

DISTANCE EDUCATION, E-LEARNING, ON LINE COURSES: WHY DOES QUALITY MATTERS?

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Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić es miembro de UNESCO (desde 1990), actualmente Jefe de la sección para la reforma, innovación y aseguramiento de la calidad, en la División de Educación Superior de la UNESCO en París. Previamente a su trabajo con la UNESCO, tuvo diferentes posiciones en educación en Yugoslavia, la última como Secretaria General y CEO de la Asociación de Universidades de Formadores de Yugoslavia.

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También estuvo involucrada en revisiones de la Educación Superior en Macedonia (1994) en la revisión que realizó la UNESCO-UNDP de la Educación Superior de Bosnia-Herzegovina (1996-1997) y en la revisión realizada por la UNESCO en Yugoslavia (2000).

Sus más recientes responsabilidades apuntan al desenvolvimiento de políticas para debatir la educación a distancia a través de las fronteras, cubriendo un amplio espectro de temas desde educación a distancia hasta la comercialización de los servicios educativos en el Foro Global del Aseguramiento Internacional de la Calidad, Acreditación y reconocimiento de calificaciones (2002; 2004). Uno de sus más recientes logros de su trabajo son las Guías sobre Provisión de Calidad a través de las fronteras en Educación Superior, elaborado conjuntamente con la OECD (2005) que promueve la confianza mutua y la cooperación internacional en aseguramiento de la calidad y el reconocimiento de calificaciones, especialmente aquellas provistas en el exterior, como educación a distancia, e-learning y otras. También es la responsable de la oficina de la UNESCO y la iniciativa del Banco Mundial para la Capacidad de Aseguramiento de la Calidad, que apunta a construir la capacidad para el aseguramiento de la calidad en educación superior en naciones en desarrollo.

Introduction

It is a great pleasure to be here and represent UNESCO at this important gathering, my first conference in Latin America. I thank Rector Luis Miguel Romero for inviting me to participate. I first had the honour of meeting him in Tanzania when UNESCO organized its 3rd Global Forum on Quality Assurance and discovered then his enthusiasm for higher education and his engagement with many issues of worldwide interest, in particular those relating to the quality assurance of distance education, which are high on the agenda of many of UNESCO's Member States.

My presentation will focus on why quality matters, particularly for distance education and E-Learning.

To do this I shall review global trends in higher education and examine the policy issues they raise. I shall present UNESCO's responses to some of these challenges as they relate to UNESCO's functions of standard-setting, capacity building, being a clearinghouse, and facilitating collaboration through partnerships.

Global Trends: Massification, Diversification, Growth of ODL:

The trend to mass higher education is now the key factor in the worldwide development of the sector. Student enrolments are burgeoning and there are some 132 million tertiary students worldwide if you include part-time students (UIS, 2004). China and India have doubled enrolments in the past 10 yrs and China now has the largest higher education system in the world with some 23 million students.

Most countries want to join the knowledge society by following the example of developed countries where age participation rates in higher education of 40-50% are now perceived as necessary for sustainable development. Unfortunately, many countries in the developing world are far from reaching this percentage and government action alone cannot satisfy the rising demand. Indeed, government budgets for higher education are declining steadily on a per capita basis. An example from Africa demonstrates that due to the massive enrolments, public expenditure per student fell from US \$ 6300 in 1980 to US \$ 1241 in 1995. (Martin; Sanyal, 2006).

This has encouraged diversification of types of provision and the way they are funded, notably through the growth of alternative providers. Open universities and regional universities are already making HE more accessible, especially to working adults and those in remote rural areas.

One aspect of this trend is that private higher education is now the fastest growing element of the sector worldwide. Although in Western Europe only 10% of students enrol in private institutions, in other parts of the world they are already well established. For example in some Asia-Pacific countries such as Japan, South Korea and the Philippines, 80% of students are enrolled in private institutions, although governments exercise control and regulation over this private sector. (Altbach; Levy, 2005). In Africa there are often partnerships between private and public institutions and IT academies like Cisco deliver certificates. (Varghese, 2006).

