International Online Courses: Issues of Global Quality Assurance, Multi-Country Collaboration and Open Educational Resources

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Abstract

If international online courses are to play a significant role in the expansion of education they must be placed within a global framework of quality assurance and qualifications recognition that inspires confidence. We describe this evolving framework before exploring the special challenges facing small countries and giving the example of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, a collaborative venture in the production and use of online courses involving 30 countries. We end by emphasising the potential importance of open educational resources and drawing attention, through the Cape Town Open Education Declaration, to the various degrees of openness being practiced.

Introduction

There is a widespread expectation that online courses will transform the worldwide provision of education, both by making opportunities for learning more widely available within countries and also by expanding the phenomenon of cross-border education. We shall begin by describing the rapid expansion of higher education that provides the context for the development of online courses.

If online courses are to have a transformative impact, then institutions must avoid the difficulties that have led to the failure of many e-learning initiatives (see e.g. Keegan et al., 2007). For international online courses to play a significant role in the expansion of education they must be set within a global

framework of quality assurance and qualifications recognition that inspires confidence. We shall outline this evolving framework.

One initiative for online courses already spans the globe: the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. This collaborative venture between 30 countries illustrates the benefits gained and the challenges faced when many countries collaborate to develop courses online and offer them internationally through existing institutions with local accreditation. The collaborative development of courses online raises questions about copyright and the availability of such courses for onward use and adaptation. We shall comment on this issue with reference to the Cape Town Open Education Declaration (COL, 2008; Shuttleworth Foundation/Open Society Institute, 2008).

The global expansion of higher education

The most striking global trend in higher education is burgeoning student enrolments. There are now 132 million students worldwide. China and India have doubled their enrolments in the past 10 years. Many governments are struggling to respond to increased demand, knowing that their Age Participation Rates in higher education are well below what is needed for sustained national development. APRs are now between 40-50% in OECD countries but remain below 5% in some developing countries.

We are also seeing strong growth in private higher education. Private and for-profit provision is now the world's fastest growing sub-sector of higher education because public and government institutions can no longer meet the demand. Countries like Japan and South Korea already have 80% of their students enrolled in private institutions within a sound framework of government regulation. The for-profit sector includes attempts to develop scaleable new models of technology-assisted provision to promote mass access (see e.g. Whitney International University System, 2008).

Increasing international academic mobility and its accompanying phenomena of migration and brain-drain are major trends in our thoroughly interconnected world. 2.4 million students went abroad in 2004 - a three-fold increase since 1980. African students are proportionately the most mobile, with 1 out of 16 African students studying abroad. These figures are likely to increase even further. The Global Student Mobility 2025 Report (Böhm et al., 2002) foresees that the demand for international education will lead to 7.2 million students crossing borders to study in 2025.

As well as students, institutions and programmes are also increasingly mobile. For example, 33% of all international students enrolled in Australian institutions actually studied from their own country rather than Australia in 2004 compared to 24% in 1996. In China there was a 9-fold increase in foreign programmes between 1995 and 2003.

Learners are becoming more diverse. Traditional learners have a greater need for flexibility and diversity in their studies and they are now joined by life-long learners, adult learners and degree holders who need updating to guarantee employment. There is also growth in cross-border higher education (CBHE) through corporate universities, franchises and branch campuses, although there is very little reliable data on the scope and impact of CBHE. ICT enhanced CBHE (ODL, virtual universities, eLearning, Open Educational Resources) is likely to become the most significant driver of cross-border provision.

Given this context, can international online courses help the expansion of access to HE in the developing world and, if so, how? What policies can governments and institutions adopt to ensure that CBHE makes a positive contribution by rising to the challenges of quality assurance and the portability of qualifications?

Many stakeholders consider distance education in any form to be of lower quality than face-to-face teaching. The burgeoning tertiary education market already has plenty of dubious providers, bogus institutions and degree mills offering fake or low quality degrees, many of which are provided online. How can we alert learners to these and help them choose reputable institutions?

