



**Modern Professional Practice and its Future**  
**Allens, Level 28 Deutsche Bank Place**  
**126 Phillip Street, Sydney**  
**Thursday, 3 March 2016**

**What is the Point of a National Exam? University Training and Life-long Learning in the Professions?**

My comments about a national exam are in essence comments about educational standards and credentials on the one hand, and learners and employers on the other. My intention is to have a look at the very complicated landscape in which all of these players are active and then draw some conclusions about what we are referring to as the 'national exam' .

**The Educational Landscape**

Over the past 25 years the number of educational providers has increased exponentially as the demand for skills continues to grow with the development of global economies. Over the past five years, technology has impacted dramatically on the delivery of education making it accessible to so many more people. For example, a study program today may consist of –

- a traditional university program on a campus;
- a university program online;
- individual chosen accredited courses or subjects through a university;
- certified or non-certified MOOCs;
- a hybrid combination of the above open to accreditation by a university or potentially certified by an independent agency.

These developments have presented as serious challenges to the delivery model of university education and, now, as we have entered the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of MOOCs, universities have overcome their initial anxiety about their role and relevance and adapted very well. As content is no longer exclusive to university experts and is virtually available to everyone, universities have moved from mainly delivering content to curating it for specific purposes. They also have flipped the classroom in the redesigned learning ecosystem. Also universities are starting to develop partnerships globally (eg UNSW, Arizona State University, UCL) which allows freer movement of students across university programs.

## **21<sup>st</sup> Century Learners**

The demand for higher education continues to grow (and reflects the expansion of the higher education industry). In Australia there were 1, 213, 403 students in 2015 which is an increase of 3.1 per cent from 2014. I am particularly heartened that P/G students represent 26 per cent of all students with an increase of 4.6 per cent from 2014.

This represents a growing acknowledgement of the importance of the need for higher level skills in a smart economy. Of these 1.2 million, 312 000 are over the age of 30. In America, higher education enrolment by students aged over 35 has also risen from 314 000 in the 1990's to 899 000 in the 2000's.

So we have young learners, older learners, full-time and part-time learners, domestic and international learners - all of whom are choosing from the array of delivery modalities. The big 3 MOOC providers have delivered to over 12m students; edX says nearly half of its students come from developing countries. Coursera plans to expand its focus on Asia.

To add further to the complex educational environment, student objectives vary enormously. For example some students want –

- an emphasis on a broad education that develops critical thinking skills (learning how to ask the right questions) coupled with professional content;
- specific expertise to develop sought after (ie employable) skills;
- an opportunity through education to lift living standards;
- to become innovative and entrepreneurial;
- to become educated citizens.

Last year during her visit to Australia, Daphne Koller (co-founder of Coursera) showed examples of young African students studying business courses on their mobile phones! Student objectives in obtaining an education are indeed very diverse.

## **21<sup>st</sup> Century Employers**

Employers have always and will always need skilled employees. Many identify the desired 'soft skills' that ensure analytical and critical thinking, communications etc in addition to content knowledge. Others focus on deep knowledge with content expertise. Employers need creativity and graduates who can 'ask the right questions' and drive innovation. Some employers just want people to do the job, whatever that requires.

My own view is that many employers, particularly Australian ones, don't have a clear picture of their current and future skill needs. (This is an opportunity for professional associations to support employers in their recruitment practices.)

Once again, we see a broad array of employers with differing work based requirements.

## **Some Implications Arising from this Complicated Landscape**

Entry standards to university have loosened with the expansion of the marketplace and the expansion of the student population.

University entry is becoming increasingly flexible to accommodate the array of learners. Recently, Victorian university vice-chancellors called the ATAR as "out-of-date, imperfect measure of success and increasingly irrelevant". A growing number of universities are

instead selecting their students based on interviews, portfolio work, special consideration and performance in exams” (*The Age* 2/9/16). Swinburne just announced that students at Templestowe College will be given the option of applying for any course at the University. Entry will be based on new measures of student ability: grit, leadership and interpersonal skills . Other schools are being invited to take part in the pilot.

There is no restriction to enrol in a MOOC and increasingly students are taking advantage of digital badges and verified certificates in non-degree credentialing outside the realm of the traditional academic credit. Online degrees are not far away. The value of these alternative credentials will rise or fall based on the actual performance of the individuals. And as we have noted, there is an employer market segment out there that is willing to take the risk and hire people with newly created credentials to do the job. Linked In, Seek etc makes global recruitment easy.

So in the context of many forms of educational provision, many types of students and diverse employers, what is the point of a national exam? Not much, I would say.

One issue in this environment is how professional associations engage with employers to assist their understanding of the array of qualifications that are now turning up on websites.

### **Some Final Comments on Life-long Learning**

The tremendous changes brought about by technology in the way we live and work underpins the necessity of life-long learning. It is happening informally all of the time as we have adapted to the digital age in so many ways. It is happening more formally in the workplace as industrial transformation takes place. All services (medical, financial, legal or social) involve the internet now. In addition to qualifying, maintaining one’s professional status now is regulated because of the pace of change.

So life-long learning is a given because the professionals need it and the consumers demand it. And in the modern educational landscape that offers more options than ever has been available means that ongoing and, hopefully, quality learning will be easier to access.

This is a good thing because we are producing better and more educated citizens with a global perspective. This demand will only continue to grow.

In my view, this is the landscape in which professional organisations are now operating. So, let me identify some of the implications-

- 1) a reignited interest in apprentice style training as a complement online learning ie ‘work experience’ as a basis for independent credentialism;
- 2) part of employers’ willingness to accept higher risk is the high quality of online learning – some of these MOOCs are presented by Nobel Laureates and the production values of the course are very high and very well accepted;
- 3) MOOCs deliver well regarded courses on ethics – are these enough to pass the professional bar?