

Cross-border higher education for capacity development

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Context

Higher education has become increasingly international in the past decade as more and more students choose to study abroad, enrol in foreign educational programmes and institutions in their home country, or simply use the Internet to take courses at colleges or universities in other countries. This growth is the result of several different, but not mutually exclusive, driving forces: the promotion of mutual understanding between countries; migration of skilled workers in a globalised economy; the need to build a more educated workforce and to improve the quality of higher education in countries where international students come from, where foreign providers operate and foreign programmes are delivered, generally emerging economies; and other factors like declining transport and communication costs. Over the past decade, cross-border higher education has increasingly been regarded as a potential lever of economic growth.

An increasing number of students are being offered, and taking advantage of, a new option – taking a degree or other post-secondary course offered by a foreign university without leaving their home country. This is typically in the form of a particular programme offered, generally face to face but also by e-learning, or where the foreign institution is physically present in the student's country. Programme and institution mobility has grown over the past decade and is likely to meet a growing demand in the future. Such services might not offer students the same cultural and linguistic experiences as foreign study, but they involve lower personal costs than studying abroad and can lead to beneficial spillovers in the receiving country's higher education sector.

Some (typically emerging) countries encourage imports of cross-border higher education, however delivered, as a quick way to meet their unmet local demand and build capacity for their higher education system and for their human resources. They use scholarship programmes supporting the outward mobility of domestic civil servants, teachers, academics and students but also encourage foreign institutions, programmes and academic staff to come and operate private for-profit ventures, generally under a government regulation which ensures their compatibility with the country's development agenda. Twinning arrangements and partnerships with local providers are encouraged (and sometimes compulsory) in order to facilitate knowledge transfers between foreign and local institutions.

The OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation published 2 books in 2004 analysing the recent trends in this field: *Internationalisation and trade in higher education* and *Quality and Recognition in Higher Education: the cross-border challenge*. The potential of these new trends in cross-border education for development have not received much attention yet. In a joint effort with the World Bank, it is now exploring whether and under which conditions cross-border higher education could benefit to developing countries' capacity building agenda. This will result in a book due to be released by early 2007.

The aims of the study are 1) to show how new trends in cross-border education can help developing countries to build capacity in tertiary education (and, more generally, contribute to their development); 2) to offer developing countries some policy recommendations to enable them to reap the benefits of these new trends while minimising their potential risks; 3) to show the variety and complexity of the policy instruments at their disposal; 4) to open up new areas for research in development theory and bring forward new ideas and ways of thinking on capacity development.

While most countries mainly see the possible benefits of exporting education services, the main message would be that a well designed import strategy can also yield strong potential benefits, especially where countries are unable to meet their demand for tertiary and post-secondary education.

Given that many (developing) countries do not have a strategy related to cross-border education and that the development community is not always aware of the opportunities offered by cross-border education, these are important questions to be discussed. Moreover, during the elaboration of the guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education, jointly elaborated by the OECD and UNESCO, in which over 90 countries participated, many developing countries asked for advice on quality assurance and the regulation of foreign provision.

Aims of the conference

The aim of the conference would be to foster an evidence-based dialogue on the above-mentioned issues between the education, the development and the trade communities in developing and developed countries. It would aim at raising awareness of the potential opportunities and challenges of cross-border higher education for developing countries, at sharing experience on good practice and offering policy recommendations to tackle these issues, and at advancing new ideas in the field. The findings of the OECD/World Bank study could be a starting point for the discussion. The conference would target policy makers, stakeholders as well as researchers in the fields of higher education, development and trade. Besides the discussion and possible revision of the conclusions of the book, outcomes of the conference could be policy recommendations for regulating foreign provision of higher education in different developing countries as well as a possible platform for carrying the debate on (under a form to be discussed at the seminar).

Themes of the conference

The conference will cover four main topics, with an emphasis on the two first ones, through open discussions, short presentations of the issues and of country/region cases:

1. Capacity building through cross-border higher education (and, more generally, higher education): cross-border education as a means of enhancing local education systems, increasing the share of the population gaining access to higher education and the quality of the local systems. What are the trends in developing countries from different regions and of different size and income level?
2. Good practice in regulating foreign provision in higher education and in quality assurance and accreditation: increasing the capacity of developing countries to regulate their own higher education systems, including foreign provision. What is good practice assure quality in higher education and to make sure that foreign provision is effectively attracted where it is welcome and really contributes to the receiving country's capacity and nation building agendas?
3. Aid and trade in higher education: increasing the ability of developing countries to use trade in their capacity building strategy and enhance the understanding of how it complements development aid.
4. International mobility and brain drain: discussing the risk of brain drain related to cross-border higher education and better understanding how a balance can be found between developed and developing countries.