Impact of Globalisation on Accreditation and Quality Management of Open and Distance Learning Institutions

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Abstract

The term 'globalisation' has become very common now and it is a very generic term and can be defined in a number of ways depending upon the circumstance. Globalisation pertaining to higher education has been best defined by Knight and de Wit (1997). Their definition reveals that globalisation is a multi-faceted process and has several impacts. As a result of globalisation new modes of higher education are emerging and mode like Open and Distance Learning (ODL) are becoming more popular. ODL is adopting new forms of delivery to keep the momentum with the changing pace of time and demand. But, the new forms it is adopting and acquiring has posed several challenges and accreditation being the primary. Globalisation has also caused a serious concern for quality of ODL institutions. To cope with these challenges, ODL institutions are developing mechanisms and adopting strategies for continuous quality improvement. Likewise, over the past few years accreditation has become a priority of ODL institutions. The concept of accreditation and quality of ODL are becoming more popular then itself. This paper is an effort to highlight the aspects of globalisation of higher education, outline the impact of globalisation on ODL, analyse aspects of accreditation and quality management of ODL institutions in the current scenario and discuss specific issues and challenges regarding accreditation of ODL institutions.

Abstrak

Istilah globalisasi telah menjadi umum sekarang ini dan ianya merupakan istilah yang sangat generik dan boleh didefinisikan dalam pelbagai cara bergantung kepada keadaan. Globalisasi yang berkait dengan pendidikan tinggi telah pun didefinisikan oleh Knight dan de Wit (1997). Definisi mereka menggambarkan bahawa globalisasi adalah satu proses pelbagai muka dan mempunyai beberapa impak. Hasil daripada globalisasi beberapa

mod baru pendidikan baru terhasil dan mod seperti pembelajaran terbuka dan jarak jauh menjadi semakin popular. Pembelajaran terbuka dan jarak jauh menggunakan bentuk penyampaian baru untuk mengekalkan momentum dengan gubahan masa dan permintaan. Tetapi bentuk baru yang digunakan menyumbang kepada beberapa cabaran dan akreditasi adalah yang paling asas. Globalisasi telah menyebabkan pertimbangan yang serius kualiti institusi pendidikan terbuka dan jarak jauh. Untuk mengatasi cabaran ini institusi pendidikan terbuka dan jarak jauh sedang membangunkan mekanisma dan strategi untuk memperbaiki kualiti secara berterusan. Dalam masa yang sama, dalam beberapa tahun ini akreditasi telah menjadi keutamaan kepada institusi pendidikan terbuka dan jarak jauh. Konsep akreditasi dan kualiti pendidikan jarak jauh dan terbuka telah menjadi semakin popular berbanding pendidikan itu sendiri. Kertas kerja ini adalah satu usaha untuk mengetengahkan aspek-aspek globalisasi pendidikan tinggi, membincangkan impak globalisasi terhadap pendidikan terbuka dan jarak jauh, menganalisis aspek akreditasi dan pengurusan kualiti institusi pendidikan jarak jauh dan terbuka dalam senario semasa dan membincangkan isu-isu spesifik dan cabaran berkaitan dengan akreditasi untuk institusi pendidikan jarak jauh dan terbuka.

Introduction

Globalisation of higher education resulting into cross-border delivery has revolutionised higher education. It must be acknowledged that foreign provider have helped in increasing access to higher education and have specially helped in promoting lifelong learning and continuing mode of professional development. They use a variety of modes such as virtual education and distance education. One of the important outcomes of transitional forces being experienced by higher education everywhere is global environment of increased competition. The existence and growth of a large number global higher education institution further increase the quest for quality. In the case of ODL, very often there is a chance of dubious quality and students being mislead. But, to overcome this problem, higher education institutions and ODL take the advantage of being accredited. Accreditation of institution is central to today's higher education landscape.

Globalisation of Higher Education: Emerging Trends

Globalisation is a set of processes leading to the integration of economic, cultural, political, and social systems across geographical boundaries (www.hsewebdepot.org). All regions of the world are deeply involved in and heavily influenced by global, regional and bilateral trade agreements. Although since the Second World War, international higher education has grown at a rapid rate, the emerging trade agreements further facilitate to strengthen and boost educational trade. Following is a snapshot of the emerging trade agreements, which are linked with education.

- The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS): The GATS of WTO extends the call for member countries to liberalise not only trade in goods, but also the substantially larger and more complex domain of services. In response to the GATS and other trade agreements, a great many countries are seeking to liberalise their educational policies (Leventhal, 2005).

- Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC): APEC is not scheduled to become a free trade agreement until 2020. In the interim however, there are a number of official activities taking place for purposes of fostering regional harmony, including some activities related to higher education.

- Other Regional/Bilateral Agreements: By 2005, Asian countries (excluding China) had ratified 14 bilateral and regional Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and had negotiated but implemented another seven. Asian nations are also actively negotiating some 23 bilateral and regional FTAs, many with non-Asian partners, including Australia, Canada, Chile, the European Union, India and Qatar (Hufbauer and Wong, 2005). According to 2005 Sutherland Report, commissioned by the Director General of the WTO, about 15 preferential trade agreements (PTAs) are in force and the number is expected to double by 2007.

Impact of Globalisation on Higher Education

There are some universal factors that impact the higher education communities in countries around the world. These are:

- Expansion: With the fastest growing economies, the countries are making plans to protect its economic interests by assuring world-class education through its institutions of higher education.

- Distance education: The emergence of ODL as the effective supplementary system to the traditional universities and colleges is also an important trend in the expansion of higher education worldwide.

- Privatisation: As a part of the general thrust for increasing the size of enrollment in higher education, spurred by the need for additional resources, countries have already undertaken the initiatives to privatise higher education.

- Transnational education: It is substantial in many of economically well-developed countries. Sensing the concern for the openings for higher education opportunity, these countries have come in a large way to establish their teaching and training centers in a number of countries.

- Diversification: Consequent to the phenomenal growth of knowledge and the emergence of many multi-disciplinary subject areas, the range of educational offerings has also increased substantially. Besides, diversity also comes from the variety of new delivery system by educational providers (Gnanam, 2001).

Quality in Cross-Border Higher Education

Cross-border education refers to when students follow a course or programme that is produced and maintained in a different country from where they live. The reality of today is that cross-border higher education is making a negligible contribution to the provision of higher education that is accessible, available and affordable in most developing countries. While for profit cross-border providers are active, they tend to offer low quality education at a high cost. Improving quality is the key to improving

the impact of cross-border higher education. Developing countries need quality management mechanisms that are equipped to cope with cross-border education. UNESCO and the OECD have developed a valuable resource 'Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education' jointly, with the help from COL. The guidelines aim to support and encourage international cooperation and enhance the understanding of the importance of quality provision in cross-border higher education (that includes profit/non-profit, public/private, face-to-face/distance learning).

The increased cross-border mobility of students, academic staff, and professionals presents challenges for existing national quality management and accreditation, frameworks and bodies as well as for the systems for recognising foreign qualification. Some of these challenges are:

- National capacity for quality assurance and accreditation often does not cover cross-border higher education. This increases the risk of students falling victim to misleading guidance and information and disreputable providers, dubious quality assurance and accreditation bodies and low-quality provision, leading to qualifications of limited validity.

- National systems and bodies for the recognition of qualifications may have limited knowledge and experience in dealing with cross-border higher education. In some cases, the challenge becomes more complicated as cross-border higher education providers may deliver qualifications that are not of comparable quality to those which they offer in their home country.

- The increasing need to obtain national recognition of foreign qualifications has posed challenges to national recognition bodies. This in turn, at times, leads to administrative and legal problems for the individuals concerned.

- The professions depend on trustworthy, high-quality qualifications. It is essential that users of professional services including employers have full confidence in the skills of qualified professionals. The increasing possibility of obtaining low-quality qualifications could harm the professions themselves, and might in the long run undermine confidence in professional qualifications.

Guidelines for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Bodies

In addition to internal quality management of institutions/providers, external quality assurance and accreditation systems have been adopted in more than 60 countries. Quality assurance and accreditation bodies are responsible for assessing the quality of higher education provision. The existing systems of quality assurance and accreditation often vary from country to country and sometimes within the countries themselves. Some have governmental bodies for quality assurance and accreditation, and others have non-governmental bodies. Furthermore, some differences exist in the terminologies used, the definition of "quality", the purpose and function of the system including its link to the funding of students, institutions or programmes, the methodologies used in quality assurance and accreditation, the scope and function of the responsible body or unit, and the voluntary or compulsory nature of participation. While respecting this diversity, a co-coordinated effort among the bodies of both sending and receiving countries is needed at both the regional and global level, in order to tackle the challenges raised by the growth of cross-border provision of higher education, especially in its new forms. In this context, it is recommended that quality assurance and accreditation bodies:

- Ensure that their quality assurance and accreditation arrangements include cross-border education provision in its various modes. This can mean giving attention to assessment guidelines, ensuring that standards and processes are transparent, consistent and appropriate to take account of the shape and scope of the national higher education system, and adaptability to changes and developments in cross-border provision.