International responses

The Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications

Quality assurance and qualification recognition is never easy. However, UNESCO has created a space for policy debate on these issues through its Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications that was launched in 2002. Its third meeting was held in Tanzania in 2007 and brought together stakeholders around the theme, *"Guiding Learners in New Higher Education Spaces: Challenges for Quality Assurance and the Recognition of Qualifications".*Since the key theme of the Global Forum was empowering learners, it discussed issues ranging from mobility and migration to academic fraud.

The meeting urged a strong focus on capacity building for quality assurance, with the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border higher education being held up as a useful tool for capacity building as CBHE becomes more widespread.

Distance education was a topic discussed frequently. Does the quality assurance of distance education require processes that are different from those used for quality assurance in traditional settings? Is the quality assurance of open educational resources a separate issue again? Indeed, can the quality of rapidly evolving open educational resources and e-learning materials be assessed at all? Some interesting models were presented at the Forum, notably the E-xcellence approach that was the outcome of a two-year project of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU, 2007).

Excellence offers a supplementary instrument which may be used with other quality assurance processes to allow the consideration of e-learning as a specific feature. An important aspect of E-xcellence is that it offers a Europe-wide set of 33 benchmarks, independent of particular institutional or national systems, with guidance about educational improvement. Aside from the full E-xcellence manual, its Quickscan facility gives a quick orientation on aspects of quality specific to e-learning in the areas of curriculum design, course design, course delivery, services (student support; staff support) and management (institutional strategies). UNESCO is working with EADTU to adapt the E-xcellence benchmarks and manual, which were developed for Europe, to suit other regions of the world.

The UNESCO Portal

To further its responsibility for protecting and empowering learners, UNESCO launched a pilot project for a portal of recognized higher education institutions in 2006 and presented the first results in 2008. This work was a logical extension of its earlier work with the OECD that produced a set of Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education (UNESCO/OECD, 2005)

The aim of the UNESCO Portal is to make up-to-date, accurate and comprehensive information on recognised higher education institutions/providers available at the international level. It provides authoritative data on the status of higher education institutions and quality assurance systems in countries around the world in order to help students make informed decisions about undertaking higher education (including cross-border higher education), and protect them from misleading information, biased guidance, low quality provision, rogue providers, and qualifications of limited validity.

Currently, the portal gives access to information on institutions and systems in Argentina, Australia, Canada, China, Egypt, Jamaica, Japan, Kenya, Malaysia, Nigeria, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and the United States of America. The number of countries covered will be expanded in the next stage of the project.

After reviewing the pilot phase the portal's steering committee decided to put it online and to seek resources from outside UNESCO to fund future developments.

The country information on the portal is managed and updated by the competent authorities in the participating countries.

More information on the national processes for recognising or otherwise sanctioning institutions is available on the country pages. These define key terms, indicate where information can be found, describe the national higher education system, list recognised institutions and programmes, and provide information for students planning to study in the country (including details on foreign credential assessment and recognition, opportunities for financial assistance, and provisions for cross-border higher education).

Degree Mills

Fraudulent and low quality providers, popularly known as 'degree mills', threaten the credibility of the online provision of courses internationally by offering credentials and degrees that are costly but of dubious educational value. Electronically-delivered degrees are largely unregulated and pose serious challenges in many countries in the world. Although comprehensive and reliable data on degree mills are not available, thousands of degree mills are estimated to operate world wide. The growing demand for higher education has created a significant market for such providers but few governments or organisations are positioned to take needed steps to educate and protect the public.

The US Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is working with UNESCO address the problem, beginning with the development of some general international principles. The aim is to develop suggestions for effective practice to assist the international community in confronting degree mills. A possible outcome is the establishment of an ongoing, reliable network of higher education agencies,

quality assurance/accreditation bodies and international organisations that can identify degree mills and share information and ideas.

The Challenges facing Small States

The challenges of developing and delivering online courses internationally are best identified by examining examples. We shall describe the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, a project that illustrates many of the challenges and the opportunities that international online education presents (COL, 2008).