Open and Distance Learning and E-learning are growing in order to provide access to the wider student population now seeking higher education. Where there were only ten Open Universities in the world in 1988, by 2005 there were more than ten in India alone.

The growth of the private higher education sector includes the establishment of private distance education providers. A prominent Indian provider, the Symbiosis Centre for Distance Learning, organized a seminar in Pune, India earlier this month to launch an Indian consortium of private ODL institutions.

India is ambivalent about the private provision of higher education, especially private, for-profit provision. Although Indian policy makers recognise the inevitability of private provision if the country is to grow its tertiary sector, an agreed strategy for its place in Indian higher education has yet to emerge.

Meanwhile there is some tension between the private providers of open and distance learning and bodies such as India's Distance Education Council (DEC), which is part of the public Indira Gandhi National Open University, and the University Grants Commission (UGC). On the one hand, the private providers feel that there are too many bodies involved in regulating higher education, especially distance and open learning, which limits desirable expansion. On the other hand, the regulatory bodies such as the DEC and the UGC criticise some private providers for charging capitation fees, enrolling more than the allowed number of students, lacking a social mission, having inadequate infrastructure, franchising to unworthy partners, and employing unqualified teaching staff.

Growing student mobility is another dominant trend world-wide: 2.4 million students went abroad in 2004 – a three-fold increase since 1980. African students are the most mobile, with one out of every sixteen studying abroad. The Global Student Mobility 2025 Report predicts that demand for international education will increase to 7.2 million students in 2025. However, some of these students will study with a foreign institutions in their own country. For example in 2004 33% of all international students enrolled in Australian institutions studied at home, a figure which was up from 24% in 1996.

This is an example of the growing mobility of programmes and institutions. China saw a 9-fold increase in foreign programmes between 1995-2003 and in 2000 more Singaporean

undergraduate students accessed a foreign programme in Singapore than went abroad. With the rapid deployment of information and communications technology (ICT) ICT-enhanced Cross Border Higher Education (CBHE) is likely to become a significant development (Bohm et al., 2003).

These trends in global higher education raise a number of policy issues for governments and institutions. Is international online higher education the answer to expanding access to HE in the developing world? What policies can governments and institutions adopt to ensure that CBHE makes a positive contribution? How do countries address the challenges in Quality Assurance and the Recognition of Qualifications? What about the growing threat of degree mills and bogus institutions to the integrity of national tertiary systems? How can we draw a line between institutions providing sub-standard programmes that are susceptible to improvement and the out-and-out degree mills?

Some international responses: UNESCO Standard-setting

As part of its core functions of setting standards, building capacity at national and regional levels and serving as a clearinghouse, UNESCO has grounded its responses to the new challenges in global higher education in the existing legal framework supported by the six regional conventions on the recognition of qualifications that have been ratified by over 100 member States worldwide: a unique system. Although the ultimate objective of the conventions was to develop a Universal Convention covering the whole world, this is still an unrealistic objective, so the regional conventions are now being revised and regional frameworks are being strengthened in response to the rising challenges of globalisation.

A recent outcome of UNESCO's standard-setting activities was the development of the 2005 Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education. This work was done jointly with the OECD and the Guidelines address six groups of stakeholders in higher education: governments, higher education institutions, student bodies, recognition bodies, quality assurance bodies and professional bodies. They recommend actions based on collaboration, foster mutual trust and confidence and encourage access to reliable and transparent information. The overall aim is to promote quality in the growing phenomenon of cross-border higher education.

Global initiatives for capacity building in quality assurance

Quality assurance and qualification recognition is never easy. 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 that was launched in 2002. Its third meeting was held in Tanzania in 2007 and brought together stakeholders around the theme, ‘Guiding Learners in New Higher Education Spaces: Challenges for Quality Assurance and the Recognition of Qualifications’. Since the key theme of the Global Forum was empowering learners, it discussed issues ranging from mobility and migration to academic fraud.

