

Contribution to the Conference Proceedings on

**Recognition of Qualifications and Internationalisation of Higher Education
in the Euro-Mediterranean Region**

“Lost in Transnational Education: Issues for Discussion”

by

Patrick Werquin¹

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¹ Patrick Werquin has a PhD in Economics. He is Professor at CNAM (*Conservatoire national des arts et métiers*, a French Tertiary Education and Research Institution), Paris; and independent international consultant based in Saint-Sulpice-sur-Lèze, France; patrick.werquin@gmail.com, +33609543569.

1. Background – The Number of Transnational Students Will Grow

In 2012, the number of mobile students – i.e. enrolled in tertiary education outside their country of citizenship – reached 4.5 millions (OECD, 2014). And their number is rapidly growing: they were about 2 millions in 2000. The potential number of transnational students is therefore potentially very high: indeed if there are only two or three students that would like to study transnationally – and who do not enrol in a tertiary education abroad for cost, family or cultural reasons – for each actually mobile student, then the potential number of transnational students is potentially very high.

There is a difference between mobile students and transnational students and the challenge in terms of equity is glaring. There is no widely accepted definition of Transnational Education (TNE) but, for the sake of this paper, it is useful to differentiate it from the encompassing concept of Cross-border Education. One useful way to see it is that Transnational Education is only one component of Cross-border Education. In short Transnational Education refers to the mobility of *curricula*, programmes and institutions. Another component of cross-border education concerns the mobility of students. Transnational students study in their home countries, while mobile students study abroad. In both cases, the students are following *curricula* elaborated in another country than their country of citizenship, it is just that some study remotely whereas others are physically present in the university of which they follow the *curriculum*.

The issue in terms of equity lies here because studying on site or transnationally has major implications regarding quality (Vincent-Lancrin and Pfotenhauer, 2012) and also assessment, motivation, recognition and therefore employability of graduates. This paper is an attempt at discussing some of them, and recognition in particular. To a large extent, these implications overlap with those commonly addressed when dealing with the difference between classroom-based learning and distance learning. One similarity is, for example, the fact that a bigger fraction of the learning is happening non-formally, and even informally, in the cases of distance learning and of transnational learning. There is also the issue of the cultural background that may be very different between the place where the institution delivering the *curriculum* is and the country of the student. To that extent, it is interesting to note that, in some regions of the world, transnational students tend to now enrol in a tertiary institution of their region. For example, in the Arab States, the share of mobile students studying within the region increased from 12% to 30% between 1999 and 2013. The gap is smaller in Central and Eastern Europe (from 25% to 40%), and in Sub-Saharan Africa (from 18% to 22%)¹.

In summary, it is likely that Transnational Education will grow in the years to come. It is likely that transnational students will increasingly choose institutions of their region for studying transitionally. Institutions involved in delivering Transnational Education (e.g. Western universities), or in recognising the currency of qualifications awarded transnationally (e.g. CIMEA in Italy or CIEP in France), should address the challenges associated with equity. Before some of the challenges are spelled out for fuelling the discussion, some succinct definitions are now provided.

2. Terms and Concepts – Qualifications to Make Competences Visible

Several terms will be used throughout this paper. They are rather consensual since the 2007 review of the role of Qualifications Systems in OECD countries (Coles and Werquin, 2007) but they deserved to be reminded here as they are relevant to the points made herein regarding Transnational Education.

¹ Source: www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-student-flow-viz.aspx

A qualification is achieved when a competent body determines that an individual has learned knowledge, skills and/or wider competences than knowledge and skills (a.k.a attributes) to specified standards. This competent body is usually accredited by a ministry – most of the time the Ministry of Education, but also the ministries of Labour, Tertiary Education, Health or else – to award qualifications on its behalf. During the assessment process, the learning outcomes are compared to the criteria set out in the standards. It is preferable that the standards are widely accepted. To create this sense of ownership, all stakeholders – including employers – must be involved early in the process of elaborating the standards. In practice, a qualification is a document that describes the knowledge, skills and attributes (i.e. learning outcomes) of the holder. It is a piece of currency that has value in the formal education and training system and in the labour market. It is one of the main components of employability, especially in countries where a written proof of competence(s) is necessary to occupy a job.

