Crafting appropriate curricula in TNIs: An integrative critical analysis

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Abstract
The plethora of technological advancements in different communities across the world has created a scenario in which higher education institutions (HEIs) have decided to enhance their global appeal by making their programmes available to transnational students. Globalisation and the resultant growth of multinational corporations that demand skilled labour have also fuelled the emergence of transnational education (TNE) and its associated transnational institutions (TNIs). This global phenomenon has compelled TNIs to revisit their curricula design processes. The marketisation of education, driven by issues of globalisation has motivated some traditionally single mode face-to-face HEIs to reconsider their teaching and learning strategies in order to remain relevant. This rethinking of strategy has obviously impacted on curriculum reform in response to TNE demands. This article endeavours to explore how TNIs take cognisance of the perspectives of multiracial and multicultural societies in crafting curricula that appeal to divergent student populations. It is argued that the rich and powerful capitalist (Western) forces will remain dominant in the creation of knowledge systems, while keeping the less privileged cultural influences on the periphery. The study used critical ontology (Foucault 1983) to assess the relationship between knowledge and power and their impact on the crafting of curricula for transnational students.

Keywords: social presence, transnational perspectives, multiculturalism, multiracial, critical ontology, socio-cultural context

INTRODUCTION
The provision of transnational education (TNE) in a globalised world has become complex and fluid, especially for higher education institutions (HEIs). This is partly because of the competitiveness generated by the rapid flow of commodities, ideas, practices and the people who have been empowered by information and communication technologies (ICTs), as well as increasingly porous borders.
The changes that characterise the Information Age have given birth to a world of unprecedented transnational connectedness which in turn gives prominence to multicultural and multiracial societies.

At the outset, it is necessary to briefly examine the definitions of TNE. In this study, we will focus on two popular definitions by the Council of Europe and the Global Alliance for Transnational Education (GATE), respectively. The Council of Europe in the ‘Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education’ (Riga, 6 June 2001) defines transnational education as follows:

All types of higher education study programmes, or sets of courses of study, or educational services (including those of open distance learning [ODL]) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based. Such programmes may belong to the educational system of a State different from the State in which it operates, or may operate independently of any national system.

GATE (1997, 1) views transnational education as an export product:

Transnational Education denotes any teaching or learning activity in which the students are in a different country (the host country) to that in which the institution providing the education is based (the home country). This situation requires that national boundaries be crossed by information about the education, and by staff and/or educational materials.

Both definitions emphasise one of the characteristics of TNE, namely that it can be exported, and an additional characteristic that has been predominant in open and distance learning (ODL), namely that the student and the institution are separated in space and (increasingly) in different time zones. ODL arrangements and virtual universities provide students with their course materials via post or web-based platforms. The students, in turn, self-administer the learning materials at home or anywhere else outside campus in any geographical location in the world. TNE, assisted by globalisation, has elevated distance education to a more advanced and competitive level without territorial borders or distance limitations.

Transnationalism is, therefore, a social movement that has developed from the heightened interconnectivity between people and the loosening of boundaries between countries. International migration and new technological developments have made various global, transnational and even totally deterritorialised social relations possible. The education sector is no exception to this new world order of cross-border relations and increasingly fluid borders as reflected in the rise in popularity of TNE. Some writers have pointed to the possibility of ‘educational imperialism’ in TNE if transnational educators (usually Western) expect their students (usually from developing countries) to simply adapt or conform to Western models of education. Evans (1995) and Jianxin (2009, 624–649) note the similarity between TNE and colonialism with its scramble for territories and spheres of influence. Jianxin (ibid.,
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626) further argues that although TNE is similar to colonialism ‘it was instead disguised as a mutual beneficial cultural movement’. The reality, however, is that the movement of knowledge in TNE provision is largely from the West or Asia to less developed countries (LDCs) in the global South. This indicates that there is no synergy as far as the transfer of culture and knowledge is concerned.

These providers capitalise on their financial muscle to grow their market into LDCs. The poorer institutions in LDCs find themselves out-resourced and out-competed by the more powerful institutions, which, with their stronger financial backing, are able to poach a larger chunk of the local student population. In these circumstances, the power dynamics between the developed countries and the LDCs are evident, because whoever can reach the largest market is able to break even. Some entities in the LDCs struggle in such situations because the provision of education falls into the hands of outsiders, with the risk of local knowledge systems being dominated and replaced with knowledge created elsewhere for a different sociocultural context. Biggs (1997) argues that cultural differences can be overcome by applying the same universal principles of effective teaching no matter where a course is taught. It is horrifying to think what may be construed as universally accepted principles in the light of linguistic and cultural differences as well as socio-political disparities in the modern world.

