

Transborder Education In Perspective

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A. Introduction

As knowledge becomes more important, so does education. Countries need to educate more of their people to a higher standard – a certified competency is now a basic qualification required for many skilled jobs. The quality of knowledge generated within educational institutions, and its accessibility to the wider economy is becoming increasingly critical to national competitiveness. Education has been marked as the single most important key to development and poverty alleviation, to development of dynamic and globally competitive economies, to the construction of democratic societies, therefore, education has played an active role in the so-called global market.

Through the advancement of information and communication technology, and the increasing growth of e-learning, educational services are expanding rapidly. Their contribution to the global spread of the modern knowledge economy should not be underestimated. Availability of these education services may contribute to the development of a more qualified and

efficient workforce, good governance, and a more democratic and sustainable society.

In the era of globalization, trade in education services suddenly becomes the buzzword. Actually, it has been going on for years, and some nations are holding large market shares, as importer as well as provider of education. Exchanges are taking place, and each nation has striven to seek an international oriented profile in its educational system, while at the same time retaining the national values and identities. Such a situation may form the basis for creating new partnership and opportunities in learning, and enriching the global capacity building and cultural exchange. While respecting the national policy objectives and the importance of public education system, it is advisable to see to the great potential, maximize the benefits, and minimize the possible disadvantages of increasing the world trade in education services.

Education should be recognized to a large extent as a government function, and international education services must not displace public education system. The government of each country will retain the right to regulate to meet domestic policy objectives, and the national authorities will continue to play important roles as suppliers of education and training services for its people.

While there are many practices of the existence of international education services at the primary and secondary level, emphasis of international education services is to be set in vocational education, polytechnics, higher education and adult education level, which intention is to help upgrade knowledge

and skills while respecting each country's role of prescribing and administering appropriate public education for its citizens.

International education services must form the basis for mutual recognition of qualifications. Due respect should be paid to national quality assurance systems and transparency in education. Recognition of qualifications should comply with international certification or professional standards, and there should be no discrimination regarding the international students, tuition fees, and other student related issues. These become the basis of the so-called transborder education.

B. Transborder Education

In addition to the growth of ICT, and the prospective liberalization of trade in educational services, transborder education (TBE) is one of the reflections of globalization of education. This development poses new challenges at a time when the government of a country is no longer the sole providers of education. Such challenges not only address issues of access, equity, intellectual property, and quality, but also those of national sovereignty and cultural diversity. Further, TBE providers and trade will affect the funding provided by government's budgets to education sectors, thereby affecting weaker and poorer nations and benefiting the more prosperous ones.

The perception toward TBE is mixed. There is one group fiercely oppose to education being treated as a commodity and pressure the government not to make commitment to such a mode of education. While also

other group who advocates that the trade is happening, and that it has certain benefits and opportunities, on condition that it is handled and monitored correctly.

In general, there are four modes of TBE, i.e., the presence of natural persons, commercial presence, consumption abroad, and cross border supply. The presence of natural persons has been long practiced in education, in which scholars move between countries to teach and or to do research. A country can control this movement through issuance of visas and work permits.

Commercial presence is when an educational institution sets up a branch or satellite campus abroad, or when it makes twinning or franchising arrangements with the local education institutions. There is a wide range of possibilities under this category; however, it is considerably the most controversial form of TBE, especially when it deals with international rules setting on foreign investment in a country.

Commercial presence can also be seen as a potential form of trade of education services in which the receiving country will be able to take advantage in developing its education system. A country may not blend in to the foreign provider which comes into its territory. Examples of the commercial presence among others are the University of Nottingham in China, the Sheffield University in Malaysia, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Vietnam, etc.

Such partnership of universities from developed countries with universities from developing countries have been perceived successful, e.g., to enable

thousands of ordinary people in China to study their own language and gain a “western” qualification at relatively low cost, to train hundreds of local staff the skills needed to run a quality distance learning system, and some local universities have grown robust in their own right based on this partnership. What we seek to explore is the possibility of having University *Kebangsaan* in England, or Shanghai University in London, or Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in Australia.

Consumption abroad is the oldest form of education trade, that is one country sends its young people to study abroad. In addition to acquiring the skills and knowledge being studied, these young people also enjoys exposure of international life and culture. Many of those who have studied abroad become involved in international work and contribute to global understanding. The receiving country acquires new foreign friends and also gains a substantial financial benefit through students’ spending both on fees and living costs. Nevertheless, this mode is the most expensive one, and the sending country may loose its young people who are tempted by different (or better) life styles in a richer or more developed countries.

