

ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

QUALITY TRANSNATIONAL DISTANCE EDUCATION: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY ON
INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Approval of Dissertation

The undersigned certify that they have read the dissertation entitled

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Abstract

Globalization has catalyzed new opportunities and risks for higher education institutions, prompting a transformation in defining quality to measure and encompass internationalization, including transnational distance education. This study aims to identify quality dimensions to support internationalization efforts for transnational distance education, assess the impact of an internationalization quality dimension on research outputs, and understand perceptions of quality through the reflection of transnational distance learners. Using an exploratory sequential mixed methods design, this three-phased investigation begins with a qualitative content analysis of five international quality assurance frameworks to identify internationalization quality dimensions for transnational distance education. Informed by the findings of the first phase, the second phase incorporates a bibliometric analysis to measure international research collaboration outputs of three open universities and nine of their national counterparts. The third phase, also an international research collaboration, explores the experiences of three transnational distance education learners and their two faculty mentors using an in-depth collaborative autoethnography approach to define quality in transnational distance education. Twenty-seven internationalization indicators were conceptualized within a typology, predominately embedded in curriculum and governance dimensions, revealing a misalignment between research and practice. One of these indicators, international research collaboration, was further examined. Findings suggest the credibility of international research collaboration as a proxy for quality and academic excellence, demonstrating a 12.3% article citation increase in peer-reviewed publications. Finally, from the perspectives of transnational distance learners, quality is related to access, curriculum design, social and emotional support, and relevancy across contexts. A summary of the findings and implications in this manuscript-based dissertation are discussed, presenting international research collaboration as a quality dimension and measurable indicator across all levels of education

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systems. Recommendations are shared to support quality efforts in transnational distance education.

Keywords: quality, internationalization, higher education, transnational distance education, international research collaboration, open universities, transnational distance learners

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Internationalization of higher education is becoming increasingly prevalent, fueled by globalization, the growing necessity for a globally competitive workforce, and the desire for cross-border research partnerships to address national and global issues (Castells, 2011; Knight, 1997). These factors have catalyzed higher education institutions to respond by integrating internationalized practices and strategic initiatives to satisfy social, cultural, political, and economic motivations, including talent mobility, knowledge diplomacy, and global institutional rankings (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Furthermore, communication technologies and governmental policies have facilitated the internationalization of higher education, enabling higher education institutions to reach a broader, more diverse audience and contribute to cultural exchange and diplomatic efforts (De Wit, 2020; Lima et al., 2020). With this backdrop, innovative education models, including transnational distance education, have emerged. By reducing time and distance across geographical borders, transnational distance education leverages communication technologies, enabling learners and instructors to engage in knowledge sharing, acquisition and application without the need to physically travel for an in-person experience (Bruhn-Zass, 2022).

Over the last thirty years, there has been a significant increase in transnational distance education (Bannier, 2016), and this trend is expected to continue (GUNi, 2022). Transnational distance learning offers a range of advantages, such as providing flexible learning options for marginalized and lifelong learners, being operationally scalable, and promoting environmental sustainability (Sabzalieva et al., 2022). Moreover, it can address the expected increase in higher education enrollments (ICDE, 2015; OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2019). The potential for transnational distance education is substantial, as international organizations predict a significant

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increase in higher education enrollment from 99.4 million in 2000 to over 414.2 million by 2030 (Ossiannilsson et al., 2015; World Bank, 2018). Moreover, the Paris High-Level Policy Forum stated that numerous students will enroll online and across borders to pursue higher education (UNESCO & ICDE, 2015). In response to the enrolment demand and the ease of access provided by internet-based communication technologies, higher education institutions have adopted distance learning modalities (Nichols, 2020), and policy agendas have evolved to support internationalization strategies and facilitate globalization (Uvalic-Trumbic & Martin, 2021).

Shaped by enrolment factors and more accessible communication technologies, higher education internationalization efforts have accelerated (Bruhn, 2020; Gaebel et al., 2018), but concerns regarding quality have also increased (Jung, 2022; Knight, 2001, 2007; Latchem, 2016). As a result, stakeholders such as governments, higher education institutions, academic professionals and students have shifted their focus towards evaluation metrics and outcomes that aim to enhance socio-economic development across borders (Guo et al., 2019; OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2019). Despite efforts to establish quality outcomes in higher education, a universally accepted definition or metric to evaluate quality does not exist (Altbach et al., 2019; Sarrico et al., 2010; Vinent-Lancrin & Pfothenauer, 2012). This is particularly challenging in transnational distance education, where identifying and interpreting quality can be more complex because quality is defined by social, cultural, political, and economic value systems and individual paradigms (Garrison, 1993; Harvey & Green, 1993). In transnational distance education, participants come from diverse cultural backgrounds, have different technological infrastructures, and face varying regulatory requirements. To ensure quality education, universal standards must adapt to accommodate cultural and contextual variations, ensuring effective implementation across diverse transnational distance settings.

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My dissertation research is significant because it explores the complex challenges and dynamics associated with quality in transnational distance education, a rapidly advancing field in practice and study. By understanding and addressing cultural, technological, and regulatory differences, stakeholders can improve educational experiences and outcomes for learners across borders. In order to enhance the evolving landscape of internationalization in higher education, my dissertation research examines quality dimensions of transnational distance education through three distinct analyses, providing a benchmark for future research to inform practice and demonstrating the depth of this emerging field of study. These three analyses are presented as individual manuscripts in Chapters 2-4 and follow an exploratory sequential design (Tashakkori et al., 2020) in which each manuscript informed the subsequent research phase. Chapter 2 employed a content analysis method to build a typology of quality indicators for transnational distance education shaped by five internationally recognized quality frameworks for distance learning modalities. The findings in this manuscript identified 27 quality indicators for transnational distance education; one indicator, international research collaboration, was tested in the subsequent study. Consequently, in Chapter 3, I provide a bibliometric analysis that examines the impact of international research collaboration on the quality of research outputs within open universities. This manuscript is unique because it is one of the first to measure the quantitative impact of publications from researchers affiliated with open universities. Finally, in Chapter 4, the third manuscript represents a form of praxis in which the study is an example of an international research collaboration output that gathered primary data from transnational distance graduate students to explore quality in a collaborative, qualitative approach.

The findings of this dissertation may suggest to policymakers, researchers, and higher education professionals how to measure quality in transnational distance education to support

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effective internationalization practices for successful transnational distance learner outcomes.

Additionally, this research sheds light on the significance of open universities as more than teaching and learning institutions for workforce development but also valuable contributors to knowledge production and dissemination worldwide, both quality components to academic excellence in higher education. This body of research also guides faculty and students in designing, supporting, and engaging in a quality transnational distance education experience.

In the remainder of this chapter, I establish the background and significance of this study and ground the research in a literature review summary. Following the overview of relevant literature, I introduce the research design and interrelated components of the three manuscripts to establish the logic and relevance of the three studies to form the basis for this dissertation.

Background

Globalization has significantly redefined the infrastructure, policies, and practices of higher education. The effects of globalization on higher education have been profound, affecting not only the physical and operational aspects of institutions but also the fundamental paradigms and principles that underpin the educational landscape (Van Der Wende, 2001; Tight, 2021). Marginson and Rhoades (2002) define globalization as “the development of increasingly integrated systems and relationships beyond the nation” (p. 288), a concept that evolved over centuries and continues to provoke governments and higher education institutions to respond (Lee & Stensaker, 2021). In response, leaders and decision-makers guide academic and administrative staff to fulfill political and social responsibilities essential for developing global information societies (Sharipov, 2020; de Wit, 2019). Accordingly, academic and administrative professionals have developed policies, practices and strategies in the form of international mobility models known as the internationalization of higher education (Altbach & Knight, 2007;

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de Wit, 1999). The mobility and flow of students, educational programs, institutions, research, and services across international borders (Strielkowski et al., 2021; Torres, 2015) only continues to accelerate. For example, between 2010 and 2017, the number of international students enrolled in higher education globally more than doubled, from 2.75 million to 5.7 million (UNESCO, 2019). In 2020, on average, 10.4% of all students enrolled in higher education in OECD countries were international students (OECD, 2023), reflecting the growth of higher education institutions involved in internationalization (Ge, 2022).

Additionally, higher education plays a dual role in globalization, both as a creator of technological innovations and as a significant consumer (Välimaa & Hoffman, 2008). The evolution of technology, especially in transportation and communication, has brought significant changes to higher education (Ramírez Iñiguez, 2011; Zumeta et al., 2021), enabling new modes in the internationalization of higher education (Kovačević & Dagen, 2022), such as transnational distance education. These technological advancements have reduced barriers and increased the exchange of resources, including soft and tangible assets, across geographical borders and cultures (Knight, 2022a). The cross-border flow of resources has increased economic, political, and societal global interdependence, as well as knowledge transfer, creation and dissemination generated by higher education institutions (Castells, 2011; McBurnie, 2001). According to Gopal (2011), national policy and guidance have created the conditions for universities to be the vehicle to produce knowledge as a form of soft power (Evans & Jakupec, 2021; Nye, 1990) as a means to engage in international diplomacy (Knight, 2022b). In today's networked and knowledge society (Márquez-Ramos & Mourelle, 2018), information and knowledge are perceived as high-value assets and an economic sustainability plan in the global marketplace (Sharma & Sharma, 2021). With power in knowledge and innovation, research funding and sponsorship are more

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transparent with open-access publishing rights (Morillo, 2020) and support more significant, long-term global strategies (Knight, 2022a). Additionally, from a knowledge transfer perspective, countries want to engage in collaborative processes and agreements, such as cross-border accreditation, to present perceptions of quality and compete for international students (Blanco Ramírez & Luu, 2018) to generate revenue (Cantwell, 2019). As these global interdependencies continue to evolve at an unprecedented pace, scholars worldwide project the need for innovative strategies to steer the course of higher education (Huang et al., 2022; Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2015; de Wit, 2020).

Transnational distance education is an innovative internationalization strategy that provides access to educational opportunities across geographical boundaries by using communication technologies without needing to physically relocate to the country of the educational provider (Ziguras, 2008), thereby making education borderless (Cunningham et al., 1998). Scholars suggest that transnational distance education has the potential to provide more inclusive access to cross-cultural education (Bruhn-Zass, 2022; Sadykova & Dautermann, 2019), especially for those who are unable to relocate to another country for professional or personal reasons. However, transnational distance education as an internationalization model requires more research and evaluation to demonstrate its effects (Bruhn, 2016; Kosmützky & Putty, 2016). This dearth of research might be the reluctance of higher education institutions to strategically integrate online and distance learning modalities into their education model (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2022), perhaps due to negative perceptions of quality (Gaskell & Mills, 2015). Alternatively, the absence could result from the lack of consensus and objective measures to assess the effectiveness of internationalization efforts (Gao, 2019; UNESCO, 2020). Regardless, to facilitate the growth of the internationalization of higher education and ensure its

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success across borders, stakeholders necessitate evidence-based and actionable guidelines for informed decision-making and ongoing quality enhancement in transnational distance education (Ubachs & Henderikx, 2022).

Finally, this body of research is situated from the perspective of open and distance universities. Over the last thirty years, open universities have implemented new methods to enhance the accessibility of education to a diverse range of individuals who are unable to attend in-person classes (Tait, 2018). Many of the innovative features that open universities have introduced, such as collaborative instructional design and modular credit systems, have been embraced by traditional institutions and are now part of mainstream higher education (Guri-Rosenblit, 2019). Within this three-decade period, the internationalization of higher education redefined university strategic plans and policy guidance to mobilize education internationally and expand its reach (Knight & de Wit, 2018). Conceptually, if the goal of open universities and internationalization is to expand access, then transnational distance education offers an integrated solution as a more inclusive and flexible international learning model (Moreira, 2016). However, in the context of open universities, transnational distance models lack organizational capacity, including funding and staff readiness (Hou, 2022; Queroda, 2020; Wang & Zhang, 2013) even though strategic plans are becoming more internationalized (Celikbas & Toprak, 2023; Marinoni & de Wit, 2019). As more open universities strategically engage in internationalization practices, evidence-based quality measures and standards are necessary (Latchem & Ryan, 2013; Wilkins & Juusola, 2018). Without international guidance, valid measures or quality assurance practices, stakeholders' risk negative unintended consequences from degree mills to the erosion of cultural values (Kamyab & Raby, 2023). Therefore, this body of research aims to close the gap between

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the four concepts of internationalization of higher education, distance education, quality dimensions, and open universities in order to inform research and practice.

Significance of Study

With the anticipated increase in higher education enrollments and acceleration of the knowledge economy, universities seek strategies to meet the demand and remain competitive in the globalized market. A solution is to provide access to higher education through distance learning models and internationalization initiatives. Nevertheless, while open and online universities are innovative, they are not always synonymous with academic excellence and quality. As higher education institutions engage at an unprecedented rate in internationalization activities, like transnational distance education, stakeholders cite the need for valid quality assurance tools and universal instruments to measure their performance and reduce risk (Knight & Liu, 2019; Wysocka et al., 2022).

As a result, my dissertation research addresses five significant purposes. Firstly, in Chapter 2, this study identifies internationalization indicators in cross-border and distance education quality assurance frameworks that support transnational distance education efforts. The findings may inform scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to reflect upon current recommendations and guidance to develop systematic and measurable indicators to support the acceleration of internationalization in higher education. Secondly, this body of research takes an innovative approach to understanding the relationship of international research collaboration as a quality indicator with knowledge production and transfer in three open and online universities. Most studies that utilize bibliometrics analysis to measure research outputs, including international research collaboration, do not examine the effects in open and online universities. Thirdly, the contributions of this research may be one of the first studies to measure

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internationalization in distance education contexts and benchmark descriptive statistics on open universities research outputs, as articulated in Chapter 3. Fourthly, this dissertation amplifies the experiences of transnational distance learners by sharing an example of an international research collaboration study that identifies quality dimensions from the student perspective in Chapter 4. Finally, this pragmatic study strengthens and builds upon the dynamic relationship between distance education and higher education internationalization.

In order to demonstrate the significance of this body of research, I provide a brief overview of the literature. Additionally, literature reviews are included in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, which are tailored to address the corresponding research questions in each manuscript.

Summary of the Literature

This section demonstrates a brief, but comprehensive overview of relevant literature developed by scholars worldwide. In total, I conducted five literature reviews for this dissertation. The first preliminary review was initiated to understand the landscape of this study. Three additional reviews were conducted to support individual research phases and were developed for each manuscript, provided in Chapters 2, 3 and 4. A final literature analysis was initiated at the conclusion of the three research phases to integrate more recent research into Chapters 1 and 5.

The literature reviews were conducted using DISCOVER, Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest and Google Scholar databases with a Boolean operator as a search strategy to assess peer-reviewed literature published in English between 2011 and 2024. Search terms were categorized as quality assurance and evaluation, internationalization in higher education, education models, learner characteristics, and research measurement to develop search combinations. The following terms or their variations were used in the Boolean search: adult

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education, adult learner, assurance standard, Canada, distance education, distance learners, evaluation, globalization, Greece, higher education, international, international research collaboration, internationalization, internationalization at home, knowledge diplomacy, learners, learning experience, lifelong learning, online education, open access, open university, performance measurements, quality assurance, quality indicators, transnational, transnational distance education, sponsored research, students, university, and virtual internationalization. My preliminary searches concluded with 783 potential articles, which were synthesized and reduced to 354 resources due to their relationship with the studies. Additionally, subset searches were performed to identify policy reports, historical documents, and more recent and seminal literature, which expanded the data corpus by 40 additional resources. Once all the research outputs were obtained, I evaluated and categorized 394 resources by author, year, journal, keywords, research questions, methodology, delivery models, findings, country, affiliation, quotes, and the number of citations. Finally, I engaged in a review and selection process to identify and synthesize trends and patterns in empirical research, the relationship between studies, and gaps in literature. Informed by the literature analysis and the literature reviews provided in the manuscript Chapters 2, 3, and 4, this section focuses on the issues surrounding the knowledge gap of quality in transnational distance education and the premise of this body of research. The overview intends to reduce redundancy across chapters and to situate the context.