- Sustain and strengthen the existing regional and international networks or establish regional networks in regions that do not already have one. These networks can serve as platforms to exchange information and good practice, disseminate knowledge, increase the understanding of international developments and challenges as well as to improve the professional expertise of their staff and quality assessors. These networks could also be used to improve awareness of disreputable providers and dubious quality assurance and accreditation bodies, and to develop monitoring and reporting systems that can lead to their identification.

- Establish links to strengthen the collaboration between the bodies of the sending country and the receiving country and enhance the mutual understanding of different systems of quality assurance and accreditation. This may facilitate the process of assuring the quality of programmes delivered across borders and institutions operating across borders while respecting the quality assurance and accreditation systems of the receiving countries.

- Provide accurate and easily accessible information on the assessment standards, procedures, and effects of the quality assurance mechanisms on the funding of students, institutions or programmes where applicable as well as the results of the assessment. Quality assurance and accreditation bodies should collaborate with other actors, especially higher education institutions/providers, academic staff, student bodies and academic recognition bodies to facilitate the dissemination of such information.

- Apply the principles reflected in current international documents on cross-border higher education such as the UNESCO/Council of Europe (www.oecd.org/education).

Quality Regimes in ODL

Until recently, the terms quality and standards in education were not defined explicitly. However, after a thorough research on different approaches to quality in ODL in the last three decades, Koul and Kanwar (2006) define quality in ODL broadly as "…comprising those of its attributes that not only promise but also provide opportunities for a better quality of life for its takers, whatever their social context, and the communities/societies they work in and contribute to…". Their review also gives an impression that there has been a visible tension between the notions of educational standards on the one hand and quality assurance on the other (Harvey et al., 1992; Harvey and Green, 1993). While it would seem that quality assurance emerged as the favoured notion for practical purposes, standards, as objective measurable outcomes, are gaining ground again. The industrial and market orientation for the assessment of educational enterprise seemingly helped in reducing the popular prejudice against ODL, as both the face-to-face and distance modes of education

began to be scrutinised and assessed in one and the same way. In many developed countries in the West, where an accredited ODL course is as good as an accredited face-to-face course, the mode of education has ceased to be a deciding factor in judging its standards as well as quality. What matters is what is done under each mode. In particular, the quality of the transaction is seen reflected in the products, the processes and now also the outcomes (levels of learners' learning, competence and satisfaction, employability of graduates vis-à-vis the perceptions of employers and the long-term socio-educational impact) of a system, rather than in the system (or its nomenclature) itself. Most of the developing world, however, continues to labour under the burden of tradition!

Factors that Contribute to Quality Assurance Practices in ODL

Koul and Kanwar (2006) have pointed out that driven by ICTs, ODL has been and is changing its profile rapidly, but the change is not uniform. ODL is not one and the same operation everywhere, nor even at any two institutions in the same country. Quality assurance concerns, protocols and practices, therefore, appear to be context specific. The authors have looked at quality assurance, especially in the context of quality as a culture, along three dimensions the core dimension, the systemic dimension and the resource dimension.

The core dimension pertains to those factors that were identified in the second generation of ODL operations. Their quality constitutes the foundation of quality assurance, whatever the context or generation of ODL that we may consider. This dimension pertains to learner-centricity (pointing to the importance of learning, not teaching, as a quality measure) and capacity-building (training/preparing academics and administrators to manage that shift). The said factors are course materials and instructional design, the teaching learning transaction (including learner evaluation practices) and learner support services, teaching-learning transaction (including learner evaluation practices) and systemic research.

The systemic dimension pertains to those factors that constitute the system of ODL at the institutional as well as the national level. Their importance became obvious progressively as we moved beyond the second generation ODL operations. This dimension pertains to the initiation and introduction

of quality assurance mechanisms, internal as well as external, the symbiotic relationship between the two and the management of both the mechanisms and the relationship. The said factors are: the state, institutional leadership, innovative management, long – as well as short-term planning, and quality assurance mechanisms. The resource dimension pertains to factors like technology, technical and academic expertise, learning resources, physical infrastructure including ICT applications and cross-institutional collaboration.

