not been seriously applied to the UK yet – but there is every reason to expect it will come." (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2013, p. 7)

This study was intended to identify whether completion of a MOOC course is likely to enable a student to obtain academic credit in a Wbl department which are assumed to be the main practitioners of APL/RPL procedures and likely to have the most flexible attitude towards curriculum design. These are early days in the life of MOOCs but it seems few if any students are presenting with MOOC certificates and if they do, there are very few universities likely to be accept them either as the basis for admission to a programme or as the basis for the awarding of academic credit in such

departments. One of the findings of the study in this respect is the low awareness among tutors of the potential of MOOCs and other online resources for providing content, particularly those which are best suited for conversion into large blocks of credit. By contrast academic tutors are still heavily engaged in doing what they always done- creating content. During the course of 2015 one UK university announced it would accept the completion of a MOOC course and exam as the basis for an APL/RPL claim. But this is only for Futurelearn and not other MOOCs (Times Higher Educational Supplement 2015).

The study has revealed findings in other aspects of practice which strongly suggests the need for further research. There has not been a large scale survey of APL/RPL practices in England since Merrifield, MacIntyre and Osaigbovo (2000). Even from this small sample it is evident there are still many barriers to overcome in order for practices to become more flexible. The importance of this is highlighted by the latest round in the Bologna process as set out in the Yeravan Communique (2015). This includes a commitment to

"remove obstacles to the recognition of prior learning for the purposes of providing access to higher education programmes and facilitating the award of qualifications on the basis of prior learning, as well as encouraging higher education institutions to improve their capacity to recognize prior learning" (European Higher Education Area 2015)

One of the most surprising findings is that some universities still do not allow any provision at all for the recognition of prior learning. The present survey confirms findings in previous surveys that rigidities in curriculum design are an important obstacle (Cooper and Harris 2013; Hurlimann, March and Robins 2013; Whittaker et. al. 2011). Where this study goes further is drawing attention to the restricting effect some practices associated with the assessment of past learning. Pokorny (2011) identifies two approaches to the assessment of claims for past learning. In the 'Credit Exchange' model students are able to obtain either a part or whole named award on the basis of demonstrating evidence of past professional attainment. The usual method for demonstrating competence is by the production of a portfolio of evidence, perhaps accompanied by an interview to verify claims. Because of the difficulties associated with equating experience with learning levels and volumes of credit, interviews are usually arranged with a panel of often senior academics to ensure some authority is brought to the process.

The second method of assessing past learning is the 'Development Model'. In this approach there may or may not be a portfolio of evidence but the principal mechanism for determining learning attainment is evidence of new learning from the experience. Ideally this is completed in the form of a reflective review which incorporates academic literature and obeys academic conventions. This allows for the easier translation of experience into academic credit and level. It is also less resource intensive as the review can be assessed by an individual tutor as with any other assignment.

The use of the Development model also facilitates the greater use of APL/RPL. Although it might be considered suitable as a mechanism for assessing experiential claims, the awarding of credit based upon a portfolio makes it a poor instrument for assessing other forms of learning such as that gained directly from a structured programme. Portfolios are really only useful as evidence of Informal rather than Non-formal learning. In the case of a MOOC all a student will have to show for their learning is a certificate. Unless a certificate is considered sufficient for a portfolio, an assessment using the Credit

Exchange model is likely to also require evidence of application. In the Developmental approach all a student need present is the Certificate alongside a reflective review summarising the learning and a reflective account of its application.

In addition to suggesting the need for a more comprehensive survey on APL/RPL practices the survey also suggests further research is needed is on the extent to which Wbl and the practices associated with it have infiltrated UK higher education in the past twenty five years. As far as I am aware this is the first time anyone has even tried to estimate how many students are engaged in Wbl. Whatever the actual number it is clear there are now many thousands of students actively engaged in various forms of it. Traditionally the academic community of Wbl tutors has thought of itself as being quite small but it is clear that there is something of an unnoticed revolution going on in our universities as students demand more relevant forms of education and tutors attempt to meet their aspirations. It is probable there are between 10-20,000 students engaged in some form of Wbl in England and Wales alone and this is not an insignificant number. As with the requirement for more extensive use of APL/RPL the Yerevan Communique also emphasises the greater need for the kind of flexible, relevant learning Wbl represents.

Despite this we know that the advance of Wbl has been far from evenly distributed. Few research intensive universities have attempted to introduce it yet others which pride themselves on their teaching and vocational orientation have not attempted to do so. In some universities it has been introduced and abandoned. The introduction of full market fees in 2013 has had a calamitous effect on part time provision as has the collapse in public sector money available to train staff (Hillman 2015). Moreover despite interest from policy makers at a European level domestic policy makers have shown little or no interest in any form of part time provision, let alone Wbl. If the phrase has ever passed the lips of a British politician it has done so nowhere in the public domain.

Finally although it was not the focus of the research it is apparent that some universities engaged in Wbl are a lot more flexible in their approach to pedagogy than others who are also nominally doing the same thing. One of the unrecorded outcomes from this project is a good deal of interest from practitioners keen to learn from others. A fuller survey of Wbl will help shed light on other areas of practice to the benefit of students, academic tutors in the sector and UK higher education.

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