Internationalization holds great promise as an innovative practice in the higher education landscape, but research gaps persist. My literature analysis revealed four gaps which influenced my research design for this multi-phased dissertation. These gaps can be described as a lack of conceptual consensus on transnational distance education and the learners who engage in these internationalization strategies, as well as identifying quality and its measurement in transnational

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distance education. The remaining part of this section will further discuss these four gaps in the literature.

To begin, distance and online internationalization models, often referred to as transnational distance education, internationalization at home, borderless education, or virtual internationalization in higher education, are under-conceptualized (Bruhn, 2016; Bruhn-Zass, 2022). This issue may be compounded by the lack of consensus among scholars on the definition of internationalization in higher education (Knight, 2011; de Wit, 2023), let alone its facets, with transnational distance education being one of them. Internationalization in higher education is a multi-faceted concept rooted in the academic mobility of individuals, programs, providers, policies, and projects across geographic borders (Knight & de Wit, 2018). This exchange is a dynamic process and deliberate practice driven by social, cultural, political, and economic motivations to extend access to higher education internationally (de Wit, 1999). The complexity and vast evolution of the internationalization of higher education rely on governments and higher education institutions to define which dynamic and deliberate processes and practices they engage in and how they define them within their contexts (Tight, 2021). Without a common language or term for distance internationalization models, researchers and practitioners are left with a conceptual understanding that reflects their context and paradigms. Therefore, further theoretical and empirical research is necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of the emerging models of transnational distance education, their impact on the quality of education, and the unique challenges they pose. Emerging research addressing these gaps may be imminent, as the global pandemic increased the development and adoption of transnational distance education models (Huang et al., 2022; Schueller & Şahin, 2023).

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Subsequently, and perhaps because transnational distance education has not been fully conceptualized, the transnational distance education student perspective is critically absent from the literature (Stewart, 2019). According to Mittelmeier et al. (2021), transnational distance students occupy a distinct “third category” between international and distance learners and have yet to be fully conceptualized. My analysis also recognizes that many distance education students, including transnational distance, are adult learners with distinct learner characteristics (Holmberg, 2003; Mezirow, 1997; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017). Chapter 4 further discusses similarities and differences between international students and transnational distance learners in higher education. As an emerging and heterogeneous student population, transnational distance learners present a significant opportunity for future research (Mittelmeier, 2022). Transnational distance learners’ unique experiences, challenges, and aspirations remain understudied, hindering a holistic understanding of quality and internationalization practices.

The topic of quality assurance is a common issue discussed in both distance education (Jung, 2022; Scull et al., 2011; Shraim, 2020; Stella & Gnanam, 2004) and the internationalization of higher education literature (Hou, 2020; Khamis & Scully, 2020; Smith, 2010; van Damme, 2001). However, the intersection of these two fields, specifically in the context of transnational distance education, remains relatively uncharted territory. Defining quality is a complex task influenced by diverse stakeholders, from students to policymakers, as well as educational paradigms (Harvey & Green, 1993). Furthermore, this complexity is compounded by the absence of validated methods and metrics for assessing internationalization effectiveness in higher education (Yesufu, 2018). Scholars advocate for common quality assurance frameworks in cross-border education to ensure international standardization and comparability of qualifications (Ossiannilsson et al., 2015; Staring et al., 2022) as well as

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indicators that offer institutions a holistic perspective on quantifiable quality dimensions (Gao, 2019; Knight, 2007; De Wit, 2019). Further, Esfigani (2018) suggests that content analysis is one approach to identifying common quality indicators of existing international quality frameworks and standards. Therefore, as presented in Chapter 2, I conducted a content analysis to highlight the perceived importance of globally valued quality dimensions and factors in open and online distance education to address the gap.

Finally, the fourth research gap is measuring quality across national contexts in university internationalization. As Gacel-ávila (2005) suggests, global performance measurement can only be effective if it moves beyond national borders and is adopted internationally. Based on my literature analysis, Gao (2015, 2018, 2019) has provided the most comprehensive document analysis and multi-national case studies to determine internationalization performance measurements and quality dimensions. Two dimensions Gao (2019) identified are studied in this body of research: international research collaboration and international students. International research collaboration is an output indicator that measures the production and dissemination of knowledge from researchers affiliated with different countries (Coccia & Bozeman, 2016; Frame & Carpenter, 1979). Although international research collaboration is an emerging performance indicator, often studied through bibliometrics (Ball, 2020), it has rarely been applied to transnational distance education contexts, including open and online universities. The second internationalization quality dimension explored in this research, according to Gao's framework (2019), is international students, their mobility, and opportunities post-graduation. However, as previously mentioned, there are conceptual differences between international students and transnational distance students (Mittelmeier et al., 2021; Stewart, 2019), although the dimensions Gao outlines are similar indicators for transnational distance education students. Gao integrates

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the framework in China, Singapore, and Australia but does not explore transnational distance education models. Therefore, a gap remains in investigating quality measurement frameworks to capture the nuances of transnational distance education, which is further discussed in Chapter 3.

In summary, stakeholders involved in international higher education suggest a need for practical guidelines to facilitate their decision-making and continuous improvement efforts for quality transnational distance education (Carvalho et al., 2022; Esfijani, 2018; Leisyte & Westerheijden, 2014). However, there is a lack of research on the quality dimensions and performance indicators of transnational distance education. Therefore, further research is necessary to measure quality dimensions and determine the impact of supporting transnational distance education as an internationalization strategy. Additionally, informed by my literature analysis, there is a significant opportunity for future research in internationalization measures, particularly in the context of distance education. Open and online universities are well-positioned to scale mass education and innovate higher education (Daniel, 2023; Tait, 2018), but they are not well-represented in the relevant literature. Furthermore, with the expansive growth of open, online, and flexible education and the internationalization of higher education, research is lagging behind practice. In addition to pragmatic theoretical models and conceptual frameworks, more advanced research methods such as content analysis and bibliometric analysis are needed to understand effective internationalization practices. The findings of this initial literature review guided the methodological approach to address gaps in research on transnational distance education, which is further discussed in the following section.

Purpose Statement

This body of research examines transnational distance education quality dimensions and the impact of internationalization efforts in open and online distance education universities. It

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also presents an example of an internationalization measure through an international research collaboration manuscript which explores quality dimensions through the experiences of graduate transnational distance education students. Through a collection of three manuscripts, this dissertation provides a typology of quality dimensions in transnational distance education, demonstrates that open and online universities participate in academic excellence through international research collaboration as a metric for internationalization, and explores quality dimensions from the perception of transnational distance learners in an international research collaboration.

By conducting an exploratory sequential mixed methods design across three studies, this research evolves from qualitative exploration to quantitative examination to assess how international collaboration impacts transnational distance education and concludes with an example of international research collaboration. Therefore, this dissertation serves three research purposes, which are further illustrated in the manuscripts presented in Chapters 2, 3 and 4. The first purpose is to utilize qualitative, secondary data from international quality assurance frameworks to identify quality dimensions to support internationalization efforts for transnational distance education. From this initial exploration, the qualitative findings informed the quantitative analysis of secondary data from the Scopus database to investigate the effects of international research collaboration as a measure of quality in open universities. This leads to the second purpose, which is to measure international research collaboration and the research outputs in three open universities engaged with the quality assurance frameworks utilized in the first phase of exploration. This helps us understand how and to what extent open universities engage in the internationalization of higher education through knowledge dissemination as a quality dimension. Finally, the third purpose is to assess how international collaboration in

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research supports quality transnational distance education from primary data generated by transnational distance learners who graduated from an open university. The significance of this qualitative approach is to draw attention to the emerging transnational distance student population and highlight perspectives to inform quality internationalization practices in higher education. In order to address these purposes, three research questions were developed and investigated.

Primary Research Questions

This manuscript-based dissertation contributes knowledge through three papers, with each manuscript sequentially addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the quality dimensions to support internationalization efforts for transnational distance education?
2. How does international research collaboration affect knowledge production and dissemination in open universities compared with non-open universities?
3. How do transnational distance education graduate students perceive quality?

Methodology

An exploratory sequential mixed methods research design is demonstrated across three manuscripts, each with its own analysis, to examine quality dimensions for transnational distance education. In order to understand why this methodological approach was determined the most appropriate for this study, I begin this section with a discussion of my ontology and epistemology. Additionally, this section will establish the research design components, including the research methods, research questions, data collection and analysis of each manuscript and how they align collectively as a dissertation.

Ontology, Epistemology and Paradigms

The intention of defining the researcher's underlying philosophical views and associated interpretations establishes the influences of the research design and data analysis (Bunniss & Kelly, 2010). According to Crotty (1998), ontology is the study of existence, which shapes a researcher's scientific inquiry and determines the nature of their reality. The way a researcher understands her reality is related to the process of knowing, which is called epistemology (Cohen et al., 2017). A researcher's epistemology refers to how knowledge is acquired and the relationship between the knower and the known. Guba and Lincoln (1994) address this process by asking, "what is the nature of the relationship between the would-be knower and what can be known?" (p. 108). The researcher's paradigm, or worldview, influences the research question or hypothesis, the research design, data collection, procedures, and analysis (Khaldi, 2017). Therefore, researchers adopt a methodology based on their worldviews, which include the researcher's discipline, community, and personal experiences, to act as "a basic set of beliefs that guide action" (Guba, 1990, p. 17).

My investigation of this world is multi-faceted and aligns most closely with objectivist assumptions of reality, which can be understood imperfectly and probabilistically (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Further, I believe that reality is socially and culturally constructed and can be observed and measured through diverse viewpoints (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). In this body of research, my epistemological assumptions are objective and subjective, shifting their relationship to support an exploratory sequential design (Cohen et al., 2017). Additionally, I identify my worldviews with post-positivism and pragmatic orientations based on how I perceive knowledge to exist and how I believe knowledge is created. The following sections will further discuss my research paradigms and how they shaped this study.

Post-positivism Paradigm

Social science researchers recognized the limitations of positivism, or the scientific method paradigm, and combined interpretivism components to define post-positivism as a “deterministic philosophy in which causes determine effects or outcomes” (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 6). To observe an objective reality, post-positivism views accept an experimental, reductionist approach that tests variables. Although post-positivists may take a qualitative approach, they often adopt quantitative methods to test a theory (Cohen et al., 2017), which is evident in my second manuscript, shared in Chapter 3.

Throughout this body of research, my voice may transfer as a “disinterested scientist as an informer of decision-makers, policymakers and change agents” (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 166). This is because I strive to be as neutral as possible, not only in my voice but also in my research design and data analysis (Giddings & Grant, 2007). As Ryan (2006) suggests, post-positivist researchers strive for neutrality, accept duality, recognize complexity, and believe that there is not an overall truth, which makes post-positivist research inclusive to qualitative, quantitative or mix-methods studies. By valuing a mixed-method approach, like this dissertation, post-positivists seek to minimize bias and maximize reliability (Panhwar et al., 2017). Therefore, post-positivism supports a pluralistic perspective that recognizes the scientific method and believes that theories require testing to demonstrate acceptable results (Popper, 1959).

Pragmatism as a Paradigm

In addition to a post-positivist worldview, I also strongly align with pragmatism. According to Feilzer (2010), pragmatism offers an alternative worldview with a focus on the problem and questions to be researched and the “desire to produce socially useful knowledge” (p. 6). Pragmatists accept that there are singular and multiple realities by rejecting the binary

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distinctions from the paradigm wars (Gage, 1989). Therefore, pragmatism offers a third choice and enables researchers to “mix and match design components that offer the best chance of answering their specific research questions” to solve real-world problems (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 15). One of the most defining characteristics of pragmatism as a paradigm is that it offers “an expensive and creative form of research, not limiting form of research. It is inclusive, pluralistic, and complementary, and it suggests that researchers take an eclectic approach to method selection and the thinking about and conduct of research” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 17). I believe this creative approach is threaded throughout the dissertation but may be most apparent in the first manuscript, in Chapter 2. For example, in Chapter 2, I pose the question, what are the quality dimensions to support internationalization efforts for transnational distance education, and through a content analysis, I quantitatively describe the dataset before listing the 27 quality indicators, then proceed to a network analysis to demonstrate they interrelations of concepts. Although I took a qualitative approach to identify the quality dimensions, I actively mixed and matched research design components to illustrate my findings. Further details of this manuscript as well as the others, will be introduced in the following section, now that I have discussed how my positionality has informed this research.

Research Design

Research questions or hypothesis statements centralize what the researcher intends to learn or answer in the study using data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Simply put, “research questions get to the heart of the research issue” (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 165). In the case of mixed methods studies, the research method “should contain at least three research questions: the qualitative question, the quantitative question or hypothesis and a mixed-methods question” (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 142). The researcher’s philosophical underpinnings form the

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research questions, and in return, the research questions frame the purpose, objectives, design, methodologies, data types, and interpretation of the study results. Informed by my philosophical views of reality and the interrelationships between each paradigm approach, post-positivism and pragmatism, I address the following research questions:

1. What are the quality dimensions to support internationalization efforts for transnational distance education?
2. How does international research collaboration affect knowledge production and dissemination in open universities compared with non-open universities?
3. How do transnational distance education graduate students perceive quality?

Exploratory Sequential Design

Using a mixed methods approach across three phases of analysis, with each analysis presented as a manuscript, this study involves qualitative and quantitative data collection (Creswell & Clark, 2017). A sequential exploratory design is characterized by a qualitative phase followed by a quantitative phase of data collection and analysis (Fetters et al., 2013). In this approach, data collected in the qualitative phase informs the quantitative data collection as an embedded design to guide interpretation and explore a phenomenon (Creswell, 2003; Subedi, 2016). Researchers often choose mixed methods designs because integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies provides deeper insights and credibility to address complex and multi-faceted research problems (Doyle et al., 2009; Greene et al., 1989; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010). Therefore, my dissertation research incorporated three analyses, beginning with a qualitative phase in Chapter 2, before a quantitative analysis in Chapter 3. The third analysis, in Chapter 4, takes a pragmatic approach to understanding quality dimensions in transnational distance education and connects the previous chapters. Creatively, the Chapter 4 manuscript

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integrates components of Chapter 2 to explore how transnational distance education learners perceive a quality experience; however, it also mirrors the findings of Chapter 3 as an indicator of quality. A more in-depth interpretation of the results and the relation between manuscripts is provided in Chapter 5. The following section introduces an overview of the research design and the study's three phases to situate the three manuscripts.

Phase One

In this initial phase, a qualitative content analysis was utilized to organize networks of concepts and identify quality indicators from five internationally developed quality assurance frameworks to establish a quality dimension typology. Quality is a subjective concept that is influenced by individual perspectives, paradigms, value systems, and objectives of the stakeholders involved in the educational process (Harvey & Green, 2006). Therefore, this study aimed to identify international indicators and variables of quality to support and inform the internationalization of higher education through transnational distance education.