Accreditation of ODL

Accreditation is a system for recognising educational institutions and professional programmes affiliated with those institutions for a set level of performance, integrity and quality, which entitles them to confidence of the educational community, and public they serve. Accreditation allows perspective students to know that their credentials will be widely accepted (Leventhal, 2005).

There are different types of accrediting agencies and each considers accreditation differently as per their set standards. The following paragraphs explain types of accreditation agencies (more specifically for ODL) and their functioning styles.

Regional Accreditation

As such there are no regulatory bodies for higher education or for ODL and training. An European project on accreditation aimed at ensuring transparency of degrees and promoting mobility at European and international levels was developed under EU auspices (Sursock, 2001). However, in Europe there are only six regional accrediting agencies that evaluate and accredit the institution as a whole but do not accredit its individuals and programmes. In order to develop a common frame of reference regarding online or distance education offerings, the regional accrediting organisations collaborated to develop the "Best Practice for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programmes". According to van Damme (2001), further progress in Europe on accreditation is likely to be slow. In the US, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), which represents over 3,000 institutions, has fostered regional accreditation while acknowledging the problems of decentralised

educational systems and national isolation (Petersen, 1999). Countries in the South Asian Region are considering mutual recognition of degrees (Hawkridge, 2003). For example, in India IGNOU being the apex body of accreditation and mutually recognising the degrees provided in distance mode by other ODL.

National Accreditation

In general as the World Bank (2002) notes, rich countries have established or begun to establish accreditation. National accreditation usually focuses on an entire institution that has a narrowly focused mission or delivery model rather then institutions with a large variety of different programmes (Robinson, 2004). According to the CHEA website there are currently six recognised national accrediting agencies within the US only. While, UK has a QA agency that performs audits of teaching and research in universities and colleges, including distance education institutions such as UKOU. In India, IGNOU is the national accrediting agency for ODL, NAAC for conventional universities and colleges.

Specialised/Professional Accreditation

These accrediting agencies evaluate individual programmes within an institution such as law, medicine, pharmacy, business management etc. which may or may not have received regional accreditation for the entire institution. One basic difference between a specialised accreditation agency and a regional agency is the use of competency standards or outcomes by specialised accrediting agencies. These agencies evaluate programmes that are focused on a relatively narrow window of knowledge, skills and attitudes. In US, Accreditation Council on Pharmacy Education (ACPE) is the accrediting agency for pharmacy institutions. In India, National Board of Accreditation (NBA) is the accrediting agency for technical and some other professional education. Specialised accrediting agencies are also attempting to improve their own ability to evaluate the quality of programmes using distance learning by reviewing and revising their standards. The crucial dimension of quality in specialised accreditation is the adequacy of the educational programme as it relates to professional expectations and requirements for entry and practice in the field.

International Accreditation

There is no agreed international quality framework for higher education and accreditation and QA systems very widely (Larsen, Martin and Morris, 2002). UNESCO fosters debate in this field through its Global Forum on International QA, Accreditation and Recognition of qualification. In a contribution to this debate, van Damme (2001) suggests that an international initiative is essential in this field. Some observers while noting the danger of massive bureaucracy are in favour of international QA systems, at least for higher education. Most existing schemes are national and do not cover foreign providers, whether a bricks and mortar campus or operating through distance education or online. A more recent trend seen is ODL obtaining accreditation from outside the country. It implies that ODL want to gain confidence of current students and prospective students around the globe in their ODL programmes and services by meeting rigorous international QA standards (Jung, 2005). For example, Monash has obtained ISO 9001 certification for its services; OUM has also obtained ISO 9001 certification and USQ too. UT is also in the process of selling international accreditation and quality certification from ICDE. In the rapidly changing and evolving field of ODL, international accreditation will certainly contribute to support capacity building efforts of an ODL and gaining international confidence in its courses and services.

Regardless of the sector in which ODL is working, the accrediting agencies have independently developed standards, policies or processes for QA of ODL. Some of these take the form of new standards, while others are adding to existing standards (CHEA, 2002). The following seven fundamental features compiled from variety of sources briefly present institutional considerations while seeking accreditation.

Institutional Mission

In the ODL environment, accrediting organisations focus on the relevance of the distance learning programmes and courses to the institution's mission. The accrediting organisations consider the following sub-criteria.

- Is the mission of the institution consistent with its intent to provide educational programming at a distance?
- Why is the institution interested in distance education programmes?

