

The Expansion of Higher Education in the Developing World: What can Distance Learning Contribute?



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Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to address you. It is a pleasure to be in a session with my former colleague from UNESCO, Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić. Four years ago, almost to the day, the two of us were in Washington with other UNESCO colleagues to mark the re-entry of the USA into UNESCO. We held a workshop on 'UNESCO's World of Education' on the tail end of one of the biggest snowstorms that Washington had seen in years.

One of UNESCO's functions is to develop what are called, somewhat grandly, 'global public goods'. For all countries an important public good is a higher education system in which students, parents, employers and governments can have confidence. In that context globalisation presents new challenges. It is accelerating the expansion of higher education and driving it to greater diversity of provision.

I am going to explore the processes of expansion and diversification of higher education in the developing world. The effect of these will be to make it harder for students to make wise choices and avoid fraudulent providers. Stamenka will explain what UNESCO is doing to help them by describing a series of tools that already exist or are in preparation.

This is the International Commission so I shall focus particularly on the developing world and most especially, for starters, on India, the world's largest democracy. My title is *The Expansion of Higher Education in the Developing World: What can Distance Learning Contribute?*

In an article that we published in Change Magazine last summer (Daniel, Kanwar and Uvalić-Trumbić, 2006) with our colleague Asha Kanwar, Stamenka and I argued that the growth of higher education in the developing world is a tectonic shift that will break up the old order. In a decade or two most university

and college students will be in the developing world, which will, by definition, redefine the norms in higher education globally.

Growing Demand

There is no doubt about the demand. For two decades worldwide enrolment growth has exceeded the most optimistic forecasts. A milestone of 100 million enrolments was passed some years ago, and an earlier forecast of 120 million students by 2020 looks likely to be reached by 2010. Indeed, if part-time students are counted, numbers have already passed 130 million. Growth is, if anything, accelerating as more governments see the rapid expansion of higher education as key to their transition to developed country status.

Thus in China enrolments doubled between 2000 and 2003. By 2005, with 16 million students, China had overtaken the US as the world's largest higher education system. Malaysia also illustrates the trend. It plans to increase enrolments in higher education by 166 percent in the next four years, from 600,000 to 1.6 million, in order to achieve developed-nation participation rates. Mauritius has recently passed legislation to create a third university for its 1.2 million people, having added a second only five years ago.

Growth has been rapid in other developing countries as well - but usually from a very low base. Across the world there is a massive disparity in the higher education participation rates of people between 18 and 23 years old (known as Age Participation Rates, or APRs). APRs of around 50 percent are now the norm in developed countries, whereas in numerous countries in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa they languish below 10 percent.

To date the growth of higher education in the developing world has been constrained by various factors, notably cost. But today spreading connectivity, allied with the massive creation of open educational resources based on open-source technology, could create the radical reduction in costs necessary for higher education to serve the four billion people at the bottom of the world's economic pyramid. Were that to happen it would generate over a hundred million more students.

Meeting the Demand

How can developing nations respond to the massive demand for higher education that they will face? Will the patterns of provision that have worked for industrialized countries suffice, or are new approaches needed? Since developing countries will soon account for the majority of enrolments in higher education worldwide, their answers to this question will effectively define the global profile of higher education in the 21st century. The profile seems likely to change in three ways.

First, it will include a much greater role for private, for-profit institutions. Seeing a massive market opening up, first-world for-profit institutions will expand their cross-border provision of educational services. No doubt they will soon be joined by large for-profits from the developing world that will take advantage of their lower costs to beat the rich countries at their own game. In India, for example,

privately managed institutions, mostly locally owned, already account for over 75 percent of professional education.

How will both the public and the private sector provide higher education to the millions of new students in the developing nations? Much of it will likely follow traditional patterns of classroom teaching on locally owned campuses, but distance learning, offered both locally and across borders (COL/UNESCO, 2006), will have an increasingly high profile.

Distance Learning

Open and distance education is a good way of reaching out to large numbers. The example of India, which accounts for a quarter of the population of the developing world and already has the world's third largest higher education system, illustrates this.

Today India's higher education system provides access to less than 10% of the 18-23 age cohort despite massive growth in distance education. Note that in India increasing the age participation rate by just one percentage point means adding one million more students. Therefore moving from a 10% to, say, a 35% APR will add 25 million more students. It is against this background that two weeks ago India's Knowledge Commission, alongside various recommendations for a systematic reform of higher education, called for the number of Indian universities to grow from 350 today to 1500 by 2015 - and that is only to cope with a doubling of the current participation rate from 7% to 14%.

Distance learning is already a significant component of Indian higher education. Today 24 percent of all enrolments - well over two million students - are in distance education - specifically in 13 national and state open universities and 106 institutions, mostly public, which teach both on campus and by correspondence. The government's target is that by 2010, 40 percent of all higher education participation will occur through distance education.

The Indira Gandhi National Open University now has 1.5 million students and India's state open universities are growing very fast. For example, the Netaji Subhas Open University in West Bengal had fewer than ten thousand students in 2000 but will likely achieve 100,000 students - and mega-university status - sometime this year. The Tamil Nadu Open University was only created in 2003 and already has 60,000 students.