In order to analyze content effectively, Krippendorff (2018) suggests reducing text into smaller units and using a structured approach to identify and measure the meaning of each unit. This process helps to minimize bias and increase the reliability of findings. Therefore, I determined that content analysis was the most suitable method for this study because it uses a network of stable correlations and analytical constructs to explicitly operationalize the context of the body of text to ensure reliability and reduce bias (Berelson, 1952; Stemler, 2000).

Through content analysis and a deductive coding scheme, I cross-examined quality indicators from five international frameworks to list universally generated quality indicators for transnational distance education. I identified the selection of frameworks by geographical region, contextualized for institutional-level implementation, accessible in the English language,

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developed by stakeholders internationally dispersed throughout the geographical region they represent, and inclusive of distance learning modalities. In this first phase analysis, I examined a total of 17,348 words from the following frameworks, the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU), the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), and the International Institute of Online Education with UNESCO (IIOE). Additionally, the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) adopted the COL framework; thereby, the COL framework represents Commonwealth countries and distance education providers in Africa.

The full study, published by *Open Praxis* in December 2022, is presented in Chapter 2, and the findings lead to 27 unique transnational quality indicators. One of these indicators, international research collaboration, was then used to test the significance of this variable as a measure of quality, as presented in the following section as well as Chapter 3.

Phase Two

Following the first phase of study, I adopted a quantitative approach in the second phase to investigate the impact of international research collaboration in open universities. International research collaboration is both an input and output indicator that serves as a proxy for academic quality and excellence (Knobel et al., 2013). International research collaboration is considered a criterion for global university rankings because successful partnerships in collaboration can lead to increased visibility, funding, research effectiveness, scientific productivity, and opportunities, as noted by Abramo et al. (2009). Additionally, the outputs of international research collaboration can demonstrate the transfer, creation, and application of knowledge. By using international research collaboration as a proxy for quality, I studied international research

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collaboration outputs from 12 universities to examine the significance of open universities' international research collaboration.

Bibliometrics analysis was identified as the most appropriate method to statistically analyze research indicators as performance metrics to assess publication patterns and impact (Price, 1965). Bibliometric indicators normalize research outputs and measure results across publications, enabling researchers to examine large datasets across sciences, disciplines, and topics (Donthu et al., 2021; Tunger et al., 2020). In conducting bibliometric analysis, utilizing databases offering comprehensive coverage is essential. Scopus, in particular, proves to be advantageous as it covers a wider range of journals than Web of Science or Google Scholar (Bauer, 2020).

In this phase, I assessed research outputs from three open universities. These universities were involved in developing and using at least one quality assurance standard or framework based on the samples from the first phase of research. To identify the three open universities, I took a sample of 20 open universities and reduced the list to three by assessing the frequency of doctoral programs, active research centers, a publishing extension, and easily accessible grant and funding reports. Additionally, geographical and cultural factors were considered to ensure a diverse representation of open universities for generalizability; only one university could represent a continent or large geographical region. Universities also had to meet Scopus database search criteria, including affiliation, open access, and peer-reviewed journal articles published from 2000 to 2022. After applying the inclusion criteria, I calculated publication counts to determine the top three universities: Anadolu University (Türkiye), Open University (UK), and University of South Africa (UNISA). Finally, a controlled comparison was conducted on nine universities to understand the impact of international research collaboration. These nine

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universities were chosen based on their frequency of collaboration with the three open universities, according to the Scopus database, in February 2023. With 12 universities identified, I conducted a descriptive analysis of the data to make meaning of the 609,365 peer-reviewed publications that spanned all subject areas, sciences, open-access types and languages. This study was published by the *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning (IRRODL)* in August 2023 and is shared in Chapter 3 for further review. The study shows that international research collaboration significantly impacts citation counts, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 5.

Phase Three

Unlike the previous two phases, this final phase of the study utilized primary data in a qualitative collaborative autoethnography approach. As the name suggests, collaborative autoethnography involves a collaborative effort by multiple researchers who may also be participants who come together to explore and understand a shared experience or cultural phenomenon (Chang et al., 2016). In this case, I, as an American citizen, worked with an international research team comprised of three Greek transnational distance learners and two of their former faculty who identify as Canadian and bi-cultural, Polish Canadian to define quality dimensions of a transnational distance education experience. Collaborative autoethnography incorporates multiple individuals' perspectives, experiences, and reflections to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the subject matter, often leading to rich, multi-faceted narratives and insights (Adams & Herrmann, 2020). This paper fuses transnational distance education quality dimensions from the student perspective with an example of quality as an international research collaboration generated at an open university. Also, it brings to light the

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significance of a third category of learners who are often overlooked and cannot be neatly defined as international or distance learners (Mittelmeier, 2022; Stewart, 2017).

This third phase explored the experiences of three Greek students who completed a master's program at a Canadian open and distance university to define quality dimensions. Through an iterative research process, the six-person research team received approval from the ethics review board (Appendix A) before gathering data from four sources: personal memories, structured individual interviews followed by open-ended questions to prompt recollection and reflection on experiences before, during and after the program, written reflections on cultural identities, and archival data from discussion forums, program assignments, and capstone ePortfolios. The data collection instrument used in the interviews was influenced by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) quality evaluation for transnational education report from Greece and Cyprus (2015), a framework included in this dissertation's first phase. The intent of using this report was to ensure that the study aligned with the context and established practices. With a co-researcher on the full research team, we analyzed the data using values coding to explore cultural values, beliefs, and identity (Saldaña, 2021). The researchers reflected both individually and as a group, identifying common themes and negotiating meaning (Chang et al., 2016). Following a collaborative autoethnography writing process, we used a first-person narrative to show the depth of the transnational distance learner's experiences and combined their stories into a cohesive collective narrative.

The findings in this final research phase of the dissertation suggest that quality transnational distance education entails accessible, learner-centred instructional design, social-emotional support, and practical application of knowledge and skills in local contexts. This

research collaboration produced a manuscript submitted to a journal in October 2023, presented in Chapter 4, and further implications are analyzed in Chapter 5.

Manuscript Design

This dissertation is presented in three manuscripts, each serving as a chapter and “bookended” by an introductory and conclusion chapter for a total of five chapters. Each manuscript represents a research phase and is shared in sequential order. Therefore, Chapter 1 is the introduction to present an overview of the context, identify the significance and research gaps, and articulate the approach and rationale to bridge the gap in knowledge. Following Chapter 1 is the first published manuscript in Chapter 2, which employs qualitative content analysis to define quality from five internationally recognized frameworks and identify internationalization strategies to support transnational distance education. The second chapter creates a foundation for understanding quality. Following Chapter 2 is the second publication, which is a bibliometrics study that examines the significance of international research collaboration on open universities and their national counterparts. Chapter 3 is a quantitative investigation of quality to measure internationalization. Chapter 4 is the third manuscript, which shifts the perspective to former graduate students to explore the meaning of a quality transnational distance education experience through collaborative autoethnography. The fourth chapter utilizes primary data and models an international research collaboration output, a dimension of quality. The concluding chapter, Chapter 5, threads together the significance of the findings from each manuscript to discuss the implications of this body of research for practice.

Collectively, the three manuscripts provide a comprehensive study of quality dimensions in transnational distance education and the internationalization of higher education. They offer a holistic view of quality by considering non-governmental, institutional, and learner aspects while

highlighting the significance of international research collaboration. Together, they form a valuable resource for understanding the various factors that influence the quality of education across borders. The analysis of these interconnected pieces enhances the understanding of quality in transnational distance education and offers valuable insights for educational policymakers, administrators, educators, researchers, and learners in an increasingly globalized higher education landscape.

Chapter 1. Summary

This chapter introduces the challenge underlining this study and provides an overview of the factors contributing to the dearth of measurable quality dimensions to support internationalization in transnational distance education. Previous studies demonstrate the significance of the research problem and the lack of attention to measuring the impact of quality dimensions in open, online and distance education and internationalization activities in higher education. By recognizing the dynamic relationship between the field of distance education and higher education internationalization, this study offers four outcomes intended to address the gap. First, it draws attention to current internationalization indicators in distance education quality assurance frameworks. Second, it examines international research collaboration to understand how knowledge production and dissemination have impacted three open and online distance education universities. Third, it highlights transnational distance students and how they define quality based on their collective experiences. Fourth the contributions of this study will add to the scholarship of higher education internationalization in distance education contexts and may guide future studies and decisions of policymakers and practitioners. This chapter introduced the primary research questions and articulated the organization of the manuscript-based dissertation. Finally, this chapter provides the study's rationale, which is organized

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through an exploratory sequential mixed methods design. The intent is to measure a quality dimension, international research collaboration, to support transnational distance education as an internationalization strategy in higher education as well as demonstrate an example of an international research collaboration through the eyes of transnational distance education students.

Chapter 2. Quality Dimensions Typology

Introduced in the first chapter, quality is a multidimensional concept that reflects individual value systems and does not have a universal definition. However, as globalization catalyzes higher education to become more internationalized, stakeholders require evidence-based guidelines to inform decision-making. Prior research highlights the importance of defining quality dimensions and the insufficiency of gauging the influence of internationalization efforts, especially in open universities. This chapter, which also is the first publication of this dissertation by manuscript, establishes a typology of quality dimensions for transnational distance education to facilitate a more universal understanding of quality and identify opportunities for measurement.

In order to identify quality indicators that reflect a more cross-cultural understanding, I examined five internationally developed quality assurance frameworks that support open, online and distance education to extract internationalization variables. As discussed in the literature analysis of Chapter 1, content analysis is a suggested research methodology by scholars who have examined quality in distance education as well as the internationalization of higher education. Therefore, this first phase of exploration utilized a content analysis to address the first research question: *What are the quality dimensions to support internationalization efforts for transnational distance education?* Additionally, the objective of this study was to distill international indicators and variables for testing in the second phase of research, which is presented in Chapter 3.

In addition to the research aims of this study, submitting this manuscript to *Open Praxis* was intentional. *Open Praxis* is an open-access, peer-reviewed journal published by the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) in partnership with UNESCO.

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As an international leader, ICDE collaborates worldwide with other organizations and institutions to support quality education through open and distance learning models in quality reviews and project reports. One of these reports served as a foundational study for this research as it categorized over 40 quality frameworks worldwide to provide a landscape analysis of quality in online and open education (Ossiannilsson et al., 2015). Building from the recommendations by Ossiannilsson et al. (2015) and others whose research contributions significantly informed this study (e.g., Bannier, 2016; Belawati, 2022; Esfijani, 2018; Irele, 2013; Jung, 2022; Latchem, 2014; Tait et al., 2022; Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2015; and Youssef, 2014), this chapter identifies quality dimensions for internationalization efforts in transnational distance education. Furthermore, this manuscript sets the course for subsequent studies in this body of research, expanding on the typology.

In the remainder of this chapter, I provide the reference to the publication in *Open Praxis* and present the first manuscript of this three-part dissertation. Finally, I conclude with a summary detailing the contributions of this study to knowledge before proceeding to the third chapter and next publication.

Manuscript 1.

Heiser, R. E. (2022). Quality education beyond borders: An international content analysis for transnational distance education. *Open Praxis*, 14(4), pp. 256–269.

<https://doi.org/10.55982/openpraxis.14.4.499>

Quality education beyond borders: An international content analysis for transnational distance education

Abstract

Due to the forces of globalization, higher education institutions have increased their participation in international partnerships and the flow of academic services and resources across borders. This international academic mobility is known as internationalization, and transnational distance education is an example of an innovative internationalization strategy. Despite the exponential growth and the projected acceleration of transnational distance education enrollment, there is a dearth of knowledge in the measurement and practice of international quality dimensions and learning outcome indicators to support internationalization efforts for transnational distance education. This research utilized content analysis to organize networks of concepts and capture quality indicators from five internationally accepted frameworks to establish a quality dimension typology. Based on preliminary findings, 27 internationalization indicators were identified to support transnational distance education internationalization efforts. Findings support a need for more holistic quality frameworks with greater attention to internationalization quality dimensions to guide successful outcomes across borders.

Keywords: Quality Indicators, Transnational Distance Education, Globalization, Internationalization, Higher Education

Introduction

The acceleration of globalization is forcing higher education to increase its participation in international partnerships. In response, institutions integrate internationalization practices to mobilize academic services and resources across borders to address micro- (e.g., program and institutional enrollment), meso- (e.g., accreditation recognition), and macro (e.g., globalization) - level demands. One of these practices is transnational distance education which leverages innovative communication technologies to enable learners to traverse across geographical borders without leaving their physical location or country to continue their education ([Altbach & Knight, 2007](#)). As more stakeholders engage in global cooperation and transnational distance education, higher education institutions require quality assurance frameworks to support effective practices, decision-making, and continuous improvement to meet intended learning outcomes and culturally-diverse expectations. Despite the exponential growth in open, online, and flexible education and the internationalization of higher education over the past few decades, there is a significant dearth in the research, measurement and practice of international quality dimensions and learning outcome indicators. To meet this growing demand, Jung ([2022](#)) highlights the urgent need to develop holistic quality assurance frameworks that address global and local learning outcomes. In an effort to support this call to action, this study sought to articulate the relationships among quality indicators from five internationally accepted frameworks to establish a quality dimension typology to support transnational distance education internationalization efforts.

As the forces of globalization continue to shorten the time and distance between learners and educational providers during the knowledge era, higher education institutions are positioned to enhance international cooperation and emphasize the importance of quality provision in transnational education ([Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2015](#)) and internationalization efforts ([de Wit, 2020](#); [Knight, 2016](#)). In 2015, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) encouraged intergovernmental organizations, governments, higher education institutions, academic staff, and student stakeholders to engage in global collaboration for equitable, accessible and quality learning outcomes ([UNESCO, 2015](#)). In order to meet the political and societal demands for more inclusive education, universal stakeholders identified open, online, and flexible education as an essential strategy. Additionally, international associations such as the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) and intranational organizations, including UNESCO, project that over 414.2 million students will be enrolled in higher education by 2030, a significant increase from 99.4 million enrollments in 2000, with many of those enrolled learning online ([Guo et al., 2019](#); [OECD, 2019](#); [Ossiannilsson et al., 2015](#); [UNESCO, 2019](#)). This significant growth will accelerate transnational and internationalization efforts to support access and demand for higher education. Also, this acceleration challenges political, social, cultural and economic systems with the import and export of how stakeholders define quality learning experiences across geographical boundaries.

As institutions expand their capacity to open, online and distance learning modalities to support access to higher education, ICDE reinforces that “improving the quality of student experiences is more than ever extremely important” ([Ossiannilsson et al., p. 6, 2015](#)). In order to address this challenge, this study presents a conceptual typology to reduce the complexity of five international quality assurance frameworks framed by evaluation criteria defined by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD). This preliminary research utilizes content analysis to organize networks of concepts and capture the dimensions of quality criteria for internationalization efforts in transnational distance education.

Literature Review

Due to recent technological innovations, globalization has enabled the flow of knowledge across cultures for economic, political, and societal interdependence ([Altbach & Knight, 2007](#); [Castells, 2011](#)). As defined by Marginson and Rhoades (2002), globalization is “the development of increasingly integrated systems and relationships beyond the nation” (p.288). Globalization is not a new concept; it is a complex phenomenon transforming educational policy, practice and strategic plans ([Torres, 2015](#)). Higher education is a significant agent of globalization that not only develops technological innovations but also is a primary consumer subject to the limitations of technological innovations ([Välilmaa & Hoffman, 2008](#)). These technological innovations require leaders and decision-makers to restructure the institutional fabric of higher education and influence the efforts of academic and administrative personnel to meet political and social responsibilities crucial to the development of global information societies ([OECD, 2007](#); [Ossiannilsson, 2018](#); [UNESCO, 2005](#)). As we continue to see significant increases in the movement of people, programs, institutions, research, and services across national borders at an unprecedented pace, OECD projects new models of internationalization practices are needed that will transform the trajectory of higher education ([Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2015](#)).

