

# *The Role of International Online Courses in the Worldwide Provision of Education*

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*International courses and services online Virtual Erasmus and a new generation of Open Educational Resources for a European and global outreach*

*The role of international online courses in the worldwide provision of education*

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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 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 urging EADTU members to sign up to the Cape Town Declaration on open education and to contribute to the creation of an open web of course content.

## **Introduction**

*Ms. Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić*

It is a pleasure me to participate in the 20th anniversary celebrations of EADTU along with my co-authors, Sir John Daniel and Paul West. Sir John arrived at the UK Open University soon after the creation of EADTU and served on the board for a number of years. We at UNESCO have admired the role that EADTU institutions have played in expanding quality higher education and ensuring that distance learning plays a strong role in the European higher education space.

Our short presentation is entitled *The role of international online courses in the worldwide provision of education* and is in three parts.

First, 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. I shall describe this evolving framework.

Sir John will then describe an initiative for online courses that spans the globe, the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. This venture, which Paul West is managing, is a collaborative venture between 30 countries that illustrates the challenges of developing courses online by multiple countries and offering them internationally with local accreditation. Finally, Sir John will urge the EADTU community to sign up to the Cape Town Declaration on Open Education.

I start with some comments about the global context of higher education, focusing particularly on developing countries.

## What is the Context of Global Higher Education?

The most striking global trend 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 required for 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 of the private higher education sector. 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 have 80 % of their students enrolled in private institutions within a sound framework of government regulation. The for-profit sector is developing new models of provision to promote mass access. An example is the Whitney International University System, which intends to be the first global university focusing on students in developing countries with the aim of providing mass access to quality education at a low price.

Major trends in our interconnected world are increased international academic mobility and its accompanying phenomena of migration and brain-drain. 2.4 million students went abroad in 2004 - a three-fold increase since 1980. African students are 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 (Bohm et al., 2002) foresees that the demand for international education will increase to 7.2 million students in 2025.

As well as students, institutions and programmes are also increasingly mobile, as EADTU institutions know well. For example, 33% of all international students enrolled in Australian institutions actually studied from their own country rather than Australia in 2004 (up from 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 being joined by new types of students such as life-long learners, adult learners and degree holders who need updating to guarantee employment. Again, EADTU is in the thick of these developments.

There is also growth in cross-border higher education through corporate universities, franchises, 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 development in cross-border provision.

## What are the Issues Related to International Online Courses?

Against that background, we ask whether international online courses can help expand access to HE in the developing world and, if so, how? What policies can governments and institutions adopt to ensure that cross-border higher education makes a positive contribution by rising to the challenges of quality assurance and the portability of qualifications?

Your EADTU institutions offer online courses of quality, but you know that many stakeholders consider distance education of 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?

## What Kind of International Responses?

Sadly, there are no easy solutions. 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. Sir John and I were both involved in its launch in 2002.

The third meeting of this Global Forum was held recently in Tanzania. It brought together stakeholders around the theme, *"Guiding Learners in New Higher Education Spaces: Challenges for Quality Assurance and the Recognition of Qualifications"*.

The meeting emphasized the need for a strong focus on capacity-building for quality assurance. The UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border higher education were praised as a useful tool for capacity building as this form of provision becomes more widespread.

Quality assurance in distance education came up often in the discussions. How does it differ from the quality assurance of traditional courses? Is the quality assurance of open educational resources a separate issue again? Indeed, can the quality of rapidly evolving open educational resources be assessed at all? Some interesting models were presented at the Forum, such as E-Excellence developed by EADTU.

Since the key theme of the Global Forum was empowering learners, it discussed issues ranging from mobility and migration to academic fraud.

A new pilot project for a UNESCO Portal of recognized higher education institutions aims to provide better access to transparent and reliable information. This Portal may offer possibilities for linkages to the EADTU European Portal for International Courses and Services (EPICS).

With that by way of background on the international framework emerging around online courses I hand over to Sir John to give you a concrete example, the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

## The VUSSC: a Concrete Example

*Sir John Daniel*

I shall describe a unique adventure in international online courses, but first some background.