Overall, TBE is challenging, and also leads to great possibilities. another possibility of TBE is cross border supply, where courses move between countries. Growth in cross border supply can be expected with the increasing sophistication of the technology and pedagogy of e-learning and extension of access to the internet. This mode is relatively less expensive, and people can stay at home while studying abroad at the same time. It is seen as invaluable means of international cooperation to educate learners for the

future, reduces the information divide between nations by permitting institutions to share resources and know-how with each other.

Nevertheless, it is a new development and many scholars are still skeptical to this form of trade in education. Even an expert in distance education such as John Daniel states that *"the idea that millions of students will forsake the institutions of their own countries in favor of courses of study that sneak across the frontier in the Internet is a fantasy and will remain so"* (2003).

Based on the present practices, there are also some requirements for cross border supply to be successful, i.e., strong partnership with local education institution, and that the partnership will have strong impact in developing and growing partner institution and in contributing to the development of education in the country. The extreme case example of this partnership is Open University of Hong Kong partnering with OUUK in its early establishment (to distribute OUUK courses in Hong Kong and Mainland China).

C. Strategic Issues

While in GATS, education is one of the least committed sectors due to unresolved arguments, i.e., less than 30% of 147 WTO's member states have made commitments, but the transborder education is rapidly developing, with all the issues that entail. Razak (2006) has identified eight general barriers to transborder education, i.e., incompatible national legislation and policy, qualification authorities and accreditation, movement of person (brain drain),

foreign currency controls, disregard for international agreements, limitation on foreign ownership, lack of political understanding, lack of integrated approach to promote and market education.

Other scholars are concerned with the issue of international standards, compatibility of degrees and diplomas, and the dynamics as well as sustainability of transborder education. The “fake diplomas for right price” or “phony degree” is also another booming issue experienced by many countries in the case of transborder education, especially online transborder education. Many people buy fake diplomas from online vendors – a university that does not exist. Furthermore, some people say that under the guise of globalization, the transborder education could lead to dominance or new forms of imperialism by major cultures and value systems from outside the country. This is especially true, when the playing field is not level, when the providing and the receiving countries do not share the same level of vision and operation.

In general, there are three sets of issues, i.e.: recognition of qualification, accreditation and qualification, and the availability and access to information.

1. Recognition of Qualifications

The criteria and procedures adopted for the recognition of foreign education qualifications for the purpose of employment and further education is a domain in which the regulatory activity of governments (and other bodies responsible for recognitions such as professional associations) has a significant impact on transborder education

services. The attractiveness of potential students to a particular qualification is closely related to the likelihood of its recognition for employment and further study in the student's home country and countries to which a student may wish to migrate as well as the cost, complexity and duration of recognition procedures.

The Lisbon convention – 1997 Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in the European Region – provides a model for (transparent, low cost and non-discriminatory process for) recognition of qualification. One main features of the approach is the presumption of equivalence unless proven otherwise. This places the burden of proof on recognition authorities to demonstrate the lack of equivalence rather than the reverse.

In Australia, for example, no distinction is made between qualifications delivered through distance or other modes of education in terms of recognition for the purposes of further study or employment. Within many countries in Southeast Asia, struggles for recognition is still continuing, especially the treatment of status of education qualification delivered through (traditional) distance education or e-learning as compared to that of qualification delivered in 'face-to-face' or 'on campus' mode.

Mutual recognition agreements must be reached between sending country and receiving countries or educational institutions, among others, on the basis of trust in and understanding of each other professional practice, and the use of international evaluation or peer reviews and standards.

Furthermore, regional and international network must also be established and maintain to serve as platforms to exchange information and best practices as well as to increase mutual understandings. Improvement of links between academics and professional bodies, stakeholders, and the labor markets will facilitate the process of recognition of academic qualifications across border.

2. Accreditation and Quality Assurance

The existence of a robust and transparent system of accreditation and external quality assurance of higher education institutions is one of the most important safeguards for students and stakeholders in transborder education. These provide credibility that an institution or program meets certain standards and is or has been subject to external evaluation (although the standards and level of scrutiny offered may be varied in various countries or by various accreditation agencies). An example of the transborder accreditation and quality assurance is the University 21 – a collaborative (transborder) accreditation among higher education institutions in several countries, a.o., Australia, China, New Zealand, and some European countries.