This initiative reflects the Commonwealth's special focus on the small states (usually defined as having populations of fewer than 1.5 million) that make up a majority of Commonwealth membership (32 out of 53 countries). They include the island countries in the Caribbean, the Pacific, Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean as well as the landlocked states of Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana, and the coastal states of The Gambia, Belize, Guyana and Namibia. Despite their variety, these small states face common challenges. One is simply being small, another is costly transport and a third is proneness to environmental challenges, climate change and natural disasters. All the world's small states, three-quarters of which are members of the Commonwealth, are increasingly conscious of their common needs and expect international bodies to address them.

For example, UNESCO is devoting increasing attention to the specific challenges faced by small states in higher education; helping them to develop quality assurance capacity but also to address wider policy issues. The small states face common challenges caused by their remoteness and isolation, often coupled with limited capacity to respond to the multiple impacts of globalisation. To understand better the particular issues related to quality assurance in small states, UNESCO commissioned case studies from a number of such jurisdictions: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bhutan, The Gambia, Maldives, Rwanda, and the University of the West Indies.

An expert meeting on small states was convened by UNESCO in 2008 to review these case studies, to devise strategies of addressing the specific needs of such countries and to link them to appropriate existing initiatives and networks. The Commonwealth of Learning and CARICOM also brought their own expertise to the meeting. One outcome may be the establishment of a network and a community of practice on quality assurance for small states. Recommendations included the development of principles and tool-kits for quality assurance in these countries. This work will build on existing principles and standards, e.g. the Cross-border Guidelines (UNESCO/OECD, 2005), the European Network of Quality Assurance Standards and Guidelines (2005) and the INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice (2007). It will also link to other networks and activities, in particular the VUSSC and the Transnational Qualifications Framework that is being developed as part of that initiative .

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC)

Origins and Purposes

The concept of the VUSSC emerged when Commonwealth Ministers of Education met in Canada in 2000. That millennium year was noteworthy in two ways. First, a strong focus on international development led to the articulation of the Millennium Development Goals and the Dakar Goals of Education for All. Second, the rich world experienced the dotcom frenzy. The Internet began to revolutionise communication between people and to create new ways of doing business. Online communication also seemed to have potential for transforming education.

The ministers of education from the small states wanted to take advantage of online communication in developing their education systems but realized that their individual countries did not have the critical mass of expertise, equipment or bandwidth to engage resolutely with online learning. However, they hoped that by working together they could nurture an indigenous capacity for online learning and so harness these new ICT developments for the benefit of their peoples. They believed that the small states, working together as a collectivity, could achieve more than the sum of their individual efforts.

The ministers conceived a mechanism for such collaboration, called it the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) and asked the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) to help them conduct a needs analysis and prepare a formal proposal. The proposal was approved at the ministers' next triennial meeting in 2003.

Despite its name the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is a collaborative network, not a new tertiary institution. It began as a network of ministries of education seeking to use online learning in the development of education and training. In 2004 COL canvassed ministers to determine the priority topics for course development in the small states. They flagged the areas of Teacher Education, ICTs, Information Systems, Tourism and Hospitality, Nursing and Health Care, Technical and Vocational Education and Training, Life Skills, Small Business Management and Entrepreneurship, Public Administration, Agriculture and Fisheries (COL, 2008a).

The VUSSC is an emanation of the countries and their existing tertiary institutions. It is a collective mechanism for producing, adapting and deploying courses and learning materials, on subjects such as those just listed, that would be difficult for any one country to develop alone. At the same time it provides a special opportunity for their people to develop expertise in online collaboration, eLearning and ICTs generally.   Although the ICT infrastructure in many small states is still rudimentary, especially outside the main population centres, the ministers conceive the VUSSC as a route into the online world. The initial drive in the use of ICTs is to orientate professionals, academics and managers to interact with comfort in a networked, or "web2" world.   Even if its first courses have to be delivered by traditional means of face-to-face and distance methods to some students, they will be developed in formats that can be shared electronically between participating countries.

