

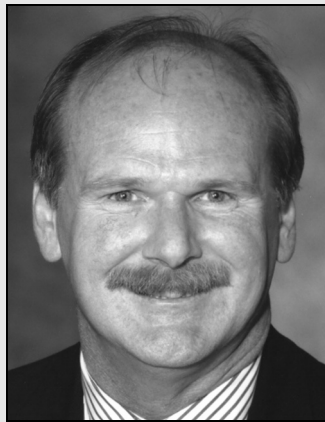
Going Global

Perils and Promises for Open and Distance Education

Don Olcott, Jr.

INTRODUCTION

The advances in e-learning and distance learning technologies during the last decade, including refined teaching designs, methods, and support services, suggest that these innovations would have revolutionized the international stage for higher education.



Don Olcott, Jr., Chief Executive,
The Observatory on Borderless Higher
Education, and Chairman of the Board, United
States Distance Learning Association.
Telephone: 44 (0) 207 380-6714.
E-mail: d.olcott@obhe.ac.uk

Moreover, globalization is driving the interconnected facets of international economic, social, political, cultural, and political life that further suggests that e-learning (or distance learning, blended learning, distributed learning, or next week's latest term) would have created a brave new world, but it hasn't happened. Indeed, this is just the opening act (Olcott, in press-a, in press-b).

This commentary will examine a range of issues related to internationalism, cross-border higher education, and distance learning. Some of these remarks may be perceived as provocative and controversial. C'est la vie! Moreover, they are directed specifically at college and university presidents. Why? Because as the honorable Harry S Truman so eloquently stated, "the buck stops here."

LOST IN TRANSLATION: THE INTERNATIONAL E-LEARNING ENIGMA

Institutional leaders often convince themselves that distance delivery will accelerate their welcome on the international stage (Olcott, in press-a). In some respects, this

would be an excellent strategy if the rest of world would just see the value-added simplicity in this approach. The rest of the world, however, is not quite ready to play in this techno-sandbox. China, North and South Korea, Japan, the Gulf States, Eastern Europe, Russia, Malaysia, India, and other nations have publicly stated they want Western technology, academic programs, research, and technology transfer to help create sustainable economies, develop multitalented workforces, and ultimately build stable higher education systems at home (Olcott, in press-a, in press-b; Olcott, Papi, & Newbould, 2008).

At the same time, the credibility of these Western resources appears to be directly related to having real people (academics, researchers, business executives, etc.) on the ground in country (Olcott, 2008, in press-a; Verbik & Merkely, 2006). The net result of these views is that the majority of cross-border higher education is being delivered at branch campuses, corporate sites, and through unique public-private partnerships. There are, of course, exceptions, and international students do take online and video-based courses, but proportionally, these numbers are relatively small.

From an instructional design perspective, it is not surprising that foreign universities and governments have been resistant to embracing external distance learning providers. Most faculty will tell you the inherent challenges in teaching foreign students and the potential for language, cultural, and social miscommunication. Online teaching exacerbates these issues and creates a whole new range of challenges for teaching faculty (Olcott et al., 2008).

Technology is not culturally neutral, and even English is contextual like most other languages with potential for miscommunications. The fact is, we know very little about the interconnected dynamics of culture, language, and social norms of academic communications delivered via

media. We have many assumptions, but these do not equate to sound teaching and learning paradigms that are grounded in empirical research. Given that China, in fact, in the next few years may be the largest English-speaking nation on the planet it would seem prudent to begin addressing these pedagogical issues now rather than later (Helms, 2008; Olcott et al., 2008).

These teaching challenges are also intimately tied to the quality assurance measures of international open and e-learning programs (Helms, 2008; Knight & de Wit, 1999; Stella, 2006; United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization/Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2005; Woodhouse, 2006). We might argue that we employ the same quality standards for international student programs, yet we have not accounted for these language, cultural, and social differences. Going international through distance education will require these issues to be addressed in systematic and meaningful ways. This can only be accomplished through research and the development of new pedagogical models. Visionary leaders who desire to play on the international stage will take the necessary time to ensure these issues have been addressed.

LEVELING THE LEARNING FIELD: TOWARD GLOBAL ENGLISH OR CULTURAL IMPERIALISM?

The emergence of English as the global language of commerce raises some critical issues for open and distance learning. Although there is merit in having a language in which many peoples of the world can communicate, particularly for education, commerce, employee mobility, and day-to-day communications, one must ask: What do we as citizens of the global village *lose* in the process of placing one language above all others? Moreover, from a higher education perspective, will this global trend really “level the learning field” for all

students and make them more competitive in the job market? The general answer seems to be “yes” among international students, educators, and business leaders (Olcott, in press-c).

