

# Global Connections – Local Impacts Opportunities and Challenges for Cross-Border Open and Distance Learning

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Thank you very much for your kind and generous introduction. I am indeed delighted to be with you today in Shanghai. I would like to congratulate and thank the conference organizers, planning committee, and sponsors for hosting this global forum.

My comments today will address some of the trends, opportunities and challenges we face in global open and distance learning. As ‘global colleagues,’ can explore these issues together, engage in insightful discussions, and through these dialogues, perhaps, be enlightened about our own views and biases towards global higher education.

Liang Qichao (1919), a unique figure in Chinese history, nearly a century ago inspired us all about the human, social and cultural potential of a global community. From *Impressions from my European Journey*, he wrote:

‘Our nation has a great responsibility . . . to enrich our culture with Western culture and to enrich Western culture with our culture, so that they may fuse into a new culture.’

We can also enrich our collective understanding of open and distance learning by sharing together as global colleagues.

## **Access: The Global Challenge**

A major catalyst for the growth of global higher education has been the complex issue of educational access. It has been estimated that by 2010 there will be 100 million people in the world fully qualified to move from secondary education to tertiary education for which there may be no access. This total is actually now closer to 120 million students. So here’s an interesting question. Indeed, if this forecast is true, then why is global competition for students growing so rapidly?

The answer, in part, is that even if these estimates are remotely accurate, these qualified students do not return to university at the same time or with the same goals. How will we serve these students? Is open and distance learning the solution? We will come back to this question.

## **Going Global: The Driving Factors for Universities**

What factors are driving universities into the global higher education marketplace? First, is the underlying premise that a nation’s economic infrastructure in the global marketplace is inherently dependent upon establishing global partners, attracting qualified students and workers with high-need skills, and establishing higher education linkages to world class research, technology transfer, academic programmes, and global business enterprises.

Secondly, many universities are going global to attract alternative sources of revenue to support both domestic and foreign endeavours, including

internationalizing their curriculum to ensure graduates are prepared for living and working in a global society.

Thirdly, the growth of English as the global language for commerce is serving as a catalyst for universities to expand their international linkages and more universities are now offering programmes, particularly at the post-graduate level, in English to attract international students. International student mobility is shifting rapidly and more students are completing part of their education while studying abroad.

### **Trends in Global Cross-Border Higher Education**

Today, host nations are becoming more selective for approving and selecting foreign providers to offer programmes in-country. At the same time, we are seeing unique public-private partnership models develop between government, business, and universities that are designed to meet specific needs within the host country. For example, these programmes may be training mid-level public managers, creating professional development for engineers, or offering high level English language training programmes for business personnel.

My main point is that host nations are becoming very selective about the types and levels of programmes offered by foreign providers. As I mentioned earlier, these partner linkages are designed to strengthen internal economic infrastructure, provide high-skills training for the workforce, and enhance the host country's higher education system.

As you may surmise, these issues relate directly to quality assurance issues in cross-border higher education. I would like to mention some essential global resources that are available. First, is the *Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education (2006)* published by UNESCO-OECD.

Second, is a document entitled '*Sharing Quality Higher Education across Borders: A Statement on Behalf of Higher Education Institutions Worldwide (2004)*,' endorsed by more than 30 higher education associations around the world. Third, is '*Sharing Quality Higher Education across Borders: A Checklist for Good Practice*' (2006). These two latter documents were jointly prepared by four prestigious global organizations: *the International Association of Universities (IAU)*; *the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC)*;

*the American Council of Education (ACE)*; and *the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)*.

Given we are here Asia, a final related resource is the *UNESCO-APQN Toolkit: Regulating the Quality of Cross-Border Education*. I encourage you to access the organization websites of these organizations and review these documents.

## **Emerging Hosts and Sources**

This graphic provides you with a general matrix of international cross-border activity. *Host countries* are those that approve foreign providers to deliver programmes in-country. *Source countries* are those that deliver their programmes globally to other countries. You will notice that historically the US, UK, and Australia has been the major source countries. Conversely, China, India, Malaysia, Singapore and the Gulf States have been the major host countries over the past five years. This, however, is changing. China, France, Germany, India, Malaysia, South Africa, Russia, and many other countries are becoming emerging source nations and delivering programmes externally.

## **Global Distance Learning (Ad) Ventures**

What are the goals of your distance learning programme and strategy? It is a truism that if you don't know where you're going, it won't matter which path you take. Moreover, if you don't take the necessary time to plan then you will be embarking on a distance learning adventure rather a sound, well developed open and distance learning venture.

