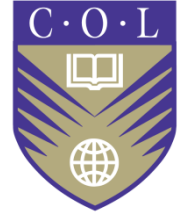


Quality Assurance and Cross Border Higher Education in the Commonwealth: The Work of the Commonwealth of Learning



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Introduction

It is a pleasure to be back in Delhi with many old acquaintances, especially some of my former colleagues from UNESCO. When I was at UNESCO myself I found joint events between UNESCO and India's Ministry of Human Resource Development particularly fecund. I remember very fondly a weekend seminar organised by my UNESCO colleague Abhimanyu Singh at which eight Indian states compared the approaches they were taking to achieve universal primary education. The jocular jockeying for position as each state tried to claim the greatest originality of approach was truly entertaining.

Now I am working with the Commonwealth of Learning, COL, and am delighted to present this address co-authored by our Vice-President, Professor Asha Kanwar, and our new Higher Education specialist, Willie Clarke-Okah.

We shall begin by looking at the current situation of Crossborder Higher Education (CBHE) in the Commonwealth and ask whether crossborder HE providers are latter-day pirates or contribute significantly to the educational needs of developing countries. We will then examine quality assurance through the lens of COL's work.

Later on we shall introduce an exciting new concept, that we call 'criss-cross' border higher education, which is the basis of the new Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

We shall not attempt a thorough definition of CBHE. We recognise it when we see it, good and bad. We see the attractive side when a young student in Seychelles is able to complete a distance learning degree from an Australian university and is then employed by the national Distance Education Unit. We see the nasty side when a bureaucrat from the Ministry of Education in Sierra Leone who completes her PhD in six months with an organisation she found on the Web discovers that it will not count towards her promotion.

More abstractly, CBHE refers to 'the movement of people, programmes, providers, knowledge, ideas, projects and services across national boundaries '(Knight, 2006). It often involves collaborative arrangements and sometimes requires access to technology. It includes both face to face and distance education provision and usually offers employment-related qualifications. It is one response of education to the phenomenon of globalization.

How does this phenomenon manifest itself in the Commonwealth? The 53 countries of the Commonwealth, which are found in all regions of the world, have a population of two billion, one third of the earth's population. 45 of the 53 Commonwealth countries are developing countries. Very significantly for our work at COL, 32 of them are small states: small in population and often small in area - many of them islands. These states have special challenges with cross-border education and we shall come to that later.

Most Commonwealth citizens are young people. Under-25s account for over 60% of the population in India and 50% in Zambia. Many of these young adults will seek access to higher education in the near future but can their countries cope with the demand?

The number of Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) has grown massively in the last fifty years. In 1960, 29 developing countries had no college students but by 1990 this was true only of The Gambia, Comoros and Guinea-Bissau (Easterly, 2003).

Even so, age participation rates (APRs) in Higher Education (HE) especially in sub-Saharan Africa, remain well below 5% (UNESCO, 2003). Compared with the APR's of 40-50 % of OECD countries, the trend towards expansion will need to be further accelerated if sustainable development is to be achieved.

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. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago wants to see an APR of 60% by 2015 (Rosemin & Sampson-Ovid, 2006).

India , despite having the world's third largest HE system with some 9.2 million students in 15,000 colleges and 330 university institutions, provides access to less than 10% of the 18-23 year-old age cohort. For India to catch up with its neighbours Thailand and Singapore (with 20% and 34% APRs respectively), it will need to find cost-effective mechanisms for expanding access.

Open and distance education is considered to be a viable means of reaching out to large numbers, as evidenced by the fact that 24 % of all HE enrolments in India today are in distance education, specifically in 13 open universities and 106 dual-mode institutions. The government's target is that by 2010, 40 % of all participation in HE will be through distance education.

The greatest expansion in HE in the coming years will be in the developing world. Can cross-border higher education help meet the demand? The situation is evolving rapidly. In the mid 1990s, for example, South Africa was an attractive destination for foreign providers. But of the 38 foreign providers who moved in, only two survive today's strict accreditation procedures.