This issue is among the many double-edged sword dilemmas that permeate higher education. Many will argue that this makes good pragmatic sense and will create a common connection for a globally mobile economy and workforce. This author is not convinced.

First, the inherent value and mutual respect that can be extended through the language continuum of the world are immense. When one visits France or China or Oman, should we not expect to initially communicate in the home country language? This is simply good manners, which dominant English speaking peoples often forget, ignore, or just do not waste their time trying to learn. And, here is the ultimate paradox: the United States and the United Kingdom, global leaders in attracting international students and in delivering cross-border higher education (face-to-face and via distance learning) send very few of their own students abroad (Olcott, in press-c).

Less than 1% of the total U.S. higher education population of nearly 17 million students, study abroad. More students in the United States go to Cancun or St. Thomas on spring break than study abroad. The study-abroad numbers in the United Kingdom are not much better. Candidly speaking, this is an arrogant and Anglo-centric view of the world that is very perplexing when one considers the global language movement for English. This movement, in fact, may have less to do with “leveling the learning field” than with a subtle infiltration of language and cultural imperialism (Olcott, in press-c). *C’est la vie!*

Another manifestation of this Anglo-centric view of the world centers on the study of foreign languages in English-speaking countries. Despite years of

research and results by linguists that has show clearly that children can learn a second (and third) language beginning around age 5, American school-aged children do not take language courses until their first year of high school. This is usually around age 14-15. With over 4,130 institutions of higher education, all which accentuate the importance of graduating global citizens, consider the irony. We are preparing global citizens from among a pool of students who do not travel, who do not study abroad, and who have the most basic and deficient level of foreign language skills. What’s wrong with this picture?

Let’s return to the issue of language and culture. We know that language is very closely aligned with cultural and social norms in many countries. For these students when taught in English, the questions really are about what is “lost in translation.” As earlier noted, international distance learning in English is resisted by many governments and foreign universities exactly for issues of quality of instruction and the threat to local language, culture, and social norms (Olcott, in press-c). At the same time, students are being encouraged to study English by their governments, businesses, and higher education institutions. Why? Because a knowledge of English is accepted as an invaluable asset for future employment and career advancement. So the story goes. Apparently, the threat of English dominance is perceived as less than the long-term benefits of learning English.

The trend toward English is, in and of itself, not the problem for open education or society. The issue is about global context, showing mutual respect for diverse languages, cultures, and social values, and engaging actively in the global village. How can anyone enjoy coffee at a Parisian café and not immerse themselves in the setting, culture, and language of the City of Light? How can a historian or tourist walk along the Great Wall of China and

not be taken aback by the immense history, culture, and beauty of this experience? If you want the English version, buy a video; there are plenty.

Perhaps the obvious resolution to this dilemma is to create a new global language policy. Given that in about 10 years the largest English-speaking country on the planet will be China, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and all other English-speaking countries could require that all college students are fluent in Chinese, Spanish, and French. Moreover, these must be articulated in clear student learning outcomes, measured by established competencies, and demonstrated by all students prior to graduation. It is unlikely this will happen, and hence the language and cultural illiteracy of native English-speaking students will persist (Olcott, in press-c).

A final word to our international students across the globe. Embrace the language, customs, culture, and social diversity of your homeland. English will be a valuable skill for your future, but it will not be a panacea for all the opportunities and challenges you will face in your lifetime. It is your responsibility to demand that others across the globe show respect and dignity towards your language and culture.

ASPIRING TO THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

In my view, aside from the fact that every president wants to leave an eternal legacy at his or her institution, the single most important driving force is money or the pursuit of money to offset continuing reductions in the funding levels to American colleges and universities over the past 15 years (Olcott, in press-b). Of course, leaders will seldom articulate this publicly and offer politically correct rhetoric that focuses on educational goals such as internationalizing the curriculum, preparing students for a global society, collaborative

research, and the value of exposing and immersing students (and faculty) among and within a diverse multicultural, global society.

All of these are laudable and admirable goals that intrinsically are based on a sincere and substantial dose of truth; yet, before we get a bit too goo-goo eyed over these, let's set the record straight. *Colleges and universities have been forced or driven to be more entrepreneurial to replace funding reductions.* I did not say institutions were asked, encouraged, persuaded, nudged; no, they have been driven by these realities to pursue business-type activities, particularly in the international arena. Indeed, institutions can only raise tuition so many times before the public demands restraint, legislators are removed from office, or students dropout and go to Key West to find themselves, write a novel (let's just hope they read one occasionally), and/or meditate on the beach (Olcott, in press-b).

