

High Quality Online Education

THE NEXT SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FRONTIER

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International education has long been characterised by attracting talented learners to the academic institutions of developed economies, creating a flow of knowledge that sees those learners acquire the methodologies and skills prevalent in their host institutions. Those institutions and their local populations in turn benefit from the diverse perspectives that international students bring with them, as well as the drive and passion for learning that is often intrinsic to the nature of those individuals who have travelled the world to further their knowledge and advance their future careers.

The limiting access factors to international education (resources, visas, locations) have, in the recent past, been sought to be addressed by transnational education, porting the nature and ways of knowledge acquisition of the host institutions to be delivered in-situ across the world. This has had a positive impact on access to tertiary education, but to the detriment of the rich cultural collaboration that flourishes within mixed-nationality cohorts.

Both international education and transnational education have long raised sustainability and participation questions, due to their high reliance on international travel, the contextualisation on a single geography, and their high-intensity delivery models.

Most recently, the current global public health crisis has revealed the inherent weakness of campus-based delivery models: a single high-density location for delivery that if compromised can result in mass disruption of the education of thousands of students.

High quality online education (fully supported, active, distributed and international) has the potential to address all the above issues, and deliver an educational experience that will bring some key benefits to individuals and society:

- **Sustainability:** online education is inherently sustainable because of its core flexibility, allowing for rapid and sustained expansion, negating the need for travel, accommodation and additional buildings.
- **Knowledge diplomacy:** international cohorts of students who are still located in their original countries of residence create extremely rich learning environments, as they all bring into the learning process their contexts and live experiences. The theories they learn get analysed through their local perspectives, and together, international cohorts are able to formulate solutions that are relevant and mindful of their newly acquired global perspectives.

- **De-colonisation of the curriculum:** a true active international learning community is one that is rich in perspectives and local examples relevant to the theories being learnt. This is an education that no longer sees the world only from the perspective of western academia. It is an environment where critical analysis is an active agent for a global curriculum.
- **Inclusivity:** online education widens access and participation in ways that are not possible for other delivery models. The flexibility it offers allows participation for individuals who have restrictions on their time (due to work, family or other reasons). The removal of the fixed location for delivery democratises access further as visas, travel and accommodation no longer play a part in the ability to access the courses. Also, very importantly, well supported online education can cater for a wide variety of educational and pastoral needs, making education much more accessible to disenfranchised groups.
- **Talent retention:** one of the key benefits of high-quality online education to local societies is the fact that their population talent is retained, rather than exported. The learners stay in their localities and grow their skillset and global perspective to the advantage of their societies.

The advent of online learning initiatives and reliable dynamic technologies has seen an amalgamation of international and transnational education, allowing for the creation of learning experiences that are both transcultural and accessible, with cohorts of students from a wide variety of origins interacting remotely. Both, technological advances and our refined understanding of pedagogical models for online collaboration enable us, educators, to facilitate online learning experiences that have the same level of quality than attended ones. Students interact in real-time and asynchronously, effortlessly lapsing time zones and working in groups, developing the social learning interactions that are so important in the development of critical analysis skills.

There are some key areas for institutions to focus while developing high-quality online education:

- **Resources and support:** online learners require just as much (if not more) support than students on campus. Quality can only be achieved by investing the required resources into the development and delivery of online education.
- **Cognitive flow:** there has to be a determined effort to ensure that the educational programmes we design are not mono-directional (one of fixed worldviews).
- **Co-creation:** fostering the development of educational experiences with students from a wide variety of backgrounds remotely is an active process, and our pedagogical frameworks have to be designed to make that happen.
- **Empowering local knowledge:** academic provision needs to be truly representative, so that global perspectives can flourish.

The above issues are very pertinent to world leaders of international education as they target the core values of tertiary education: criticality, diversity and access. If our international educational offer is to remain vibrant and attractive we ought to actively consider how we make it relevant and accessible to every corner of the world, and how do we make sure that it is contextualised within the culturally fertile environment of our cohorts.

The pandemic we are living through is extremely timely to prompt us to consider how the digital world is enabling new models of pervasive collaboration that can help us take our international curriculum to new levels of sustainability, resilience, relevance and sophistication. Education that is locally resonant and globally aware within the context of dispersed international cohorts who actively co-create knowledge together is a new paradigm that has great potential to make significant positive contributions to the wider society and help us address global challenges.



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