

# *Distance Learning Across Borders: Cultural Imperialism or Intellectual Independence?*

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## *Introduction*

It is a pleasure to be in Australia again. I came to this Darling Harbour conference centre last year when I was with UNESCO in Paris and I think it is one of the world's most pleasant conference venues in one of the most attractive urban waterfront developments. Now I come to you from Vancouver, which has a nice relationship of diagonal symmetry across the Pacific with Sydney, especially at this equinoctial time of year, when the days are the same length and the weather is almost identical.

It was very thoughtful of you to schedule this IDP Education Australia Conference a few days before the UNESCO/OECD Australia Forum on Trade in Educational Services being held here next week. It makes it possible for people like me to attend both and have an excuse for getting to know Sydney even better.

What I had not bargained for is that this trip would be subject to the Chinese curse 'may you live in interesting times'. I mean two things by that.

First your Prime Minister did not warn me that he would call an election for the end of this week. That has disrupted my plans because, as the new head of the Commonwealth of Learning, I had hoped to take advantage of my time here to arrange meetings with the Australian ministers of Education and of Foreign Affairs. Clearly that is no longer possible because they are, quite rightly, concentrating on the basic

political imperative of getting re-elected. Indeed, one of the ministers whom I hoped to see is in a particularly tight race and certainly has more important priorities than seeing me.

Second, these are interesting times for Australian higher education. The election campaign has created a debate on the Higher Education Support Act. A vice-chancellor has resigned under pressure. The creation of an overseas campus was referred briefly to a state Crime and Misconduct Commission. Trends in international student applications are in the news. In these circumstances I am nervous about coming from overseas to talk about Australian international education. I ask forgiveness in advance if I step on anyone's toes.

The good news is that I shall be free to enjoy your election, for elections are great spectator sports. Elections in Australia are particularly interesting because you are one of a minority of countries where voting is compulsory. In view of the steady decline in voter turnout in other democracies that seems like rather a good idea.

In my new role as President of the Commonwealth of Learning, or COL for short, I work within the framework of the Commonwealth of Nations, which is based on the fundamental political values of democracy and good governance. A major part of its work is to strengthen democracy by training electoral officers and the many thousands of people now involved in local democratic councils such as India's panchayat.

Australia is an interesting exemplar of democracy and also a very interesting player in international education. No other country has given education such a prominent role in its trade and foreign policy. The figures, whether they are the cause or the effect of that policy, are impressive.

The title of last year's Ministerial statement on the internationalisation of Australian education gives the flavour: Engaging the World through Education.

My title today is Distance Learning Across Borders: Cultural Imperialism or Intellectual Independence? My aim is to look broadly at issues of international education using Australia's experience as my main point of reference.

But before I turn to Australia I would like to draw from my new institution, the Commonwealth of Learning, some lessons about the development of education across borders.

## Concern about student mobility

The creation of the Commonwealth of Learning stemmed from a widespread concern in the mid-1980s that the physical mobility of students between Commonwealth countries had decreased substantially from previous levels. The reason of principle for this decrease was the growing view that higher education is a private good as much as it is a public good. In practice this principle led the UK, in particular, to raise the fees for overseas students substantially, thus making access to its universities more difficult for students from poorer countries.

I was the President of Laurentian University in Canada at the time and I remember being invited to a meeting of the Commonwealth Standing Committee on Student Mobility at Marlborough House in London. Seeing neither any immediate prospect of reversing the UK's fees policy for foreign students, nor of raising sufficient scholarship funds to compensate for it, the Committee came to the simple conclusion that if you couldn't move the students to the courses, then you should move the courses to the students. Thus began one of the earliest systematic discussions of distance education across borders.

A group was set up to examine the issues further. It was chaired by Lord Asa Briggs, the social historian, who combined experience as vice-chancellor of the new University of Sussex in the 1960s and 1970s with service on the planning committee of the UK's Open University in the late 1960s. Having been associated with the creation of a new university of the traditional type at Sussex and with the design of the radically new Open University he was ideally suited to understand the issue of student mobility and the dynamics of moving courses.

