

Global Trends in Transnational Education

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Abstract—The realities of globalization, both positive and negative, dominate the landscape of higher education. Transnational education programs allow students to pursue higher education in other countries without physically relocating. These programs offer collaborative learning opportunities which are valuable for increasingly globalized societies, and hold great potential for developing countries. However, concerns regarding cultural compromise and quality assurance remain. This article highlights current global trends in transnational education, with a dual focus on culture and quality.

Index Terms—Transnational education, online education, distance education, globalization.

I. INTRODUCTION

Transnational education is an umbrella term encompassing many of the educational platforms more commonly labeled as distance education, online education, collaborative education, for-profit education, and satellite campus teaching. While transnational education is inherently international in scope, different terminology is used to clarify that transnational education does not require international travel.

In 2002, the Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education ratified by the Lisbon Convention defined transnational education as “all types of higher education study Programmes, or sets of courses of study, or education services in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based. Such Programmes may belong to the educational system of a state different from the state in which it operates, or may operate independently of any national system” [1]. While this definition represents the aggregate perspective of the 47 Member States of the Council of Europe, transnational education is a global phenomenon.

The World Trade Organization (WTO), representing 159 nations and the overwhelming majority of all international trade, has taken significant interest in transnational education programs. Rules and regulations specified in the WTO’s General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) recognize transnational education as an internationally traded service. As such, online education programs and other distance education programs which enroll students across international borders fall under the scrutiny of GATS rules and the World Trade Organization itself.

II. INTRANATIONAL BEGINNINGS

A. Online Education

Transnational education is the logical outgrowth of online and distance education programs, which are currently experiencing globally unprecedented growth in both scope and scale. Online education programs generate \$60 billion US Dollars (USD) per year in global revenue, accounting for an increasing percentage of total higher education revenue every year [2]. Many global regions with well-developed higher education infrastructure are experiencing a shift in momentum from traditional classrooms to the online environment, with an estimated 25% of all higher education students in India, along with 30% in the United States and 40% in Turkey, enrolling in distance education programs [3], [4].

Regions with less well-developed higher education infrastructure are also experiencing promising growth in the online arena. For example, while the African continent has the lowest rate of higher education participation overall, online education is increasingly used as a means of circumventing physical and geographical barriers to university access [5].

As online education opportunities expand, the collective body of research grows increasingly global in scope. Table I illustrates a sampling of recent intranational online education research. While the nations and programs studied vary, an emphasis on evaluating quality and the effects of globalization appear to be common threads.

TABLE I: SINGLE NATION STUDIES

Country	Emphasis	Researchers	Year
China	Legal, quality, and cultural issues	Yang	2008
China	Marketing	Altbach	2013
China	World Trade Organization opportunities	Xu, Kan	2013
China	Student perceptions	Fang, Wang	2014
Finland	Quality assurance	Saarinen	2008
Iran	Internationalization of curriculum	Zare	2013
Romania	Participation Statistics, student satisfaction	Tutunea, Rus, Toader	2009
Saudi Arabia	Cultural issues, student satisfaction	Hamdan	2014
United Arab Emirates	Student satisfaction	Wilkins, Balakrishnan	2013
United States	Participation Statistics	Allen, Seaman	2013
United States	Legal issues	Lane, Kinser, Knox	2013

Top to bottom: references [4], [6]–[15]

B. Open Education

Open education or free access programs are a close cousin

of traditional online education, as the majority of open education resources and free classes are offered in an online format. While myriad open education opportunities exist, two of the more common types are Massive Open Online Courses and open universities.

Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs are quite popular and are indeed massive, with an average course enrollment of 43,000 students [16]. MOOC popularity appears to have already peaked, as enrollment numbers have dropped slightly each of the past few years.

Where MOOCs are arguably on the decline, open universities are gaining in popularity. The first Open University opened its virtual doors in the UK in 1971. The concept of free higher education learning opportunities was instantly popular and expanded fairly quickly, with the first Open University in India accepting students in 1982. Economies of scale have allowed the open university concept to remain easily financially solvent, even as conventional higher education institutions are increasingly facing financial restraints [17].

Today, the open university concept is expanding rapidly on the African continent. With instruction and learning materials available free of charge, learners need only web access through a computer or mobile phone to participate. Sub-Saharan Africa is experiencing the strongest growth in mobile phone subscriptions in the world [3]. This growth is a likely factor in open university expansion, particularly at African Virtual University and Sudan Open University (SOU). SOU has enrolled 93,000 students in the past decade, and now offers an online library [18].