Transnational educators point out that while differences in teaching and learning may exist between exporting and importing countries, the differences are being reduced as common educational philosophies and techniques gain a foothold around the world. Instead of being Western approaches, the educators would argue (echoing Biggs, 1997) that flexible and student-centred approaches which educators in all countries are introducing into their curricula are based on the universal principles of good teaching which transcend cultural differences irrespective of students’ prior experiences or expectations. Indeed, since its emergence in the late 1980s, TNE in South East Asia has commonly involved Western educators teaching offshore, following educational approaches developed for students in Western sociocultural contexts with hardly any efforts to tailor-make the teaching for offshore students (see Kelly and Tak 1998; McLaughlin 1994; Wells 1993).

Ziguras (2001, 8) states the following:

> The use of online learning in transnational education brings together, in an unfamiliar environment, students and educators whose experience of teaching and learning stems from very different cultural traditions. Educators who have taught international students in classrooms come to understand that students from different countries bring with them different experiences and expectations of teaching and learning.

This statement highlights the importance of context in knowledge creation and delivery of teaching and learning for a transnational student population. A number of useful guides to teaching international students have been published in recent years (e.g. Ballard and Clanchy 1997; Metzger 1992), but thus far, there has been little
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discussion of cultural issues in online and transnational teaching. This integrative research is meant to analyse other scholars’ views on the issues surrounding the crafting of appropriate TNE curricula for socioculturally and racially diverse students located in different geo-locations in the world.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the context of transnational curricula reform, the aim of the article is to develop a notion of critical ontology (ontology is the branch of philosophy that studies what it means to be in the world, to be human) and its relationship with being a curriculum developer in the light of multicultural and transnational knowledges and ontologies. As curriculum developers from dominant cultures explore issues of indigeniety, they highlight both their differences with cultural others and the social construction of their own subjectivities. In this context, they come to understand themselves along with the ways in which they develop curricula and their pedagogy in a transnational world. Individuals who gain such a critical ontological awareness are able to understand how and why their political opinions, religious beliefs, gender roles and racial positions have been shaped by dominant cultural perspectives. A critical ontological vision helps individuals to gain new understandings of and insights into who they are and who they can become. According to Foucault (1983, 220):

What defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future ... The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome. Basically power is less a confrontation between two adversaries or the linking of one to the other than a question of government.

In the Archaeology of knowledge, Foucault (1972) uses a critical ontology to reveal the relationship between knowledge and power in practices that are taken for granted. Foucault’s perception of power can be used to view TNE as an instrument of power. This is because in the production of curriculum by TNIs, there is an embedded knowledge system that views teaching and learning through the cultural lens of the creator of the educational materials. In so doing, the worldviews of knowledge creation systems of the importing context are overridden by the knowledge system of the provider/exporter.

Our argument is that education is not a one-size-fits-all type of commodity, but rather a cultural product which can be and is used as a form of cultural domination and influence. We argue that different worldviews and knowledge systems exist from one location to another and are shaped by the sociocultural and even political climate surrounding people’s existence. In short, people’s thought processes and actions are shaped by their environment and experiences. We interrogate the tendency of TNE to turn a blind eye to issues of location and positionality in the export of education to less developed contexts. Critical ontology gives us the lens through which we can
interrogate the implications of TNIs and their expansion into non-Western contexts.

Through the use of critical ontology we explore issues arising from the cantering of dominant knowledge systems while keeping others at the periphery. We explore different power relations within TNE and how they act upon students who come from different socio-cultural backgrounds. We ask what cultural capital is being exported to these students and how does that impact on their own cultural capital? It is important to interrogate the impact of these cultural collisions and the resulting effect on teaching and learning. Who gets the shorter end of the stick or is silenced when common/collective knowledge is centred? Whose knowledge is centred and forms the ‘collective’ ways of knowing? The subjectivation of the individual by modern technologies (deconstruction) has led to the hybridity of identity as borders become fluid due to technology which is a vehicle for globalization. What are the new identities that are created? How do we untangle the myriad of intersecting identities resulting from this?

Figure 1 shows how indigenous knowledge systems more often than not either receive the shorter end of the stick or are silenced when common/collective knowledge is centred. International knowledge is centred and forms the ‘collective’ ways of knowing. The influence of external knowledge systems and the resultant domination of local knowledge systems can be used to view transnational education as an instrument of power and domination (Foucault 1983).

