

Internationalisation, Regionalisation and Globalisation: Breaking out of the Iron Triangle



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Transcript

Ministers, Colleagues:

My title is Internationalisation, Regionalisation and Globalisation: Breaking out of the Iron Triangle and I shall make three points.

First, higher education faces the same key challenge everywhere in the world.

Second, some universities have risen to this challenge through a technological revolution that widens access, improves quality and cuts costs – all at the same time.

Third, the Open Educational Resources (OERs) movement is now making this revolution possible in smaller states as well.

First then, one reason for the internationalisation of higher education is that the challenge of providing it is the same everywhere. Governments want three outcomes from their higher education systems:

- Access: to be as wide as possible
- Quality: to be as high as possible
- Cost: to be as low as possible

The nature of the challenge is clear when you create a triangle of vectors. With traditional methods of face-to-face teaching this is an iron triangle. You want to stretch the triangle like this to give greater access, higher quality and lower costs. But you can't!

Try extending access by packing more students into each classroom and you will be accused of damaging quality.

Try improving quality with better learning resources and the cost will go up.

Try cutting costs and you will endanger both access and quality.

This iron triangle has hindered the expansion of education throughout history. It has created in the public mind – and probably in your own thinking – an insidious link between quality and exclusivity. This link still drives the admission policies of many universities, which define their quality by the people they exclude.

But today there is good news. Thanks to globalisation successive waves of technology are sweeping the world – and technology can transform the iron triangle into a flexible triangle. By using technology you can achieve wider access, higher quality and lower cost all at the same time. This is a revolution – it has never happened before.

How does it work? The fundamental principles of technology, articulated two centuries ago by the economist Adam Smith, are division of labour, specialisation, economies of scale, and the use of machines and communications media.

My second point is that these principles have been applied successfully to higher education by the distance teaching institutions, often called open universities.

I give the example of the UK Open University as an institution that has stretched the iron triangle. With over 200,000 students and over a million alumni it has substantially widened access. It is also distinguished by its quality. In the final year of operation of England's Teaching Quality Assessment system the Open University placed 5th out of 100 universities. For each of the last three years it has also topped government surveys of student satisfaction in all English universities. Furthermore, the Open University operates at lower costs per student or per graduate than conventional universities. Not surprisingly, therefore, distance teaching universities have become a global phenomenon. These two slides show how the number of open universities in Commonwealth countries has increased over 20 years.

Some Asian open universities have over one million students and they form a natural affinity group. India's Indira Gandhi National Open University and Pakistan's Allama Iqbal Open University have more in common with each other than either has with the conventional universities in its own country. Each enrolls over one million students, each teaches nationwide, each uses similar technologies, and each costs very little to the public purse.

There are global and regional groupings of such universities. The membership of the Asian Association of Open Universities brings together institutions that enrol many millions of students between them. It is an important forum for discussing the role of technology in higher education.

But my third point is that the latest technological breakthrough allows you to stretch the iron triangle even without the economies of scale that you can find in India, Pakistan or even Britain.

That breakthrough is Open Educational Resources. These are teaching and learning materials in digital formats that are freely available worldwide for adaptation and use. Our draft communiqué talks of higher education as a public good. Open Educational Resources affirm that principle. They herald the creation of a global intellectual commons.

Open Educational Resources are important to smaller countries because creating good learning materials is expensive. Using OERs can cut these costs. Moreover, small states no longer have to depend on bigger states for materials.

The Commonwealth Ministers of Education have created a collaborative network, called, somewhat misleadingly, the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, through which 32 small states work together to create courses of importance to them. This courseware is readily adaptable to the needs of each country for use both in face-to-face teaching and also in distance or eLearning.

So just as technology-mediated learning has revolutionised the cost structure of higher education in large states, it can now have a similar impact in small states. Helping the small states take advantage of this development is just one element in the Joint Work Plan between UNESCO and COL.

Ministers and Colleagues, I hope you agree that the three points I have made are good examples of the benefits of internationalisation.