Course development

In theory, specialists in the participating countries could have begun developing eLearning courses by collaborating internationally in a common electronic space. In practice it was considered imperative to start by bringing the participants together physically in order to provide training in online working and to create a common sense of purpose around the VUSSC initiative. The model that has developed is a three-

week training and course development workshop at which subject specialists from a subset of the participating states strengthen their IT skills and being to develop course material collaboratively online. The online technologies provide the means for these professionals to continue interacting and developing learning materials in future years.

Five of these workshops, which are sometimes called 'boot camps' because of the basic training in online working that they provide, had been held by mid 2008: Tourism and Entrepreneurship - Mauritius, 2006; Professional Development of Educators - Singapore, 2007; Life Skills - Trinidad & Tobago, 2007; Disaster Management - Samoa, 2007; and Fisheries - Seychelles, 2008. A sixth workshop on the Construction Industry is scheduled for the Bahamas. These events have become progressively more efficient in four ways. First the training in IT skills has become more tightly focused on the participants' real needs; second, better methods for capturing the course material in a useful form have evolved; third, an increasing amount of usable course material is generated during each workshop; and fourth, collaborative course development continues more smoothly after people have returned to their countries.

Each time a workshop is held country interlocutors (Ministry of Education representatives) are asked to nominate participants for the training. Participants who are already knowledgeable in the particular topic area are expected to be in a position to work in the online groups. Four participants are selected from the nominees to take on the additional role of team leader. The team leaders represent the major regions of the world from which the participants are drawn and are expected to take the lead in running the three-week workshop. A co-ordinator is nominated by the host country's interlocutor and the task of this individual is to be a team leader, to co-ordinate the activities of the other team leaders and to act as a conduit to local expertise. As far as possible, local expertise is used to support the workshop participants.

Some of the participants have either limited connectivity or low-powered computers in their offices or at home. To palliate this problem COL provides them with a high-capacity flash disk carrying a suite of software that is effectively a portable computer, because it can be used on almost any Windows computer into which it is plugged. When workshop participants return to their countries they have three tasks. The first is to continue and complete the development of the course material that was begun at the workshop. The second is to take the lead in the adaptation of the material for use in their institution. The third is to train other colleagues in the online working skills they have learned. By early 2008 the 90 boot camp participants had passed on their newly acquired IT skills to some 300 other colleagues - a significant contribution to bridging the digital divide.

The course materials are created using COL's Instructional Design Template (COL, 2006), using a private online team workspace called BaseCamp. Information about the workshop is published on the Internet on COL's WikiEducator (COL, 2008c). These materials, which are available on COL's website, are open educational resources, freely available for use and adaptation by people and institutions anywhere in the world. Institutions in the small states will adapt them for their own use and may offer them as distance learning or to enrich face-to-face instruction. As the corpus of learning materials grows, the VUSSC will gradually transmute from a network of ministries of education into a consortium of the tertiary institutions using the materials in the participating countries. COL will continue in a supporting role as long as necessary.

In creating the VUSSC, education ministers wanted their countries to acquire the skills to operate confidently in the eWorld so that they could produce eLearning courses appropriate to their needs. Their goal was not the autonomy of developing every course from scratch, but rather to acquire the skills required to be able to assess the world's rapidly growing body of open educational resources in order to adapt and use them appropriately. One important criterion of appropriateness is whether a particular course fits the existing pattern of qualifications in each country.

Transnational Qualifications Framework

A 30-country international online course development initiative like the VUSSC poses challenges of qualifications frameworks and qualifications recognition. Nothing like this has been done before. Courses developed under the aegis of the VUSSC are intended to be adapted and offered in many countries. But since the VUSSC is not an accrediting or awarding body, the institutions that offer the courses must accredit them locally.

Fortunately previous international work on qualifications recognition, notably UNESCO's Global and Regional Frameworks for Quality Assurance and the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education, has laid useful foundations (UNESCO, 2008). COL is working with the South African Qualifications Authority, which has an impressive track record in the field, to create a master qualifications framework for the VUSSC. The aim is to ensure that all the open educational resources that are being created collaboratively can be adapted smoothly into recognised courses that students can take for credit through the tertiary institutions of the small states. VUSSC participants hope that one useful by-product of the qualifications framework will be to discourage bogus providers, which are particularly active in trying to sell fake qualifications in the small states.