Internationalization

Internationalization is the academic mobility of people, programs, providers, policies and projects that traverse across geographic boundaries in response to globalization ([Knight & de Wit, 2018](#)). Scholars consider internationalization a dynamic practice that institutions engage with based on social, cultural, political, and economic motivations to provide access to higher education in international contexts ([Altbach & Knight, 2007](#); [de Wit, 1999](#); [Gao, 2019](#)). Internationalization practices incorporate a broad spectrum of mobility models, including study-abroad programs, branch campuses, targeted recruitment of international students for financial incentives, and distance learning programmes ([Youssef, 2014](#)). These practices, according to Qiang (2003), “...must be entrenched in the culture, policy, planning and organizational process of the institutions so that it can be both successful and sustainable” (p. 257–258). Due to the holistic requirements to support internationalization practices effectively, institutions must integrate a global dimension to policy, practice, service, and research in alignment with institutional goals and infrastructures ([Knight, 2011](#)). Internationalization is implemented internally across all stakeholder groups and through a distributed, international learning network supported by globalized universities and educational policy ([Armengol, 2002](#)). Institutions that engage in an international network embrace and incorporate knowledge from other countries and cultures into their local and global practices, thereby improving academic quality and increasing access.

Transnational Distance Education

Online transnational distance education is an innovative internationalization strategy and emerging learning model to address the forces of globalization in higher education. For the purposes of this study, transnational distance education refers to enabling international learners to pursue educational opportunities through internet technologies without physically relocating to the country of the educational provider ([Bannier, 2016](#); [British Council, 2013](#)). With a focus on access and equity, internet technologies can transform education availability, affordability, and accessibility across borders and cross-cultural contexts ([Daniel et al., 2005](#)). Without the context of internet-enabled learning, transnational education is an internationalization strategy that

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multilateral agencies and scholars often refer to as “cross-border” ([UNESCO, 2005](#); [Knight, 2003](#)), “off-shore” ([Bohm, 2000](#); [National Tertiary Education Union, 2004](#); [Chapman & Pyvis, 2006](#)) “borderless” ([Cunningham & Training, 1998](#); [Middlehurst, 2002](#)), or “student mobility” ([OECD, 2004](#)) education ([British Council, 2013](#)). In 2002, the Lisbon Recognition Convention defined transnational education as “all types of higher education study programmes, or sets of courses of study, or education services in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based.” Current trends denote an emergence in transnational terminology with a concentration on cultural comparisons, teaching and learning practices, and complex processes that transcend one-dimensional views of traversing geographical boundaries ([Kosmützky & Putty, 2016](#)).

Quality Dimensions

As global online learning opportunities expand, concerns regarding quality assurance and cultural compromise dominate transnational initiatives ([Banner, 2016](#); [Walsh, 2019](#)). Unfortunately, economic factors often outweigh social, political, and academic motivations to compete for student enrollment in a globally engaged institution, resulting in low-quality experiences and providers ([Youssef, 2014](#)). Due to the commercialization of higher education or the pursuit of financial profits over quality learning outcomes, unaccredited online institutions or “degree mills” may fulfill the educational access gap ([Knight, 2011](#); [Piña, 2010](#)). This situation leaves vulnerable recipients, often from countries without a national or regional quality assurance system, at risk of receiving unaccredited degrees or completing their program of study underprepared and underrecognized to contribute to their localized workforce. Therefore, it is pertinent that quality assurance systems guide, measure, and enhance services, practices, and scholarship for higher education institutions engaged in transnational distance education and nations responding to the forces of globalization.

Globally, higher education lacks a standard definition of quality and does not have a common metric to evaluate systematic assurance practices ([Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2012](#)). Without consensus on quality dimensions at the macro-level, intergovernmental agencies, including UNESCO and the OECD, have tried to address the need and created guidelines to encourage transnational higher education ([Stella, 2006](#)). Specifically, UNESCO and OECD recommended that cross-border quality assurance practices should be transparent in national policies and institutional procedures, promote diverse learning models, protect individuals engaging in the learning experience, ensure information is accessible to an international audience and increase collaboration across all stakeholder groups. In a follow-up report, OECD suggested that effective quality assurance systems require a supportive legal framework that enables institutions to comply without government oversight ([Vincent-Lancrin & Pfothenauer, 2012](#)). Without national quality control, independent third-party providers may fulfill the need in situations and national contexts where national quality assurance mechanisms are deficient or nonexistent. In recent trends, national governments are responding and taking the lead in defining quality rather than third parties, including accreditation agencies ([Eaton, 2017](#)). This shift narrows the scope of quality to outcomes-based variables, such as graduation, employment placement and financial freedom.

A shift to an outcomes-based approach to define quality is consistent in distance education literature as well. Scholars recognize a dearth of research capturing an integrated, system-view of measurable quality dimensions in online distance education ([Scull et al., 2011](#); [Tait, 1993](#)) and suggest future research focused on quality outputs and outcomes, not only quality inputs and processes, to develop benchmarks, standards, frameworks, and models ([Esfijani, 2018](#); [Jung,](#)

2022; [Latchem, 2014](#)). However, defining quality is highly contextual by individual nations and government agencies ([Guo et al., 2019](#); [Middlehurst & Woodfield, 2006](#)). The same can be true in open, online, and flexible learning models. For example, the ICDE Quality Network strives to centralize multicultural perspectives and value systems to assess the impact of growth in distance education across the globe ([Tait et al., 2022](#)). However, the spectrum of quality practices and indicators is diffuse and presents itself through various forms of certification, accreditation, benchmarking, and quality assurance processes at all systems levels ([Ossiannilsson et al., 2015](#)).

In this vast and rapidly evolving landscape of quality in education, transnational online distance education providers should develop integrated policies and quality assurance strategies focused on equity, access, workforce relevance and social development to protect and benefit from international partnerships ([Smith, 2010](#); [Tait & O'Rourke, 2014](#)). Additionally, globally engaged institutions should embrace dynamic internationalization performance measurement strategies in order to provide quality learning experiences and outcomes. These strategies may include reflective practice through culturally relevant evaluations and consistent feedback loops for all stakeholders ([Darojat et al., 2015](#); [Gao, 2019](#); [Jung, 2011](#); [Shelton, 2010](#)). In an effort to connect multiple concepts in this complex landscape, this research aimed to delineate and address, *what are the quality dimensions to support internationalization efforts for transnational distance education?*

Methodology

Defining quality in online distance education is a challenge because it holds different meanings for different distance learning stakeholders and is dependent on individual paradigms regarding the educational process ([Garrison, 1993](#); [Gift & Bell-Hutchinson, 2007](#); [Hazelkorn et al., 2018](#); [Jung & Latchem, 2007](#); [Jung et al., 2013](#)). In order to determine what quality means to support internationalization efforts for transnational distance education, this study cross-examined quality indicators by employing a content analysis approach to distill international indicators and variables ([Darojat et al., 2015](#); [Esfijani, 2018](#); [Martin et al., 2017](#)).

Framework Sampling

For this study, five internationally accepted quality assurance frameworks were reviewed, including the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU), the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), and the International Institute of Online Education with UNESCO (IIOE). All frameworks were anonymized to reduce bias. The selection of frameworks was identified by geographical region, contextualized for institutional-level implementation, accessible in the English language, developed by stakeholders internationally dispersed throughout the geographical region they represent, and inclusive of distance learning modalities. Additionally, the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) adopted the COL framework; thereby, the COL framework represents Commonwealth countries and distance education providers in Africa. To illustrate the data corpus used in this study, [Table 1](#) summarizes the total count of word frequency for each international quality framework analyzed. This research studied a total of 17,348 words from five quality assurance frameworks. Also, Appendix A presents the 25 most frequent words in the five quality assurance frameworks.

Table 1

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Total Word Frequency of International Quality Frameworks

International Quality Framework	Total Word Frequency
International A	1700
International B	5653
International C	4191
International D	823
International E	4981
Total	17348

Content Analysis

Scholars in the field of distance education have identified content analysis as an opportunity to further research. For example, Esfijani (2018) recommends that “content analyzing of the detailed quality factors in the existing body of knowledge might help to extract the quality factors that have perceived importance globally” (p. 70). Since the 1940s, researchers have categorized a diversity of content analysis techniques utilized to study trends, relations, transformations, patterns, differences, standards, evaluation, judgement, frequency, linguistic representations, conversations, and institutional processes by relating textual matter to social realities (Berelson, 1952; Krippendorff, 2018). According to Krippendorff (2018), content analysis requires unitizing text-driven research designs to conceptualize meaning to inquiry objectively. By explicitly operationalizing the context of the body of text through a network of stable correlations or contributing conditions in an analytical construct to ensure reliability and reduce bias (Berelson, 1952; Stemler, 2000), content analysis was deemed the most appropriate method for this study.

In order to objectively unitize international quality frameworks, I used a deductive, structural coding method (Saldaña, 2016) informed by evaluation definitions and criteria from OECD (2021) to establish key dimensions and organize complex networks of concepts (Jaakkola, 2020; MacInnis, 2011). Developing an organizational typology aims to create the necessary conditions for researchers to empirically test and evaluate complex theories (Doty & Glick, 1994). Additionally, Creswell and Creswell (2018) claim that deductive reasoning enables researchers to test research questions in order to interpret and operationalize variables for measurement. Therefore, a deductive codebook informed by OECD’s *Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators* annual report was employed to predict variance in dependent variables from the international quality frameworks data sample.

The *Education at a Glance* report serves as the authoritative source for global education statistics used to evaluate and monitor the performance of educational systems, and evaluation is a strategy that can inform quality dimensions (Irele, 2013; Pawson, 2013). Five categories were classified in the report to understand the complex relationship between international quality criteria and global evaluation metrics. The first category pertains to indicators of the contextual dimensions of the education systems and actors within. The second category includes indicators of the input into education systems or the learning environment. The third category focuses on internationalization strategies and process indicators to support cross-border education efforts and initiatives. The fourth category entails indicators of the participation and progression within education entities. Finally, the fifth category describes education systems’ output, outcomes, and impact indicators. All categories were coded and tabulated in Nvivo12 for analysis. Then, anonymized data was extracted from Nvivo software to R Studio for further interpretation to

delineate the quality dimensions to support internationalization efforts for transnational distance education.

Findings and Discussion

This study analyzed five international quality frameworks and organized indicators into five categories based on OECD’s *Education at a Glance Report (2021)* in the content analysis and reported through descriptive and qualitative analysis. In a synthesis across frameworks which resulted in the analysis of 2109 coded references, only 27 were interpreted as internationalization strategies and processes to support transnational education efforts and initiatives. This section explores critical findings to address the research question: *What are the quality dimensions to support internationalization efforts for transnational distance education?*

Quality Dimensions for Internationalization

The first finding addresses the research question; 27 quality dimensions were identified to support internationalization efforts for transnational distance education. [Table 2](#) presents the 27 quality dimensions of internationalization indicators deduced verbatim from the five international quality assurance standards employed in this study.

Table 2

Internationalization Indicators in International Quality Assurance Frameworks

Indicators	Framework
1. The institution has a clear policy statement of non-discrimination in genders and geographical/regional distributions for all the affairs and activities of the institution, including admissions, registration, and length of study	International A
2. The institution has a well-defined vision and mission statement, which incorporates the internal and external educational environment, its potential, national development agenda, and international trend in education	International A
3. The institution cooperates with relevant domestic and/or overseas organizations	International A
4. The institution has a stated vision and mission that is supported by specific and clearly defined goals and objectives within the context of national development priorities and the latest international trends in education	International B
5. The institution demonstrates its drive to develop itself into a Centre of Excellence and to maintain nationally and internationally comparable and acceptable standards	International B
6. The vision and mission reflect the latest international trends in education	International B
7. The institution publishes clear policies on the admission of local and overseas students	International B
8. The institutional plans and policies reflect national and international concerns	International B
9. Quality management mechanisms are in place at the institution to ensure that the content offered by external providers is of good quality and meets the national and institutional quality criteria	International B
10. The institutional plans and policies are continuously updated to meet national and international requirements	International B
11. The institution publishes clear policies on the admission of local and overseas students	International B
12. Quality management mechanisms are in place at the institution to ensure that the content offered by external providers is of good quality and meets the national and institutional quality criteria	International B
13. The offer of programmes is determined in response to national needs and reflects global trends	International B
14. Course design is focused on national and international priorities and trends and the needs of prospective learners and employers	International B

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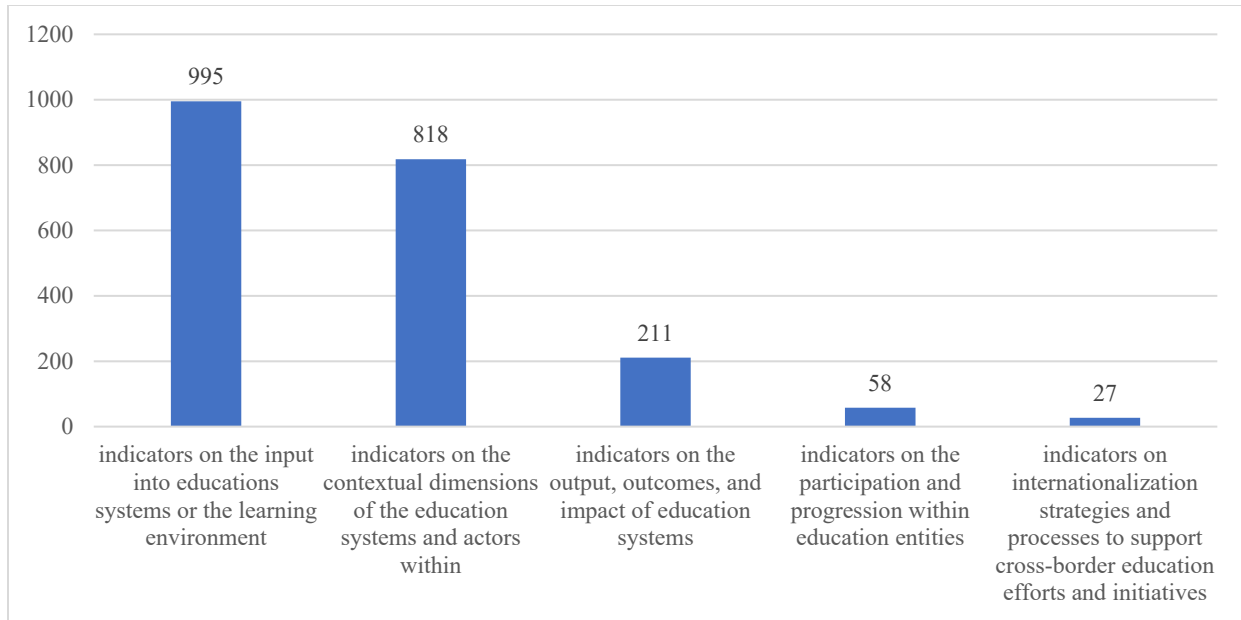
15. Mechanisms for adoption and adaptation are established to encourage linkages with national and international agencies for course design, development and delivery	International B
16. There are MOUs with national and international agencies to share good quality materials which demonstrate good practice in course design, review of materials, development and delivery	International B
17. The institution has linkages with national and international agencies to exchange expertise for content development and delivery methods	International B
18. Assessment is an essential feature of the teaching and learning process, is properly managed, and reflects institutional, national and international standards	International B
19. National and international benchmarks guide assessment	International B
20. The institution has strong links to and collaborates with various international, national, governmental and non-governmental agencies in undertaking research	International B
21. There are exchange agreements with other educational institutions providing e-learning programmes, and interoperabilities have been agreed and set out with these providers	International C
22. All programmes have a modular structure, and courses have credit points that are consistent with national and European norms	International C
23. The credit transfer system is aligned with national and European systems of credit transfer and operates bi-directionally	International C
24. Pre-requisites and student learning outcomes are developed within an institutional or national framework, facilitating student mobility between courses, departments and institutions	International C
25. Course materials comply with national and European standards on accessibility	International C
26. There are partnerships and collaborations with other institutions and organisations (e.g. HEIs, educational enterprises, international organisations, etc.) to support online and blended learning	International D
27. The credibility of courses is anchored in recognised national and European frameworks, applicable PSRB requirements and degree-level Apprenticeship Standards. These reference points help to maintain sector-recognised standards by offering consistency across the range of provision. Providers also develop and use internal guidance against which courses are designed, developed and approved	International E

The second finding is that most quality assurance indicators in quality assurance frameworks are primarily input indicators (n = 995) and focused on contextual dimensions (n = 818). Additionally, the total count of outcome and output indicators (n = 211) suggests that most frameworks are input-driven rather than outcome-focused. Regarding the document matrix presented in Appendix A, many of the word count frequencies are related to actors within the system, suggesting a strong alignment to the context dimension. Notably, indicators on the participation and progression quality dimension (n = 58), often related to student support systems, appeared significantly less than contextual and input quality indicators. Finally, with a particular focus on the aim of this study, indicators on internationalization strategies and processes (n = 27) were referenced the least of all indicators. [Figure 1](#) presents the total counts of each category for interpretation.

