

# Can transnational education assist development aims?



**Joanne Purves**

With such a large proportion of its population under 30, and basic literacy and numeracy high on the agenda across South Asia and Africa, education is clearly an issue of paramount importance to the Commonwealth. Have the ministers of education been right to focus their attention almost exclusively on teacher training, health education, gender issues and retention at primary level? Is tertiary education a luxury that can only be a priority for the most wealthy and developed of Commonwealth countries and if not, how is it to be achieved? This article seeks to explore some of these questions with commentary on differing education policies and their effects as well as practical examples from a British university that has been changing its pedagogical methodology to meet the diverse needs of the global education environment. The potential of transnational education (TNE) as a tool for development in Commonwealth countries will be demonstrated with an exploration of the possibility of wider joint partnerships between higher education and Commonwealth governments to promote the development agenda.

## Global demand

The often quoted report 'Vision 2020: Forecasting International Student Mobility' (British Council, 2004) looks at the global demand for an international education. The major conclusion of the report was that when considering capacity, economic ability and population patterns, the demand for tertiary education provided in or by major English speaking destinations (i.e., the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, USA, New Zealand) would increase by over 150% between 2003 and 2020 to 2.6 million students. This has been borne out by recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) statistics showing the highest market share of internationally mobile students taking higher education belonging to English speaking countries (OECD Indicators, 2006).

In the Vision 2020 report, Sub-Saharan Africa is predicted to see the numbers of its inhabitants seeking international qualifications rising by 140% by 2020. This demand for overseas education from developing countries will be augmented by large rises in South and South East Asia. Whether we believe the extent of these predictions or not, the effects of even a partial increase in the 'brain drain' in developing countries are significant. Unless a method is found of satisfying this increasing demand locally and there is capacity building at tertiary level within these countries, the pattern of the best and brightest going away to study and

staying away will continue. The 2006 Global Education Digest (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] Institute for Statistics, 2006) paints a particularly alarming picture for Sub-Saharan Africa, with the average student mobility (i.e., those who study their tertiary education in a country other than their country of residence) already far exceeding the global average of 2%. South Africa, with its well-established and stable university system, manages to buck this trend but other countries must look urgently at what they can do to prevent this problem from becoming worse.

I would suggest that it is counter-productive to consider tertiary education as a luxury that can only be developed once the capacity for primary and secondary education is satisfied. There are methods of expanding capability and capacity through TNE that have proved successful in many areas and can offer a partial or total solution to the problem of human and capital flight that conventional student mobility engenders.

## Forms of transnational education

The Vision 2020 report also concluded that while the demand for students coming to the United Kingdom and other English speaking destinations to study conventional courses at traditional education institutions would increase, this could be by far outstripped by the demand for qualifications in English delivered by TNE. This would allow students either to stay in their own country, or travel to a third country destination that was convenient or economically more viable.

TNE has a multitude of modes of delivery, many of which are suitable for meeting the needs of developing countries by reducing the human resource and money transfers out of the country. These usually take one of the forms outlined below.

### State provision

Where an existing higher education system has capacity issues (e.g., China), collaboration with universities from other countries has allowed local state institutions to set up new programmes. These are developed with foreign input but partially or wholly taught by local staff, with foreign or joint degrees awarded in-country. The students may also complete the final part of the course at the awarding institution overseas, maintaining the desire for mobility, but at a much shorter level. The home country gains from upgrading its skills base through the input of foreign



expertise, with state regulations sometimes specifying the levels of knowledge transfer that must take place between the collaborating partners.

### Private provision

Local private education providers can be integral to increasing capacity. The private sector has played a vital role in supplementing the public system in countries such as Malaysia. This has been achieved with high levels of involvement from international providers and has contributed immensely to Malaysia's educational and economic achievement over the last 15 years. Of course there are issues. The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education has had to set up a whole quality assurance administration to ensure that private providers do not partner with disreputable institutions overseas or fail to deliver education of the requisite standard.

### e-learning

The economics of TNE are such that mass provision through distance learning or distance taught courses can be very cost-effective for both provider and participant. There are caveats to this type of teaching however, especially where cross-cultural issues need to be taken into account.

While distance learning without any face-to-face contact is attractive to providers because of the low ongoing resource needs after initial development, success rates of students in a purely virtual learning environment can be much lower without a peer group and academic leadership. Distance learning in its purest form is not necessarily an attractive market proposition either, as was demonstrated by the high profile failure of the e-University in the United Kingdom. This virtual institution, although offering e-learning degrees from well-regarded institutions, only achieved a fraction of its enrolment targets.

Distance learning courses tend to be much more successful if they are backed up by some sort of support presence and central location where students can meet their peers. This can be furnished by a local partner or by the foreign institution, and becomes a type of blended learning that is very flexible in terms of adapting to local needs.