Of course, the exception is California, where tuition and fees have increased over 90% on average in the past 5 years in the University of California and California State University systems alone. Annually, this has become as regular in California as the Academy Awards. Perhaps the governor should find a "terminator" to deal with this strategy. These increases are not just the domain of Schwarzenegger's state, they are pervasive across American higher education.

DEVELOPING AN INSTITUTIONAL INTERNATIONALISM STRATEGY

If we follow the premise that colleges and universities in many nations have been driven or forced into the metaphysical world of international entrepreneurial business ventures, then one might surmise that when force is the primary driver, performance is mixed. This is a critical reality check for presidents. Many colleges and universities are pursuing this market, yet do not have any business in this market.

These institutions do not have the resources, the experience, and/or the history to move from local delivery to the international stage. They also do not have the connections to make these ventures work (Olcott, in press-b). Even The Beatles had to pay their dues and have the right supporting cast before arriving on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

TRENDS IN CROSS-BORDER HIGHER EDUCATION

The delivery of cross-border programs, research, and related services is a complex enterprise for most universities. Despite the growing number of international providers over the past 5 years, there are emerging trends that suggest this market will become increasingly competitive and that host countries will focus on partnerships with foreign institutions that can help them build their own high quality, sustainable higher education system and economy. Some of the current trends include:

- Host nations (nations and/or universities hosting foreign programs in their country) are becoming more selective of entering foreign providers (Helms, 2008).
- Asia, the Middle East, and the Gulf States are the most active cross-border regions, yet increasingly, interregional partnerships are arising in these geographical areas (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007).
- Cross-border research exchange is a rapidly growing priority among nations (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007; Thomas, 2007).
- Quality assurance oversight agencies, internal and external, are paying increasing attention to universities operating abroad (Helms, 2008; Stella, 2006; United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization/Organiza-

tion for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2005; Woodhouse, 2006).

- Competition for internationally mobile students is growing more intense each year (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007).
- New models of public-private partnerships are emerging in cross-border higher education among business, higher education, government, and community organizations (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007).

MANAGING INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS: STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Colleges and university leaders negotiating international e-learning partnerships, either internal or external, will be faced with many critical decisions during the process. The following provides a summary of key strategies to assist leaders in these discussions (Olcott, 2008).

GETTING STARTED BEFORE YOU GET GOING

- “You never have a second chance to make a first impression.” Do your homework before, not after, you establish an international partnership. Research your partner organisation, it’s culture, language, history, current partners, partnership record, financial stability, and how the organization is perceived in their own country. What do they bring to the table that you need? *What are the potential benefits for all partners?*
- Build partnerships that compliment your organisational strengths? Does your potential international partner view these attributes as your strengths? Why or Why not? Do not attempt to be all things to all people.
- Establish formative and summative performance review processes—managerial, programmatic, and financial from

the outset. Presume from the start that you will need to make adjustments, modifications and, perhaps, major alterations to your partnership strategy. Global economic, cultural, political, and social environments can change rapidly, can you?

HOW DO YOU CREATE PARTNERSHIP SUSTAINABILITY?

- Create a diversified investment strategy—one partner, but additional stakeholders who perceive value in the endeavour and may invest money, people, and time. Remember, international partnerships particularly, in higher education must be approached as a business venture.
- Build contingencies into your budget planning. Every higher education budget on the planet looks good on paper, when it hits the real world is when the problems start. Build your budgets based on real costs plus inflation and the projected costs of doing day-to-day business.
- Conduct extensive market research on your customer(s) base. If your financial plan is highly dependent on student enrolment tuition and fees, analyze the changes that are occurring in this sector for the partnership country and surrounding region. Students are becoming more mobile and more selective, with more higher education choices.

COLLABORATION AND THE CURRICULUM

- If your university-department is the primary content provider, you retain control of the curriculum, period. From a practical standpoint, however, connecting your faculty with international faculty in the partnership country can be

beneficial and strengthen partnership collaboration.

- Align curriculum delivered abroad with the process of “internationalizing” the curriculum on the campus. Developing curriculum that is culturally, socially, historically, ethnically, and gender accurate and sensitive are prerequisites for all international curriculum.
- Diversify your delivery modes. Can you deliver a significant part of the curriculum via educational technologies (distance learning)?