Figure 1

Code Reference Total Counts By Indicator

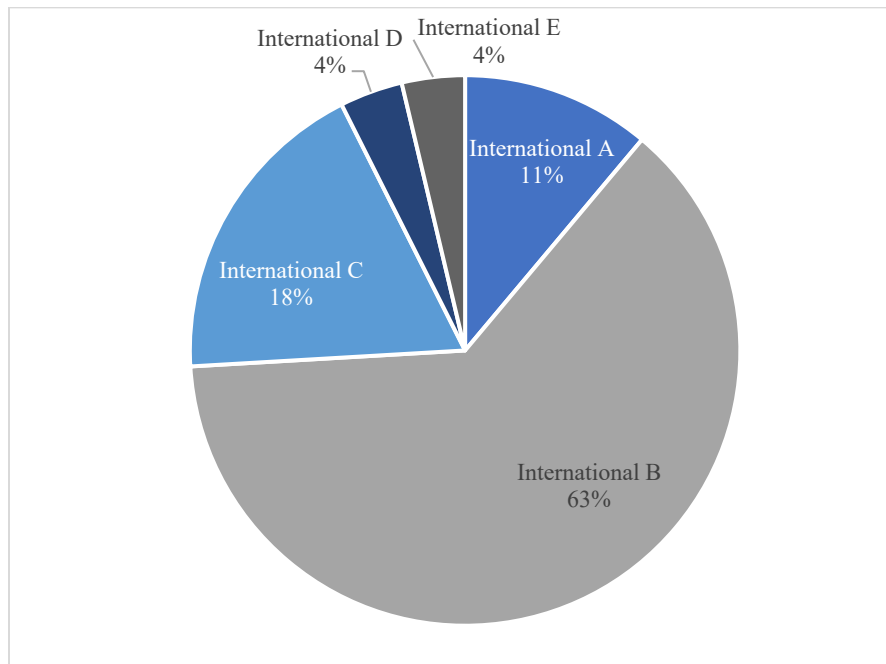
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The third finding, as demonstrated in [Figure 2](#), suggests that the International B framework provides the majority (58%) of the internationalization indicators; however, this framework is also the most extensive dataset. Additionally, although based on a significantly smaller dataset, the International A framework makes up (13%) of the internationalization quality dimensions.

Figure 2

Internationalization Indicators By Quality Assurance Framework



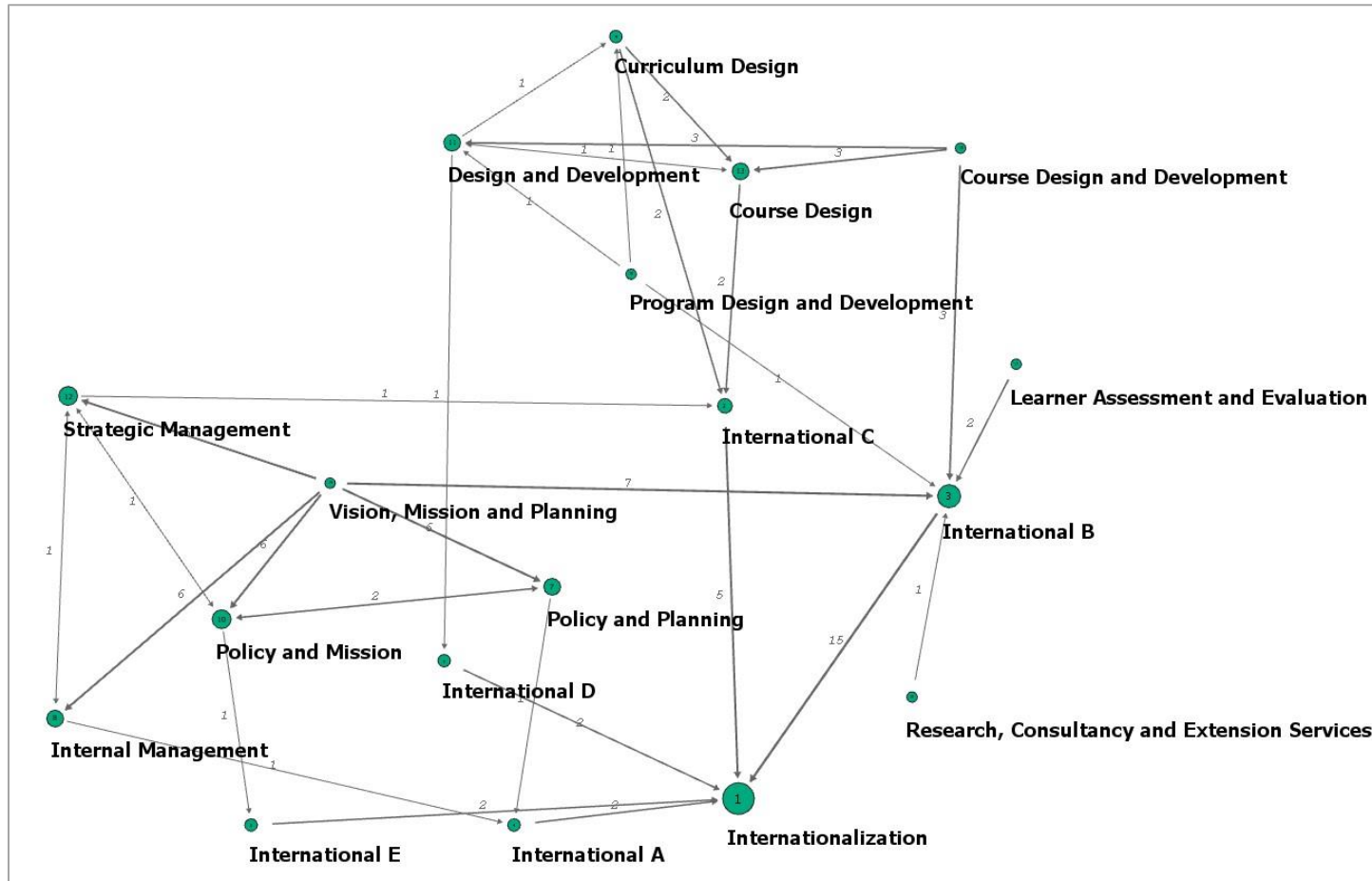
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The fourth finding takes a critical focus on understanding the relationship of internationalization indicators within the schema of the frameworks. In this regard, each international quality framework is organized with a unique schema to categorize a set of quality dimensions, statements of expectations and practice, descriptions of assessment areas, guiding principles, or components and subcomponents. Therefore, [Figure 3](#) demonstrates the location of the internationalization indicators within their frameworks and the interconnectedness between frameworks to develop a visual typology. Furthermore, by applying the Fruchterman-Reingold Layout to reduce the system's energy through the placement of vertices to achieve equilibrium ([Fruchterman and Reingold, 1991](#)), the network analysis illustrates the degree of quality dimensions. All frameworks host internationalization indicators across categories such as course, curriculum and program design, and leadership functions, including strategic planning and policy management. Additionally, the International B framework offered internationalization strategies in two outlier categories: learner assessment and evaluation, and research, consultancy, and extension services. Notably, the categories that integrate internationalization indicators appear to have a stronger correlation with input and context indicators rather than progression and output indicators.

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Figure 3

Network Analysis of Internationalization Indicators



Note. Internationalization is the centrality node connected to all international quality assurance frameworks. The number on the lines represents the weight of the dimension related to the framework. Relationships are concentrated in leadership dimensions and learning design dimensions. Two outliers are present, learner assessment and evaluation, and research, consultancy and extension services.

Discussion

There is an opportunity for international quality assurance frameworks to address the growing need for internationalization strategies and practices in distance education. From the analysis, only 1.3% of criteria and indicators from the five quality assurance frameworks could be interpreted as internationalization strategies and processes to support transnational education efforts and initiatives according to OECD performance indicators. However, some may argue that quality indicators and practices should be considered generalizable and inclusive to all distance education models, not just transnational distance education, to support internationalization strategies. Additionally, internationalization and transnational distance education may not be a priority for all world regions or contexts. Instead, the quality assurance frameworks utilized in this sample may have been developed as a tool for institutions to meet and address localized needs, such as developing a systems infrastructure and increasing capacities for national student enrollment. Therefore, more research and transparent reporting are needed to improve the socio-cultural understanding and context shaping the development and creation of the international quality assurance frameworks.

As evident in the results, the majority of criteria and indicators for quality distance education are focused on system inputs and address areas such as resources invested in educational content and facilitation, actors within the system, and infrastructure. This finding is problematic as institutions require guidance on monitoring their relationship to the effects of output, outcome, and impact indicators for the greater good. Also, institutions must be able to evaluate system components to assess continuous improvement efforts and resource allocation ([Gao, 2019](#); [Knight, 2007](#); [Maringe, 2010](#)).

Drawing from the extant literature, scholars, policymakers, and practitioners argue for an outcome-based quality assurance framework, which is not apparent in the frameworks analyzed in this study ([Darojat et al., 2015](#); [Gao, 2019](#); [Gift & Bell-Hutchinson, 2007](#); [Latchem, 2014](#); [Scull et al., 2011](#); [Shelton, 2010](#); [Tait, 1993](#)). However, some scholars advocate for a more holistic, systemic perspective ([Esfijani, 2018](#); [Jung, 2011, 2022](#); [Zawada, 2019](#)). Situated in foundational literature, Moore and Kearsley ([2011](#)) summarize that an online distance education system is complex and requires leaders to take a systems approach to understand the interrelationships between system components in terms of inputs and outputs to be successful in practice. Additionally, [Esfijani \(2018\)](#) acknowledges “a need for a holistic approach to consider quality factors in different aspects, that is inputs, resources, processes, outputs and outcomes” (p. 69) rather than input-driven quality indicators and criteria. Consequently, there is an opportunity for a global partnership of scholars, practitioners and critical stakeholders to co-construct a more outcome-oriented approach to quality in online distance education and establish a universal framework for localization in national and institutional circumstances.

Finally, by taking a conceptual approach to understanding the relationship between international quality framework schemas, the network analysis illustrates that internationalization indicators are embedded within leadership functions and learning design. Internationalization is not an isolated process, strategy or set of activities but “a system in line with international standards” ([Qiang, p.250, 2003](#)). [Knight \(1997\)](#) recommends that international perspectives must be systematically integrated across an institution. However, the findings indicate that internationalization indicators appear to be centralized in macro-and micro-level organizational structures and not representative of a holistic system. By definition, internationalization in higher education is the flow of students, faculty, administration, research, innovation, service, and practice across borders. Accordingly, a structurally aligned quality assurance framework should

have internationalization indicators threaded throughout the corpus of components, including learner support systems, human resources, research and scholarship, infrastructure, community and outreach, work-based learning, and performance evaluation. Perhaps this suggests that not all stakeholders' perspectives are integrated or represented in the creation of these frameworks, which may pose challenges for institutions aiming to evolve into an open, internationally networked university ([Agre, 2000](#); [Standaert, 2012](#); [de Wit, 2010](#)) ingrained across political, economic and academic sectors to support lifelong learning ([Hedge & Hayward, 2004](#)), 21st-century competencies ([Voogt et al., 2013](#)) and global citizenship ([Torres, 2015](#)) in accordance to the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 ([UNESCO, 2015](#)).

Conclusion

There is a need for intentional and purposeful integration of internationalization indicators to guide institutions with a system-view of measurable quality dimensions in transnational distance education ([Gao, 2019](#); [Yesufu, 2018](#)). Informed by five internationally recognized quality assurance frameworks, only 1.3% of indicators were identified as internationalization quality dimensions, with the majority of indicators coded as systems inputs, not as systems outputs. Therefore, this study builds on previous literature, suggesting that more research is necessary to measure the results of system inputs and processes to create valid instruments to inform quality. By identifying system inputs and outputs and incorporating indicators into an evaluative framework, institutions can self-assess or engage in a quality certification process to determine their performance and improve practice ([Jung & Latchem, 2007](#); [Jung, 2022](#); [Maringe, 2010](#); [Zuhairi et al., 2020](#)).

In addition to building on previous literature, this study addresses “the next leap in distance learning” ([Bruhn-Zass, 2022, p.253](#)), or transnational distance education, to elevate the need for internationalization performance measurement strategies. Although a complex process to establish international consensus ([Tait et al., 2022](#)) across socio-cultural value systems, Gacel-Ávila ([2005](#)) suggests that global performance measurement can only be effective if it moves beyond national borders and is adopted internationally. Therefore, this study addressed the research question, *what are the quality dimensions to support internationalization efforts for transnational distance education* and identified 27 internationalization indicators from five international quality assurance frameworks supporting distance education modalities. This study is an effort to develop an internationalization quality typology to support transnational distance education, and this article illustrates the complex dimensions of the findings. The findings suggest that more purposeful partnerships across all stakeholder groups and sectors are necessary to create quality dimensions to prepare learners for a globalized workforce and lifelong learning. Future research is needed to test and measure quality dimensions to determine the impact of the value gained from transnational student engagement at the higher education institution and on socio-economic benefits within local communities and cultures. Finally, the global pandemic has served as an innovative disruptor and catalyst for higher education institutions and prospective students to consider new learning models and opportunities. Therefore, transnational online distance education and internationalization efforts will continue to expand as globalization brings us closer together. In order to support the acceleration of internationalization in higher education and support successful outcomes across borders, educators, policymakers, and learners need practical guidelines to guide decision-making and continuous improvement efforts for quality transnational distance education.