Last month I met Professor Rajan Velukar, Vice-Chancellor of the Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, which has 200,000 students. He told me that he was confident of taking it to 400,000 in the next three or four years. Some of the other state open universities, such as Rajasthan's Vardhaman Mahaveer Open University, Kota, and the open universities in the large states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have not yet taken off into serious numbers but the potential is there for them to do so as pressure of demand continues to increase.

Such numbers put the contribution of cross-border provision of distance education into perspective. In a paper that Asha Kanwar, Stamenka and I presented to the last INQAAHE conference in New Zealand, we showed that the current numerical contribution of cross-border higher education in developing countries is negligible (Daniel, Kanwar & Uvalić-Trumbić, 2005). Cross-border providers of all types focus on

countries at a relatively high level of development as measured by the UNDP's Human Development Index.

The most active cross-border providers in developing countries are, not unnaturally, from other developing countries. The Indira Gandhi National Open University, which must be the world's largest unitary university, is already active in 26 other countries. The University of South Africa (UNISA), a distance-teaching university created back in the 1940s that now has a quarter of a million students, has long had students all over Africa. Nelson Mandela and Robert Mugabe are both graduates, having studied in prison. Today, as well as recruiting students individually, it is setting up institutional agreements to augment provision in countries like Ethiopia.

All the institutions I have mentioned are public institutions. Although distance education began in the commercial sector, as correspondence education, public institutions, particularly those called open universities, have made the running in the last thirty years. They converted correspondence education into multi-media distance education and implemented effective student support systems to complement the learning materials.

Will the private sector re-enter the field in a big way? Profit margins per student are lower for distance learning than for face-to-face provision, but the volumes could be enormous. People sometimes evoke C.K.Prahalad's book, *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid*, to suggest that by making radical innovations in technology and business models and creating highly distributed, small-scale operations married to world-scale capabilities, educational enterprises might serve this huge market profitably.

Private cross-border provision might be part of the answer, but it is only in its infancy even in face-to-face provision. The number of cross-border providers in India increased from 27 in 2000 to 114 in 2004. But in light of India's potential student numbers, their role is negligible. Moreover, their quality is problematic: a third of the institutions are not recognized or accredited in their country of origin, and an equal proportion of their Indian collaborators are not part of the formal higher education system either.

Even when the foreign providers are universities, they are not in the premier league and have mediocre reputations in their own countries. Neither branch campuses nor franchise agreements have had much success, with the exceptions of 61 twinning and articulation arrangements that allow students to go to the source country in the final year and stay on for employment purposes.

But an additional market of tens of millions of students should be tempting for major and serious providers of distance education. But will students want what they have to offer? To make distance learning attractive they must address the five A's of affordability, accessibility, appropriateness, accreditation and acceptability.

Affordability, Accessibility, Appropriateness and Accreditation

Affordability is a major challenge. India, like many developing countries, is trying to transform higher education from an elite to a mass system aimed at the needs of a vibrant democracy. To succeed, providers of distance learning must devise a business model that can take them beyond the elite to reach

out to the masses, in order to realize the cost efficiencies associated with large numbers of students and to address the nation's educational goals.

A series of developments in the ways that technology is used could stimulate the dramatic reduction in educational costs that is required for a radical widening of access.

New methods of education have always attracted private providers. When Britain introduced the penny post in 1840, Isaac Pitman almost immediately started offering a correspondence course in shorthand, and private providers subsequently dominated the correspondence education industry. The next wave of distance education, led by the large multi-media open universities, was dominated by the public sector. In addition to widening access dramatically in some countries, these institutions also showed that distance learning can be of higher quality, as well as less expensive, than conventional higher education because it has to be developed and delivered in a much more systematic way.

The current wave of distance learning, often called eLearning because of its extensive online components, seems once again to have a special appeal to the private sector. It has a cost structure in which a higher upfront investment is rewarded by lower marginal costs when volume is achieved. The for-profit institutions' access to capital markets allow them to make those investments.

Moreover, providers wishing to use eLearning now have available a rapidly growing body of open educational resources; freely available learning materials that can be adapted to particular local needs. I shall return to this crucial development. The combination of expanding connectivity and the swelling reservoir of open educational resources is potentially revolutionary, not least for its capacity to cut costs.

Accessibility is not just a matter of cost. Higher education also requires access to the technology and allied infrastructure through which education is delivered. Internet connectivity is particularly important, yet the proportion of people online is only 4% in India, 1% in Africa (half of them in South Africa) and 0.1% in Bangladesh. But in contemplating the limited use of the Internet in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, remember that twenty years ago the online technology that now permeates the West hardly existed. Communication links are already beginning to alter the way that poor villages in the developing world function. As bandwidth costs go down increased Internet connectivity will accelerate that trend.

Cross-border providers often fail the test of **appropriateness**. Their subject offerings are limited, and liberal education often loses out to more market-driven programs such as business and information technology. Students from a variety of cultures and linguistic backgrounds have to follow the curriculum of the country of origin, baseball analogies and all, with no recognition of social, cultural, and ethnic differences.

