Chapter 2

The Why and How of Transnational Teaching:
A University of South Africa Perspective

Narend Baijnath
University of South Africa, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Most countries today are facing the challenge of trying to increase enrolment in higher education but to do so in ways that are affordable and sustainable and in which increased access represents a reasonable chance of ultimate success. The increasing ubiquity and flexibility of technology creates multiple avenues for institutions to open access to higher education and for students to access this provision. This has yielded a steady increase in cross-border/transnational provisions for higher education. In this, the developing countries of Africa have tended to be consumers of services and materials rather than producers. The potential of TDL in reaching large numbers of people is obvious, but there are still a number of militating factors that need to be addressed if this potential is to be fully realised. This chapter explores some of the reservations that have existed among African higher education institutions, until recently, regarding transnational provisions, and then looks at why this is now changing, with examples of recent developments, and reflects on some lessons for how meaningful transnational engagement can be facilitated.

INTRODUCTION

Most countries today are facing the challenge of trying to increase enrolment in higher education but to do so in ways that are affordable and sustainable and in which increased access represents a reasonable chance of ultimate success. The increasing ubiquity and flexibility of technology creates multiple avenues for institutions to open access to higher education and for students to access this provision. Whereas in the past it was necessary for students and/or teachers to move physically from place to place so that curriculum could be communicated, it is now possible for this to happen to a much larger extent in a virtual space. This has seen a steady increase in cross-border

higher education on a continuum ranging from purely online to blended learning approaches, which involve both online as well as face-to-face provisions at home or in the providing country through to the establishment of satellite campuses of international institutions in other countries. The UK-based Observatory on Borderless Education notes that enrolment in UK-based courses offered outside the UK had already outstripped the number of foreign students physically studying in the UK by 2008 (The Observatory, 2011).

In this process, the developing countries of Africa have tended to be consumers of services and materials rather than producers. A key strategic issue therefore is to focus on growing local capacity to enable African institutions to become exporters of educational content and services in a truly global endeavour. African countries share similar cultures and contexts, which may enable them to better address the needs of other developing countries, and at the same share valuable indigenous knowledge in the global domain.

Over the past decade, a number of scholars and commentators have identified specific challenges and issues for cross border/transnational provision. In 2004, for example, Middlehurst and Campbell (2004) commented on the need to build on national quality assurance arrangements and to address the often very high costs of international accreditation.

Daniel, Kanwar and Uvalić-Trumbić, speaking in 2005, noted that cross-border education up to that point had had very little impact on educational provision in developing countries. They posited that part of the reason might be a concern that this could lead to "cultural imperialism and loss of sovereignty."

The Organization for Economic and Cultural Development and the World Bank (OECD & IBRD, 2007) argued that cross-border education could help with the rapid expansion of higher educational systems in countries whose domestic capacity could not cope with demand, provided issues such as quality, local capacity development and appropriate costing, were taken into account. Another issue is the prevailing challenge caused by the tendency of students to not return to their home country after participating in traditional contact-based, cross-border education. The resulting high stay rates in the countries in which these students have graduated translate into no return on investment for the home country, unless the student repays the loan. The payment may consist of the loan amount plus interest or perhaps national service. Another approach is to remit payments to the home country in support of family left behind. A further problem is that programmes of study generally cannot simply be transplanted from one context to another: there is always need for some adaptation and contextualisation. In this context, the first of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)'s guidelines for institutions offering cross border education seems particularly pertinent to the current discussion. UNESCO recommends that institutions offering higher education across borders should:

Ensure that the programmes they deliver across borders and in their home country are of comparable quality and that they also take into account the cultural and linguistic sensitivities of the receiving country. It is desirable that a commitment to this effect should be made public. (UNESCO, 2005, p.15)

A key aspect of this understanding is the need to provide equivalent experience and support, while taking cognisance of the diverse audience likely to participate. For some types of programmes, such as the humanities, economics, and management sciences this diversity could strengthen the inherent value and quality of the learning experience, if activities are built in that explicitly foster meaningful exchange. Other key curriculum design issues include equivalence of arrangements for practical and work learning components through inter-institutional partnership agreements. Merely

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