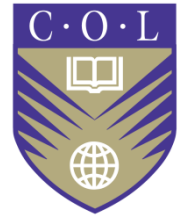


# *Cultural Imperialism or Global Public Goods: Dilemmas of International Education*

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## **Introduction**

It is an honour to address this session on Dilemmas in International Education at this ACU Executive Heads conference. I spent 17 years as an executive head, first at Laurentian University in Ontario and then at the UK Open University. I became a fan of the ACU and it is now a privilege, as President of the Commonwealth of Learning, to be an observer on the ACU Council. The ACU's Secretary-General, John Rowett, is an observer on our Board at the Commonwealth of Learning.

I have prepared these remarks with the help of two wise and perceptive observers of the international higher education scene. Dr. Asha Kanwar, who became Vice-President of COL at the beginning of this month, came to us after academic appointments in India and work with UNESCO in Africa.

Ms. Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, Chief of the Section on Reform Innovation and Quality in Higher Education at UNESCO in Paris, served previously as Secretary-General of the Rectors' Conference of Yugoslavia and at CEPES, UNESCO's Centre for Higher Education in Europe in Bucharest.

For us the key challenge in international higher education is the stark contrast in participation rates across the globe. In the developed world Age Participation Rates (APRs) in postsecondary education of 50% are

becoming the norm. So a rapidly developing country like Malaysia plans to raise its APR to 40% over the next four years, requiring a 160% increase in student numbers. China has more than doubled its enrolments in higher education over a short period of time. In 1998 it had some 7 million students and by 2005 this had risen to 21 million students, giving it the world's largest higher education system.

Yet APRs still languish below 10% in India and even below 5% in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. This is the dilemma. Participation rates must now increase dramatically throughout the developing world. After many wasted years when international bodies like the World Bank downplayed the importance of postsecondary education, everyone now seems agreed about its vital role in development.

Expansion is the challenge. Our question is whether there is an international dimension to resolving it. Should developing countries try to bootstrap the growth of postsecondary education entirely from their own resources or is there a role for outsiders?

Mentioning international partnerships raises another question, which is our title today: *Cultural Imperialism or Global Public Goods: Dilemmas of International Education*. Is international involvement in expanding higher education in developing countries a benign expression of globalisation or sinister neo-colonialism?

We shall address this question through four others.

First, where should the drive for expanding postsecondary education in developing countries come from: the public sector or the private sector?

Second, how can providers, whether public or private, scale up postsecondary education quickly enough? In particular what should be the balance between building campuses and expanding distance education?

Third, what sorts of study programmes are needed?

Fourth, how will we know whether the expanded provision is any good? What quality assurance mechanisms are needed?

## Private or public?

We start with the first question, private or public? Some developing countries have systems where most postsecondary education is provided by the state without tuition fees. These countries usually have low APRs. Given the many other calls on the public purse no developing country - nor indeed any rich country - can achieve modern participation rates in an age of lifelong learning on this model. Either tuition fees must be introduced or the private sector must be invited to contribute - most likely both.

The private sector can be either home-grown or international. Note that all cross-border providers are, by definition, private for-profit providers once they spread their wings outside their country of origin. A public university becomes a private, for-profit provider when operates in another country, even though it may not initially repatriate its profits. Indeed, developing countries sometimes tell you that the ethical standards of public institutions operating outside their home jurisdictions can be lower than those of avowedly commercial providers.

However, to expand postsecondary education the growth of private provision is essential. No government can fund all the postsecondary education its citizens want, so the choice is either a public-sector monopoly giving inadequate provision or meeting the demand through a diversity of public and private institutions.

A country such as Malaysia, which encourages private provision, has many lively home-grown postsecondary education businesses. Thailand and Vietnam have private campuses of foreign public universities as well as local commercial providers. In Kenya, some private providers have international links, both to secure capital and to gain credibility by association with foreign institutions.

The World Bank's private-sector arm, the International Finance Corporation, estimates the private higher education market worldwide to be worth some \$US 350 billion already. The current problem, if the aim is a major expansion of postsecondary education, is that most private providers, both local and foreign, cater expensively to an elite market. They may have a useful exemplary role but they do not contribute much to expansion because they are not usually scaleable. This is the central dilemma of private, for-profit higher education: can it be combined with equity of provision?

