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Transnational Education – An Opportunity and a Canadian Role

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Abstract

Transnational education is a huge growth industry and a potential source of considerable income for Canadian educational institutions. Canadian educational establishments seem to be missing out on this, and this seems short sighted.

Canada has a very good reputation globally; this could be utilized when selling Canadian educational institutions in potential markets such as Asia and the Gulf. In their search for success, Canadian transnational educational institutions must enhance, not weaken, Canada's international reputation through this process.

Introduction

Establishing a transnational campus is a very complex endeavor with many potential obstacles. Some of these obstacles include educational consistency, pedagogy, finance and culture. My goal with this paper is to look at one example—attendance—and how it affects educational standards and to briefly discuss the opportunities that are being missed by Canadian educational institutions.

Australia has a well-established transnational education profile, and in 2003 there were over 1,500 offshore programs offered by Australian universities with over 55,000 students enrolled in those programs (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005, p. 7). The projected demand for international higher education in Australia is around 996,000 students by 2025 and within that growing number of international students there is a predicted increase in the number of transnational students. It is estimated that by 2025 transnational education will account for 44% of the total demand for international education (Bohm, Davis, Meares, & Pearce, 2002).

There are many qualitative issues which need addressing. Since Canadian educational institutions are relatively new players in the global educational field, many of these obstacles could be avoided by ensuring that managers of future Canadian transnational institutions familiarize themselves with these issues in advance.

Canadian examples

I recently worked for two Canadian educational institutions, McGill University and Algonquin College, which provide transnational training. One of these institutions, Algonquin College, is providing training

according to the traditional definition of a transnational institution. Essentially this means that students graduating at an off-shore campus receive their diplomas from the visiting school.

Transnational higher education institutions (TNHEIs) are best understood as HEIs that award their degrees to students located in a different country. (Shams & Huisman, 2012)

McGill "international" is providing language training to students as part of an 18-month industrial trainee program in Jubail, Saudi Arabia. The students graduating from this program will receive their certification from the Royal Commission in Jubail. McGill's role is to provide teachers for this program, and to potentially develop the language instruction curriculum at some later date.

During the period I was employed by McGill (2012-2013), the texts used were out of use texts from ARAMCO. The language lab used the same program that is being used at McGill University in Montreal, perhaps the best part of the program. Since McGill is not involved in language training for industrial workers in Canada, one of the main issues discussed in the literature on transnational education does not apply. This is an issue of consistency in educational quality.

McGill has expected learning objectives for students enrolled in their programs in Montreal. These learning objectives are to teach students enough English to allow them to complete the ESL program, so they can be admitted into a university. Therefore, would it be reasonable to expect the students that McGill is involved in training in Jubail to have the same learning outcomes in a similar time frame? Perhaps, but since the students McGill trains in Montreal are generally expecting to attend a Canadian university, probably not.

The issue of academic consistency would apply to the two main aspects of the Algonquin program: one, the English level required to participate in the Algonquin programs; and two, the level of technical proficiency of students at graduation.

Algonquin accepts international students in Ottawa, so one could also ask if Algonquin should expect the same things from their transnational students as from their international students. For those who support consistency of programs, the answer is "yes". Since I worked at CADRE (Algonquin's partner in Saudi Arabia) in its pilot year, I was exposed to these issues as they became apparent but not necessarily on how they would be resolved.

Research has identified that a congruency between the main campus core program and the internationally separated peripheral branch campus cannot be presumed and that real differences in academic performance, student demographics, staff qualifications and physical infrastructure exist (Coleman, 2001).

The two issues I will discuss that relate to the academic quality in the preparation year program at Jazan Economic City Polytechnic (JEC-PT) are attendance and the English level of students admitted into the technical programs.

People who are familiar with post-secondary language instruction from the perspective of either the instructor or student know that, unlike other post-secondary programs, language programs usually have an attendance requirement. The reason behind this is, unlike other academic disciplines, one cannot teach oneself to communicate by reading the textbook. For managers and teachers to ignore this requirement is to say that they are uninterested in the communicative progress of their students. Moreover, the work ethic in the Gulf is generally very different from many Asian and developed countries. So is one of the roles of a transnational school to change this? Yes!

The Saudi management at JEC-PT was completely disinterested in applying globally accepted standards to student attendance. This led me to conclude that, if Western educational institutions desire to uphold similar standards to that of the home campus, they will have to promote these standards themselves.