Institutional Organisational Structure

Accreditor generally provide institutions with considerable flexibility in establishing structures that meet an institution's particular needs when developing distance learning initiatives. All require effective planning and evaluation systems and appropriate administrative structures that allow the institution to achieve its distance learning goals. Institutional structures for distance learning may vary significantly based on interest in sub-contracting or entering into other arrangements for delivery of distance learning rather than the institution itself providing distance learning. The sub-criteria can be:

• Is the institution committed to allocating resources to a distance education initiative and is that commitment in terms of personnel, finances, etc?

Institutional Resources

Accrediting organisations also address an institution's financial capacity to provide an educational programme that meets generally accepted norms for quality. The sub-criteria can be:

• Is the institution committed to allocating resources to a distance education initiative and is that commitment in terms of personnel, finances, etc?

Curriculum and Instruction

Accrediting organisation standards related to curriculum and instruction vary considerably because of the different types of institutions they accredit and the diverse credentials (degree or certificate) the institutions award. However, certain common features do prevail: The standards address, the content of the curriculum, the structure of the credential awarded, and the institution's process for reviewing and updating the curriculum. This includes appropriate academic support for the educational programmes of the institution, including library and learning resources. The appropriateness of the subject matter for delivery at a distance is also a focus of accreditation attention. Academic support that is essential to the distance learning environment is also addressed

accreditation review. This includes the technology and methodology the institution uses to deliver the instruction. Sub criteria can be:

- Does the institution have the appropriate courses matched with the appropriate outcomes, how is it ensuring that outcomes are being met, is the technology being appropriately used, etc?

Faculty Support

In a distance learning environment, faculty support includes technological support for delivery of distance learning offerings. Appropriate training for faculty in technology is also important. Faculty capacity to teach in a distance learning environment is essential as well. Sub-criteria can be:

- Is the institution providing resources that help develop the faculty to provide online instruction and has it given appropriate consideration to the issues of faculty load, content ownership, copyright, intellectual property, etc?

Student Support

Accrediting organisations require adequate and appropriate support for the students served by the institution in a distance learning environment. This includes a major emphasis on technical support. Student interaction with faculty is central to the quality of distance learning. This includes developing a sense of community in the distance learning environment. Sub-criteria can be:

- Does the institution provide distance learners with access to advisors, facilities, learning resources, counseling, and accommodation of students with learning disabilities, etc?

Assessment and Evaluation

One of the most significant changes in accreditation in the last few years has been the increased attention accrediting organisations have been giving to student learning outcomes. Where once accreditation focused almost exclusively on educational resources and processes such as course

syllabi, faculty qualifications, library holdings and physical plant, central to accreditation reviews today is evidence of student achievement. Institutional accreditor requires institutions to sustain a comprehensive system for the evaluation of the institution's educational effectiveness in relation to student learning. More important, however, is the accreditor requirement that institutions must document, as a result of their evaluation of their effectiveness, that they are in fact meeting their educational mission and goals and that their student outcomes are at an acceptable level. This is true in the distance learning environment as well as campus-based learning. Sub-criteria can be:

- How is the programme's effectiveness begin evaluated, are the outcomes being reviewed for clarity, what is being done to compare learner performance to intended learning outcome, etc?

The Challenges ODL Pose for a Accreditation

ODL challenge accreditation in a number of ways:

- Many of the measures used in traditional accreditation reviews do not apply to online institutions – among these are the institution's full-time faculty, the number of volumes in the research library, and the amount of time that students are in class.

- How can it be determined if a course offered online is equivalent to a traditional classroom based course?

- Who will accredit a university that does not have a physical campus? Regional accreditation, as its name suggests, is based on the physical location of the institution. Western Governors University, a collaboration of 18 states and Guam, has its administrative headquarters in Utah (located within the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges accreditation region) and its academic headquarters in Colorado (located within the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools accreditation region).

- Even for those institutions that do have a physical campus, what happens when the student is in another region and never sets foot on the physical campus? (www.distancelearningnet.org/reports).

Conclusion

The above discussion makes it clear that higher education institutions worldwide are highly influenced by emerging concepts like internationalisation, globalisation, free trade agreements etc. To get along with the global cultural momentum institutions are setting quality as number one priority. They have a mechanism in their hand called accreditation to prove their qualitative status in the dynamic market. ODL are also following the same trend but they pose certain challenges to the concept of accreditation because of their nature of operation. It is also felt that there is no such concrete approach to quality management of ODL, as it is very situational according to their requirement and the concept is fast changing.

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