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Appendix A

Keyword	A	B	C	D	E	Total Frequency	Weight Percentage
institution	155	230	81	5	17	488	0.028099269
learning	21	82	78	112	52	345	0.019865262
students	19	23	90	130	0	262	0.015086083
staff	32	99	61	34	13	239	0.013761732
learners	46	128	15	0	13	202	0.011631255
assessment	23	53	33	77	8	194	0.011170611
support	16	60	58	37	20	191	0.01099787
course	18	60	64	40	8	190	0.010940289
student	8	14	51	100	0	173	0.009961421
development	13	45	48	21	11	138	0.007946105
academic	7	56	13	45	2	123	0.007082398
appropriate	10	45	32	30	3	120	0.006909656
quality	13	41	7	37	8	106	0.00610353
providers	0	2	3	100	0	105	0.006045949
courses	12	22	28	24	18	104	0.005988369
activities	9	37	27	24	5	102	0.005873208
ensure	18	32	3	46	2	101	0.005815627
online	0	1	59	0	38	98	0.005642886
design	6	29	29	25	3	92	0.005297403
research	10	34	13	33	0	90	0.005182242
information	6	36	27	18	1	88	0.005067081
elearning	0	0	85	0	0	85	0.00489434
outcomes	1	26	16	33	9	85	0.00489434
needs	20	29	13	18	2	82	0.004721598
programmes	0	44	18	1	19	82	0.004721598

Appendix A. The document matrix of the 25 most frequent words in the five quality assurance frameworks.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Chapter 2. Contributions of Knowledge

This publication makes three significant contributions to knowledge. Notably, it identifies quality indicators for internationalization in transnational distance education. The contribution of this study highlights the growing need for more intentional and measurable internationalization dimensions in existing quality frameworks. My analysis found that only 1.3% of criteria and indicators, 27 in total, could be considered internationalization strategies or processes. Of these 27 internationalization indicators, the majority are curriculum and governance dimensions, according to Gao (2019). A key finding of this study is that it establishes a reference point for future research and practice, as it illustrates an opportunity for quality frameworks to evolve current indicators to be more measurable and internationalized.

Next, this study categorizes quality indicators in a systems model and builds on existing literature on quality assurance in distance education. Scholars have advocated for a more holistic, balanced approach to quality frameworks that includes output, outcome, and impact indicators to evaluate all system components for continuous improvement and resource allocation (Esfijani, 2018; Jung, 2011; Latchem, 2014; Moore & Kearsley, 2011). However, in this sample, the majority of indicators are categorized as input and contextual dimensions related to the educational system. This finding highlights a misalignment between research and practice, presenting an opportunity for stakeholders to collaborate and reassess current frameworks.

Lastly, this study bridges the literature gap between internationalization and distance education, an area that remains under conceptualized (Bruhn, 2016; Mittelmeier et al., 2020). Internationalization in higher education is an integrated system that involves the movement of students, faculty, administration, research, innovation, service, and practice across borders (Qiang, 2003; Knight, 1997). However, the internationalization indicators in this sample are

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limited to governance and curriculum dimensions (Gao, 2019), which do not fully represent the educational system. Therefore, a structurally aligned quality assurance framework should have internationalization indicators threaded throughout the corpus of system components to represent all dimensions.

As a result, the 27 indicators identified in this study informed the subsequent studies presented in Chapters 3 and 4. As previously mentioned, most indicators are located in the governance and curriculum domains and used as input and contextual indicators. Consequently, very few indicators were determined to measure an educational system's output, outcome or impact indicators. After analyzing the 27 indicators, I recognized an outlier that could quantitatively be measured and tested at the institutional level to verify its validity as a quality dimension of transnational distance education, which is, "*The institution has strong links to and collaborates with various international, national, governmental and non-governmental agencies in undertaking research*". Based on this indicator, I introduce international research collaboration as a quality metric and proxy for academic excellence in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3. International Research Collaboration as a Quality Indicator

Internationalization strategies and practices are diverse, but methods and measurements are limited, especially in open and distance universities, suggesting that practice is outpacing research. Informed by the findings of the first phase of my dissertation research in Chapter 2, this published manuscript reports on international research collaboration as a quality indicator of internationalization in three open universities and their three national counterparts. In this chapter, I examine international research collaboration as a measure and describe the degree of participation in internationalization by research outputs in nine universities.

As with the previous chapter, there were multiple objectives for this second analysis phase. Initially, I intended to use the findings from Chapter 2 and apply them authentically and pragmatically. Specifically, I aimed to test the concept, *The institution has strong links to and collaborates with various international, national, governmental and non-governmental agencies in undertaking research* in real-world contexts, which include the Open University in the United Kingdom, Anadolu University in Türkiye, and the University of South Africa. Additionally, and shaped by my literature review, international research collaboration is a significant indicator of knowledge production and dissemination from researchers affiliated with different nations in cooperative and collaborative processes (Frame & Carpenter, 1979; Turner & Robson, 2007). However, from my extensive analysis, I was unable to find previous literature on the role of knowledge production generated by open universities in the internationalization of research, which suggests that this second analysis phase addressed a significant research gap. Furthermore, one of my goals in pursuing a doctoral degree was to expand my skill set as an emerging scholar by learning quantitative approaches and diverse methods for knowledge creation. This second manuscript demonstrates the opportunity for me to learn and use bibliometrics analysis to study

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research outputs across publication indicators quantitatively. Finally, this manuscript served another objective: to illuminate the value and evolving role of open and distance universities. Many scholars have examined the negative attitudes and perceptions towards open and distance education (Baggaley, 2008; Clark, 1993; Kaban, 2021; Tait, 2018). This chapter approaches the subject from an international and collaborative perspective to argue, as others have before, that distance education is not inferior to traditional, in-person education but is different (Jung, 2022). With these objectives, this chapter presents *how international research collaboration affects knowledge production and dissemination in open universities compared with non-open universities* to understand the extent to which open universities engage in international research collaboration, which indicates academic excellence and a dimension of quality internationalization.

This second manuscript was submitted to the *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning (IRRODL)* as the most appropriate open-access journal due to its worldwide focus on open and distributed learning. Additionally, *IRRODL* has an established history in publishing quantitative methodological approaches, including bibliometric analysis (e.g., Elbeck & Mandernach, 2009; Zancanaro et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2022). Although this second phase of research is published in a journal that focuses on open and distributed learning models, it is important to note that many of the references and scholars who informed this study come from fields such as scientometrics (Aksnes 2003; Chinchilla-Rodriguez et al., 2012; Coccia & Bozeman, 2016; Guerrero Bote et al, 2012; Vieira et al., 2022), higher education evaluation and research (Abramo & D'Angelo, 2023; Gingras, 2016; Kwiek, 2021; Wysocka et al., 2022), business and economics (Donthu et al., 2021; Jaffe et al., 1993), as well as internationalization of higher education (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Gao, 2019; Knight, 2022). Grounding the foundation

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of this research from the lens of open and distance learning, I relied on seminal scholars and influential contributions from Daniel (1996), Guri-Rosenblit (2019), Moore (1995), Paul (2023), Peters (2008), and Tait (2018) to situate the significance of this chapter.

Proceeding with this introduction to the second manuscript, I provide the reference to the publication, the published manuscript, and conclude with a summary of the contributions of knowledge. In my summary at the end of this chapter, I discuss how this second analysis phase informs quality in transnational distance education to set the stage for Chapter 4.

Manuscript 2.

Heiser, R. E. (2023). The Emergence of the Open Research University Through International Research Collaboration. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 24(3), 99–124. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v24i3.7328>

The Emergence of the Open Research University Through International Research Collaboration

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Abstract

In higher education, international research collaboration functions as a visible mechanism of cooperation and competition, serving as a proxy for quality and academic excellence. Open universities use revolutionary education models but are not often associated with quality or academic excellence. To investigate the impact of international research collaboration by active researchers affiliated with open institutions, a bibliometrics analysis was conducted of three open universities and nine traditional, comparative universities between 2000 and 2022. The results indicate that research outputs that are open access, sponsored and funded, and developed with international coauthors have positive and statistically significant effects on citation counts. Moreover, international research collaboration significantly affects all universities, not just open institutions. The results conclude that researchers affiliated with open universities are only 4.3% less cited than their comparative peers, which is attributed to publication factors, research disciplines and subject areas, and journal characteristics. Findings are discussed and imply a strategic shift in the institutional functions and outputs of open universities as collaborative conduits of knowledge production and dissemination.

Keywords: internationalization, higher education, international research collaboration, open universities

Introduction

Twenty-first-century higher education institutions aim to support the empowerment and development of people and nations through knowledge transfer, knowledge creation, and the application of knowledge (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Jong et al., 2021). Traditionally, universities regard these functions and achievements as indicators of quality or the degree of excellence (Elken & Stensaker, 2018). Open and distance education universities, hereafter referred to as open universities, are often overlooked (Peters, 2008; Xiao, 2022) in their pursuit of academic excellence (Moore, 1995; Paul, 2023), despite their innovative model and relevance in twenty-first-century higher education (Daniel, 1996; Paul & Tait, 2019). Open universities use distributed education models, including single and dual modes, and incorporate flexible curriculum structures and admission processes. Additionally, open universities engage in transnational distance education and other internationalization strategies (Bruhn-Zass, 2022; Hou, 2022; Mittelmeier et al., 2021). Globalization and the rise of the knowledge economy have catalysed new opportunities and risks for higher education institutions (Knight & Liu, 2019), including open universities, which evolved quality assurance efforts to quantify internationalization. Further, Wysocka and colleagues (2022) argue that internationalization in higher education “is also an attribute of quality and an indicator” (p. 208). Building from this premise, this study examines the degree to which open universities participate in internationalization strategies through knowledge transfer, creation, and application using international research collaboration as an indicator.

It is challenging to use a universal approach to measuring quality across diverse sociocultural contexts. Esfijani (2018) and Maringe (2010) broadly identify internationalization and quality outputs as stakeholder satisfaction, learner graduation and completion rates, research publications and grants, and academic achievement. These output metrics drive a reductionist narrative in which the materialization and perception of evaluating the quality of internationalization in higher education are reduced to two paradigms: competition and cooperation (van der Wende, 2001). First, institutions and stakeholders have placed increased importance on higher education rankings to display status, competitive advantage, and international prestige in hopes of increased funding and international mobility (de Wit, 2019). As a result, academic rankings have dramatically shaped policy and practice, transforming universities into national and international strategic investments while obscuring higher education activities into comparative forms for measurement (Hazelkorn, 2015). Second, higher education embraces cooperation as a mechanism to engage in academic exchange as a bilateral communication channel to maintain relations (Altbach & de Wit, 2015). Cooperation is the pathway to participating in knowledge networks, which also enables a path to competition (Guerrero Bote et al., 2012; van der Wende, 2007).

However, there is a third paradigm: collaboration, a dynamic process that engages partners in shared creation with a common goal. In contrast, cooperation allows partners to work together to address independent goals. International collaboration in higher education has various forms (Lopez, 2015); for the purposes of this study, only international research collaboration is explored.

Accelerated by globalization, the creation and production of knowledge flow across international borders and social networks at an unprecedented pace in the form of international research collaboration (Ribeiro et al., 2018). This exchange leverages the strengths of collaborative partnerships to generate knowledge as a soft power (Knight, 2022). International research

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collaboration is the visible mechanism of cooperation and competition; it is both an input and output indicator that serves as a proxy for quality and academic excellence (Knobel et al., 2013). For example, international research collaboration can be input criteria for global university rankings. As output criteria, such collaboration results from successful partnerships that can lead to increased visibility, funding, research effectiveness, scientific productivity, and opportunities (Abramo et al., 2009). The outputs of international research collaboration have the potential to demonstrate knowledge transfer, creation, and application.

Research universities generate most of the attention given to international research collaboration due to supportive governance and regulations, financial resourcing, and attracting highly qualified talent (Altbach & Salmi, 2011); these factors overshadow knowledge generated and disseminated by open universities (Tait, 2018) and universities located in the Global South (Gueye et al., 2022). Based on my extensive literature review, scholars have not yet investigated the degree of international research collaboration in open universities as an indicator of academic excellence and quality dimensions of internationalization. Therefore, this study aims to address the gap in research and examine the significance of international research collaboration to shed light on the question: How does international research collaboration affect knowledge production and dissemination in open universities compared with non-open universities?

Literature Review

Measuring Internationalization of Higher Education

Scholars have not agreed on a singular definition of the internationalization of higher education due to the term's complex concepts (Qiang, 2003) and because it is a phenomenon that has rapidly evolved over the past three decades (Lee & Stensaker, 2021). Additionally, internationalization is highly contextual and dependent on the cultural, political, societal, and economic priorities of countries and education systems that engage in knowledge exchange (Knight, 2008). However, internationalization is understood as the academic mobility of people, programs, providers, policies, and projects that flow physically and virtually across geographic boundaries in response to globalization (Knight & de Wit, 2018). Internationalization practices and strategies in higher education are diffuse (Yesufu, 2018), and the methods and measurement of global partnerships and their effectiveness are scarce (Gao, 2019). The practices and strategies of internationalization function across a broad spectrum of mobility models, including study-abroad programs, branch campuses, targeted recruitment of international students for financial incentives, and distance learning programmes (Youssef, 2014). One of these mobility models is international knowledge networks (Jaffe et al., 1993), which support the flow and globalization of knowledge through international research collaboration (DeLaquil et al., 2022). Unlike other internationalization strategies and practices, international research collaboration can be quantified to measure the effectiveness of international knowledge networks for self-evaluation, comparisons, and classification purposes (Gao, 2019).

International Research Collaboration

The internationalization of research in higher education is known as international research collaboration, which is an influential indicator of the production and dissemination of knowledge from researchers affiliated with a nation who partner with researchers affiliated with another nation (Frame & Carpenter, 1979). The factors that affect international research collaboration include graduate education faculty and students and their mobility, contextual characteristics of sciences and disciplines, access to funding opportunities, communication and dissemination strategies, and regional or intranational initiatives (Woldegiyorgis et al., 2018).

According to Barnett (1990), research outputs indicate higher education's relevancy and intellectual contributions. Therefore, for some, the internationalization of research serves competitive agendas focused on increased productivity of individual researchers, institutions, nations, and their rankings (Buckner, 2022). Nevertheless, others consider the cross-pollination of ideas across geographical borders as a cooperative and collaborative process (Turner & Robson, 2007). Moreover, the mutually shared benefits of international research collaboration continue to drive researchers and policymakers to support the globalization of knowledge and knowledge diplomacy (Knight, 2022). Due to these diverse motivations and rationales, scholars aim to identify indicators to measure the internationalization of research. However, there is a dearth of knowledge on the role of knowledge production generated by open universities and their participation in the internationalization of research.

Open Universities

Following the establishment of the Open University in the United Kingdom (UK) in 1969, over 60 open education universities have expanded access to higher education worldwide (Tait, 2018). Moreover, within the first 30 years of the open education model, some universities, such as Indira Gandhi National Open University, the Open University of China, Universitas Terbuka Indonesia, and Anadolu University, quickly accelerated enrolment to support learning for millions of students (Bozkurt, 2019; Daniel, 1996). The revolutionary model of open universities ushered in innovative practices and functions, including opening admissions procedures, shifting instructional paradigms, prioritizing adult learners, embracing collaborative development models, using modular curriculum structures, and adopting emerging communication technologies (Guri-Rosenblit, 2019; Perry, 1970). Built on the foundations of access and social justice (Tait, 2013), open universities have evolved to meet the needs of contemporary knowledge societies and international knowledge networks (Teixeira et al., 2020).