The overwhelming majority of students first admitted into Algonquin's technical programs in Jazan did not pass the entrance exam. The English proficiency test used was the same one that was used in Ottawa. These students' lack of English proficiency was not entirely one of Algonquin's making. When JEC-PT was first set-up, it contracted out the provision of the language training to a private language institute based in Vancouver. From what I could see, this institute was unable to create the learning environment required to achieve the desired results or were blocked from doing so by the Saudi management. In any case, the Algonquin management decided to admit students into their programs in Jazan who would not be admitted into their programs in Ottawa. Simultaneously, there was an understanding that the students would have to pass the language entrance test before graduation. This seems like a reasonable work-around, so long as this objective is maintained.

An anecdotal example of the inconsistent standards relating to attendance in Jazan is when the Saudi student counselor at JEC-PT brought a student who had been expelled for weak attendance back to my class. This student's attendance had been 8% during the preceding month. This student's expulsion fell within the guidelines of the college, and would be perceived as a reasonable decision by any experienced language instructor. Even so, this student was returned to my class. I remember arguing with the student counselor that this young man should not be re-admitted to my class. I suggested that if a 10% cut-off, which is significantly below the attendance requirement of a Canadian college or university language program, was considered a reasonable short-term attendance requirement, then an attendance rate of 8% attendance was too low. This suggestion was again well below the stated expectations in Jazan.

I also suggested that an open, transparent and consistently enforced policy should be clearly communicated and that the standards, if they were set at 10%, should be raised on a quarterly basis until they meet the same standards as Algonquin in Ottawa. These types of discussions between the JEC-PT management and the Western instructors often caused these instructors, who found these types of decision unusual, to disengage. Even if one accepted the idea that these students had been re-admitted on a "probationary" basis, sometimes argued by our managers, these students were never asked to leave once they had demonstrated that they could not adapt to the college's expectations.

Some might argue that applying rigorous academic standards in the Gulf is culturally insensitive. I would not! Why would teachers or Western educational institutions feel entitled to take educational funding without pushing students towards Western educational benchmarks?

I was told by an Algonquin employee that the actual attendance cut-off at Algonquin in Ottawa is 50%, even though it is stated in their promotional literature as 80%. So my suggested temporary bench mark was significantly lower than the one being employed in Ottawa, and also much lower than the stated objective in Jazan.

It is argued that existing quality assurance systems may underestimate the potential site of variation in offshore programs. The issue of educational congruency and quality is especially salient to developing countries, as the absolute majority of offshore programs are located in the developing world. (Coleman, 2003)

There are some incredible employment opportunities for Western-educated Westerners in Saudi Arabia. These opportunities encompass a wide variety of professions. Saudi salaries typically depend on two factors: country of origin and where someone was educated. A Canadian student interested in an opportunity at ARAMCO, arguably the best Saudi employer based on salary and working conditions, might consider a year at Algonquin in Saudi as a way of becoming acquainted with Saudi culture, the Arabic language, as well as an opportunity to make Saudi contacts.

"Wastah," the Arabic word for influence, is of paramount importance for anyone interested in succeeding in the Gulf. Making local contacts is of real importance for achieving success in this employment market. Without having done any research at Algonquin, I suspect that getting Canadian students registered at Algonquin College in Ottawa to study at their off-shore campus in Jazan would be difficult. One reason for this is the common perception that programs run at off-shore campuses are not as rigorous as the ones being offered at the home campus.

A further iteration of the peripheral nature of branch campuses is the composition of the student body. At this stage in the expansion offshore, there is little suggestion that a student local to an Australian, Canadian, British or American university would undertake their degrees at an

offshore campus—official exchanges to international universities, certainly; transference to a university's satellite campus, no. (Coleman, 2003)

The two concerns I saw while working for McGill and the Royal Commission in Jubail were related to curriculum and culture. Even though my concerns related to the curriculum were widely shared by my colleagues and mirrored in the literature I reviewed, I will not comment on them here, since McGill is not running a transnational campus in the traditional sense.