The standard of learning is confirmed by means of an assessment process at the end of a learning process. It is important to stress the use of the term “learning process” and not “learning programme” because the latter is too restrictive and refers only to formal learning, whereas more and more countries are now establishing systems for assessing non-formal and informal learning outcomes, and awarding qualifications on the sole basis of an assessment, whatever the context of learning, formal or not. This point is essential, in the case of Transnational Education, because a fair fraction of the learning outcomes are acquired non-formally, and sometimes informally.

The assessment process leads to the validation of learning outcomes and the awarding of a qualification if the applicant meets the standards. This is sometimes called recognition of learning outcomes but the term recognition should be avoided because it brings about confusion regarding actual recognition – a.k.a Societal Recognition (Werquin, 2012 and 2013) – by the end users, such as employers and other recruiters (e.g. university recruiters). This point is amplified below.

In traditional system – best exemplified by the initial formal education and training system – a qualification usually confers official recognition of currency in the labour market and in further education and training. A qualification can be a legal entitlement to practice a trade. However, there is evidence that a qualification is not always recognised by the society – and employers in particular – typically when it is awarded outside the formal learning system. A qualification that does not benefit from this societal recognition is a poor component of employability.

A qualifications framework is a classification device. It is an instrument for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for levels of learning outcomes achieved. This set of criteria may be implicit in the qualifications descriptors themselves or made explicit in the form of a set of level descriptors. The scope of frameworks may be comprehensive of all learning achievement and pathways or may be confined to a particular sector – for example, initial education, adult education and training or an occupational area. Some frameworks may have more design elements and a tighter structure than others; some may have a legal basis whereas others represent a consensus of views of social partners. All qualifications frameworks, however, establish a basis for improving the quality, accessibility, linkages and public or labour market recognition of qualifications within a country and internationally. A Qualifications Framework should be distinguished from a Qualifications System. The former is only a component of the latter. A Qualifications System is everything in a country that leads to the validation of learning outcomes. It includes the cultures, the financing, the cost. It may include a Qualifications Framework, and a Credit Accumulation and Transfer System.

Qualifications Systems include all aspects of a country’s activity that result in the recognition of learning. These systems include the means of developing and operationalising national or regional policy on qualifications, institutional arrangements, quality assurance processes, assessment and awarding processes, competences recognition and other mechanisms that link

education and training to the labour market and civil society. Qualifications systems may be more or less integrated and coherent. One feature of a qualifications system may be an explicit framework of qualifications.

Formal learning is organised, by a university typically. It is therefore always intentional and it has objectives in terms of learning outcomes. Informal learning is experience. It is never intentional and does not have spelled out learning objectives. It takes place by the mere fact of experiencing the world around and it can happen at home, at the workplace or through participation in voluntary activities for example. Non-formal learning is in between the two previous concepts. Its definition varies depending on the country and the context¹. It is often associated with adult learning (e.g. Africa, Germany and South East Europe) but it could be a second chance for basic education (Morocco). It could also be side learning that takes place alongside a formal learning programme. For example, there is evidence that when undertaking distance learning activities, individuals learn about themselves, learn about self organising their work and becoming more effective. This learning is additional to the initial learning objectives. It was not planned but it did occur.

All in all, this means that there is in fact a continuum of learning contexts, from the most formal to the least formal that is called informal; with non-formal learning contexts somewhere in between. Only three contexts of learning were given a name (formal, non-formal and informal) but there is not such a thing as a three-point scale where only three benchmarks would be marked on the continuum of learning; and all this varies in time and space. Any country aiming at addressing issues such as Transnational Education, or Validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes should definitely decide for itself what kind of definitions, concepts and shared understanding it needs in the short and medium term. This is part of a pragmatic policy, regardless of the international injunctions².

To conclude this section on concepts, the assumption will be made that tertiary education is vocational. There are several reasons for that. The main one is that the definition of vocational education is that it prepares for direct access to the labour market. Since there is nothing else than the labour market after tertiary education, it is necessarily preparing for the labour market. After secondary education, there is either the labour market or tertiary education; but after tertiary education, there is only the labour market. There is also the general trend that tertiary education students have become more utilitarian: they want a job that match their expectations – i.e. their learning career – and that provide decent revenues. In a general context of depressed labour markets, and of fierce competition for the few available job vacancies, the definition of a qualification as a piece of currency for employability takes on its full meaning. It does not mean school should prepare for the labour market. School should prepare for life; but employment is a large component of adult life. It does not mean universities should not thrive for academic excellence, but this excellence is first and foremost rewarded in the labour market. In fact, this paper pretends that the difference between academic and vocational is vain, especially in tertiary education. Most of the curricula heavily rely on conceptual knowledge as well as practical skills and France, in its 2002 Law of Social Modernisation, made the choice to call vocational all tertiary qualifications. France National Qualifications Framework is entitled National Vocational Qualifications Framework.