![Diagram showing influences on indigenous knowledge systems](image)

**Figure 1: Influences on indigenous knowledge systems**

**GLOBALISATION AND TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION**

Globalisation has resulted in the mobility of goods and people across nations and higher education (HE) has not escaped this transition. Chadee and Naidoo (2009, 526)
note that ‘globalization and economic integration worldwide have created greater opportunities for human capital with a global mindset’. Globalisation has contributed to the growing prominence of education as an international trade commodity and providers of HE have eagerly embraced this growing market. The internationalisation of HE or TNE as defined above has opened up a new market for providers and created a wider and lucrative source of income. According to McBurnie and Ziguras (2001, 86), ‘TNE (Transnational Education) is attractive to providers as it offers opportunities for increased market expansion and for raising their international profile’. In this article, we note with concern the shift of discourse from viewing education as a way of empowering the student to more of a source of income for the provider. Lieven and Martin (2006) argue that the kind of HE that operates in a free-market economy leans more towards making a profit than delivering quality programmes.

Lieven and Martin (ibid., 41) further observe the following: ‘A significant aspect of globalisation of higher education (HE) has been the setting up of off-shore campuses in foreign countries’. The commodification of education comes with a number of challenges because it shifts the focus from education for national development to an aggressive pursuit of profit and new markets. In the past, education was mainly provided for the betterment of citizens over the financial benefits for the provider. This is now being challenged by the commercialisation of this social good. It has been argued that TNE providers bridge the gap created by the growing demand for skilled labour in a globalised world which local institutions are unable to meet. By the same token, it can be argued that the provision is fuelled by the quest for financial benefits more than the genuine desire to educate. Healey (2008, 334) explains the concern around the shift in HE as follows: ‘It has been the internationalisation of the student body, rather than the internationalisation of either faculty or research/teaching, that gives rise to the perception that universities are beginning to mimic corporations in their orientation’. Herein lies the problem: money may overshadow quality standards and the importance of creating contextually relevant curriculum in the export of education. Healey’s (2008) assertion reflects our concern that although the student bodies to which these TNE providers offer services are increasingly foreign, there are no attempts to tailor-make the curricula to their needs and contexts.

From a critical ontological perspective, the TNE providers use their resources (financial and otherwise) to influence the kind of knowledge that is exported to other contexts, without assessing how their cultural imprints impact on the final learning/teaching outcomes. The failure to consider the possible transfer of culture and knowledge systems foreign to the importing contexts is the major shortcoming of most TNE exporters. Foucault’s (1983) assertions on knowledge and power are significant in the article because they allude to the subtle nature in which cultural influences and worldviews of more powerful entities can permeate other knowledge systems and change ways of knowing. It is this seemingly oblivious approach to issues of a sociocultural context and the influence it has on the curriculum designer and the end-user that Foucault (ibid.) alludes to in his discussions of power and knowledge. What
ends up in the curriculum is not necessarily a reflection of the general population of the context but the socially influenced worldviews of the curriculum designer. If the curriculum is developed in one context and transferred to another sociocultural context without any changes, then the embedded knowledge systems of the developer are also exported. Foucault (ibid.) argues that knowledge and power act upon an individual and influence his or her worldview or perceptions. In the case of TNE, it follows, therefore, that what is transferred is not only knowledge but also knowledge created from a certain perception situated in a particular sociocultural context.

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROTECTION OF LOCAL CONSUMERS/ INSTITUTIONS

TNE providers are faced with many challenges which include quality assurance and the provision of programmes at cost-effective rates. However, regulatory bodies and governments in the importing countries face the challenge of weeding out fly-by-night providers and substandard programmes. According to McBurnie and Ziguras (2001, 91), governments need to protect the consumer and also assess the quality and viability of the programmes of TNE providers. Governments in many countries have always controlled and regulated the provision of education as a social need, but they now find themselves in the precarious position of trying to conform to the ideals of the free-marketisation of education, on the one hand, and national interests, on the other. McBurnie and Ziguras (ibid., 93) found that ‘... the Malaysian government has not been willing to completely hand over power of cultural reproduction to the market, amid concerns that the type of education offered by foreign providers may not meet national objectives’. This concern is not unique to Malaysia, as many countries, particularly in the southern hemisphere, are mostly recipients of educational (cultural) products developed elsewhere. There is growing concern among LDCs about the increasing dominance of Western ideals flooding the education market and challenging local knowledge systems and providers. The opening up of education to the free-market poses the danger of local cultures being outcompeted by the financial muscle of the Western providers.