Open Educational Resources - How Open?

We conclude with some comments about open educational resources (OERs). The movement that they represent, which is a vital component of the wider movement to foster a global intellectual commons, holds great promise for development. OERs are a fundamental element of the VUSSC.

The trend to open educational resources was given momentum in 2001 when the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) caused a stir by making the course notes of its faculty available on the web for all to see. This launched the OER movement with all the prestige of MIT. The material on display is information on course curricula rather than self-learning materials but it is widely consulted as a benchmark by faculty and students around the world.

In 2006 the UK Open University took this one stage further with its OpenLearn initiative. This makes self-learning materials, student support and collaboration tools available on the web. OpenLearn receives some 100,000 visits a week and is intended to be of more direct value to students than the MIT material. The site also has a LabSpace where people can mix, match and adapt the materials.

If MIT's OpenCourseware shares information and the UKOU's OpenLearn shares learning, then the next step is to share teaching - or course development, which is what 30 countries are doing through the VUSSC.

The steady progression of the OER movement has brought to the fore the question of how open OERs should be and this is now a topic of lively debate. One might define a fully open OER as educational material that anyone can take, adapt and use for any purpose without acknowledgement. Very few creators of OERs aim for this level of openness. Most originators of OERs put them under a Creative Commons (CC) licence, which at a minimum requires the user to acknowledge where the material came from (the "BY" restriction) and to share any derivative work under the same licence (the Share-Alike ("SA") restriction). WikiEducator will not carry OERs that are more restrictive than this.

However, some creators of OERs find it appropriate to place the No Derivatives ("ND") restriction on the CC licence in order to prevent adaptations of their material. This might be appropriate, for example, with a document listing standards that had been approved by a particular body.

More controversy is generated by the use of the Non Commercial ("NC") restriction, which MIT applies to its OpenCourseware OERs and the UK Open University applies to OERs on its OpenLearn website. Their aim is to prevent others from using their materials in profit-making educational enterprises. Others are concerned that individuals who have dedicated substantial time and energy to creating royalty-free materials, without fully understanding the legal consequences, may find that their hard work allows overseas companies to make profits while they themselves earn nothing from their labours.

There is, however, considerable confusion about what the NC restriction actually allows and does not allow. Some believe that it prevents any money changing hands in the use of an OER although many legal counsels consider that full cost recovery is allowed when using materials that carry the NC restriction.   This restriction would therefore not preclude, for example, a public institution recovering the printing costs, including salaries and overheads, associated with making copies of an OER available to students. Others take the view that a for-profit enterprise can also use an NC-restricted OER in its work provided it does not derive a bottom-line profit from that particular activity. This requires project-level budgeting and accounting.

Only country-by-country jurisprudence will establish what the NC restriction really means in a particular situation. Meanwhile, we welcome the establishment by Creative Commons of an educational division, ccLearn, which is undertaking a major study of the meaning of the Non-Commercial restriction (Rutledge, 2008). This should help to calm a dispute that has become an obstacle to achieving the more important goal of encouraging the development of a wide range of OERs.

In this context we also welcome the Cape Town Open Education Declaration, in which people holding a variety of positions on the degree of openness that is desirable in an OER have come together to promote their creation and use. The Declaration is an attempt to find common ground between the various ideological approaches to copyrighting open educational resources.

Conclusion

Online courses have the potential to drive the internationalisation of education further and faster, giving great benefits to students. They also present dangers, because it is harder for learners to verify the *bona fides*of organisations offering online programmes than of those offering face-to-face instruction. We have

reported on the moves that the international community is making to reduce those dangers and help students acquire 'quality literacy'.

Collaboration in the online world, notably through the use of open educational resources, holds great promise for developing countries and small countries that currently have limited IT capacity. As the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth develops it will provide useful lessons on the most effective ways of taking advantage of OERs.

Finally, the controversy about the degree of openness that is desirable in an OER should abate as the legal community comes to a clearer view about the precise meaning of the Non-Commercial restriction that can be included in Creative Commons licenses.

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