Open universities have significantly contributed to educational systems through policy, practice, and research (Veletsianos & Houlden, 2019); unfortunately, these efforts have come with challenges. Often shaping the narrative of open and distance education are negative perceptions regarding quality and academic excellence at national and international levels (Gaskell & Mills, 2014). However, interpreting quality practices and indicators for open and distance education universities is well documented and implemented (Ossiannilsson et al., 2015; Tait, 1993). Therefore, more research is necessary to holistically capture institutional-level quality dimensions and performance metrics on quality inputs, processes, outputs, outcomes, and impact (Esfijani, 2018; Jung, 2022). With a focus on quality outputs and the internationalization of higher education, this study focuses on knowledge production and dissemination from three open universities.

Methodology

Bibliometrics Analysis

Bibliometrics analysis is a quantitative approach that enables researchers to statistically analyse research indicators as performance metrics to assess publication patterns and impact (Price, 1965). Bibliometric indicators measure research results in scientific publications or other research outputs and meaningfully normalize research outputs across indicators (Tunger et al., 2020). Bibliometrics analysis was deemed the most appropriate method due to its ability to examine large datasets across sciences, disciplines, and topics (Donthu et al., 2021). This study uses the Scopus database, which some (Aksnes & Sivertsen, 2019; Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016) contend covers more journals and international resources than the Web of Science or Google Scholar. These databases are essential tools for collecting, processing, and extracting data for bibliometric analysis (Bauer, 2020).

Sample

Informed by the first phase of an exploratory mixed-methods study (Heiser, 2022), this paper reports on the second phase of a more extensive investigation to test the outputs of three open universities that met inclusion criteria. Open universities were required to have doctoral programs of study, an active research centre, a publishing extension, and accessible grant and funding reports, as well as to use quality assurance standards and frameworks. Furthermore, the universities had to meet the Scopus database search criteria, including affiliation, open access, and peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2000 and 2022. Additionally, geographical and cultural considerations were made to study a more internationally diverse representation of open universities to amplify unique contexts and support generalizability. Once these criteria were applied, total publication counts were calculated to determine the top three universities for analysis: Anadolu University in Turkey, the Open University of the UK, and the University of South Africa.

Finally, nine universities were identified for a controlled comparison to understand the effects of international research collaboration. These nine universities are the three most frequently collaborated national universities with the open universities, according to the Scopus database in February 2023 (Table 1). Therefore, this study examines the international research collaboration outputs from 12 universities to examine the significance of open universities’ international research collaboration.

Table 1

Most Frequent National Collaboration Affiliations with an Open University

Open university	Top three most frequent national collaboration affiliations	Total national collaboration research outputs
University of South Africa	University of Johannesburg	873
	University of Pretoria	862

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	University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg	827
Anadolu University	Eskişehir Osmangazi Üniversitesi	705
	Gazi Üniversitesi	286
	Hacettepe Üniversitesi	364
The Open University	University College London	784
	University of Cambridge	736
	University of Oxford	832

Descriptive Analysis

A descriptive analysis using R (R Core Team, 2021) was performed to delineate themes and patterns within the data, which included only peer-reviewed journal outputs published between 2000 and 2022 by researchers affiliated with the 12 universities. These data (observations = 609,365) included all subject areas, sciences, open access types, and languages. The preliminary analysis presented emerging variables regarding the total number of publications and active researchers, as well as the annual average of citations, open access, sponsored funding, and international collaboration.

Since 2000, publications have steadily increased across all institutions, as presented in Figure 1. Except for the Open University, institutions in the UK publish more frequently than all other institutions examined in this study. Further, scholars affiliated with open institutions publish less often than those affiliated with comparative institutions. Therefore, additional analysis was conducted to understand the population size of active researchers.

Figure 1

Total Number of Publications by Institution, 2000-2022

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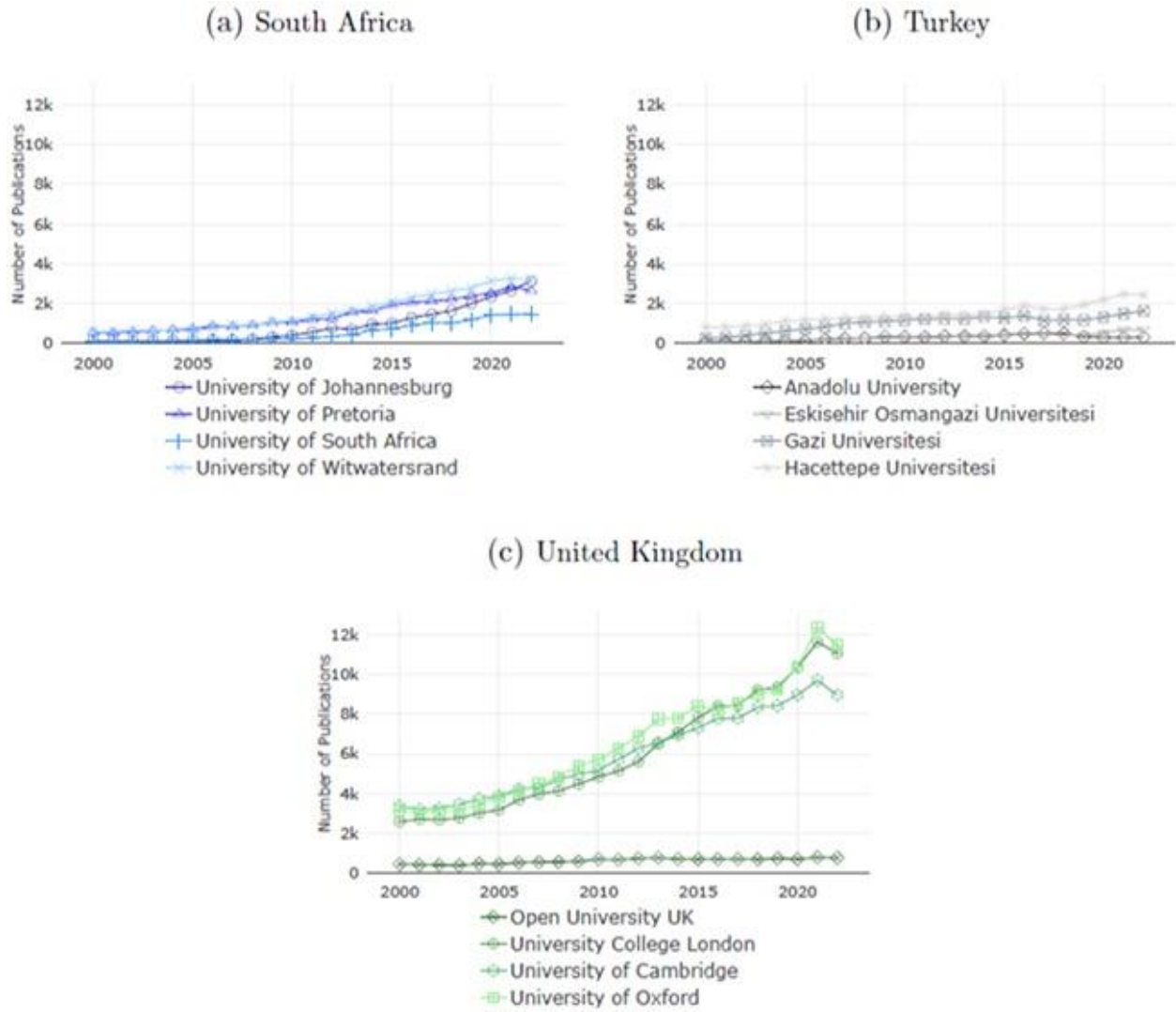


Figure 2 shows that UK institutions, except for the Open University, have increased the number of active researchers over the past 20 years upwards to 7,200 researchers. By comparison, South African and Turkish traditional institutions typically range from 1,000 to 2,000 active researchers, and the open institutions reported fewer than 1,000 active researchers with peer-reviewed publications.

Figure 2

Total Number of Active Researchers by Institution, 2000-2022

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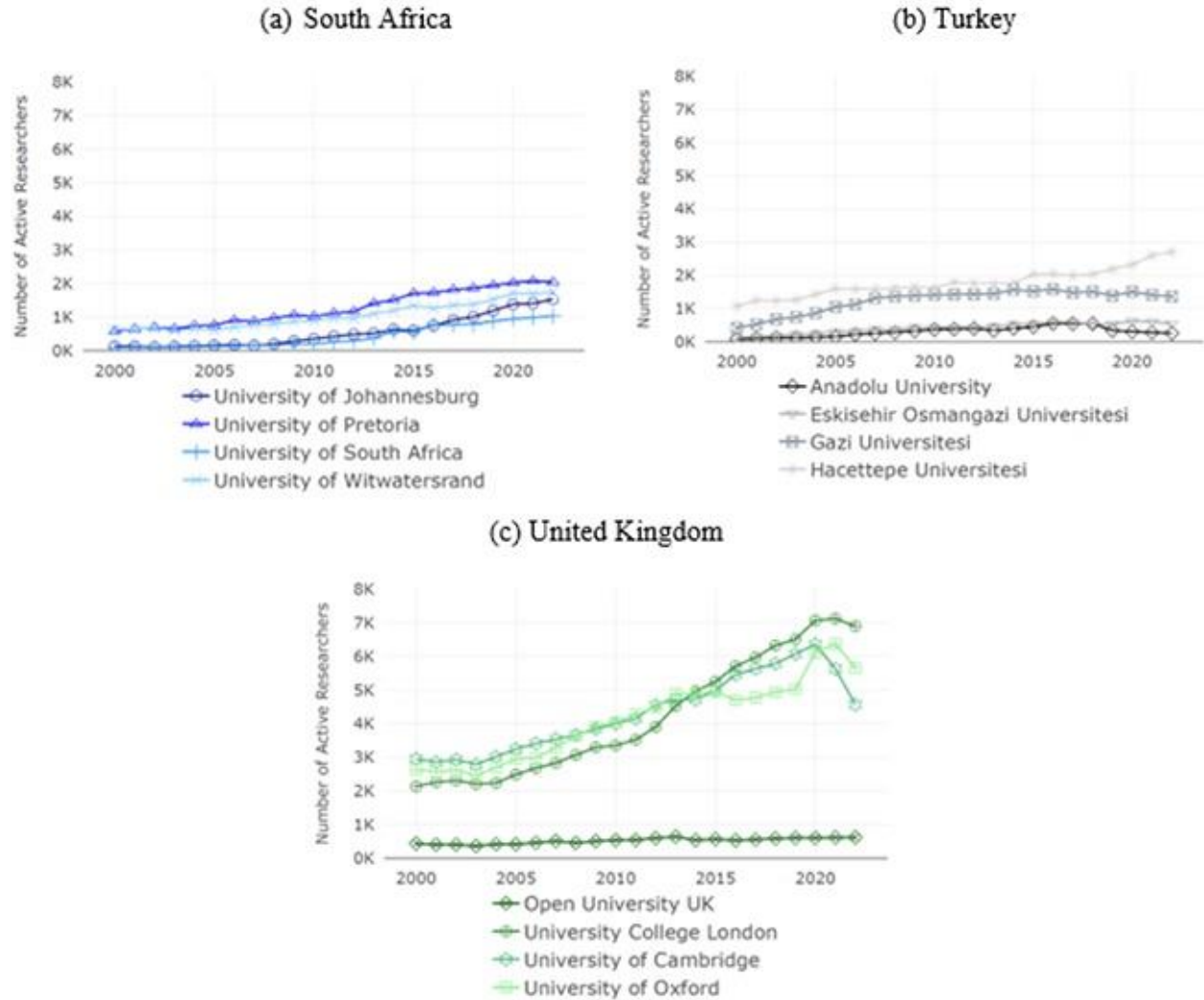
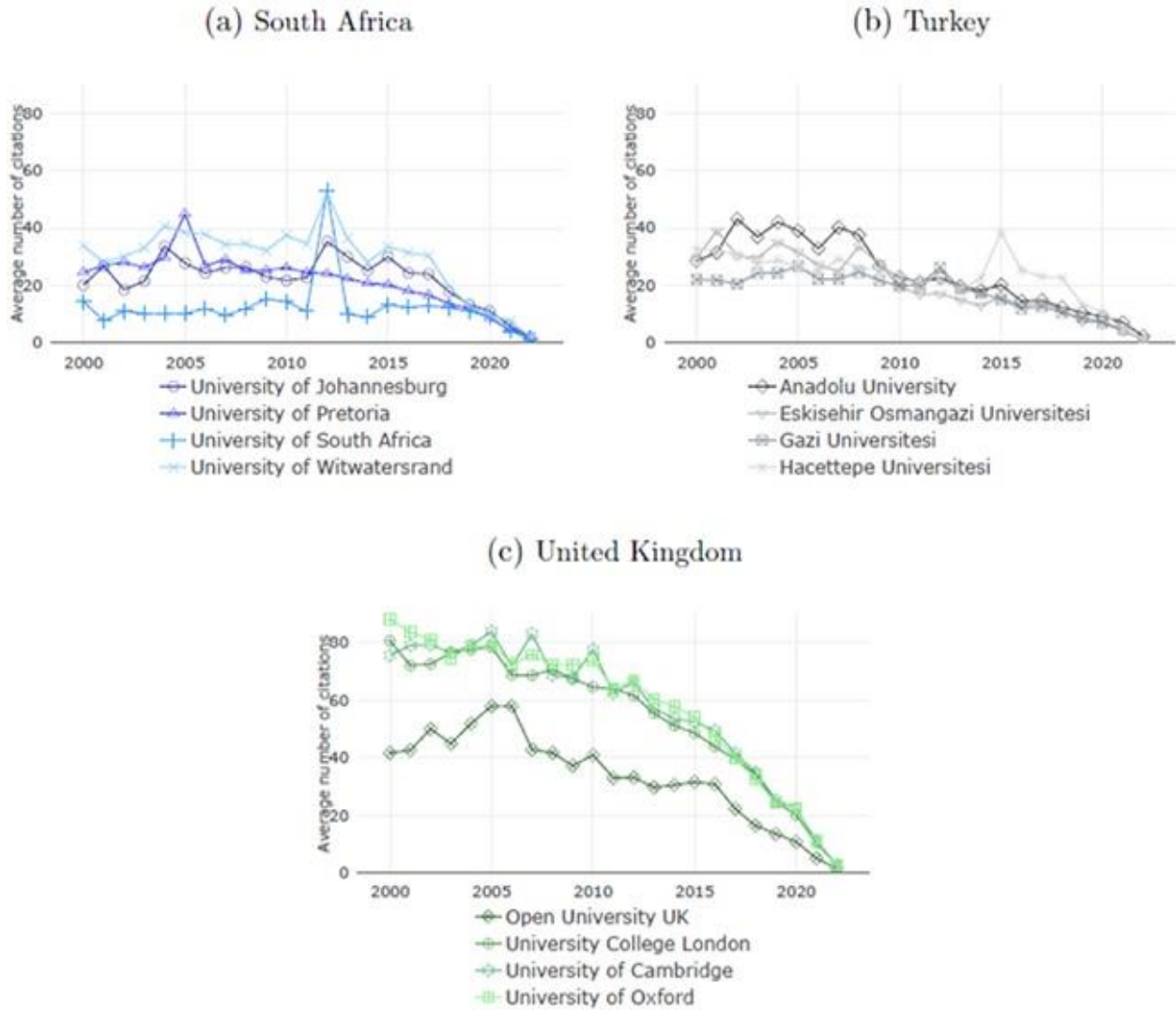


Figure 3 reports that the average number of citations declines over time, indicating that the institutions in the UK are cited more frequently than the comparative institutions in South Africa and Turkey. Unlike the other open institutions in this sample, publications affiliated with the Anadolu University are more frequently cited than their national comparative institutions.