The experiences of Israeli HE, as discussed by Lieven and Martin (2006), reflect a whole spectrum of issues that need to be addressed by both the exporters and importers of TNE. The key issue they raise is the need for a comprehensive system to regulate the institutions offering TNE in order to ensure quality and also protect consumers (students). Lieven and Martin (ibid., 65) further emphasise the need for the importing nations to monitor quality: ‘It must be borne in mind that what is “for sale” here are life chances, not mere consumer luxuries: individuals (and nations) cannot afford to buy it and see how it works out’. This emphasises the responsibility of the governments or appropriate bodies in scrutinising imported HE programmes for quality within an established quality assurance system with clear standards for measuring the quality of programmes. McBurnie and Ziguras (2001, 85) caution that ‘any attempts to promote global standards or quality principles for transnational education must address the myriad of concerns of governments, including consumer
protection, advancing national goals and protecting local systems’.

Exporters of education, however, have a responsibility to study their target populations to create curricula that will not only make the recipients marketable globally but also functional in the local context. This calls for concerted efforts to study the context and influences that impact on knowledge creation for their externally situated students. It also requires the creation of research relationships with local institutions to gain insight into the cultural influences and local knowledge systems as a way of meeting their students’ needs.

An issue of significance that is not a noticeable feature of the discourses on TNE is the export/import of culture and how that affects the learning experiences of the students in the importing country. Unless specific efforts are made to design curricula that suit a particular importing country, there is the potential to import second-hand curricula whose initial target population is situated in a different sociocultural context. The literature also emphasises the fact that the movement of TNE is mostly from the West to LDCs. This unidirectional movement of HE offerings is somewhat disconcerting and evokes thoughts of imperialism, albeit educational imperialism. Jianxin (2009, 626) mentions the actions of the Soviet Union and the United States of America (US) after the Second World War:

> They both assisted third world countries in their endeavour to develop their national economies partly through the export of education and educational aid. In this sense, transnational education became a means by which the two superpowers expanded their impact and fought for influence across the world.

This assertion indicates that the fear of colonialism is not that far-fetched because there is undeniable evidence of Western countries showing an interest so that they can exert their influence over LDCs under the guise of assistance or aid. The use of education as an instrument of power is not always overt and many educators may be oblivious of it. The fact remains that it is ever present in the import and export of education.

A survey of the literature (Chadee and Naidoo 2008; Healey, 2007; Lieven and Martin 2006) indicates that most providers of TNE are from developed countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), Australia and the US. This one-sidedness does nothing to alleviate the fears of LDCs that have experienced colonialism first-hand. The mobilisation by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) towards the liberation of the trade in goods, including education, poses a dilemma for LDCs. On the one hand, they are faced with the growing demand for HE for their citizens, that exceeds the supply, and on the other hand, there is an ever-present threat of the local institutions being outshone by the more established Western institutions with more resources.

**TNE AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS**

As explained above, TNE is characterised by providers (mostly from developed nations) exporting educational programmes to other countries. This poses a challenge
because there appears to be little or no effort made to export research or study the destination context in order to create context specific learning/teaching materials. According to Kincheloe (2003, 54),

critical complex ontology insists that individuals live in specific places with particular types of relationships. They operate or are placed in the web of reality at various points of race, class, gender, sexuality, religious, physical ability, geographical place and other continua.

It is our contention that for any form of education to be effective it must be designed and delivered in a manner that suits the sociocultural context of the recipient of the knowledge. We argue that any knowledge creation is influenced by an individual’s context, be it social, religious or political – hence the need to consider those factors that have a huge impact in meaning making for individuals in any community. Kincheloe (ibid., 53) states the following in this regard: ‘Educators aware of this critical ontology always understand that different contexts demand different goals and that seen in light of different horizons goals will take on different forms’. According to Kincheloe (2003), it is necessary for educators to challenge students to engage with the forces that influence their thinking processes. Kincheloe (ibid., 53) goes on to argue that even though there is a ‘... social, cultural, political, economic, and historical world around ... our students, we seldom encourage them to explore how this world influences the way in which they think about themselves and the world around them’. The process of curriculum development has to consider the above factors and their role in the individual’s perception of the self and his or her world-views. Kincheloe (ibid., 51) argues as follows: ‘Any view of education, any curriculum development, any professional education conceived outside of their framework ends up becoming a form of ideological mystification’.

We concur with Kincheloe (2003) and several postcolonial theorists (Bhabha 1990, 1994; Gandhi 1998; Spivak 1988), that identity plays a primary role in the way people process information and the fact that identity formation is influenced by the factors that have already been identified. According to Kincheloe (2003, 51): ‘Identity is never complete and always subject to modification in relation to prevailing ideologies, discourses, and knowledges’.