III. TRANSNATIONAL INITIATIVES

From the humble beginnings of early online and open education initiatives, transnational education has emerged and continues to grow at an unprecedented rate. Table II presents a cross-section of research examining transnational education programs throughout the world. The English-speaking nations of Australia, UK, and US lead the world in the export of transnational education programs, with approximately 2,400 degrees offered in English in mainland Europe alone [19]. China, India, Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong are home to the largest numbers of transnational education students, the majority of whom are enrolled in Australian, UK, or US institutions.

Global growth in transnational education has been heavily impacted by two nations, India and China. Both India and China have doubled their higher education enrollment over the past decade [3]. This startling growth is expected to continue, with Asia representing an estimated 70% of global demand for international higher education within the next ten years [19].

Along with rapid growth, these heavily populated nations are experiencing a shift in import-export dynamics in higher education. In 2007 for example, foreign students earned over two-thirds of all engineering doctoral degrees granted by universities in the United States; the majority of those students were from India and China [20]. Since that time, China has become one of the top ten host countries for higher education in the world. Approximately 1,400 foreign

institutions currently offer higher education programs in China, the majority of which are Australian [6], [7].

Australian institutions host the highest concentration of foreign students, with almost one-quarter of their collective student body claiming citizenship in other countries. In comparison, less than five percent of higher education students enrolled in US institutions claim foreign citizenship [20].

In the Middle East, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and Bahrain function as regional centers for transnational education programs. UAE hosts the largest number of branch campuses globally, with high rates of student satisfaction [21]. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been working collaboratively with Canada on transnational education efforts since 2003, with King Fahd University in Dhahran building e-learning initiatives with the University of British Columbia [13]. More recently, the Islamic Republic of Iran began exploring transnational education opportunities, including the logistics of redesigning curricula to expand English language usage, accommodate foreign students, and budget for marketing purposes [11].

TABLE II: INTERNATIONAL AND MULTINATIONAL STUDIES

Countries	Emphasis	Researchers	Year
France, India	Commodification, legal issues	Pilkington, Nair	2013
Australia, India	Legal and quality issues	Stella, Woodhouse	2011
Germany, US	Cultural competency	May	2013
Malaysia, Australia	Marketing, postcolonialism, ethno-nationalism	Sidhu, Christie	2014
Kenya, UK	Investment, development, legal issues	Aggarwal	2013
Japan, Australia	Curriculum	Nichol	2103
Hong Kong, Malaysia, Australia	Legal and quality issues	McBurnie, Ziguras	2001
Australia, Singapore, Malaysia	Quality assurance	Lim, Evans	2011
US, UK, Australia	Quality assurance	Smith	2010
UK, Hong Kong	Social capital	Waters, Leung	2013
China, Australia	Quality, educational imperialism	Pyvis	2011
China, India	National knowledge, values, socialization	Kumar	2014
Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Sudan, India, US, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong	Infrastructure, technology	Deb	2013
Africa (unspecified countries)	Quality assurance	Barasa	2010
Southwest Pacific/SE Asia region (24 countries)	Legal and cultural issues	Tynan, James	2013

Top to bottom: references [1], [5], [17], [18], [22]-[32]

In addition to broad multinational efforts, interesting niche programs have been developed to help students gain cross-cultural experience in specific contexts. One such

notable program is the Australian Network for Japanese Law (ANJeL), a partnership between Chuo University the University of Melbourne [26]. Another is an engineering course co-designed and offered by the University of Virginia in the US and the TU Dortmund University in Germany [24].

IV. CULTURAL CONCERNS

As of 2013, institutions in UK enrolled almost 400,000 transnational students in 217 foreign countries [30]. A single US-based institution, the University of Maryland University College, hosts over 200,000 foreign students in its online programs annually [33]. Given the multinational reach of many institutions in English-speaking nations, it is easy to understand why educational imperialism is a serious global concern. General agreement exists that transnational teaching needs to be culturally sensitive, yet there are differing opinions as to how this might be accomplished.

Widespread use of the English language in transnational higher education programs is a culturally complex matter. A few institutions work around the issue by teaching in multiple languages. Babeş-Bolyai University in Romania, for example, offers online business courses in four different languages: Romanian, Hungarian, German, and English [12]. This approach is interesting, but not always practical.

Adopting the English language for educational purposes has greatly assisted many nations in developing robust transnational partnerships. Malaysia, for example, adopted English for higher education in the 1980s. Over the past 35 years, Malaysia has entered into successful partnership programs with myriad universities in the US, UK, and Australia. Indonesia and Singapore have also shifted away from “mother-tongue medium of instruction” to English [19]. Many other Asian nations, notably China, use a bilingual approach. Colleges and universities in the People’s Republic of China are now under government mandate to adopt English as the language for instruction in a variety of disciplines ranging from biotechnology to law [19].

