

Federation, and perhaps the United States—can be expected to have a wider range of achievement and knowledge among students. In differentiated systems, an additional question should be asked: will AHELO look at all of post-secondary education or only at the university sector?

The current project seems to emphasize generic skills even more than the feasibility study. These skills are mainly critical thinking and communication. Defining these elusive characteristics may be difficult, and interpreting them in different national contexts will be even more challenging. Critical thinking may be one thing in China and quite another in Norway. Those few countries that have a strong liberal-arts tradition where broad thinking and communication are embedded into the curriculum, such as many colleges and universities in the United States, may have an advantage. But even in the United States, definitions of the liberal arts vary considerably among institutions. Further, in most countries, undergraduate education is highly specialized, with students often admitted to specific discipline-based faculties and having no opportunity to develop generic skills. Such skills may have been imparted during secondary studies, which last for varying periods of time in different countries, creating further challenges for measuring postsecondary achievement.

The two specific disciplines chosen for examination—civil engineering and economics—also present problems. While there have been some efforts to build a consensus in some fields concerning what is appropriate content for post-secondary study, this process is far from complete. Even for civil engineering, there are no doubt variations among universities and countries with regard to an appropriate knowledge base and the depth of study. Economics is even more problematical since approaches to the field vary according to different academic traditions, political realities in various countries, and the like. Further, a student enrolled in an undergraduate business curriculum may receive a quite different economics curriculum than someone in an economics department. And those who are studying in narrow faculty-based programs may have deeper knowledge than students studying a broader curriculum.

If there are problems in these two reasonably well-defined fields, the possibility of being able to compare student achievement in the humanities or most social sciences will prove to be much more challenging.

While AHELO intends to test students at the end of the first year of study—degree programs lasting three years, as is now the norm in much of Europe—may well differ from programs lasting four years, as is common in North America and much of Asia. More content may be required in a single year of a three-year program.

These problems, and many others, have no doubt been experienced in the AHELO feasibility study—and might

well have contributed to the recommendation not to proceed.

LET'S DROP A BAD AND EXPENSIVE PROJECT

Proceeding to a full-scale AHELO project seems like an extraordinarily bad idea. There is far from a consensus or even a significant number of countries interested; and the scoping paper seems to be anticipating eight countries. The costs are quite high—in the millions of dollars. The OECD seems to want to keep close control over the study, although it will be funded almost exclusively by the participating countries. It is unclear how individual academic institutions or even governments will have a significant say in the management or conceptualization of the study. It is also unclear what will be learned from the results of AHELO; and major questions remain about the basic methodology, assessment instruments to be used, and orientation of the effort. Much money has already been spent, some would say wasted, on the feasibility study. Now there is the opportunity to save considerable time, effort, and money. Those genuinely concerned about the quality of student learning and learning outcomes might better focus on developing authentic assessment tools that universities and colleges can use in self-evaluation and for self-improvement. ■

The Impact of Transnational Education in Receiving Countries

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For many years, transnational education (TNE), also known as crossborder mobility of academic programs and providers, has provided new modes of study for students; opportunities for provider institutions to broaden their reach; and alternative strategies for host countries and institutions, to widen access to higher education. There is no question that more and more students across the world are choosing to study international higher education programs, without moving to the country that awards the qualification. This growing phenomenon is facilitated by higher education institutions establishing branch campuses or de-

living their programs in foreign host/receiving countries alone or in collaboration with local partners.

To date, the majority of research, discussion, and debate on TNE has been from the sending/home country perspective. Given the criticism that TNE is for revenue and status building purposes by sending institutions, a frequently heard phrase these days is that “TNE is a win-win situation.” This may be correct, but to examine the true impact of TNE on receiving/host countries it is necessary to get their opinions and understand their views. To that end, a major survey study was undertaken by the British Council and the German Academic Exchange Service, with collaboration from Australian International Education, and in association with Campus France and the Institute for Education in London. Customized surveys were sent to eight different target groups—TNE students, TNE faculty members, senior TNE institutional leaders, higher education experts, government agencies, employees as well as non-TNE students, and non-TNE faculty in 10 TNE active countries in all regions of the world. The analysis of the 1,906 responses yielded some fascinating insights.

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TNE IS REACHING A DIFFERENT PROFILE OF STUDENTS

An interesting and helpful outcome of the research is insight into the profile of TNE students. While there is no typical TNE student, the data suggest that TNE students are generally older than the traditional secondary school leaver entering higher education. The proportion of TNE students with previous employment experience, as well as the high numbers studying master’s and PhD level programs, also point to a relatively older student cohort. Worth noting is the high proportion of students working full-time during their studies, facilitated by modules delivered over concentrated time periods during the evenings or weekends. The flexibility of TNE clearly has appeal for students with requirements to balance work, study, and other life demands.