HOW DO YOU PRESENT YOUR PARTNERSHIPS TO INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL STAKEHOLDERS?

- Leaders must be able to articulate how the partnership aligns, strengthens, and enhances the mission of the university. How will the partnership impact specific stakeholders?
- Benefits, benefits, benefits? What are the benefits from the partnership? How will these be assessed and by whom?
- Provide status reports to all key stakeholders, particularly academic deans, faculty, and board members.
- What is your exit strategy if the partnership must be terminated? Do you have an answer? Indeed, this question will be asked by multiple stakeholders. Have you considered this from a public relations, reputation and marketing perspective? Universities are talented for creating things such as knowledge, research, partnerships, policies, procedures, logos, curriculum, and services. Conversely, universities are infamous for their inability to cut their losses and exit from partnerships. From a risk management perspective, your exit strategy needs to be formulated in advance and built into the contractual negotiations with all international partners.

STAFF DIVERSITY TO REFLECT THE PARTNERSHIP

- Foreign-based partnerships—hire local staff to strengthen instruction and support services. Take advantage of the culturally- and language-rich human resources available to support your program and partnerships.
- Campus-based—ensure you have diverse staff with the communication, language, cultural awareness, and social skills to interact effectively with your international students.
- Ensure that partnership staff, faculty, and students have multiple opportunities for sharing comments, suggestions, and recommendations. This should be an essential part of the partnership and program assessment

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONS

Playing on the international stage is a major decision for most colleges and universities. The diversity of institutions and partnerships make specific recommendations difficult at best. However, there are a few guiding principles that presidents may want to consider.

- Articulate clearly that international cross-border and distance education initiatives align with institutional mission and strategic goals.
- Do your homework about your potential international partners. Leave your cultural norms at home and learn about those whom you may be working with ... their culture, their language, their social norms. If you are going into their country, you—even virtually—are a guest; act like one.
- What is your internalization strategy? How do the campus- and external activities of your strategy strengthen your institutional and contribute to a cre-

ative, dynamic learning environment for all students?

- Align distance teaching with instructional design formats that compensate and respect language, culture, and social norms of foreign students.
- Do you have a risk management strategy for major international initiatives at home and abroad? What are your contingency or withdrawal strategies for endeavors that do not work? Universities are magnificent at creating things—knowledge, partnerships, research, and curriculum—but universities are terrible at getting out of things. Develop an exit strategy in advance; don't wait until it's too late.
- Why can your institution do it better than your competitors internationally?

A LOOK AHEAD FOR INTERNATIONAL OPEN, DISTANCE AND E-LEARNING

The international stage, in many respects, is wide open for institutions that can provide responsive, high-quality open and e-learning programs. Moreover, institutions that can deliver combination of blended educational programs (face-to-face and e-learning curriculum) will be well positioned to take advantage of emerging global markets. The relatively slow immersion of open, distance, and e-learning internationally is a natural evolution of the field and the demand for programs will accelerate over the next 10 years.

At the same time, international providers of open, distance, and e-learning must address the emerging issues of language, culture, customs, and social norms that are part of the fabric of today's culturally diverse, mobile, international students. The perpetuation of English as the global language will demand that institutions offering distance programs address the pedagogical issues of what is "lost in trans-

lation" when teaching non-English natives via educational technology.

Institutional leaders and government policymakers must also collaborate to ensure that they are building a coherent international agenda that is focused on genuinely creating global citizens and providing multicultural educational experiences with dedicated support services for international students. If these are ignored in the pursuit of generating alternative funding streams, these institutions will find themselves performing their final act on the international stage. Leaders must create an institutionwide internationalism strategy, internal and external, that supports the mission of the institution and creates educational, cultural, language, and social benefits for all its students. One-dimensional strategies, no matter how well intentioned, will become obsolete when faced with competition from institutions that provide a comprehensive, multi-dimensional internationalism strategy. Olcott (in press-a) sums up the challenges for colleges and universities.

The internationalism of your university is an opportunity to strengthen all aspects of your educational program. Indeed, many large, research-based universities will have comprehensive international and cross-border programs and research exchanges. But even the smallest institution with limited resources can incrementally build the international diversity, services and curriculum of their campus. We in higher education are given the privilege and responsibility for educating tomorrow's citizens and contributing to our local community, our nation, and the global village. Our primary responsibility and commitment as educators must be to our students. This golden rule of our profession must be embraced and applied to all aspects of developing an internationalism strategy that places the education of students front and center.

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