

# *New Providers, New Approaches: Towards a World of Mass Higher Education*

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*Third Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications, Learners and New Higher Education Spaces: Challenges for Quality Assurance and the Recognition of Qualifications, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania 13-14 September 2007*

*New Providers, New Approaches: Towards a World of Mass Higher Education*

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## **Abstract**

A key challenge for the 21st century is to extend mass higher education to the world by bridging the gap between current age participation rates (APRs) of less than 10% in poor countries and rates exceeding 50% in rich ones. Opening up access to tens of millions of new students requires radical cuts in the cost of higher education. Already the profile of provision shows growing roles for private providers, distance learning and cross-border supply. But new approaches are also needed. Expanding connectivity and the growing pool of open educational resources could be combined to move teaching and learning from a 20th century industrial model to a 21st century information-network model. Could this make possible the radical cost-cutting required to bring higher education to a mass clientele worldwide? Are providers up to the challenge?

## **Introduction**

It is both a pleasure for me and an honour for the Commonwealth of Learning to have been invited to contribute to this opening debate at this *Third Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications*.

It is a personal pleasure because this Global Forum was created during my time as Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO. My colleagues in the Higher Education Division, Komlavi Francisco Seddoh and Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, were conscious of UNESCO's duty to maintain international cohesion in a global higher education system that is expanding and diversifying rapidly. That growth is

experienced most keenly in the developing world where, if it is to grow successfully, higher education must pay close attention to quality assurance, accreditation and the recognition of qualifications.

Those three issues involve at least six sets of stakeholders: governments, institutions and their staff, quality assurance agencies, student associations, professional groups, and qualification-recognition bodies. We realised that there was no mechanism for these groups to get together - particularly those representing new providers and approaches. Hence the creation of this Global Forum, of which this is the third meeting. I congratulate my UNESCO colleagues, particularly Stamenka, for the thoughtful way in which they have developed it, and for the spin-offs that it has generated. I refer to the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education (UNESCO/OECD, 2006), which are having a major impact for good, and the collaboration between the World Bank and UNESCO to encourage training in quality assurance around the world.

It is an honour for the Commonwealth of Learning to participate in this debate. COL is a tiny agency but we are particularly proud of two aspects of our work. First, throughout the twenty years of our existence, we have given consistent attention to higher education, even when it was rather out of favour with some of the other development agencies. Second, our mission focuses on the use of technology to enhance and expand higher education so we have many partnerships with new providers and are thoroughly immersed in new approaches to higher education using ICTs and all forms of open and distance learning.

Therefore we feel at home in this Global Forum on the theme, *Learners and New Higher Education Spaces: Challenges for Quality Assurance and the Recognition of Qualifications*. COL's activity is strongly rooted in institutional realities. We believe that what counts is what works and our constant concern is to translate sound principles into effective practices.

My contribution to the debate is entitled, *New Providers, New Approaches: Towards a World of Mass Higher Education*. I start from the premise that in the coming decades the global profile of higher education will be transformed by the multiplication and growth of institutions in the developing world. A key challenge for the 21st century is to extend mass higher education to the world by bridging the gap between age participation rates (APRs) in higher education of less than 10% in poor countries and rates exceeding 50% in rich ones. Opening up access to tens of millions of new students requires radical cuts in the cost of higher education. These are most likely to be achieved by new providers or new approaches. In these remarks I shall comment first on new learners, then on new providers, and finally on new approaches.

## Who Are the New Learners?

First, who will be the learners? Their numbers are exploding as the expansion of higher education comes to be seen as a route to developed status. Most learners will be people for whom it was previously an unattainable aspiration. They will look for higher education that will improve their livelihoods by being accessible, affordable, appropriate, accredited and accepted. Call these the 5 'A's.

A second major group are the lifelong learners, who will challenge higher systems designed for young school leavers. I am honoured to share this platform with Ms. Najwa Qaisy from Iraq, who won a Commonwealth of Learning award for succeeding in her course during some of the worst days in

Baghdad in June 2005. She had to study without electricity, risked cross fire in the street to reach the internet café to send assignments to her tutor, and hid her English workbook from raiding combatants (COL, 2006).