“CAREER DEVELOPMENT” IS THE MAIN MOTIVATION FOR CHOOSING TNE

Understanding why students chose their TNE program is fundamental to understanding their expectations and objectives. A clear message from students is that TNE is per-

ceived as a way to improve their professional skills, thereby improving their career prospects. TNE students also believe that employers perceive TNE to be advantageous when selecting job candidates. The two main reasons cited for this were: (1) prestige and status of the foreign institution/education system; (2) the international outlook and multicultural experience of TNE graduates relative to local non-TNE graduates. While students perceive that employers are predisposed to TNE graduates, more research is needed to ascertain employers’ awareness level of TNE, their perceptions of its value, and their support for further education through TNE programs.

COST OF TNE—POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE

The affordability of TNE relative to study abroad represents the most positive attribute of TNE for students. This provides evidence that increasing demand for international education can be partially met through program and provider mobility and also highlights the extent to which the lines between TNE and traditional student mobility have become blurred. On the other hand, the high cost of TNE compared with local academic programs represents a main negative attribute of TNE. Issues about pricing, affordability, and how TNE tuition fees compare with local education options are important to students and institutions alike. In studying the costs and benefits of TNE, more attention needs to be given to differentiating between the various modes of TNE, such as branch campuses, franchise/twinning, distance education (including MOOCs—massive open online courses), and joint/double degree programs.

INCREASED ACCESS: A TOP BENEFIT

Feedback from senior TNE leaders, higher education experts, government agencies, and employers suggest that TNE is having the greatest impact by “providing increased access to higher education for local students” and “improving the overall quality of higher education provision.” The findings also show that TNE, in general, is not providing different programs to those offered locally, which somewhat dispels the myth that TNE offers specialized niche programs not available in the host country. For the most part, TNE programs appear to be responding to student demand.

LACK OF AWARENESS OF TNE

A surprising finding is an overall lack of awareness about TNE programs in the host country. The majority of non-TNE students and non-TNE faculty surveyed were not aware of the TNE opportunities in their country and sometimes in their own institution. Surveyed employers often expressed a lack of understanding or confusion about what actually constitutes a TNE experience. This revealing finding sug-

gests that the full potential of these programs is not being realized and that much work is needed to publicize TNE opportunities in the host country.

TNE GRADUATES HIGHLY SKILLED BUT NOT NECESSARILY IN LINE WITH LOCAL NEEDS

All target groups believed that TNE graduates are better equipped than locally educated graduates across a varied set of specific skills—such as problem solving, critical thinking, and international outlook. Thus, while TNE graduates are perceived as relatively skilled, the research suggests that TNE may be only “moderately” addressing skills gaps in the local labor market. Specialized TNE courses covering niche topics were felt to have a positive impact on addressing local skills gaps, but overall, many TNE providers are offering programs already available locally.

The results paint an overall positive picture of the impact of TNE in host countries, especially in terms of TNE providing increased access for local students to higher education.

OUTLOOK FOR TNE

Respondents were generally optimistic about the outlook for TNE and indicated that both the number of new programs and the capacity of existing programs will continue to grow over the medium term. In terms of helping to build the local knowledge economy and producing collaborative research output, TNE looks well placed to play an increasing role in the host country. Economic considerations, such as the capacity of TNE to attracting foreign-direct investment and improve local infrastructure, appear less pronounced and will largely depend on host country government policy and country specific circumstances.

The results paint an overall positive picture of the impact of TNE in host countries, especially in terms of TNE providing increased access for local students to higher education. But, there is very little concrete evidence to back up these opinions, as few TNE receiving countries have the capacity or will to gather enrollment data on all TNE operations in their country. An important challenge is the collection of data by host countries on the number and type of TNE operations in their country and the aggregate enrollment of local students, expatriate students living in the country, and international students enrolled in all TNE operations.

For further information see: British Council and DAAD (2014). *Impacts of transnational education on host countries*. <http://www.britishcouncil.org/education/ihe/knowledge-centre/internationalisation/impacts-transnational>. ■

Mobility Matters: the ERASMUS Impact Study

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Europe seems to experience a significant mismatch between the skills employers require from graduates, and the skills students acquire in higher education institutions (HEIs). There are 5.7 million unemployed young people in Europe, including many higher education graduates, at the same time as one third of employers cannot find employees with the right skills on the labor market. An analysis of the obvious mismatch between what employers demand and what young adults in general, and higher education graduates in particular, supply, may effectively inform policymakers in labor market and education policy areas. This was one of the reasons for the European Commission to initiate an analysis of the Erasmus program, with a special emphasis on employability.

MOBILITY AND THE LABOR MARKET

From 1987 until the end of 2012–2013, over 3 million students from more than 4,000 higher education institutions participated in Erasmus mobility. Erasmus is the largest mobility program in the world, financed by the European Commission. It is especially designed to promote the mobility of students in higher education. Therefore, an assessment of the contribution of this program to employability might shed some light on the general issue of employability of higher education graduates. Research tells us that mobility in general and therefore probably Erasmus in particular,