Cross-border provision will become fully relevant only when it responds to country priorities, which is best done through strong partnerships between the overseas provider and local institutions to develop curricula and methods of delivery and student support.

The next 'A' is **accreditation**. In reality students' requirements go beyond formal accreditation to a more informal notion, the fifth 'A' of **acceptability**. Students like the convenience and flexibility of distance learning. Furthermore, those students who thought that they might miss the human contact associated

with face-to-face instruction often find that, when distance learning has an effective student support system, contact is both more personal and more effective than in conventional systems.

Students want the academic titles that they earn to be not only recognized, but also endowed with a good reputation. The reputation that the public accords to institutions changes slowly: rightly in my view. It takes time to build up an institutional reputation and, barring egregious mistakes, it also takes time to lose one.

Although the UK Open University acquired high esteem within the academic community very soon after its establishment, it took twenty years before employers began to say that if faced with two job applicants of similar merit they would prefer the Open University graduate. This development had nothing to do with formal accreditation but rather with the accumulation of experience of Open University students and graduates by employers. This is what I mean by acceptability.

I cannot resist a short reminiscence about my experience of taking the UK Open University through your US accreditation system. I must be one of the few people who have taken an institution through both a national accreditation process: the Distance Education Training Council; and a regional process: Middle States. In 2001 we achieved accreditation with the DETC for our offshoot of blessed memory, the US Open University. After my departure to UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning, the UK Open University was accredited by Middle States in 2005. The two processes were strikingly different, with the DETC focusing very hard on the student experience and Middle States looking at more conventional measures of institutional robustness. It would be impolitic of me to compare the value of the two processes in this assembly, so let me just say that they were nicely complementary!

Even the oldest of India's open universities is barely twenty years old; so they have barely had time to acquire a reputation for quality, even where they might deserve it. Furthermore, the open universities have had to contend with the poor reputation created for distance education by the correspondence courses offered by India's conventional universities. These longstanding operations, which enrol hundreds of thousands of students were, and mostly still are, poor quality operations with shoddy learning materials and minimal student support. The universities use them as cash cows to subsidise their campus operations.

The irony is that although the courses are mostly rubbish, they have the advantage of being associated with prestigious universities such as the University of Delhi and the University of Madras. So students looking for distance learning have a choice between crummy courses, with no support, that carry the name of a well-known university, and better courses from an open university that has yet to acquire its reputation.

In theory India's Distance Education Council, the DEC, was meant to create a quality assurance system and get the correspondence systems of the conventional universities to clean up their act. In practice this has not happened for two reasons. First, until parliament approves new legislation, the DEC is embedded within the Indira Gandhi National Open University, creating a conflict of interest. Second, the conventional universities fight any move to improve quality that would make their cash cows generate less cash. These profits outweigh any financial incentives to improve quality that the DEC can offer.

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

Having sketched the case of India I turn briefly to the challenges facing small countries in expanding higher education. I serve the 53 countries of the Commonwealth, two thirds of which are small countries, mostly with populations of one million or fewer. Their challenge is to expand higher education whilst keeping under control the foreign exchange costs of sending students abroad or importing programmes.

As part of the solution their ministers of education have created the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. Its title is somewhat misleading. It is a collaborative consortium rather than a new institution and, while courses are being developed virtually, they will mostly be delivered by a variety of distance and face-to-face methods depending on the infrastructure available. The Commonwealth of Learning is helping with its implementation.

At the moment groups of countries are collaborating virtually to create open educational resources for various courses on our WikiEducator. These can then be adapted and used by participating countries - and indeed by anyone else since they are open educational resources.

This work has thrown up some interesting questions. The first is 'how open is open content?' There is open content and open content. For the Virtual University OERs we are using a Creative Commons licence qualified only by two restrictions. The first is BY, meaning that if you use the material you must acknowledge the source. The second is SA, or Share Alike, which means that if you adapt the material you must put your adaptation back into the pool with the same licence.

We do not use the NC, or Non-Commercial restriction, because we believe that it may prevent just the sort of use and adaptation in the developing world that we want to see. We do understand that some institutions are nervous about not including the Non-Commercial restriction. The UK Open University, for example, feels that in embarking on the OpenLearn project it has laid out the family jewels in a public place and does not want them used commercially in competition with it. There is also the point that if you include third-party copyrighted material in your OER you are constrained in how open you can make it.

Another challenge is how to organise quality assurance and accreditation. Our approach is to use systematic quality processes in designing the OERs but not to attempt any kind of quality kite-marking, partly because the whole point of OERs is to generate multiple versions and assessing them all would be a nightmare.

Our hypothesis is that kite marking occurs through accreditation when an OER becomes a taught course through an institution. This is not straightforward either, because most of our Commonwealth small states do not have their own universities so we need some wider arrangements for recognition and credit transfer. We are working with the South African Qualifications Authority on this issue.

Conclusion

I have touched on a few of the issues of quality and accreditation that arise when developing countries, large and small, expand their higher education systems. Stamenka will now put this in a broader context

by describing how UNESCO is trying to protect learners from low quality and fraudulent providers and guide their choices in these changing higher education spaces.

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