For many learners local higher education satisfies the 'five-As' criteria. But, as for Ms Qaisy, this can include elements of cross-border provision: travel abroad, distance learning from abroad, or study in a local branch of a foreign institution.

Others at this Forum will talk about students who travel abroad to study. I simply note two facts: first, that their numbers have tripled since 1980 and increased by more than 50% since 1998; second, that Africans are the greatest educational travellers. One out of every 16 Africans in higher education is studying abroad.

I am particularly interested in students, like Ms Qaisy, who stay at home and study at a distance with a foreign institution. Here again I note two facts. First, the numbers studying in their own country with a foreign institution have not increased as fast as some expected. But, second, an underlying trend is clear. Between 1996 and 2004 the proportion of foreigners studying with Australian universities by staying at home instead of going to Australia rose from 24% to 33% (Krause, 2006). By 2000 more Singapore students accessed a foreign programme from Singapore than went overseas. The number of foreign programmes in China increased nine fold between 1995 and 2003.

Note, however, as I turn to ask about the providers, that the numbers of students in the poorer developing countries who study programmes coming in from abroad are still trivial compared to local provision.

## Who Are the New Providers?

Who will provide higher education for tens of millions of extra students in the coming decades? A wide array of new providers is joining the higher education scene: it includes not just new conventional or open universities but also media companies, multinational companies, corporate universities, networks of universities, professional organizations, and IT companies. I shall concentrate on one institutional feature of these new providers, which is that many of them are private, often operating for profit.

Indeed, private provision is already higher education's fastest growing segment worldwide; we can predict that it will account for most of higher education in some developing countries in a decade or two (Daniel, Kanwar and Uvalić-Trumbić, 2006). It already accounts for 70% of technical education in India.

Higher education conducted for profit is still a scary concept to some people. At a forum like this we must look the facts in the eye so let me explode two myths (Altbach and Levy, 2005). The first is that private providers avoid disadvantaged students. This is often the reverse of the truth. In the USA 62% of Hispanic students and 47% of African-American students who earn two-year certificates earn them at private career colleges. Furthermore, those who start their higher education in private career colleges have higher completion rates than those who start in public institutions (Levy, 2006).

The second myth, still held tenaciously many countries, is that zero or low tuition fees promote a broader socio-economic student profile. For years research has shown this to be nonsense (see for example Levin,

1990). In reality access to higher education is most equitable when a fees regime is combined with bursary and loan funds for poorer students. Having fees regimes in both the public and private sectors creates a level playing field that allows the combined efforts of governments and investors to satisfy the need for higher education more fully.

I shall not dwell on the distinction between private institutions that operate for profit and those that claim to be 'not-for-profit'. The situation of an educational enterprise that is quoted on the stock market, like the US Apollo Group, is reasonably clear, but what of family-run colleges and the many church institutions (Varghese, 2006)? What, indeed, of the foreign operations of public universities from countries like Australia, India, South Africa and the UK which must make a surplus unless their governing bodies are unusually altruistic? Most cross-border higher education is effectively conducted for profit in the importing country.

India is asking itself what level of profit is acceptable in higher education. Grappling with this question and clarifying legal, charitable and regulatory frameworks for private education will facilitate progress. Private higher institutions of all kinds will do much of the heavy lifting in raising participation rates. Funding will come from student fees and from investors.

## What Are the New Approaches?

In asking about new providers I have focused particularly on those that operate for profit, because for many countries the emergence of a for-profit higher education sector is a challenging novelty. I now ask about new approaches to the teaching and learning processes of higher education, what are sometimes called its delivery methods.

New approaches have originated in both the public and the private sectors. The early development of distance education, from the mid-19th century onward, was mainly driven by the private sector, which combined the technologies of printing and postal service to create correspondence education. However, the second wave of multi-media distance education that began forty years ago was primarily driven by the creation of open universities in the public sector. Today the widespread development of eLearning, which usually means distance learning with some online components, is occurring in both the public and private sectors.