## Classroom teaching or distance learning?

This leads to the second question. At present most private provision is through classroom teaching. This is too expensive to be scaleable in poor countries, which in any case lack the trained teachers required. However, distance education has shown that it can operate at scale with good quality and low costs. 23% of Indian postsecondary students and a majority of black African postsecondary students in South Africa are engaged in locally provided distance learning.

Nevertheless, even distance learning as presently organised is too expensive for the mass expansion required. Either the fees are too high for poor people or the finite budgets of distance learning institutions limit the number of poor students that they can accept.

Postsecondary education must take up the challenge of serving the 4 billion people at the bottom of the world economic pyramid. As C.K. Prahalad demonstrates in the case of other businesses, to serve such people postsecondary education will require 'radical innovations in technology and business models', aspiring to 'an ideal of highly distributed small scale operations married to world-scale capabilities'.

The likeliest candidate for a new business model is the combination of increasing connectivity and open educational resources (OERs), which are content, software and tools developed on an open source model. We believe that this has great potential and it will be the basis of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, a network set up at the request of the Ministers of Education of the Commonwealth's small states to develop postsecondary courses collaboratively for local adaptation.

This approach avoids the accusation of cultural imperialism, sometimes levelled, unfairly in our view, at initiatives such as MIT's open courseware project. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is a collaborative venture of developing countries themselves and the intention of local adaptation is built in from the start.

We can regard the MIT open courseware project, which put instructors' lecture materials on the web for the information and inspiration of faculty worldwide, as the first generation of open educational resources. The second generation is exemplified most powerfully by the UK Open University, which is going to make some of its self-instructional materials, which will be directly useful to students, freely available. Maybe the third generation of OERs will be collaboratively produced self-instructional resources designed to be adapted and localised by the collaborating partners, as we intend to do with the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

## Diplomas or degrees?

The next and third question - or dilemma - is what kinds of programmes are needed. Call this the choice between diplomas and degrees. The fact is, of course, that the vast need for expanding postsecondary education means that almost any competitively-priced programme will find a market. However, the times call for a much stronger focus on vocational programmes because securing better livelihoods is the key to development.

Most cross-border providers of both face-to-face and distance teaching already focus strongly on courses in IT and business studies, which do have a vocational element. But greater attention must be paid to the needs articulated by the countries concerned.

When COL canvassed governments on the programmes that they wanted to see developed by the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, they replied with subjects like tourism, professional development for teachers and health care workers, and training of entrepreneurs.

The key requirement for development is that the programmes foster employment and self-employment, preferably through the expansion of the formal sector of the economy, which is too small in most developing countries.

## Quality assurance or *caveat emptor*?

Our fourth and final question is quality assurance or *caveat emptor*. In an era when governments will not be the direct - or even indirect - suppliers of most postsecondary education, how do they protect their citizen-consumers? There is a challenge of ethics and quality. Distance learning is attractive to unscrupulous operators because you can close down a website very quickly. Cross-border higher education makes students particularly vulnerable to scams.

If we argue that government should monitor and regulate higher education, rather than provide it, then logically we must accept a strong role for governments in quality assurance. Indeed, we argue that the driving force for quality assurance has to be national governments even if they share the responsibility with other stakeholders. National governments can ask international intergovernmental agencies to support them in the tasks of quality assurance.

One example is the Guidelines on Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education that have been produced by UNESCO and the OECD, which countries are now incorporating into their own quality assurance frameworks. Copies of these Guidelines are available at this meeting.

So private and public sector providers must create an ethic of integrity and observe national quality regulations and guidelines. Reasserting the national role in quality assurance may help to avoid the all-too-common situation where unscrupulous providers claim to derive their accreditation through vague links with UNESCO.

## Conclusion

It is time to conclude.

Before long most postsecondary education will be in the developing world. Massive expansion of provision will occur in both quantity and diversity. This will lead to the increasing globalisation its progressive privatisation, which is another way of saying the same thing because cross-border providers are by definition private and for-profit.

For this process of globalisation to improve the livelihoods of poorer people and contribute to the development of their countries, postsecondary education must cut its costs through new, technology-mediated approaches to distance learning and focus on relevant vocational education.

To protect their citizens and fulfil their international obligations governments must work with partners to put in place national arrangements for quality assurance and work with other countries and international bodies to create global coherence in the recognition of postsecondary qualifications. This will greatly expand the global public good of postsecondary education and put paid to accusations of cultural imperialism.