## The creation of the Commonwealth of Learning

The Briggs Report, published in 1987, was entitled Towards a Commonwealth of Learning. The Report did not intend that this would be the name of a new institution. It called for the creation of a University of the Commonwealth for Cooperation in Distance Learning and included a phrase that became its signature sentence. This central proposition was that: "...any learner anywhere in the Commonwealth shall be able to study any distance teaching programme available from any bona fide college or university in the Commonwealth".

I shall return later to that lapidary phrase in order to ask whether this aspiration can soon be achieved. But first, let me dwell a little longer on the Briggs Report. The Report was adopted with enthusiasm by most of the Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met in Vancouver at the end of 1987.

However, the institutional title proposed by Briggs, the University of the Commonwealth for Cooperation in Distance Learning, contained a clear tension between the notion of a University of the Commonwealth, with its implication of institutional autonomy, and the notion of cooperation in distance learning, which implied a different dynamic.

This tension, which I have expressed more starkly in my title Cultural Imperialism or Intellectual Independence, carried over into the communiqué agreed by the Heads of Government, which talked about promoting cooperation in distance education, about the creation of a university and college network for distance education and about the need to attract more funds, concluding that 'once sufficient resources were available it might be possible to proceed with the University of the Commonwealth'.

Adding to the complexity of the concept was the role imagined for technology in the proposed arrangements. This also makes the history of COL relevant to our debates today. As a large country with a dispersed population Canada had invested heavily in satellite technology in the 1970s and 1980s and had conducted a number of projects to demonstrate the educational use of satellites. In the run-up to the 1987

Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting that was to examine the Briggs Report, Canada showed great interest in making satellite technology available to whatever project was approved at the meeting.

It would be unfair to say that the model was a University of the Commonwealth beaming courses by satellite from a single point to the rest of the Commonwealth, but there was an element of such thinking. In this respect the concept was a precursor of the neo-colonialist, hi-tech model of distance learning that the World Bank implemented in 1997 when it created the African Virtual University. The result was pretty disastrous for those now charged with picking up the pieces and trying to re-launch the African Virtual University along more sensible and more African lines.

Fortunately the idea of a satellite University of the Commonwealth was never implemented, because once the Heads of Government had given their approval in principle to the Commonwealth of Learning, a planning committee was set up. A new set of players then came on stage from the developed countries.

I declare an interest because I was one of them. I was still president of Laurentian University in Ontario and I was asked to chair the planning group. The representation on the planning committee from the developing countries showed considerable continuity with that of the Briggs' Group, including, in the case of India, the towering figure of G. Ram Reddy, the founding vice-chancellor of the Indira Gandhi National Open University.

The developed donor countries, however, fielded new teams. University representatives had played a major role in the Briggs Group. In preparing the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting the running was made by Ministries of Foreign Affairs and, in the case of Canada, of Communications. Now, as planning began in earnest, the international development agencies, what are today CIDA, AUSAID and DfID appeared on the scene. This was entirely proper because the funds to create and operate the new organisation were earmarked from their budgets. The camel was in their tent.

## Giving away fish or teaching fishing?

The great virtue of the international development agencies was to bring to the planning committee a clear view of the world, which espoused two principles in particular.

The first was that development was not about giving people fish but about teaching them to fish. The second was deep scepticism about the application of western technological solutions in the developing world. The upshot was that the notion of a university in the north beaming courses by satellite to the south was quashed. It was replaced by the concept of an agency helping developing countries to build an indigenous capacity for open and distance learning in order to answer their most pressing educational and training needs, whether at university level or not.

That is what the Commonwealth of Learning does today and it does it effectively. Over the last fifteen years COL has helped many Commonwealth countries to develop policies, institutions, systems and applications of open and distance learning that are serving them well.