Three country examples

Let us look some more at India and at two other developing Commonwealth countries in other continents: Jamaica and Sierra Leone. These countries, which are positioned at various points on the development spectrum, can also provide useful insights into trends.

The number of cross-border providers in India increased from 27 in 2000 to 114 in 2004. While India started out with a more liberal policy, it is now becoming more restrictive. One of the reasons could be the fact that over 30% of these providers are not recognised or accredited in their country of origin. An equal number of their Indian collaborators are not part of the formal higher education system either. Neither branch campuses nor franchise agreements have had much success. The only exceptions are 61 twinning and articulation arrangements that allow students to go to the source country in the final year and stay on for employment purposes. With such figures it is little wonder that cross border HE is a non-issue in India. The enrolments it attracts are negligible in the Indian context.

In Jamaica the Government expects to raise the APRs in tertiary education to 30% by 2015. Existing unmet demand opens the door for cross-border tertiary education and there are at least 50 providers, registered and unregistered, in the country (Brandon, 2003), George (2005). They are seen to be offering valuable service to adult learners whose needs are not being addressed by local institutions and are not perceived as competing with national providers. On the other hand they are seen as building the capacity of local institutions. For example, the University of Technology (UTech) offered a joint degree with the Southern Illinois University (SIU)-for the first five years the degree was offered through UTech and awarded by SIU but now the degree is offered and awarded entirely by UTech. If national institutions are to be strengthened in the long term, it is important to have a sunset clause in partnership arrangements with foreign providers, which would be phased out once local capacity is in place.

Sierra Leone, a post-conflict country, has only one university (with four constituent colleges) as well as six teacher training colleges and polytechnics. The gross tertiary enrolment rate for Sierra Leone was only 2.0 % in 2002 (World Bank, 2002) although it has doubled since then. With limited facilities and an infrastructure broken down by 11 years of Civil war, Sierra Leone can also be an attractive destination for cross-border providers. There are already some such providers in the country such as the little-known St Clement's University, an offshore company registered in the Turks and Caicos Islands in the Caribbean, which offers courses in Management, Information Technology and Development Studies.

The scale of cross-border provision

Data regarding enrolments in cross-border provision are hard to find and usually inaccurate. However, even where absolute numbers are unreliable, their relative distribution between countries is likely accurate.

The UK's HE Statistics Agency recorded 101,645 enrolments of UK transnational delivery (by franchise, branch campuses, and distance learning) in 191 countries across the world in 2002-3. The highest numbers enrolled in cross-border provision were living in well-developed countries (as measured by their rankings in UNDP's Human Development Index).

Thus the largest numbers were found in Hong Kong SAR (26th place in the HDI) followed by Singapore (28th) and Malaysia (58th). By contrast, enrolments were 1203 in India, 777 in Jamaica and less than 100 in 30 African countries taken together (excluding South Africa) (Garrett, 2005). Similarly, the Higher Education Commission, Pakistan, estimates that the total number of enrolments with foreign providers is only 5000, which again is a negligible number for an E9 country.

We conclude that cross-border enrolments in countries with low rankings on the Human Development Index are minimal. Indeed, given the unmet demand in those countries, they are practically negligible (see note 1). The obverse of the coin is that there is now significant and successful cross-border activity among the developed countries. However, cross-border provision from the developed to the developing world has yet to register as a significant phenomenon.

One encouraging sign is the growing exports of education from one developing country to another. The University of South Africa, UNISA, seems set to become a big provider across Africa and has initiated a major project in Ethiopia. The Open University of Malaysia and India's Indira Gandhi National Open University, IGNOU, are already targeting niche markets in the Middle East and elsewhere. Cross-border activities reveal a north-south divide. Can they become a global phenomenon?