### The regulatory environment

TNE has become a major component of the international tertiary education environment over the last decade and is expected to be the primary way of filling the high demand in the future. Its advantage is that it is relatively cheap for the consumer, it is of a high quality (providing the correct partners are chosen), and it enables participants to stay in their home country for part or all of their course. Malaysia has used TNE to great effect in educating its population, allowing foreign institutions to provide courses in collaboration with private partners, under what is now a highly developed system of state regulation. Now that its own mass education has largely been achieved, it is seeking to become a hub for TNE, attracting students from countries such as Sub-Saharan Africa and Malaysia to study for perhaps British or Australian qualifications.

India, in contrast to Malaysia, has yet to settle on a long-term strategy for increasing capacity while ensuring quality. Currently,

the Indian government has an ambiguous relationship with the private sector in education, both within India and with regard to foreign providers wishing to offer courses in India. The lack of consistent recognition of the private sector means that huge demand within India remains unsatisfied, and the sector is discouraging to providers who wish to enter the market. It has been said that 'if the government responds positively to the emergence of foreign education providers in India, an appropriate structural space of transnational higher education may be established in order to minimise the risks and maximise the benefits of this increasingly widespread type of provision' (Bhushan, 2006). Currently, both the state and private institutions face daunting bureaucratic hurdles in developing these possibilities, while state institutions also face widespread criticism for not increasing their capacity.

These two brief examples show the inherent importance of government involvement in creating an environment where demand for international higher education is not only met, but can contribute to the development aims of the state.

### The role of a foreign partner in capacity building – Northumbria University

The countries and institutions that have developed their own international reputations on large influxes of students from the rest of the world are currently faced with a challenge. They can no longer rely on students travelling to the traditional destinations as choice becomes more widespread. In the United Kingdom, the challenge is becoming marked, as the higher education sector institutions decide whether they want to be engaged in TNE, often through teaching collaborations, or instead provide a comprehensive research education, which relies on facilities and supervision that can not be transplanted or substituted in another location. Few institutions engage in both because of the tensions in trying to resource both these areas at the same time, particularly given that academic staff involved in the design and teaching of TNE do not usually have the time to have active research records or close supervision duties.

Northumbria University made a strategic decision to become active in making collaborative links overseas with two aims: an awareness of the growing demand for education globally that could not be satisfied just by students going to the United Kingdom; and as a component of an internationally-focused mission that intended to make students and staff of the university aware of global connections and opportunities. Over a decade, TNE has evolved to become a major part of the university's activity, with academics regularly travelling to partnerships overseas. The many ways that Northumbria has taken its learning abroad include:

- a) providing traditional methods of teaching, i.e., Northumbria staff travelling overseas and teaching intensively face-to-face;
- b) upgrading skills of local staff in public or private institutions to enable collaborative courses to operate seamlessly;
- c) developing tailor-made provision;
- d) developing on-line course content and support centres.

To demonstrate what just one university can do in terms of spreading its reach, Table 1 lists just a few examples of how



Northumbria works with public and private bodies to achieve their training and education goals.

As a university, it has been evident to Northumbria that there are themes running across the types of short, tailored training courses we are providing, namely increasing the skills base of public sector workers in health, education and public administration. However, when it comes to providing full degree courses, the usual international demand for business, computing and engineering courses applies. Graduates from these transnational degrees have had a high local employment rate, with some companies in-country actively targeting the courses to meet their own recruitment needs. State administrations that are seeking to encourage TNE must bear this in mind, as without a job market for the skills being taught the venture will quickly fail.

All the courses developed above have been tailored to fit specific needs stated from the outset. Outcomes have been measurable and have been geared towards the countries' developmental needs. Some courses have been funded by international bodies, some by the State, and some are in collaboration with private providers. While 'the predominance of social science and education graduates in countries with lower levels of national wealth is directly linked to the lower share of graduates from science and health fields' (Global Education Digest, 2006), Northumbria has recently started to notice much more interest in the possibilities for TNE in health and related fields. However, science subjects remain challenging because of the high levels of infrastructure required in developing countries.

It would be naive to ignore the fact that there is a commercial element in these projects for the providers. Universities such as Northumbria will look for a project to be commercially viable before they will consider entering into a partnership. However, large-scale projects can be cost-effective for both sides. The development of technology and cascading teaching skills to local staff has reduced the amount of costly face-to-face teaching by foreign lecturers while maintaining the integrity of the programme content.

## Conclusions

TNE should not be seen as an extension of traditional dependency theory, with the developed countries exporting courses to the developing countries to their long-term detriment. It is a genuine opportunity for countries that have long-term capacity issues in their higher education systems to take advantage of the resources of the developed countries. These can be used to retain the work force and train not only public servants but entrepreneurs who will add to the economic life of their country. The presence of TNE actually attracts foreign capital into the education system, a fact which China has recognised in encouraging its universities to set up foreign partnerships. Most British universities also accept that there is a definite life cycle in collaborative partnerships in other countries, as the knowledge base increases and the need for a foreign partner decreases.

Many of the Commonwealth countries have common skills gaps across their labour forces. It would be logical to believe that there should be scope for large-scale, cost-effective tertiary education projects across some Commonwealth borders. As a result of the size of these projects, the Commonwealth countries would have the ability to attract appropriate partners that will develop courses that are practical in their delivery mode yet ensure the successful completion of the students.