Just as the modern era of open and distance learning, which I shall abbreviate ODL, began in the developing world with the success of the UK Open University, so its progress in the developing world has also been led by universities. Institutions like the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), with over one million students, and the Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in Thailand now operate at a scale and with an impact that dwarfs anything in the western world.

There are times when a change in degree leads to a change in kind. We are reaching the point where institutions like IGNOU are not simply bigger versions of western open universities but a new phenomenon in their own right - and a phenomenon that is of more relevance to much of the developing world than the original model.

I recall an exchange I had with a development official last month. I was saying that since open universities in much of the developing world were now up and running successfully, COL's focus now was on open schools. My interlocutor replied that open schools were not particularly significant in western countries and so he didn't see why they would work in the developing world. Since I am in Australia, famous for its School of the Air, I assure you that I didn't let him get away with calling such open schools insignificant, but that wasn't my main point. Open schools in the developed world, while important, are on a small scale because the residual needs for schooling are small in rich countries that already have extensive networks of school buildings.

Necessity, however, is the mother of invention. It seems likely, for example, that the National Institute for Open Schooling in India, with 300,000 pupils, has learned to address challenges that are simply not part of the educational landscape in the rich world. This is just one instance where developing countries have more to learn from each other than from the developed world. That is why south-south cooperation has become a major part of COL's programme.

## Current issues in international education

I have made this long introduction and dwelt on the creation and work of the Commonwealth of Learning because it brings out principles that are important in international education or cross-border education.

The first principle is that student mobility is valued. When it decreases people get worried. Let's remember that when anyone claims that there is too much mobility today.

Second, there are two main ways of ensuring intellectual mobility, moving the courses, known as Cross-border supply, and moving the students, called Consumption Abroad. The four modes of trade recognised by the General Agreement on Trade in Services also include Commercial Presence (i.e. branch campuses, franchises, and so on) and what is grandly called Presence of Natural Persons (which means mobile professors). However, they all boil down to moving the students or moving the courses.

Here I should again declare an interest in that I have had personal involvement in three of these modes of trade - or all four if you consider that what I'm am doing here today is the Presence of a Natural Person.

I was an internationally mobile student when I left the UK to spend four years in France doing a doctorate in Metallurgy. Later I took advantage of cross-border supply on two occasions, first as a resident of the UK taking a Diploma in Theology at a distance from a university in Canada, and then as a resident of France taking a distance course in international development from a university in the UK.

I have also been involved extensively in forms of commercial presence. When I was at Laurentian we created Canada's first campus overseas, the Université canadienne en France. It lasted ten years until it was overtaken by the rising value of the French Franc against the Canadian dollar. Then at the Open University we had partnership arrangements in ten countries, which are still going strong.

In view of the particular focus at this conference on relations with the Arab world I am particularly proud of our involvement in the creation of the Arab Open University, which is still in its infancy but which will become, I believe, a hugely important motor for development of Arab higher education.

We also set up the United States Open University which had a short life because our pockets were not deep enough to make a big enough investment to achieve a critical mass of activity quickly.

I extract another principle from those experiences, which is that branch campuses tend to be fragile and may either disappear or mutate into indigenous operations. After all, a number of today's universities in the UK began as outposts of the University of London, and some in Canada began as outposts of McGill. Partnerships are a more robust model, and I shall argue in a minute that there are reasons of both pragmatism and principle for operating overseas through partnerships.

But, to return to the lessons from the experience of COL, another principle is to be clear about purpose. I gave you the simple dichotomy of giving away fish and teaching fishing. In thinking about purpose we also need to be clear about the target. When we talk about giving away fish or teaching fishing are we referring to the student, the institution, the country or something else?

The fourth principle is that technology can be a great facilitator of international education, particularly when the challenge is to move the courses. However, we should look closely into the mouth of this gift horse because it may not always deliver on its promises and it may have unintended consequences.

With that as background I shall examine two current issues in international education in the light of these and other principles. It is particularly productive to do this in Australia because your admirably clear Ministerial Statement of last year, Engaging the World through Education provides a basis for discussion.