The Commonwealth is particularly interested in small states, mostly of less than 1.5 million population, because they are a majority of Commonwealth members, 32 out of 53 countries. These are islands in the Caribbean, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean as well as landlocked states such as Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana, and coastal states like The Gambia, Belize, Guyana and Namibia. Although very varied, these small states face common challenges. One is just being small, another is transport and a third is proneness to environmental challenges, climate change and natural disasters.

Small states are increasingly conscious of their common needs and want international bodies to address them. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is one such programme. How did it come about?

## Why the VUSSC and What is it?

The idea emerged when Commonwealth Ministers of Education met in Canada in 2000. You will recall two features of that year. First, there was a strong focus on development. The Millennium Development Goals and the Dakar Goals of Education for All were announced in 2000. Second, the rich world experienced the dotcom frenzy. The Internet began transforming communication between people and creating new ways of doing business. Online communication also seemed to have potential for transforming education.

The Ministers from the Small States wanted to take advantage of online communication in developing their education systems. But their countries did not have the critical masses of expertise, equipment or bandwidth to engage with online learning. But they believed that by working together they could nurture an indigenous autonomous capacity for online learning and so harness these new ICT developments for the benefit of their peoples.

They called this collaborative mechanism the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, the VUUSC, and COL helped them to work up a formal proposal. So the VUSSC is an initiative of Ministers of Education to promote the development of education and training for their countries. COL is simply there to facilitate the process. We stress that the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, despite its name, is a collaborative network rather than a new institution.

The VUSSC is the countries and their existing institutions. It is a mechanism to help them together to produce, adapt and use courses and learning materials that would be difficult for any one country to produce alone. It is also a special opportunity for their people to develop expertise in online collaboration, online learning, eLearning and ICTs generally.

## Where Has the VUSSC Got To?

So far we have held three course development meetings, which we call affectionately 'boot camps': in Mauritius for Tourism and Entrepreneurship; in Singapore for Teacher Development and in Trinidad and Tobago for Life Skills. A fourth, on Disaster Management, starts next week in Samoa. These meetings last three weeks and bring together subject experts from up to 20 small states who learn to develop online materials collaboratively, begin creating online materials and continue the process when they get home.

These materials are first created on COL's WikiEducator. Once there is a stable draft we take it off and use COL's Instructional Design template to create a finished product which is usually stored on Basecamp software. They are freely available for use and adaptation to 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 face to face.

You will understand that a 30-country cross-border education project like this brings challenges of qualifications frameworks and qualifications recognition. Nothing like this has been done before. The core course is intended to be adapted and offered in many countries with local accreditation by the institution that offers the course.

Fortunately much work has prepared the ground, notably UNESCO's Global and Regional Frameworks for Quality Assurance and the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education.

COL is now working with the South African Qualifications Authority, which has an impressive track record, 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 find their way smoothly into recognised courses that students can take. The VUSSC must be a network that unites and strengthens the institutions in the small states.

The Ministers wanted their countries to acquire the skills to operate confidently in the eWorld. They did not intend that they should have to reinvent every wheel and design every course from scratch. Their skills will enable them to assess the world's rapidly growing body of open educational resources so as to adapt and use those that are appropriate.

## A Plea to EADTU – Volunteer for Open Education

That leads me to conclude with a plea to all of you. Can we not now apply to teaching the spirit of sharing and building on each other's work that we take for granted in research? Some EADTU institutions, such as the UKOU through its OpenLearn project, are already making some of their materials available on the web for free use.

I urge you all to follow suit. If each EADTU institution volunteered to make all or part of its learning material available for free use and adaptation we could quickly build up a tremendous resource for academics in the developing world. It is important that the material be as free and easy to use as possible.

For example, material on COL's WikiEducator can be adapted and used for any purpose provided users acknowledge the source and put their own adaptations into WikiEducator too. Not all institutions are comfortable with making content quite so free but we urge people to err on the side of freedom.

Your institutions might also want to sign the recent Cape Town Declaration on Open Education. We are at the beginning of a very important movement. It is vital that EADTU, which represents the open universities of Europe, be a leading protagonist of open education.

## Reference

Böhm, A. Meares, D. et al. (2003) *Global Student Mobility 2025: Analysis of Global Competition and Market Share*, IDP Australia