Commonwealth Education Ministers have much more in their remits than just primary and HIV education. 'Education for All' encompasses all levels and types of education and is vital to the development needs of the state as a whole, including economic planning, entrepreneurship, environmental health, agriculture, disaster management, social care, engineering, and allied health sciences, to name a few. While universal primary education and HIV education are of course paramount, Commonwealth countries can not afford to ignore the opportunities that their tertiary education sectors might get from participation in TNE.

**Table 1 Northumbria University – global partners and training course provision**

<i>Project</i>	<i>Numbers trained</i>	<i>Country of delivery</i>	<i>Partner</i>
Bachelors degrees	Several hundred	Malaysia	Private Institution
Completion degree for health professionals	80 in first cohort – ongoing	Malaysia	Malaysian Ministry of Health
Mentorship preparation for nurses	Up to 10,000 on a cascade basis starting 2006	Malaysia	Malaysian Ministry of Health
Transformational leadership programme for head teachers	650	Egypt and UK	Egyptian Ministry of Education and EU funding
Bachelors degrees	Several hundred	Hong Kong	State University
Advising on updating education and public administration systems with tailored staff development	50 – ongoing	Nigeria and UK	Various Nigerian state administrations
English language training	Ongoing	Libya	Libyan Ministry of Tourism
Tailored Masters of Public Administration	20	UK	Nanning Provincial Government, China



## THE EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICAN MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE (ESAMI)

### BACKGROUND

The Eastern and Southern African Management Institute (ESAMI) is a Pan African Regional Management Development Centre established in 1980 and currently owned by ten member governments from the Eastern and Southern African region: Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Namibia and Seychelles.

It is a service and market-orientated institution offering high-level, specialised management education and training; consultancy and action-orientated management research services. ESAMI's target clients are central and local government, regional and international institutions, NGOs, executive agencies, public institutions, private sector and national training institutions in the region. ESAMI is a leader in the industry in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In May 1997 the UN Economic Commission for Africa officially designated ESAMI as **The African Centre of Excellence in Management Development**. With this recognition and enhanced mandate, ESAMI has opened its service area to cover the continent.

### VISION

ESAMI's vision is to be the leading management development and advisory services firm in the world.

### MISSION

ESAMI's mission is to provide management solutions to clients. We will excel in management training and education, new knowledge generation and management advisory services. Our universe of clients will be public, private, civic, regional and international organisations.

### AREAS OF PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

Organisationally, ESAMI has nine professional areas in which it offers services: human resources management and health services; finance and banking programmes; agriculture, energy and environment management; transport infrastructure and procurement programmes; corporate entrepreneurship development; gender, development and management; governance and public sector management; information technology; and business school.

### STRUCTURE OF TRAINING ACTIVITIES

ESAMI has three slightly different but mutually supportive kinds of management training activities: open general programmes; customised or tailor-made programmes; and management development programmes for top-level managers in the public and private sectors of the countries served by the Institute.

### EXECUTIVE MASTERS IN BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (MBA) PROGRAMMES

ESAMI offers a part-time executive MBA programme for practising managers who will not be able to attend a full-time MBA degree programme.

### TRADE POLICY TRAINING CENTRE IN AFRICA (TPTCA)

ESAMI hosts a Trade Policy Training Centre in Africa, which is implemented jointly by ESAMI and Lund University from Sweden.

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If TNE is to be a successful method of upgrading the skills of developing countries, governments must allow a suitable environment. This must include a secure regulatory framework that does not discourage the private sector. Quality must be assured by appropriate types of collaboration. Cost-effectiveness can be secured by cooperation between state administrations where there are common needs.

Modest growth in tertiary education in the developing countries of the Commonwealth could have a disproportionately beneficial economic impact. In the short- to medium-term however, this is only likely to occur if a framework is created, within which the opportunities for capacity building through TNE can be seized by public and private provider alike. Malaysia, Singapore and China are currently extremely successful in exploiting TNE. Their lessons can surely be learnt by others. The demand for this type of education is increasing, and the potential flexibility and adaptability built into the system should not be ignored by those who are in need of a new model for tertiary education. If it is, these countries will find themselves continuing to lose the very human capital that has the highest potential to make a valuable contribution to the state's economic and cultural wellbeing.

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### Biographical notes

**Joanne Purves** received her BA (Hons) in Modern Arabic Studies from Durham University and her MA in International Studies from Newcastle University. After working in London for an Arabic TV station and a video production company from the United States, she started a career in international education marketing, working in both traditional and modern universities.

In July 2004, Joanne moved to Newcastle in the northeast of England to take up the post of Director of International Development at Northumbria University. The post involves the development and implementation of Northumbria's strategy outside the European Union, with Northumbria offices based in Beijing, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Delhi as well as in Newcastle (United Kingdom). She has been Vice-Chair of the British Universities International Liaison Association (BUILA), is an elected member of the British Council Education UK Partnership Operating Board, and currently sits on the Home Office/FCO Joint Education Task Force. A keen linguist, Joanne is currently learning Mandarin Chinese.