Transborder education poses a number of challenges for authorities responsible for accreditation and quality assurance. The first is that of the relative responsibilities and authority of an institution in its home country (receiver) and those in the country of the consumer (provider).

The second is that of the reach of home country (provider) regulatory authorities. Do they have jurisdiction over the activities of an institution supplying a service to consumers located on foreign soil (through commercial presence or cross border supply), and if so, can they effectively monitor such activities?

Not all countries have the same accreditation and quality assurance processes; some even does not have any quality assurance mechanism yet. Thus, the key issue is how to assure students (and stakeholders) that the transborder education services (programs or courses) they are taking are subject to the standard QA procedures (conducted by the providing country, or accrediting agency) irrespective of their nationality, the mode of delivery or the location in which they receive the service.

The Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education (2005) asserts that to minimize differences among countries or even within countries, in terms of quality assurance, it is advisable that any QA and accreditation mechanism include transborder education provision in its various modes, strengthen the existing regional and international network among QA and accrediting bodies, and establish links and collaboration between the QA and accrediting bodies of the sending country and receiving country. Those efforts may facilitate the process of assuring the quality of programs delivered across borders and institutions operating across borders while respecting the quality assurance and accreditation systems of the receiving countries.

3. Availability and access to information

Accurate, accessible and up to date information is essential to the efficient functioning of markets. Potential students and parents need high quality information to make informed choices about study options. Authorities need information to make judgments about the equivalence of foreign and domestic qualifications. Employers need to have accurate information about qualifications when making decisions regarding recruitment and promotion. A large part of the responsibility for the supply of such information lies with governments of the receiving countries, accreditation and QA authorities in exporting countries as well as institutions themselves.

From the point of view of the person seeking access to information about the status of institutions and of the qualifications and courses, the issue is not only the availability of information from appropriate authorities but also the ease with which information can be accessed and compared, and a sense of the reliability and status of information sources. Meanwhile, for the regulatory authorities in importing countries, the issue is not only that of the availability of high quality information but also one of the possibility of dialogue and the existence of a real opportunity to discuss concerns with the relevant authorities in exporting countries.

To date transborder higher education has represented a relatively small component of provision of higher education services. There is every possibility that it will grow in both scale and

importance over coming years and that this will be to the benefit of students and the nations building. High quality open and distance education, particularly in the form of online provision and e-learning has the potential to offer significant benefits to students in terms of costs, ease of access and the range of choice available.

From this point of view, it is important that the regulation of the transborder provision of higher education contributes to creating a market for distance provision which enjoys the confidence of students and other stakeholders and is free from any unnecessary barriers. At this moment, a “perceived” lesser status to qualifications earned through distance education is a potentially major barrier to the development of transborder education.

Furthermore, effective regulation of transborder education through various modes depends on the actions of receiving and sending countries as well as institutions. Also, transborder education providers must be sensitive to the needs cultures of the communities in which they operate. Their responsiveness should be assured through a process of mutual understanding between their countries and the receiving countries, and institutions. Dialogue with the stakeholders such as national and local policy makers and administration, employers, and potential students is indeed necessary.

At the final end, the aim of transborder education should be contributing to the development of a nation – the receiving country.

D. Role of SEAMOLEC

As a regional institution, SEAMOLEC has the potential to play significant role in the transborder education. Since SEAMOLEC is not an implementing academic unit, but more of capacity building agency, SEAMOLEC could provide services to bridge the sending institutions and receiving institutions or countries, regarding the provision and dissemination of reliable information, the quality assurance and accreditation, and the recognition of qualifications in labor markets and among professional bodies. In addition to the peripheral role, SEAMOLEC also can play instrumental role in facilitating the development of transborder courses or study programs based on open and distance learning principles and also offering training and other capacity building activities to interested institutions/countries.

The more significant contribution from SEAMOLEC can also be expected through its research and development effort in the area of transborder education, especially comparisons between or among various modes of transborder education, the effectiveness of transborder education from various perspectives of stakeholders, the impact of transborder education in nation building.

Based on this study, SEAMOLEC could develop specific guidelines on transborder education, especially between and among higher education institutions in Southeast Asian countries, enhancing the presently available guidelines from UNESCO.

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