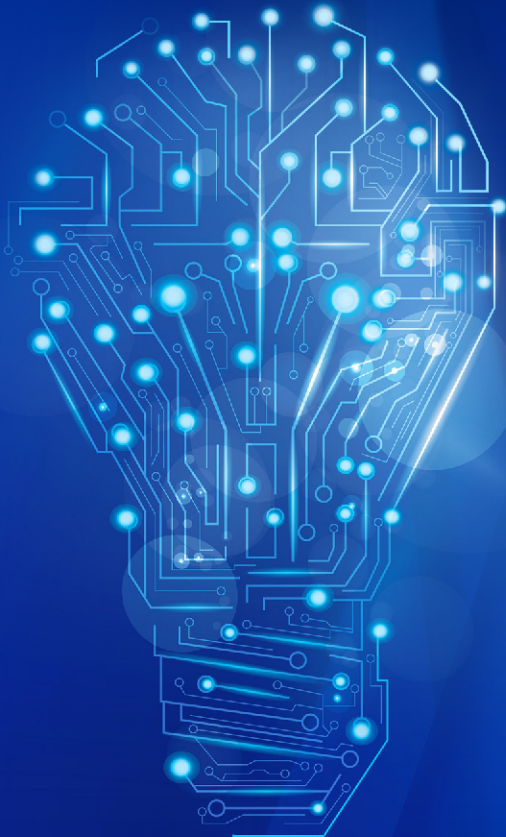


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High Quality Online Education – The Next Sustainable Development Frontier





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Abstract

Purpose

This is a conceptual thought leadership paper that explores current issues in Global Higher Education and their relationship with sustainable development. The aim of the paper is to further the debate on the role that online education can play within the sustainable development agenda.

Design/Methodology/Approach

This study uses descriptive and literature review methods to present current trends in international education, drawing on relevant publications and references to practical implementations. The narrative is supported by publicly available large data sources that assist in the modelling of suggested areas of focus for institutions.

Findings

This paper presents a clear argument on how high quality online education can act as a multi-faceted solution for sustainable development, institutional resilience, widening participation and de-colonisation of the curriculum.

Originality/Value

Online education has traditionally been perceived as an alternative delivery model that can help when face-to-face teaching is not possible or practical. The originality of the argument presented here is that high quality online learning has an intrinsic set of affordances that makes it unique and that has very clear alignment with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals 2030.

Keywords

**Online Education, Higher Education, Quality Education,
Widening Participation, Curriculum De-colonisation**



Introduction

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 (Asada, 2019). In turn, those institutions and their local populations 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 (Lew et al., 2020).

The limiting access factors to international education (resources, visas, etc.) 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 (Bamford, 2020). 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 (Phan and Mohamad, 2020).

Both international education and transnational education have long raised sustainability and participation questions; this is due to their high reliance on international travel, the contextualisation on a single geography, and their high-intensity delivery models (Karakaş, 2020).



The impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education

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 in the education of thousands of students (Días et al., 2020).

UNESCO estimates that the education of over 1 billion learners has been disrupted by COVID-19 across the globe (Rappoport et al., 2020). Universities have not been immune to the disruption. Institutions around the world had to

close their campuses during 2020 and rapidly put in place emergency remote teaching supported by technology.

The crisis has also changed the intentions of candidates looking to access Higher Education programmes all over the world. According to data from Studyportals (2020), the volumes of students looking for online programmes peaked at the beginning of April 2020, at nearly 60% higher than when compared to the same period in the previous year.

Online education as a multi-faceted solution

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 (Tartavulea et al., 2020).

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 (Pavelka, 2020).

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 their contexts and live experiences into the learning process (Rüland, 2019). 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 (Edwards and Kitamura, 2019).



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 (Elfenbein, 2020).

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 and/or family reasons) (Scarpene, 2020). 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 (Broderick, 2020; Love, 2020).

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 (Bamford, 2020).





High quality online education

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 (Pillai et al., 2020). Both technological advances and our refined understanding of pedagogical models for online collaboration enable us, the educators, to facilitate online learning experiences that have the same level of quality as attended ones. Students interact in real-time and asynchronously (Muir et al., 2020), effortlessly lapsing time zones and working in groups, developing the social learning interactions that are so important in the development of critical analysis skills (Toro-Troconis et al., 2019).

Online learning is no longer just an alternative delivery model. High quality international initiatives have demonstrated that the quality of the learning experience can be of equal standing to campus-based delivery models (Jenkins, 2020; Kintu et al., 2020). As reported by Frutos-Perez (2019), the Cambridge Education Group consistently achieves over 90% retention rates and high attainment levels for fully online learners on postgraduate courses that are delivered to international cohorts across a number of partnerships with UK universities. The combined student population of over 2,000 individuals across a diverse portfolio of programmes are subject to the same quality assurance processes as any other campus-based courses, and subsequently obtain identical credentials to attending students.

Key design considerations

There are some key areas for institutions to focus on 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 (Jenkins, 2020).
- **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) (Graham et al., 2020).
- **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 (Kintu et al., 2020).
- **Empowering local knowledge:** academic provision needs to be truly representative, so that global perspectives can flourish (Baraya et al., 2020).

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 (Voce et al., 2019). 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. We also need to consider how we make sure that it is contextualised within the culturally fertile environment of our cohorts (Zhang et al., 2020; Glăveanu et al., 2020).

Conclusions

The pandemic we are living through has forced a larger engagement with technology. It has prompted 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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Biography

Professor Manuel Frutos-Perez is an academic expert in the field of Digital Learning. In his role with Cambridge Education Group, he develops partnerships with universities across the UK to enable them to expand their reach to global markets through the provision of high-quality online learning. Manuel has over 20 years teaching, research and management experience as an academic. He has worked and collaborated with multi-disciplinary teams at universities across Europe.