

Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and/or
Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium

**Negotiating Differences in Academic Preparedness Among
Transnational Students in Higher Education**

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Abstract

“Students these days don’t know anything,” commented a faculty member in a focus group. But is it that students don’t know anything, or that faculty members are unfamiliar with what students do know? This is no small issue, as the acceleration of internationalization in higher education and the broader processes of globalization have led to increased numbers of students with general education profiles that differ from those of the instructors and their domestic students. These transnational students—not only international students (paying international tuition), but also permanent residents and citizens—received their primary and secondary (and, possibly, undergraduate) educations outside of Canada, and instructors often lack an awareness of their educational backgrounds and experiences. Emerging from a study of the everyday instructional needs of full-time college and university faculty, this paper presents the results of a systematic review of the literature on the general education of students from four regions that are sources of international students and immigrants, and, therefore, prepared students on campus: China, India, the Middle East, and Latin America. The research not only identifies the curriculum that these students followed, but also the impact of educational reforms on the teaching styles and learning skills emphasized in these systems, and describes the implications for Canadian instructors.

Keywords: general education curriculum; international students; transnational students; teaching strategies; student preparedness

Introduction

This paper describes differences in general education curricula in four key regions, China, India, the Middle East, and Latin America. These regions were selected as they are regions from which Canada welcomes many international students. The question guiding the research is: What should Canadian instructors know about the academic preparedness of transnational students? This paper serves as a base for what instructors need to learn about the prior educational experiences of students who received a large portion of their general education abroad.

The paper examines three research questions: (1) What curriculum did students follow? (2) What teaching styles were common in students' preparation? (3) What are the implications for Canadian instructors?

Literature Review

Higher education today is in a transition period. Over the past 20 years, there has been a considerable acceleration of globalization and internationalization, which has been observable in English-language higher education across the globe (Knight, 2002; Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Concurrently, there has been a shift in the narrative about the economic value of obtaining a degree. Higher education is now seen as key for young people gaining a competitive edge in the global knowledge economy (Lakes & Carter, 2011).

However, it should be noted that these transitions (and much of the writing about them) operate at the macro level. That is, countries and organizations (higher educational institutions) develop policies and incentives (King, 2019; Knight, 2002; Altbach & Knight, 2007); for example, regarding targets for the recruitment of international students and fees.

On the ground, instructors are often under-informed about the policies being negotiated and signed. They have little say over what changes these policies create in their classrooms. The assumption seems to be that any changes that these macro level policies create in the classroom will simply work themselves out.

But is this an accurate assumption?

Research suggests that it is not. Macro-level changes create a lot of micro-level question marks. Questions of language and socialization loom large. There are also concerns about immigration and motivation, and there is the question of preparedness.

The assumption that students' educational and professional backgrounds and knowledge do not matter in the process of teaching and learning is false. It matters to instructors. The course design, preparation and delivery are all affected by who shows up in the classroom. In short, instructors need to have a good idea of who their students are, and what they know or do not know.

In the process of teaching and learning, administrative differences, such as who is an 'international' versus a 'domestic' student can also break down. A student who arrives on a student visa, and a student who has permanent residency or citizenship but obtained a large portion of their prior education abroad, may be very similar from the point of view of teaching and learning. Due to this, in this paper, we use the term 'transnational student' to refer to students who received a large portion of their general education abroad, regardless of citizenship status.

Methods

This study aims to describe the general educational systems in four regions from which Canada receives many transnational students. The methodology used was a systematic literature review. We performed a database search and searched reference lists. The literature selected was published between 2007 and 2019. It was restricted to literature published in English, and of which addressed themes relevant to instructor needs.

Results

This portion is divided into three sections. First, the general characteristics of the four educational systems are presented, and the themes of curricula globally are detailed. Then, the approaches to teaching are discussed. Finally, the implications for Canadian instructors are presented.

What are the general characteristics of curricula in the four regions and globally?

In China, there have been massive reforms which began in the 1990s, and which extended to all regions in the country, with the exception of Shanghai, which had already implemented reforms earlier (Ma, 2018; Yin, 2013). One of the main objectives of the reforms was to shift from instructor-centered to student-centered teaching techniques. There was also a great emphasis placed on 21st century skills, such as problem-solving, collaborative learning, intercultural competence (Wang, 2014), and the use of technology (Huang, 2017). There was also a focus on personality elements like fostering perseverance (Pilz et al., 2016).

In India, there were also a series of reforms in the 20th century, but these had uneven effects throughout the country (Carnoy & Dossani, 2013; Khare, 2014). India is a large, highly diverse country, with many linguistic and ethnic minorities. Different jurisdictions have implemented different priorities in their educational systems. The literature also emphasises the networks of both public and private education in the country, with variable outcomes. Some institutions are well-supported, but others struggle. Problems can include outdated approaches to teaching and a curriculum that is focused on reference disciplines (math, language, history) (Pilz et al., 2016). Secondary education teachers often hope their students will enter into tertiary education, and enter fields that will help them improve their social-economic situation (Khare, 2014).

In the Middle East and North Africa, the literature emphasizes the history of colonial educational systems, which have made way to other forms of political influence (NGOs, other interests) (Karami Akkari, 2014; Mazawi, 2008; Zia, 2007). While the curriculum can often be similar to that taught in the western world, there are some differences. For example, education is taught within a moral and religious framework (Zia, 2007). Also, in institutions where a canon of western literature is taught, the texts are often studied out of context (Dallal, 2017). While reforms have encouraged new approaches to teaching, traditional methods are still prevalent.

In Latin America, the literature emphasizes the high degree of socio-economic inequality in the region (de Ibarrola, 2007; Vasquez-Martinez, 2018). There is a push in many countries to increase access to secondary education, but this must be balanced with the economic reality of many families, which demand that children start working to help support the family by adolescence (de Ibarrola, 2007). In an attempt to balance the need for more access to education

with economic constraints, many countries have established economic partnerships with foreign educational institutions (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Globally, what can be seen is an effort to converge the curricula (Stacey et al., 2018). These efforts are more successful in the sciences and math, than in the social sciences and humanities, which are more culturally dependent (Soysal & Wong, 2007). There is also often an implementation gap; curricula may be more similar on paper than in the students' experiences. Many regions, in many countries, struggle with obtaining the teaching and technical resources to implement the curricula as intended (Pilz et al., 2016).

What teaching strategies have students been exposed to?

The large-scale reforms that have been observed globally also target teaching styles. The goal is to move towards student-centered approaches and modern instructional strategies. However, as with the content of the curriculum, there can be an implementation gap in its delivery. Institutional inertia and pushback from educators are two key factors in the success or failure of implementation of new approaches.

What are the implications for Canadian instructors?

Canadian instructors should be more aware of regional differences that transnational students have. It is also important to treat assumptions of similarity with care: our knowledge bases may be alike, but they also may contain unexpected differences. Similarly, students' experiences of teaching strategies may be similar to those used in Canada, but they also may be different. What's more, the larger the transnational student base, the less likely cultural knowledge is shared.

Discussion and Conclusion

Ultimately, this paper serves as a call for instructors to have strategies for addressing areas of potential mismatch in their classrooms. It is important to clarify expectations and to help students access the resources that they need to address gaps.

The limitations of the study include a focus on comparative education, rather than literature focused on teaching and learning. Despite the macro-level analysis, solutions have to be adapted to individuals and classrooms.

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