## International Education: Money

My first issue is money.

There is a large demand for international education and it will get larger. The IDP forecasts growth in higher education worldwide from around 100 million places in 2000 to 260 million in 2025, of which

some 7 million will be international students going overseas or taking courses from overseas.

The reason for this demand is clear. In most countries the salary differential between graduates and non-graduates continues to rise even though there are many more people graduating than there were ten or twenty years ago. A recent study in Canada showed that the rapid rise in the number of female graduates has almost closed the earnings gap between male and female graduates. Trends like these mean that individuals want to invest in higher education. That means money, which creates a market.

I admire Australia for being more robust and explicit than most countries in embracing the commercial aspects of international education and not being afraid to call a spade a spade and to call trade trade. The commercial aspects of international higher education are simply a manifestation of the commercial aspects of national higher education.

I understand that it was the doubling of the numbers of international students in Australia, from eight to sixteen thousand, between 1979 and 1983, that first led this country to take a market approach to international education. Those students were competing for university places with fast-rising demand from native Australians, so raising the price for foreigners was a way of keeping things in balance.

As demand for higher education from nationals has continued to rise nearly everywhere, governments began, timidly, to apply market approaches to national students as well, gradually introducing fees. This has been extremely helpful to the finances of the universities. Conversely, universities like those in much of continental Europe, which cannot charge fees from their nationals and are under tight state control, are struggling to maintain their intellectual eminence in the contemporary world as state funding declines.

I can best summarise this principle in a quote from the great Dr Samuel Johnson, who once said that 'there are few ways in which a man can be more innocently employed than in getting money'. The same applies to educational institutions.

The five billion dollars that Australia earns annually from trade in education has a healthy impact on your national accounts. Indeed, it pays more than twice over for the two billion dollars that you spend on international aid. Of that aid about \$300 million goes on education, which you can compare to the \$30 million that the government plans to spend annually to support the development of Australia's international education trade.

I hesitate to talk student numbers because this is a rapidly evolving and volatile business. In Australia your numbers of international students have been growing at 10% a year so that you now have the greatest concentration per capita in the world, followed closely by Switzerland.

China is growing its numbers fast; hoping to increase from the present 86,000 to 120,000 by the time it hosts the Olympics in 2008. China, however, is not yet calculating the economic effect. To quote Ms Chen Yinghui, director of the international students division of the Ministry of Education:

"In China we still don't calculate things like that. Our priority is the education of the Chinese students,

next we hope to create a lively and cosmopolitan cultural environment for them. Foreign students add to the economy, that's clear, but so far we don't have an overall estimate."

China, with its rapidly expanding higher education system, clearly still has a plenty of room to expand its intake. So, to a massive extent, does another sleeping giant, India. The numbers of foreign students in India have actually gone down, from a high of 13,000 in 1994 to a bit over 5,000 now. This is an insignificant proportion of the 8 million nationals in India's 260 universities and 11,000 colleges. Another emerging state with ambitions in international education is South Africa, which is eager to increase from the 37,000 international students that it has today. Obviously these are very different situations from Australia's because you have to worry about saturation. The foreign students here expect to meet some Australians during their studies, so you can't give your universities over entirely to the international set.

Where the Australian statistics are insignificant, however, is in the numbers of Australians going overseas to study. At only 1%, according to the Ministerial Statement, this hardly counts as engaging with the world, although I understand that the figures are already growing as a result of Government interest.

We tend to assume that all foreign students want to study in English, but the 35,000 Koreans, 16,000 Japanese, 6,000 Europeans and 7,000 Americans studying in China are doing so because they see Chinese as a coming language of international trade.

The Indian figures showed that what goes up can come down and this happens in other places as well. According to last week's issue of *The Economist* the number of Chinese students applying to US universities is down 76% this year and the number of Indian students is down 58%. Even at a solid institution like Texas A&M University applications from foreign students are down 38%. This, of course, is a consequence of the United States over-reaction to 9/11, which has created the sad situation where even good friends of the United States no longer feel welcome there.