The meeting urged a strong focus on capacity building for quality assurance at all levels and the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border higher education were held up as a useful tool for this work as CBHE spreads.

Earlier this year UNESCO and the World Bank launched a new partnership, the Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity (GIQAC). This aims to create a global framework to support capacity development in developing and transition countries. In the first year, GIQAC will support regional Quality Assurance networks in Africa, the Arab States, the Asia/Pacific region, Latin America and the Caribbean; as well as the international network for quality assurance agencies, INQAAHE.

Clearinghouse: Study Abroad, UNESCO Community of Interest on OERS, Portal

For nearly 60 years now, UNESCO has published Study Abroad, its international guide to tertiary education institutions and scholarships that covers over 150 countries. Recent editions include more material on open/distance learning and have a section ‘Tools for Students’. This is based in part on the work of two US bodies: the Council of Higher Education Accreditation’s (CHEA) questions for students; and the Western Consortium for Educational Telecommunications’ (WCET) Consumer’s Guide. It was also inspired by South Africa’s Council on Higher Education initiative for promoting quality literacy about tertiary education among secondary students. Directories and listings about Open and Distance Learning were used for that section. The latest edition (2006-2007) also provides information on bogus institutions.

The new phenomenon of Open Educational Resources, which was given momentum when the

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) made the course notes of its faculty freely available online in 2001, is also expanding beyond the developed world. UNESCO's International Institute for Educational (IIEP) has developed an international electronic community of interest with over 600 members from different stakeholder groups in some 98 Member States, which has been active since 2005.

UNESCO's OER Community sees the issue of quality assurance of OERs as a priority and links this to the broader issues of accessing information on the Internet. Because of their inherent mobility the quality of OERs needs to be tackled internationally, either through developing guidelines or adapting existing ones (e.g. CBHE guidelines). I am pleased that later in this session my former colleague Sir John Daniel will be sharing the interesting experience that the Commonwealth of Learning has acquired in developing OERs for various purposes.

The UNESCO Portal

To further its responsibility for protecting and empowering learners, UNESCO launched a pilot project for a portal of recognised higher education institutions in 2006 and presented the first results in 2008. This work was a logical extension of its earlier work with the OECD on the Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education (UNESCO/OECD, 2005) but also of the Study Abroad publication that includes information tools for students, directories and listings of ODL institution, financial aid and information on bogus providers.

The aim of the UNESCO Portal is to make up-to-date, accurate and comprehensive information on recognised higher education institutions/providers available at the international level. It provides authoritative data on the status of higher education institutions and quality assurance systems in countries around the world in order to help students make informed decisions about undertaking higher education (including crossborder higher education), and to protect them from misleading information, biased guidance, low quality provision, rogue providers, and qualifications of limited validity.

Currently, the portal gives access to information on institutions and systems in Argentina, Australia, Canada, China, Egypt, Jamaica, Japan, Kenya, Malaysia, Nigeria, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and the United States of America. The number of countries covered will be expanded in the next stage of the project.

After reviewing the pilot phase the portal's steering committee decided to put it online and to seek resources from outside UNESCO to fund future developments. The country information on the portal is managed and updated by the competent authorities in the participating countries.

More information on the national processes for recognising or otherwise sanctioning institutions is available on the country pages. These define key terms, indicate where information can be found, describe the national higher education system, list recognised institutions and programmes, and provide information for students planning to study in the country (including details on foreign credential assessment and recognition, opportunities for financial assistance, and provisions for cross-border higher education).

A constant challenge: Quality assurance of Open and Distance Learning

The quality assurance of distance education is a frequent topic of discussion in many international gatherings, including this one here in Loja and remains a challenge. Does the quality assurance of distance education require processes that are different from those used for quality assurance in traditional settings? Is the quality assurance of open educational resources a separate issue again? Indeed, can the quality of rapidly evolving open educational resources and e-learning materials be assessed at all? Some interesting models were presented at the Global Forum in Tanzania, notably the E-xcellence approach that was the outcome of a two-year project of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU, 2007).

