

Perspectives of Transnational Education

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a particular stream of distance education called *transnational education* has become widespread (Davis, Olson, & Bohm, 2000; van der Vende, 2003). Transnational education, often referred to as offshore education, describes all programs in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based. This article discusses various aspects of transnational education. It reviews the definition of transnational education, its typology, growth, factors determining demand and supply, and characteristics of typical programs. The article concludes with a discussion on the role that face-to-face interaction plays in transnational programs.

BACKGROUND

Reviewing recent studies of transnational education reveals that there is little agreement about what to include in this category. Similarly, there is no agreement on the various subdefinitions that inform the subject. For the purpose of this article, a working definition of transnational education produced by UNESCO and the Council of Europe for their Code of Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education was used (UNESCO & Council of Europe, 2001). This states that transnational education includes:

All types of higher education study programme, or sets of courses of study, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based. Such programmes may belong to the educational system of a State different from the State in which it operates, or may operate independently of any national system. (UNESCO & Council of Europe, 2001)

This definition includes education that is provided by collaborative arrangements, such as franchising, twinning, joint degrees where study programs are provided in collaboration with a partner institution, as well as noncollaborative arrangements such as branch campuses, offshore institutions, and corporate universities.

The Australian Department of Education Science and Training (DEST, 2005) provides a definition of *Australian*

Transnational Education; this definition includes two additional requirements:

1. That the transnational program be delivered or assessed by an accredited Australian provider; and
2. That the delivery include a face-to-face component.

It further stresses that, in contrast to distance education provided in purely distance mode, transnational education includes a physical presence of instructors offshore, either directly by the Australian provider, or indirectly through a formal agreement with a local institution (DEST, 2005).

Transnational Education: Perspectives and Characteristics

There are a great number of different relationships between different types of transnational education providers, delivery mechanisms, and programs/awards. Charting these types is a difficult task, as the constantly evolving, highly complex situation includes an array of partnerships, consortia, articulation agreements, modes of delivery, public, private, off-shore, for-profit and corporate elements. Various models of teaching can also be found, ranging from full program delivery at an offshore campus, combined face-to-face and flexible delivery option, and e-learning (Goodfellow, Lea, Gonzales, & Mason, 2001).

Typology of Transnational Education

Transnational education is constantly evolving. Wilson and Vlăsceanu (2000) distinguished between three interrelated perspectives of this evolution adding that:

all these new developments in higher education share certain common characteristics and similarities, mainly in terms of the ways they cross the borders of national higher education systems. It is for this reason that they are usually identified by the generic phrase of transnational education. (Wilson & Vlăsceanu, 2000, p. 75)

The first perspective relates to the delivery mechanisms and arrangements including franchising, corporate universities, international institutions, distance learning, and virtual universities (Machado dos Santos, 2002). Wilson and Vlăsceanu (2000) noted:

One form of development refers to a modality of delivering an educational programme (i.e., distance education), others to ways of establishing a programme/institution (i.e., franchising or twinning/branch campus), and others again to ways of offering primarily continuing education to certain new groups of students. There seems to be no limit to the proliferation of such modalities or arrangements, as long as the demand for higher education is still growing, and the possibilities for a global market continue to emerge. (Wilson & Vlăsceanu, 2000, p. 78)

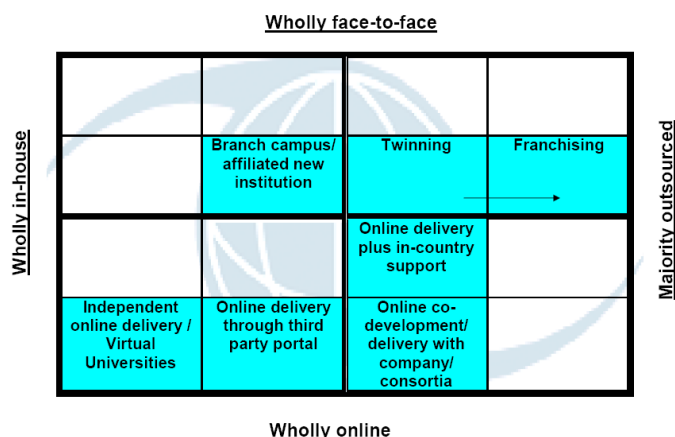
The second perspective relates to the institutional and organisational arrangements that result from the adopted delivery mechanisms. This can be either a new institution, a branch, or a franchised program or course of study offering an award within an existing institution or other organisation. The third perspective refers to the nature and quality of qualifications awarded through transnational education, for example, degrees, certificates, or study credits (Wilson & Vlăsceanu, 2002).

Following on Wilson and Vlăsceanu's (2002) categorisation of transnational programs according to their delivery mechanism, Adam (2001) and Vignoli (2004) have described the most common forms of such programs as follows:

- **“Franchising:** The process whereby a higher education institution (franchiser) from a certain country grants another institution (franchisee) in another country the right to provide the franchiser's programmes/qualifications in the franchisee's host country, irrespective of the students' provenance; in many cases, the franchisee only provides the first part of the educational programme, which can be recognised as partial credits toward a qualification at the franchiser's in the context of a *programme articulation*.

- **Programme articulations:** Inter-institutional arrangements whereby two or more institutions agree to define jointly a study programme in terms of study credits and credit transfer, so that students pursuing their studies in one institution have their credits recognised by the other in order to continue their studies (*twinning programmes, articulation agreements, etc.*). These may—or may not—lead to joint or double degrees.
- **Branch campus:** A campus established by a higher education institution from one country in another country (host country) to offer its own educational programmes/qualifications, irrespective of the students' provenance; the arrangement is similar to franchising, but the franchisee is a campus of the franchiser.
- **Off-shore institution:** An autonomous institution established in a host country but said to belong, in terms of its organisation and educational contents, to the education system of some other country, without (necessarily) having a campus in the mother country.
- **Corporate universities:** They are usually parts of big transnational corporations and organise their own higher education institutions or study programmes offering qualifications that do not belong to any national system of higher education.
- **International institutions:** Institutions offering so-called *international* programmes/qualifications that are not part of a specific education system.
- **Distance learning arrangements and virtual universities:** Where the learner is provided with course material via post or Web-based solutions, and self-administers the learning process at home; the only contact with the student is by remote means.” (Vignoli, 2004, p. 2)

Figure 1. Types of transnational provision (as presented in Bjarnason, 2005)



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