It is widely recognized that constructivist approaches to teaching and learning dominate distance learning programs. A popular colloquialism refers to this phenomenon as the “sage on the stage” being replaced by the “guide on the side” [3]. Scholars are far from consensus as to whether teaching and learning in a non-native language serves as a barrier to making meaning in a constructivist environment.

In addition to the issue of language itself, one must consider the impact of cultural context on learning in transnational education programs. The English-speaking nations of Australia, UK, and US, which are also home to the predominant transnational education provider institutions, are low context and individualistic cultures. In these cultures, presentation of information is explicit, and almost all meaning is conveyed in actual, literal words. In stark contrast, many of the Asian and Middle Eastern nations in which large numbers of transnational students live are high context and collectivist cultures. In high context cultures, presentation of information is often implicit, with meaning conveyed through gesticulation and other social cues as much as in actual words [13]. Learners from high context and low context cultures are particularly challenged when their efforts

to reach understanding with one another take place in a virtual environment. The relative lack of body language and heavy reliance upon written words in online learning environments can pose a challenge to learners from high context cultures, many of whom are already challenged by learning in a non-native English language environment.

These are complicated issues. The reality is, globalization is a potent force, arguably surpassing even industrialization in scope and scale of impact. As explained by the authors in reference [33], “finding the golden triangle between widening access to higher education, high quality teaching, and providing economies-of-scale constitutes an immense challenge for the large-scale distance teaching opportunities.” This brings us to yet another challenge.

V. QUALITY CONCERNS

Perceptions of quality in online and other distance education programs vary significantly throughout the world. In the United States, the overwhelming majority of academic leaders perceive the learning outcomes in online programs as “the same or superior to those in face-to-face” [4]. Quality control measures in the US are fairly robust. Benchmarks for quality assurance were rolled out by the former US-based Global Alliance for Transnational Education in 1995, and were realigned by the United States Distance Learning Association in 2003. An interesting case study of the educational policies of the 50 states comprising the US revealed comprehensive regulations governing expansion, competition, administration, and quality control of programs allowed to operate within individual states [15].

In sharp contrast, education leaders in Africa consistently express concerns about the low quality and questionable accreditation of foreign transnational education providers, particularly when those providers are for-profit institutions. Successful transnational education programs on the African continent do exist, such as the collaborative partnership between Intel College in Kenya and the University of Sunderland in the UK, but these high quality programs may be the exception rather than the rule. Overall, the gap between quality and cost is at times so apparent that transnational education as a means of building developing nations is viewed skeptically, even disparagingly [23]. This dichotomy in perception suggests a need for globally recognized standards, applicable in developing nations to the same extent as the rest of the world.

A wide variety of international agencies including UNESCO, the Asia-Pacific Quality Network, and the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education have been gathering data related to the quality of transnational education programs for a decade or longer. With remarkable consistency, data shows that quality control measures correlate with the developmental stages of nations [23]. Along a wide continuum, transnational education providers are subject to increasing global scrutiny. Measures used by individual nations to govern foreign providers include evaluation of accreditation, restriction of student loan eligibility, copyright regulations, and residency restrictions [3].

India and Australia offer excellent examples of carefully

planned transnational education programs, which may well serve as models for other nations. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) in India and the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) in Australia, have been collaborating on quality assurance measures with mutual success since 2001 [23].

China faces unique transnational education quality concerns, in light of both more rapid enrollment expansion and more recent membership in the World Trade Organization than many other nations. Rapid expansion has led to predictable quality concerns related to effective administration of new programs and overall capacity building [8]. In addition, China is heavily vested in assuring quality in the context of what some stakeholders view as cultural appropriateness of transnational education [6]. The goals of transnational education students themselves seem to be unique in China, as well. Often, distance education programs administered by foreign institutions are viewed as a third choice, behind acceptance into a Chinese university and behind acceptance at traditional brick-and-mortar universities abroad. Many Chinese students enroll in transnational education programs as a transitional step, in hopes of earning acceptance into face-to-face programs at either a domestic or foreign university [9]. For these students, the quality of their transnational education program is of particular significance.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Transnational education programs offer great promise for expanding access to higher education for individuals throughout the world, with far fewer geographical and geopolitical barriers than traditional, face-to-face college and university programs. Properly designed and carefully implemented, transnational education programs hold the potential to greatly assist developing nations in expanding their intellectual infrastructure. These programs also hold the potential to increase the preparedness of students in many nations to work collaboratively within and beyond their increasingly globalized societies.

However, the potential benefits of transnational education programs must be weighed against the risks of educational imperialism. The importance of this concern cannot be overstated, given the prevalence of transnational education providers in English-speaking nations. The cultural capital of receiving nations, particularly developing nations, must be protected by well-planned and collaboratively administered quality control measures.

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