This way of approaching qualifications, as a visa for work, puts a lot of pressure on Transnational Education and on system for recognising qualifications awarded by Transnational Institutions. There is resolutely an issue of equity.

¹ See Werquin (2007) for more.

² The same applies to national qualifications frameworks. The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) was never meant to be a template and countries should decide on their national qualifications framework according to their needs, and then use the EQF as a translation device; and not the other way around.

3. Challenges – Equity in Accessing Labour Market Opportunities

Sound assessment is a necessary condition to award a qualification. No qualification should ever be awarded without a thorough assessment process being organised in the first place. Individuals are not able to travel throughout life with one single occupation anymore. Young people entering the labour market in 2016 will experience several jobs and occupations – sometimes significantly different from one another – before they reach retirement age. A qualification has become the most solid *Vade Mecum* for individuals to travel throughout life and survive the rapidly changing labour markets. For end users such as employers to trust qualifications, they may only be awarded on the basis of a sound quality assured assessment. Assessment is a process that consists of comparing the learning outcomes of an applicant to a qualification with the predefined standards established for this qualification. The standards consist of a list of criteria that should be wholly or partly tested, and met, during the assessment process. It is a challenge in Transnational Education because the same learning outcome may have different value from a country to another, from a culture to another. Assessment methods will have to address this challenge. There is also the challenge of distance that leads to a situation whereby learners and teachers¹/assessors may never meet, not even electronically, in Transnational Education. It is therefore difficult to find equitable and reliable assessment methods. Traditional classroom-based written examinations cannot be organised; let alone recent developments such as MOOCs where the ratio number of learners to number of teachers/assessors is so unbalanced that actual assessment is just not possible.

Under the pressure of different international rankings – among which the Shanghai Ranking is at the same time not very convincing but still widely used – most universities on all continents have engaged in Quality Assurance. The idea is to document what they are doing in all the components of the life of a student. This range from the expect programmes, curriculum and pedagogy, or course, and extend to the every day life of the students and the recruitment of teachers. In this process, Transnational Education is barely address and, thus far, does not seem to receive significant enough attention. When they carry out their self-evaluation, universities often neglect the very specific aspect of Transnational Education, even when they are fully engaged in delivering their *curricula* to remote students. Quality Assurance is essential for Transnational Education because it is an element that helps building trust when assessment is quality assured. There are no tried and tested methods for doing so, but Transnational Education institutions may start by communicating about quality. Most [regional] institutions having transnational students may never be in the Shanghai ranking but becoming transparent about what they do, showing progress, being holistic in the Quality Assurance approach will attract [good] students. Diploma mills will not be able to sustain interest if there is full transparency. This may mean that Transnational Education institutions will have to carry out Transnational Education leavers' surveys, for instance, and they will be a cost but easy solutions exist.

A challenge that has become glaring in the MENA countries is the relevance of the curricula proposed by Western tertiary institutions to the Arab World. Instruments elaborated in Europe are used throughout the MENA region without any adaptation, let alone the elaboration of idiosyncratic instruments. It is difficult to find a place in the MENA region where the hot topics are not the BMD² approach, the Qualifications Framework, or the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning Outcomes approach; to name a few. There is no questioning whether these approaches are adapted to the local context, but they are widely used. The Sorbonne-Bologna process is often better known outside of Europe than in Europe. Again, with the assumption that all tertiary education systems are vocational and that students are first and foremost studying for eventually successfully entering the labour market, Transnational Education should prepare students for their labour market, not for a sort of one-

¹ The term “teacher” will be used herein to designate any tertiary education staff teaching, whether professor, lecturer or else.

² Bachelor-Master-Doctorate

size-fit-all non-existing labour market. If one takes education again as an economic sector, for example, few of the senior staff in ministries in the MENA region are in the a position to devise instruments that would respond to their specific needs, economically and culturally. In the best-case scenarios, senior staff in those ministries adapts western instruments to their context; most of the time they use them as such. Tertiary education students, and transnational students among them, should be prepared for their future labour market. This requires that *curricula* are adapted; this may mean that the exact same qualification may not be awarded to different students from the same institution. This would mean the end of Transnational Education and there must be intermediary options. Of course, Transnational Education has the immense merit of exposing transnational students to global issues and broad competences. However, not all transnational students will work internationally and the challenge of globally delivering local curricula should be addressed. This may mean the development of regional hubs that deliver culturally consistent curricula in their region of influence.