How has the developing Commonwealth responded to GATS? While there has been a huge outcry from the university sector resulting in the Accra Declaration on GATS and the Internationalisation of Education in Africa (2004); the International Association of Universities (IAU) Statement on Sharing Quality HE Across Borders (2005); and a report on Implications of WTO/GATS on HE in Asia and the Pacific (2005), there has been less discussion within the school sector or tech-voc institutions.

The Delhi Declaration (2005), however, does take into account these sectors. Of the 47 countries that have made commitments to education as at February 2006, seven are Commonwealth member states. Only Lesotho and Sierra Leone have made commitments to all five sectors: primary, secondary, higher, adult and other: both countries rank low on the HDI and do not have well developed HE systems.

Key Trends

What then are some common trends that emerge from the brief overview of CBHE in the Commonwealth?

First, access needs to be expanded to meet huge unsatisfied demand.

Second, for-profit cross-border providers are active.

Third, these providers are of low quality despite the high costs of their offerings. For this reason they tend to cater to an elite market and have low numbers of enrolments.

Fourth, developing countries with strong systems of HE such as Malaysia, India and South Africa are becoming providers for Diaspora populations or other constituencies.

Fifth, it is the university constituency rather than all education sectors that has led discussions on the impact of GATS.

Sixth, it is countries higher on the development index that have most attracted foreign providers

Seventh, developing countries have not rushed to commit themselves to trade in the education sector.

Eighth, there is an increasing trend toward south-south collaboration.

Ninth, increase in distance education and eLearning provision. Distance learning lends itself particularly well to cross-border education, and this will be increasingly true as connectivity and communications improve.

Tenth, it is difficult to document and track distance education and eLearning provision within countries

Our conclusion is that governments still need to respond creatively to this phenomenon: with neither a complete laissez-faire approach nor stringent punitive measures.

Are the cross border providers pirates or are they making a helpful contribution to higher education in the developing world? Given the low enrolment figures they are, for the present, a symptom rather than a full blown malady.

However, this provides an opportunity to governments and depending on their response, it will be clear whether the foreign providers strengthen or emasculate existing systems. Cross-border higher education is unlikely to help developing countries unless it is accessible, available, affordable, relevant, and of acceptable quality. Unless providers take national priorities into account, their provision will always be vulnerable to the charge of 'academic dumping' and crass commercialism.

From Best Practice to Next Practice

C. K. Prahalad reminds us that "It is advisable to follow not just best practices, but to develop next practices to blaze a trail and stay ahead of the pack!" There is also the question of who defines 'best' practices and for whom. Instead of following practices that might be considered 'best' in other contexts, developing countries should develop next practices that work within their own context.

The hard fact is that many Commonwealth countries cannot afford either the financial or time demands of developed-world quality assurance systems. For countries that are fighting centuries of educational

deprivation, the diversion of funds for accreditation systems involving internal and external assessment is neither a priority nor a possibility at present. So while there are several accreditation agencies in a country with a huge higher education system like India and Malaysia Bangladesh and The Gambia have none.

How then does one ensure that the quality of education provided is comparable to the best in the world? How do we maintain standards? Are there options other than formal external mechanisms for assuring quality? Here are two examples.

The Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning and Kyambogo University, Uganda, are both short of funds, lack of the required human resources and have poor infrastructure. They do not undertake *internal and/or external assessment*. Instead they see quality in educational transactions in terms of the *care* that the institution gives to its students. For them the *culture of quality* is a function of *attitude* and *ethos*.

They assure the quality of the training they provide by first ensuring the quality of their study material and then adding to its value by the provision of learner support that is intimate and non-commercial in character, but highly satisfying for learners living in remote locations and abject situations. However, while Uganda aims to create a culture of quality within its own institutions, it does not have any mechanisms in place for dealing with foreign providers who can come and set up shop as they like.