Whatever the methods used, distance learning is growing fast. 24% of India's higher students are now distance learners and government policy aims for 40%. The Indira Gandhi National Open University already enrolls 1.5 million students and there are burgeoning numbers in the state open universities. For example, the West Bengal Netaji Subhas Open University, which had only a few thousand students in the year 2000, has just this month reached mega-university status with 100,000 students.

I said earlier that learners want higher education opportunities to satisfy five 'A's: to be accessible, affordable, appropriate, accredited and accepted. Distance learning is not just accessible and affordable but also increasingly satisfies the other three 'A's. For example, the UK Open University is not only Britain's largest and most cost-effective university, but also places fifth out of a hundred institutions in rankings of quality of teaching programmes.

The various forms of distance learning have already dramatically reduced the cost and increased the availability of quality higher education. But do new technologies allow us to envisage another quantum leap to wider access and lower costs?

In his book *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid*, C. K. Prahalad (Prahalad, 2004) urged companies to re-jig their business models in order to bring the very poor into the consumer society. Could private providers re-jig the business model of distance learning and achieve this in higher education? Best Associates, a US merchant bank, is investing \$500 million for that purpose through its Whitney International University System which Mokhtar Annaki will describe to you.

I shall conclude by simply flagging the two technological developments that could allow new providers to reach a much lower price point and open up higher education to the billions at the bottom of the pyramid.

First, you are all aware of the galloping increase in connectivity around the globe. The Internet and mobile telephony have tremendous potential for improving the student experience, both as a channel for distributing learning materials and as a vehicle for useful interaction.

However, I believe that the real revolution in higher education is not the Internet per se, but its potential to create a global intellectual commons of excellent learning materials with appropriate pedagogy for the electronic age. These are called Open Educational Resources, or OERs. They are the equivalent for teaching of the spirit of building on each others' work that characterises academic research.

OERs are in their infancy, but the infant is growing at a blistering pace, helped by encouragement from the Hewlett Foundation. Three phases of development have occurred in little more than three years.

First, in 2002, academics at MIT shared curriculum information by making their lecture notes freely available on the web. These notes provide benchmarks for academics worldwide and a useful reference for students, even though they are not self-learning materials (MIT, 2007).

Those came in the second phase, when the Open University launched its OpenLearn project last year. This makes freely available first-rate self-learning materials backed by social software to facilitate study and collaboration (Open University, 2007).

The Commonwealth of Learning is actively involved in a third phase of OERs through the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (COL, 2007a). 29 small states are working together online to develop teaching and learning materials to augment the offerings of their national higher education institutions. One such collaborative programme, which also involves UNESCO, is the COL/UNESCO Computer Navigator's Certificate. This is a freely available version of the International Computer Driving Licence using open source software (COL, 2007b).

In only a few years OERs have evolved from sharing information to sharing learning to sharing teaching. By making excellent materials freely available for sharing and onward adaptation we believe that OERS could slash the major cost of distance learning, which is the development of quality learning materials. This could be the key breakthrough for taking higher education to the bottom of the pyramid in the large states and reducing both foreign exchange costs and dependency for the small states.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, and in the spirit of Stamenka's opening comments about this being an agenda-setting meeting, I am delighted by her announcement of the renewal of three UNESCO partnerships: with the OECD, with the World Bank and with the Commonwealth of Learning.

From the perspective of the Commonwealth of Learning our agenda items for these partnerships are nicely summarised in our three contributions to this triple-barrelled conference. Today I have talked about the coming massive expansion of higher education that will require more distance learning, more for-profit education and more cross-border provision. All these approaches present challenges of quality assurance.

Next Tuesday my colleague Willie Clarke-Okah will present a paper summarising recent COL and UNESCO experience in the use of visitation panels and mock audits for institutional development (Clarke-Okah & Daniel, 2007). Addressing the multi-faceted challenges in HE institutions in countries that do not have established QA systems is another important agenda item.

Finally, at the conference in Zanzibar next week my colleague Paul West will talk about the development of a Transnational Qualifications Framework for the 30 countries participating in the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (West & Daniel, 2007). Developing such frameworks will be a vital agenda item for higher education if the exchange of Open Educational Resources across borders is to achieve its potential for cutting the costs of programme development.

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