Among the difficulties that connect local labour market, employability, *curricula* and assessment, there is the issue of Work Based Learning. There is strong evidence that tertiary education students perform better in the labour market when they have had some exposure to the world of work and workplace practice during their studies; through internship typically. The issue is that it is already very difficult to place interns in private companies and to organise mentorship in traditional tertiary education; Transnational Education adds a layer of difficulty in terms of networking in order to place students, and in controlling and assessing the Work Based Learning outcomes. Certificates of attendance fall short of providing evidence of acquisition of competences. The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) allows the awarding of credits for work placement but it does not go without burdens, such as heavy paperwork (the signing of a Learning Agreement, with learning outcomes specified), clear procedures for assessment and/or the training of staff in tertiary education institutions for the supervision and management of work placement (EC, 2009). These also represent additional layers of complexity Transnational Education has not begun to address.

Many countries have put in place a Credit Accumulation and Transfer System. The approach is relevant but the transfer component of the system has proven difficult in many instances, mainly because the learning outcomes content of one credit vary a lot from a system to another, let alone the fact that some countries have several credit system. This proves to a large extent that many countries need a Qualifications System just as they need a Qualifications Framework. A Credit Accumulation and Transfer System is, together with a Qualifications Framework, one element of a Qualifications System and, when there is no pre-established widely accepted learning outcomes content for a credit unit. This means a lot of preparatory work involving all stakeholders.

4. Main Challenge – The Illusion of Recognition

The word recognition has at least two meanings in the context of education and training in general, and of Transnational Education in particular. The recognition of learning outcomes is different from the recognition of qualifications. The former takes place when an applicant is successful in meeting predefined [preferably widely agreed] assessment standards. The latter, recognition of qualifications, is a societal issue. In other words, and this is crucial for Transnational Education, it is not because a teacher or an assessor (or a group of teachers/assessors) has validated the learning outcomes presented by an applicant that the employers, for instance, and the rest of the society at large (e.g. families, peers, university recruiters) will accept this qualification as evidence for competence(s).

Recognition of learning outcomes is the technical part. It is close in essence to the concept of validation, whose main stage is the assessment. Recognition of qualifications takes way more

time and efforts. Recognition of qualification awarded in Transnational Education requires that many of the challenges described above have been addressed, and Quality Assurance in assessment in particular.

In Transnational Education, as in education and training in general, it is societal recognition of qualifications that matters; because again a qualification is a key component of employability and a visa for work in many systems and cultures. It is of paramount importance – especially for Transnational Education stakeholders – to realise that a teacher, or assessor, may well validate the learning outcomes of an applicant without the society accepting that the corresponding qualification has any value or currency. What matters to applicants is that their newly acquired qualification is recognised by the society they live in and, most importantly, among the key stakeholders in this society, the employers in particular.

The challenge of societal recognition of qualifications is not specific at all to Transnational Education. The same rule applies to any learning activities leading to a qualification. Qualifications awarded to successful candidates in any education and training system (upper secondary education, university, or TVET for example) must have currency and be valued by society, and by employers, for these qualifications to be useful to graduates; i.e. to provide return on investment. The fact is that, in Transnational Education, the input process¹ is unknown. Transnational students are on their own most of the time, and a large fraction of the learning is happening in a context that is not formal. Therefore, the issue of trust appears sooner or later because it is not known how applicants have acquired their competences. If the promoters of Transnational Education do not address the issue of societal recognition, then end users of qualifications – again employers mainly – may deny the currency of qualifications awarded to successful applicants. Societal recognition must be among the top priorities of Transnational Education. Otherwise, there may well be that recognition is an illusion; which means, in practice, that traditional students will always be preferred to transnational students in all recruitment processes.

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Transnational Education, distance learning, Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning Outcomes, among others, are topics that share common challenges. Issues such as assessment, quality assurance or societal recognition of awarded qualifications should be quickly addressed for a more equitable education and training, or lifelong learning, system; and for ensuring that formal initial classroom-based education is not the only acceptable education pathway toward decent careers. This needs vision and a strong commitment to address thorny questions.

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¹ How, where, when and with whom one has learnt.

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