But the chances are that it will be a temporary phenomenon, since the US economy has come to depend on foreign students coming to get doctoral degrees and then staying on. Its economy cannot afford to cut off this source of supply for long. Meanwhile, however, countries like Australia, which are working hard to offer a better alternative to the US, will try to maintain their share of the market. I guess the good news is that the market is growing, so there should be students for everybody.

## International Distance Education

My second issue, to conclude, is distance learning across borders. This too is a growing business, although it is impossible to get accurate figures because it is so fragmented. It is growing because of the general growth in interest in international education, because of demand from working adult students, who cannot travel abroad to study except for short periods, and because countries like Australia, as they approach saturation in imported students, are exporting the courses instead.

Exporting the courses is a different business from importing the students. First, you normally make less money per student unless you offer such minimal service that the business will be fragile anyway.



Second, the students approach you in a different frame of mind. If I come to Australia to study I expect to be taught against a background of Australian culture. My own reasons for going to study in France were cultural and linguistic as much as academic - and the benefits to me in later life have been cultural and linguistic as much as academic.

But if I take a distance learning course from another country in my own country I am usually more interested in the content of the course and the qualification to which it leads than any cultural baggage that comes with it. Furthermore, I am not surrounded by students from the country where the course originated who can explain and cultural references that I don't understand - such as references to Australian Rules football and suchlike.

In my experience, getting such obvious cultural markers out of the course is the easy part. More difficult are the more subtle assumptions that the course authors make about the students they are addressing. This is a real dilemma because you cannot design a course without making some assumptions. The key is to be aware of those assumptions and to make them explicit where necessary.

To the extent that a large proportion of cross-border undergraduate students are studying business and computing this is maybe not such a big problem. When the UK Open University began teaching business and management to thousands of students in the former Soviet Union in their own languages, it told its partners that university regulations allowed up to 30% of the course content to be adapted to local realities and still count for credit. They replied that they wanted to learn about western management and that Soviet management had nothing to offer.

I suspect that things may have changed a bit today as Central Europe and Russia have developed business cultures that are western in inspiration without being western in detail. No doubt the courses have evolved as a result.

My conclusion is that conducting distance learning across borders is one of those unusual and happy endeavours where sound principles lead you in the same direction as healthy pragmatism. That direction is towards partnership. Partnership is a sound principle because it helps to develop an indigenous capacity for distance learning in the country concerned and to avoid accusations of cultural imperialism. It is also healthy pragmatism because partnering with a local institution, assuming you choose one that is credible or committed to becoming credible, can give you access to much larger numbers of students than going it alone and can facilitate relationships with the national authorities.

Partnership will, of course, strengthen the partner's ability to operate a distance learning system. That may mean that one day the partner can do without you, but you should welcome that. You will have given that country a bit more intellectual independence.

If relations remain cordial the partnership can then explore new directions. You may find yourself sourcing courses from your partner. Even if the partnership does end, there are plenty more countries and plenty more institutions that need your help.

## Conclusion

I conclude simply by recalling that the coming years will see huge growth in education, in higher education and in international education. Present relationships of client and supplier will evolve. Not only will countries like China and India become large importers of students, they will also become exporters of courses.

Already, for example, we are finding at the Commonwealth of Learning that programmes from institutions like India's IGNOU are more successful in Africa than the sorts of courses that the African Virtual University is forced to take from universities in the countries of its rich donors.

The world will change but there will be plenty of room for everyone. The key to doing well in this environment is to take to heart the title of this conference: International Education: The Path to Cultural Understanding and Development. If we act on that belief we shall welcome the transformation of international education into a more genuinely multilateral phenomenon.

This could mean that the aspiration that was part of the inspiration for the Commonwealth of Learning will apply to the whole world, namely that any learner will be able to study any distance learning programme available anywhere in the world.