Saudi Arabia is very culturally complex; there is an ongoing struggle between the modernists and conservatives. Since McGill is a Canadian institution, I thought it should support the modernists and teach to the progressive end of Saudi culture. This perspective was not shared by McGill's partner in Jubail, nor by the majority of my colleagues. The literature I reviewed discussed cultural sensitivity in the context of transnational education without categorically coming down on one side of the discussion. These topics should be reviewed later.

At the end of the day, since Algonquin will be awarding graduates from the technical programs at JEC-PT an Algonquin diploma, they have a lot more to gain or lose by having high quality or low quality graduates. At this moment, McGill can distance itself from the quality of the graduates of the training programs in Jubail, by stating that their primary role was providing teachers for a program which already existed and that none of these graduates will get degrees or diplomas from McGill for their participation in this program.

Marginson (2003) further argues that 'The cultural diversity of students is respected up to and including the point at which they hand over their money. After that they have to take what they are given' (2003, p. 31). Distasteful as it may be to the many educators working in transnational settings who are committed to genuine cross-cultural exchange, transnational education is a multimillion dollar 'business', motivated as much by profits as by teaching and learning objectives. According to Merrill Lynch, the international education sector is a \$2.2 trillion business worldwide (cited in Savage, 2004); and Matthews (2002, p. 370) reports that this business was worth in excess of \$3 billion to the Australian economy in 2001. (Feast and Bretag, 2005)

My colleagues at JEC-PT were not naively idealistic, and we all realized that we would not be employed and well-paid in Jazan without the funding which made the project possible. This funding came from the Human Resources Development Fund (HRDF) and was based on enrolment. But again, using the attendance issue, many felt that if the project was to be genuinely educative, not simply a well-paid "baby-sitting gig" which was also profitable for Algonquin, that we should have to adhere to globally competitive educational standards.

Opportunities and why we should take them

As is clearly indicated in the previous quote, the economic potential for providers of transnational education is huge. Not to get in on it would be short-sighted, as the profits from these projects could be invested in educational infrastructure in Canada. It could be argued that the educational institutions (countries) which are most successful at creating transnational educational projects will be more competitive than those which are not. One significant factor in providing good learning environments is funding. Therefore, Canadian educational institutes need to think about any specialties they may have and consider if and how they could market these niche programs abroad. When deciding on which programs could be marketed, interested Canadian educational institutions must be determined to offer quality programs. It is not justifiable for teachers or educational institutions to play a role in international education if they do not provide programs that are significantly better than what could be provided locally. I worried about this while teaching in Jazan, because of my experience teaching at King Abdulaziz University (KAU) in Jeddah. My experience in Jeddah suggested that some of the administrators of the language program at KAU could move down to Jazan and set up a comparable language program to the one being offered by Algonquin and its partner.

When teaching internationally, I often thought of my hometown and wondered why the educational institutions from Kingston were not competing globally in the transnational education business. I would like to illustrate some opportunities which could be pursued by educational institutions in Kingston.

First of all, St. Lawrence College is very involved in teaching and researching issues related to "green energy." I know that wealthy countries in the Gulf are very interested in developing solar power, especially for creating energy for the desalination of water. To offer this expertise would be a way for St. Lawrence to "get a foot" into this thriving educational market.

According to the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, Queen's University was ranked 173rd in the world in their 2011-2012 survey. Many of the universities which have transnational campuses in Asia and the Gulf, the fastest growing and most lucrative markets for these types of projects, are not as highly placed in these university rankings. So competing on the basis of quality would not be an issue for Queen's.

The Royal Military College (RMC), which up to 1995 was one of three universities that trained military officers in Canada, could also export educational and officer cadet training experience. The Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, in the UK, has a history of training the world's military elite. Closing Royal Rhodes Military College and the Collège Militaire Royal de Saint-Jean in 1995 was short-sighted. By educating international students (future foreign military officers) for a number of years, RMC may have been able to place itself in a position, through liaising with its graduates, to set up profitable transnational military colleges today.

It is vital to the future success of offshore campuses, particularly in the growth region of the Gulf states, that academics are not left to 'sink in the sand' but are allowed to 'bloom in the desert' through proper induction and professional development and full recognition of their academic work. (Smith, 2009)

As is implied in the quote, I would like to see Algonquin and other Canadian educational institutions blooming in the desert, not sinking in the sand. In the end, it is only by providing quality learning environments that Canadian transnationals will be able to be globally competitive and truly appreciated over the long term in this growing lucrative market.

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