**TNE IN LDCS**

Unisa and the University of Botswana (UB) are both HEIs located in developing countries. The main difference between the two is that the former is a wholly ODL establishment, while the latter is a dual-mode setup in the sense that distance education is only a small part of the system. By its nature, Unisa has a large student body spanning the African continent studying at a distance. At UB, distance education is only available to students within the borders of Botswana and it is offered at a very small scale. However, through its conventional programmes UB tends to import students in the form of students from the continent particularly from the Southern
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African Development Community (SADC) and through exchange programmes which enrol students from the United States and Europe whose universities have partnerships with UB. These institutions (UB and Unisa) may appear on the surface to have nothing in common, but the common denominator is the tendency to expect students from elsewhere to embrace knowledge offered through the institutions wholesale. In other words, there is no focus on creating knowledge or educational programmes that cater for the different student populations from divergent backgrounds. Any internal differences are overridden by the dominant cultures in the local context. Unisa tends to look outwards into Africa and beyond in order to expand its growth and market influence. In a nutshell, Unisa reaches out to the local market while eyeing the rest of Africa as a viable conquest.

TNE AT UNISA AND UB

According to Dunn and Nilan (2007), Unisa is the major TNI on the African continent and the argument is that its aim is to offer an education that is geared more towards African interests. However, we still wonder how Unisa in fact deals with issues of sociocultural context and racial differences in the curricula designed for students both within and outside the borders of South Africa. It is evident that there is no one curriculum suitable for all students. However, are any conscious efforts made by TNE providers to cater for any differences? Globalisation in business and education is characterised by mass production and maximisation of profits with as little expenditure as possible. What does this mean in transnational HE? Where does that leave quality issues that are critical in providing HE that will produce graduates who are globally competitive but also relevant to their immediate context? Does globalisation mean uniformity when it comes to transnational HE? Does one size fit all? If not, what systems do transnational HE providers have in place to monitor the quality and suitability of programmes for importing countries/consumers?

The tendency among institutions is to design for the global market and in the process ignore local concerns. In its quest to become internationally appealing, UB recently engaged in a strategy to abandon traditional ODL and replace it with online learning (UB 2010, 31). This would have been a positive move had it not been for the fact that research (see Butale 2008; Dodds, Gaskell and Mills 2008; Kabonoki 2008) has repeatedly shown that the majority of Batswana have little or limited access to ICT. Even though UB is trying to be a player in the global economy, it has forgotten part of its commitment to the nation to ‘taking the university to the people’ by denying the majority of Batswana the opportunity to upgrade their education through distance education. The commercialisation of education as discussed above has also seen UB increasingly relying on the dictates of the market and global trends to guide its decisions on what programmes to offer.

The distance education section of UB remains closed to international or transnational students, which is threatening its very survival as an ODL provider. As stated earlier, UB has decided to phase out the provision of traditional print based distance education in favour of online learning. This change was proposed to both
the University Senate and Council and both bodies accepted this change. A document entitled, ‘A framework for growth and change: Proposed revision of the academic organizational structure’ nickname ‘ROAS’ asserted ‘... that the Department of Distance Education within the CCE is disestablished as soon as possible’ (UB 2010, 31). This change albeit drastic given the local climate as described above was aimed as following world trends by shifting the focus from print based distance education to e-learning. This situation is not unique to UB as globalisation and TNE have resulted in a scenario where institutions have to compete in an international marketplace for students. As the use of technology in education grows and breaks communication borders institutions such as UB increasingly find themselves having to compete globally for transnational students. The end result is that they have to adapt to the global market demands or lose out on the lucrative global student market.

CONCLUSION

The impact of globalisation on social mobility has significantly influenced the way education can be provided to multicultural students. Fluid transitional societies have skewed the traditional provisioning of education. ODL as one approach to knowledge generation and transfer has both a direct and indirect impact on TNE. The approach necessitates rethinking the processes of curricula reform in response to TNE demands. It is difficult for TNIs to take cognisance of the perspectives of multiracial and multicultural societies in crafting curricula that appeal to divergent student populations. More often than not, TNIs’ curricula perspectives are dominated by the rich and powerful capitalist (Western) forces. International knowledge systems will remain dominant in the creation of knowledge systems while keeping the less privileged cultural influences on the periphery.

REFERENCES


GATE see Global Alliance for Transnational Education.


UB see University of Botswana.