E-xcellence offers a supplementary instrument which may be used with traditional QA processes to address e-learning developments as a specific feature. An important feature of E-xcellence is that it offers a Europe-wide set of 33 benchmarks, independent of particular institutional or national systems, with guidance about educational improvement. Aside from the full E-xcellence manual, its Quickscan facility gives a quick orientation on aspects of quality specific to e-learning in the areas of curriculum design, course design, course delivery, services (student support; staff support) and management (institutional strategies). UNESCO is working with EADTU to adapt the E-xcellence benchmarks and manual, which were developed for Europe, to suit other regions of the world.

In addition, UNESCO is working closely with the OBHE and with COL, which has a mandate to help countries develop distance education, to provide international criteria of good practices for

cross-border higher distance learning.

What about Degree Mills?

Fraudulent and low quality providers, popularly known as 'degree mills', threaten the credibility of the online provision of courses internationally by offering costly credentials and degrees of dubious educational value. Electronically-delivered degrees are largely unregulated and pose serious challenges around the world. Although comprehensive and reliable data on degree mills are not available, thousands of degree mills are estimated to be in operation. The growing and often unsatisfied demand for higher education has created a significant market for such providers but few governments or organisations are positioned to do what is necessary to educate and protect the public.

These fraudulent providers often misuse the names of international organizations, in particular UNESCO, in various ways. These range from claiming a connection with UNESCO where none exists to exaggerating a real link with UNESCO to give the impression that UNESCO accredits them. UNESCO is not an accrediting agency.

The US Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is working with UNESCO to address the problem of degree mills and accreditation mills, beginning with the development of some general international principles. The aim is to develop suggestions for effective practice to assist the international community in confronting bogus providers. A possible outcome is the establishment of an ongoing, reliable network of higher education, quality assurance/accreditation bodies and international organisations that can identify degree mills and share information and ideas.

Partnerships: UNESCO-COL : Optimizing a Vital Contribution to the Expansion of Higher Education

UNESCO has a joint work plan with the Commonwealth of Learning, part of which covers higher education. The two organisations complement each other well since UNESCO operates at the level of global policy, whereas COL's mission is to help countries and institutions at the grassroots with new approaches to the expansion of higher education. The two agencies have produced joint publications on quality assurance as well as a publication to demystify the

Global Agreement on Trade in Services and its application to higher education. UNESCO and COL are also working together to help the world's many small states, which face special challenges in expanding higher education. Later in this session Sir John is going to talk about a most interesting initiative that COL is coordinating, the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

Bringing it all together: 2009 World Conference “The New Dynamics of Higher Education”

To what extent is higher education today a driver for sustainable development, nationally and internationally? Does the sector live up to the expectations placed in it to foster change and progress in society and to be a key player in building knowledge societies? How does higher education contribute to the development of education systems as a whole? What are the most significant trends that will shape the new higher education and research spaces? How are learners and learning changing? What are the new challenges for quality?

These and other issues will be on the agenda of the World Conference to be held from 6 to 8 July 2009 at UNESCO, Paris. The conference will take stock of changes in higher education since the World Conference on Higher Education of 1998 and will address the new dynamics that are likely to shape the strategic agenda for the development of higher education policies and institutions in the foreseeable future.

The 1998 World Conference on Higher Education was a special moment for the international higher education community. But the policy agenda has evolved considerably since 1998 and today the sector is a greater priority than ever. Higher education faces many challenges, both new and ongoing. Understanding them better will help to shape action at the global, regional, national and institutional levels.

The 2009 World Conference will provide a global platform for the sort of future-focused debate and thinking about the rapidly changing higher education and research spaces that can identify the action necessary to ensure that the sector meets both national development objectives and individual aspirations. The conference, which is being designed and conducted in synergy with the world higher education community and the fourth World Science Forum (Budapest, November 2009), will bring together keystakeholders in a new commitment to the development of higher education.

In preparation for this event, a series of regional conferences will be organised to bring specific regional concerns, expectations and proposals to the 2009 World Conference. Announcement will be made shortly and we invite you to participate fully.

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