This shows that the developing world still needs appropriate QA mechanisms for protecting both systems and students. Even where they exist, available guidelines have difficulty coping with distance education and eLearning. How can national bodies be equipped to deal effectively with this increasingly complex and diverse phenomenon? What is the role of regional and international bodies in maintaining quality provision? What should be the coordination mechanisms between national and international bodies? How will information be generated and shared?

The Work of the Commonwealth of Learning

Let us briefly look at how COL responds to these developments and supports the needs and priorities of the Commonwealth Member States.

Created by Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1987, COL is the only international, intergovernmental organisation that focuses exclusively on enhancing access to education and training through open, distance and technology-enhanced learning. We work with governments and institutions to expand the scope, scale and quality of learning by promoting policies, building models, creating materials, and enhancing capacity in support of development goals. As a small and specialised agency COL emphasises partnerships in all its activities, seeking collaborations with multilateral organizations like UNESCO and fostering communities of practice.

Since ODL is the specific mandate and mission of COL, we have worked with partners to develop guidelines that ensure the quality assurance of open and distance learning alongside conventional offerings. We also try to share such guidelines between countries so that wheels do not have to be reinvented.

QA Guidelines were developed with the Open University of Sri Lanka and the Sri Lanka UGC for use by the distance education system in the whole country. These Guidelines are now being reviewed by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan for use in that country.

COL has worked with the National Assessment and Accreditation Agency (NAAC), India to develop Performance Indicators for Teacher Training that are already being used by the National Council of College Education, Nigeria.

In partnership with NAAC, COL has developed a course on QA in Higher Education which is meant to raise quality literacy among university and college teachers in the country. This will be further adopted and adapted by Nigeria and Sri Lanka. COL and NAAC have collaborated in the development of a QA Assessors' Handbook which would have relevance in other jurisdictions across the Commonwealth.

World Bank researchers Deon Filmer and Lant Pritchett estimate that 'return on spending on instructional materials in education is up to fourteen times higher than the return on spending on physical facilities....' (Easterly, 2006), so developing adaptable open source materials is one of COL's major priorities.

Both COL and UNESCO commissioned research with the University of Surrey on Transnational Education through case studies of Bangladesh, Malaysia, Jamaica, Bulgaria and Senegal. Although one size cannot fit all, the sample countries had similar policy goals: increasing access and widening participation; increasing the economic relevance of tertiary education; improving quality and enhancing science and technology education. Most countries sought to expand access but Bulgaria sought to control it.

COL and UNESCO are now working with the University of West Indies on case studies of Foreign Providers in the Anglophone Caribbean.

Our two organisations also commissioned a report on 'Higher Education Crossing Borders: A Guide to the Implications of GATS for Crossborder Education'. The aim is to heighten awareness and knowledge about crossborder higher education and GATS so that both policy makers and practitioners can make informed decisions in the light of their own priorities and goals.

The basic issue is that countries will increasingly have to demonstrate that they are treating foreign providers in the same way as national institutions. This requires governments to have clear legislative and regulatory frameworks for higher education on their territories. Furthermore, these frameworks will be most helpful if they embrace all types of providers: state, private and for-profit institutions; and all types of provision from face-to-face teaching to technology-mediated distance learning. Initial reviews from countries as diverse as Sierra Leone, Trinidad & Tobago and India suggest that this Guide will be of particular benefit to colleagues in the developing world.

In addition to Guidelines, Research and Course materials, COL also supports capacity building in quality assurance by conducting training workshops and professional development with open universities and dual-mode institutions.

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

I mentioned that two thirds of Commonwealth members are small states. One of COL's most exciting initiatives is The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth which signals an important intervention in CBHE. Tertiary education in small states is a combination of contact teaching in the country, study overseas, and imported distance learning. The last two have onerous foreign exchange costs which increase as tertiary education expands, just at the time when changing terms of trade in their exports are reducing the foreign exchange available.

At the request of the Commonwealth Education Ministers, COL has put together a consortium of 26 small states that are working together to develop postsecondary courses with a strong skills focus that can be used in their own tertiary institutions. It is for this that we have coined the expression 'Criss-Cross Border Higher Education'.