So let me set the context for my subsequent comments. We have seen significant developments in global communications technologies over the past ten years. These have served as the catalysts for the exponential adoption of open and distance learning by universities, faculty, students, and the public for delivering higher education locally, regionally, and nationally. So given all this progress in technology and delivery potential, consider this question.

Why is 75% of global cross-border higher education delivered in face-to-face formats?

## **Barriers to Global Distance Learning**

Indeed, I acknowledge this percentage is a general estimate, but certainly a large majority of international higher education is being delivered on-site in face-to-face formats. Perhaps one reason is that countries that are spending considerable money for outside programmes, research and tech transfer perceive that having 'real people' in-country enhances quality and credibility.

Another potential barrier to global distance learning may be related to the pedagogical challenges of addressing the interconnected impacts of language, social norms, and cultural issues of open online teaching and learning. Moreover, these issues may be exacerbated if students are taught in English rather than their native language.

Technology is not culturally neutral. Can technology be perceived as a threat to one's culture? Does not English bring with it cultural overtones that may be perceived as 'cultural and linguistic imperialism' by native students and educators? The answer is a resounding yes, sometimes.

Distinguished colleagues, open and distance learning must address the issue of access to the basic technologies and infrastructures necessary for effective teaching and learning. The digital divide is a reality, it is not fiction. There are diverse and often highly divergent levels of technology access

between regions, nations, cultures, urban and rural communities, public and private education, and others.

### **The Cultural Imperatives**

So how do we reduce these barriers to open and global distance learning? From a curricular standpoint, we must do better research on the core cultural, social and linguistic traditions of the host nation. We need to build stronger regional partnerships where there may be common cultural, social and language histories and traditions. And we must ask ourselves, what can our global students teach us? Yes, they are students, but they are also a resource to help us understand what the major obstacles are to global open and distance learning.

### **Strategic Considerations for University Leaders**

Indeed, this commentary suggests that university leaders must address a number of key leadership and strategic issues. How do global distance education initiatives align with institutional mission and strategic goals? These initiatives should strengthen your university and enhance its capacity to provide quality education to students. Going global simply

because other universities are pursuing these global markets, does not address the above question. Global open and distance learning must align with the mission of your university.

At the programme level, distance teaching must be aligned with instructional design formats that compensate and respect language, culture and social norms of foreign students. How do we create the most effective and culturally sensitive curriculum for our foreign students?

University leaders must also develop a risk management strategy for major international distance learning initiatives. What do I mean by this? Leaders must develop a strategy that allows the university to transition out of and end a partnership that is not working. It is interesting how quickly universities can often create partnerships and yet perplexing how long it often takes to end partnerships that are not successful. Sometimes university leaders must cut their losses, learn from the process, and prepare for future partnerships.

### **The Global Future for Distance Learning**

In conclusion, the global distance learning market will grow significantly over the next decade. There will be unique international opportunities for creative and flexible universities who can leverage their resources, human and fiscal, to address many of the barriers mentioned today. We must keep our focus on effective teaching and learning . . . we must keep our focus on students. Technology is a powerful tool for teaching and learning. Its transformational capacity to exponentially expand educational access on this planet is undeniable. Education, and more precisely, quality education, is the manifestation of dialogue and interaction among and between students and teacher. It is the interactive and reflective communications between students.

And it is the dynamic interaction between the student and the intellectual content. These are the processes that transform learning environments for teachers and learners alike. When we use technologies to enhance these learning environments we also facilitate the creation, analyses, and dissemination of knowledge rather than just the flow of information.

From 1999-2005, the number of higher education students in China increased 458% to 15 million students. Today, the total is over 23 million. This is a remarkable achievement. This commitment to expanding access by you and your colleagues across China parallels of the fundamental ideals of open and distance learning: open access.

As we all know, education enhances our lives, strengthens the cultural, social and economic fabric of our nations, and creates the future foundations for our children and their children. Perhaps, most importantly, education expands our collective understanding, respect and acceptance of the diverse cultures that share this planet.

The Chinese word 'Ming' translates to English as 'brilliant.' I believe I share the sentiments of all my colleagues who are guests in your beautiful city and country in extending our congratulations to each of you for your 'brilliant' contributions to higher education in China. Well done.

I opened my commentary today with a quote from Liang. I shall close with a quote from a noted American author, Mark Twain.

Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.

The world of open and distance learning is there for you to explore, dream and discover. I wish you well on your journey.

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