These courses are being developed collaboratively and transnationally as open educational resources under a share-alike Creative Commons licence. This means that anyone can use the materials and adapt them to their own purposes provided that they acknowledge the source and put their own adapted materials back into the system.

Note that we have not applied the 'Non-Commercial' restriction because we believe that it would prevent the use of these open educational resources by just those countries and institutions that can benefit most from them.

COL strongly discourages UNESCO and others from imposing the 'Non-Commercial' restriction because it makes open content much less open - and also less rich, because it precludes you from incorporating any of the 600,000 free content resources in the Wikicommons project. But that is another story.

All of this course development is taking place in public view and you can watch it happen at our WikiEducator site:

[www.WikiEducator.org]

This is an almost utopian example of how countries can work across borders to create content which is available free of cost to all partners and which will be used and shared across different institutions. There will be mechanisms for joint delivery and credentialing as well as recognition of degrees and transfer of credits.

Qualifications frameworks, recognition processes and credit transfer systems are much more likely to work within such special interest groups working towards common goals rather than within overarching global provisions which stakeholders may not always identify with. Establishing a community of practice is always a good thing, and that is what we are creating amongst the small states of the Commonwealth.

Conclusion

To sum up, you can see that COL has followed several approaches to quality assurance and cross-border higher education. We have helped to develop QA mechanisms, assisted with policy formulation and supported systems development. We have had multi-level involvement at the individual, institutional, national, regional and international levels. Our guiding principles are to address the needs expressed by stakeholders and to be the voice of the developing Commonwealth.

What have we learned from all this? It is increasingly clear that national governments have a key responsibility. We suggest that they should create a central coordinating unit for cross-border education, possibly within an arms-length body like a University Grants Committee where it exists.

This unit would be a one-stop shop for all aspects of CBHE and would have a coordinating role with all stakeholders such as Ministries, Institutions and Students. It would establish policies and accreditation mechanisms for both overseas and local tertiary level providers and ensure the rigorous implementation of quality assurance within and outside the country. It should deal with face-to-face provision, distance learning and eLearning, because the distinctions between them are increasingly blurred - especially in cross-border education.

Note also the important responsibility of the national government for ensuring the quality of education that is exported as well as that which comes into the country. COL has a grandstand view of some examples of 'worst practice' by public institutions operating outside their own country.

In dialogue with national and foreign providers the CBHE unit would emphasise the need for affordable, accessible and available courses that are aligned to national development priorities. Governments can influence the developments positively by framing clear policy priorities and national agendas and by providing useful public information to guide students and other stakeholders.

All types of national institutions: public and private, face-to-face and distance, should also assume greater responsibility. In the face of competition from diverse providers and demands from a changing student body, the survival of institutions will depend on their ability to respond imaginatively to a changing world. Commitment to excellence and a culture of quality in all aspects of their operations will be the basic requirements for institutions in the coming years. Inherent in the notion of a culture of quality is that solutions must be home grown: home grown within institutions and home grown within countries.

In his book *The Armchair Economist*, Steven Landsburg summarises the whole dismal science of economics in the phrase: 'people respond to incentives; all the rest is commentary'. What incentives do the stakeholders have for the quality assurance of cross-border higher education?

For international agencies like COL and UNESCO the incentive is to widen access to quality higher education as a route to sustainable development. For national governments the incentive is to help their citizens to become productive members of a global knowledge economy. For institutions the incentive is to enhance their academic integrity internally and their reputation externally, which are the essential attributes for prospering in a competitive world. For individuals the incentive is to ensure that the coinage of the common wealth of humankind, which is learning, is not debased.

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Note

1. UK Education flourishes most in high HDI countries (65,139) followed by medium HDI countries (33, 534) and finally low HDI countries (2662). Jamaica is ranked 78, India 127 and Sierra Leone 175 in the Human Development Report 2003.