Figure 3

Average Number of Citations on Published Articles by Institution, 2000-2022

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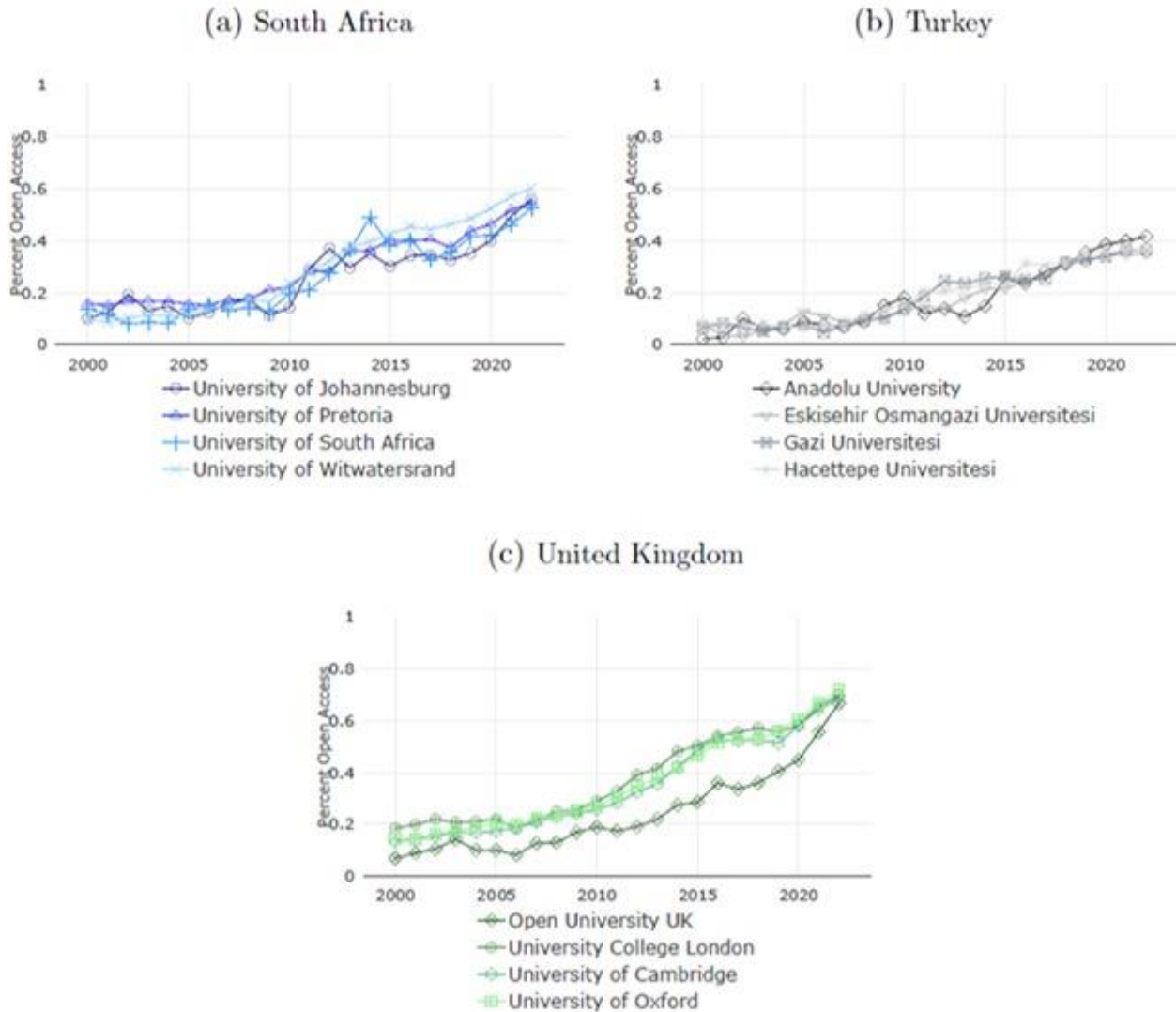


Consistent with the literature (Laakso et al., 2011), open access publications have increased across all universities, as presented in Figure 4. Institutions in the UK and South Africa frequently publish more openly than Turkish institutions in this study.

Figure 4

Percentage of Open Access Articles Published by Institution, 2000-2022

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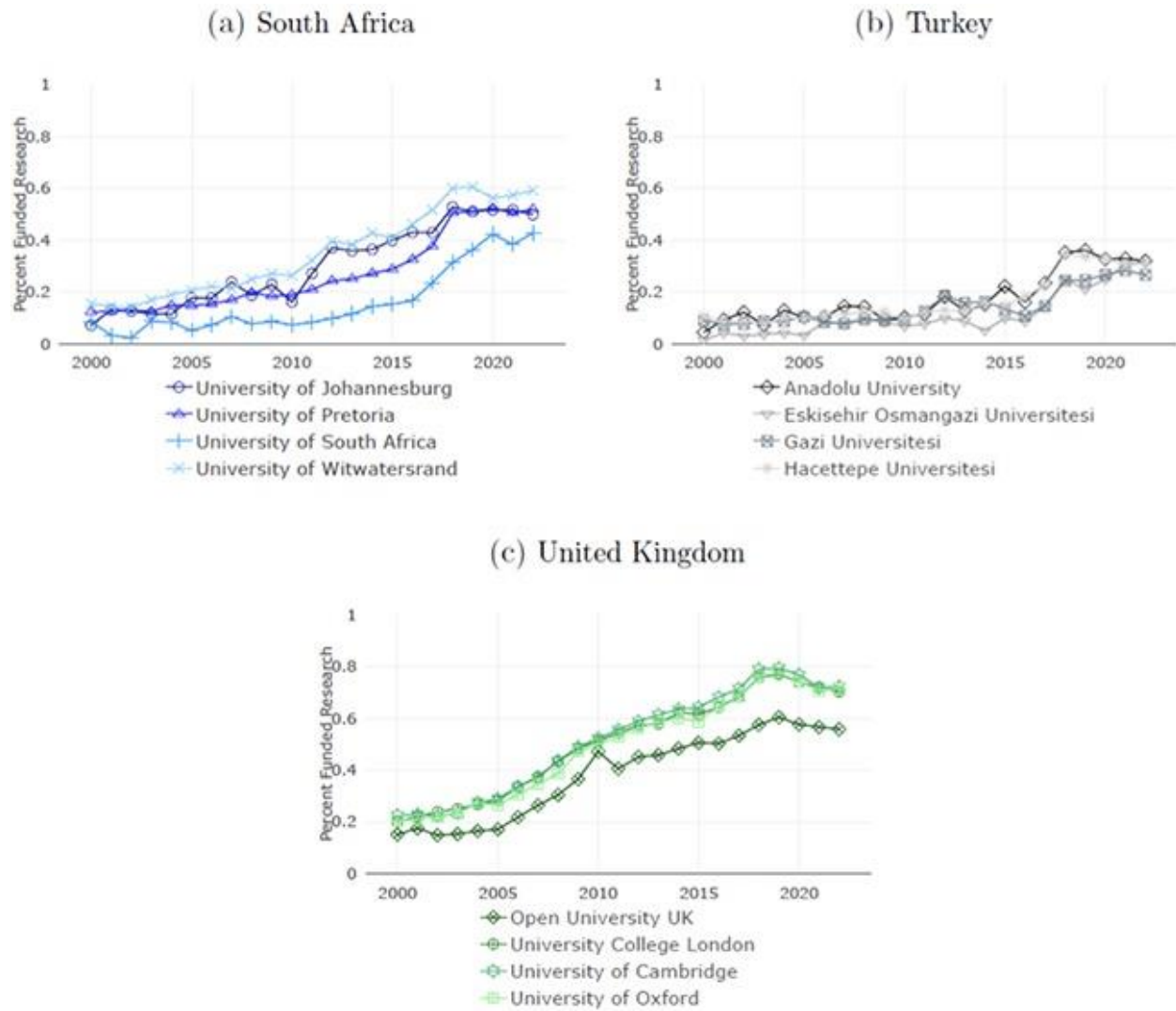


The annual percentage of funded research is reported more frequently by the comparative institutions except in Turkey, where Anadolu University strongly contends for sponsored research at the national level (Figure 5). Additionally, institutions in the UK have a higher percentage of funded research than South African and Turkish institutions.

Figure 5

Percentage of Funded Research Articles Published by Institution, 2000-2022

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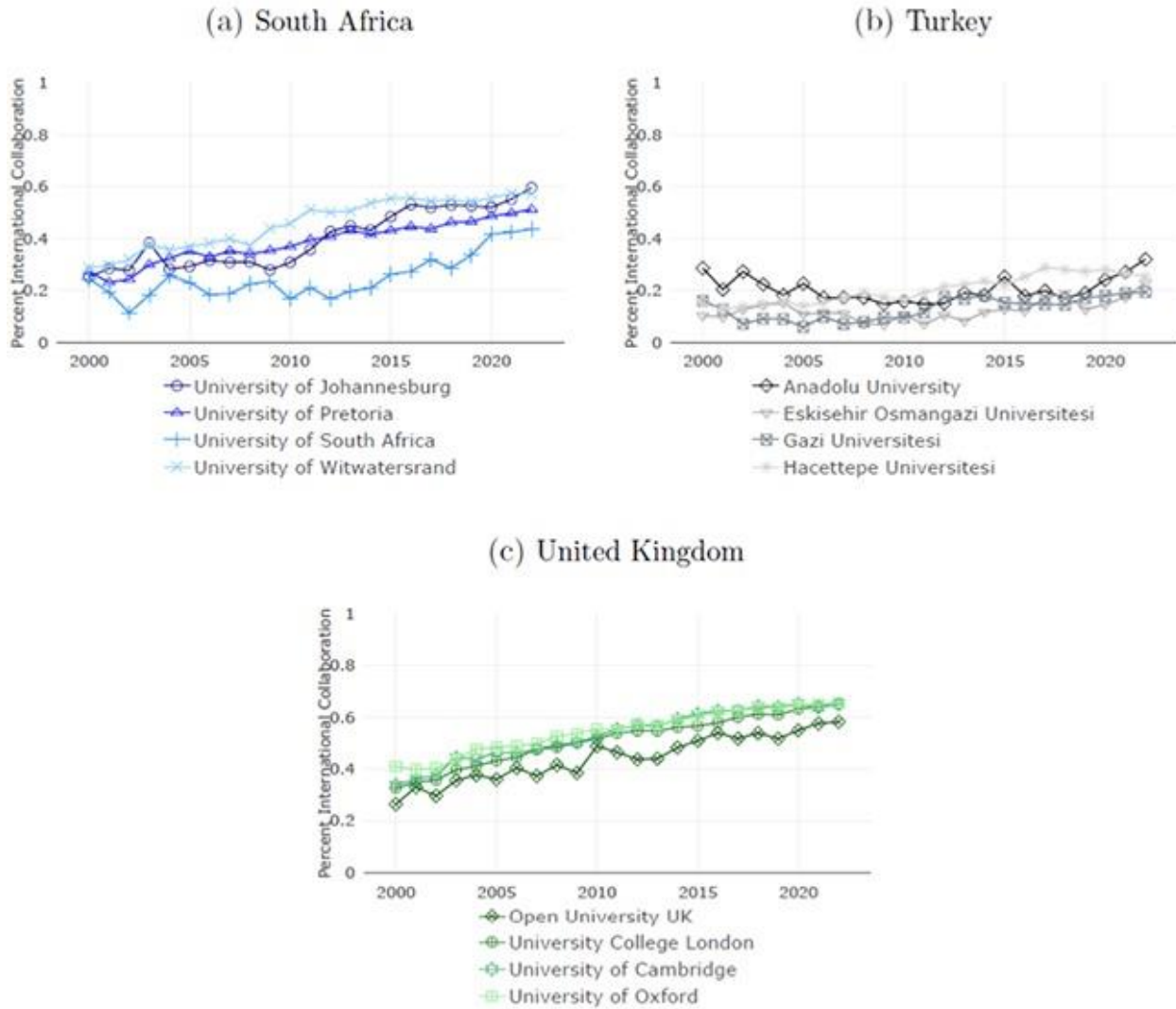


Finally, Figure 6 shows the percentage of international research collaboration, demonstrating an increase in international research collaboration across all institutions. It is important to note that all open universities in this sample collaborate internationally to a significant degree compared with their national comparative institutions.

Figure 6

Percentage of International Research Collaboration Publications by Institution, 2000-2022

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The descriptive analysis identified patterns and trends emerging in 12 institutions from three countries. Based on these findings, further statistical analysis was conducted to answer the primary research question and understand the effects of international research collaboration in open universities.

Empirical Methodology

A linear regression model was used to examine the effect of several key research input variables on citation counts over time:

$$\log(\text{Cites}_{ijt} + 1) = \beta^1 \text{Authors}_{ijt} + \beta^2 \text{Active}_j + \beta^3 \text{Inputs}_{ijt} + \psi_t + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

The dependent variable $\log(\text{Cites}_{ijt} + 1)$ represents the natural logarithm of the number of citations (plus one) for journal article i published in journal j at time t . The results are similar when $\log(\text{Cites}_{ijt})$ is used as the dependent variable. In Equation 1, Authors_{ijt} is a continuous measure of the number of authors for journal article i published in journal j at time t ; Active_j is an indicator

variable that equals 1 if the journal is still actively publishing journal articles at the end of 2022 or 0 otherwise; ψ_t is a vector of year fixed effects controlling for the year when the article was published; and ε is an error term. Finally, $Inputs_{ijt}$ is a vector of indicator variables for research inputs identifying whether the article is open access, the research was funded, and there was international collaboration. Previous studies have shown that these variables influence citation metrics (Morillo, 2020), and therefore, they were chosen for this study; however, the validity of bibliometric indicators remains ambiguous due to individual paradigms and rapid advancements in bibliometric methodologies (Aksnes et al., 2019).

After demonstrating that the research inputs significantly impact how often a journal article is cited, the variables were used as controls in a second regression, which includes an indicator variable for open universities, $Open_{ijt}$, that equals 1 if at least one author on the article i published in journal j at time t was affiliated with an open university or 0 otherwise. As a result, the updated specification takes the following form:

$$\log(Cites_{ijt} + 1) = \beta^1 Authors_{ijt} + \beta^2 Active_j + \beta^3 Inputs_{ijt} + \beta^4 Open_{ijt} + \psi_t + \varepsilon$$

After running the second regression to control for year fixed effects, additional specifications were run in R with additively separable year and subject area controls. The Scopus database assigns subject area levels to every serial publication (i.e., journal) with an International Standard Serial Number (ISSN) and the subject area controls align with the All Science Journal Classification (ASJC) code list. The subject area data by ISSN was accessed and downloaded from the Scopus Website to control for types of sciences and subjects. Scopus refers to the first subject area control as the supergroup, classifying the journal into one of three groups: life sciences, social sciences, or physical sciences. The second subject area control uses the first two digits of the ASJC code, with 27 ASJC parent codes. The third subject area control uses the complete four-digit ASJC code, of which there are 334. Finally, the subject area was controlled for with the inclusion of journal fixed effects.

Results and Discussion

Based on the empirical methodology, results indicate positive and statistically significant indicators of research outputs that are open access, receive sponsorship funding, and participate in international collaboration. Results suggest that international research collaboration is a statistically significant variable for all universities and does not uniquely affect open universities. The findings are categorized into two themes: publication factors and the effects of international research collaboration.

Publication Factors

The first finding concerns citation indicators with publication factors. Three research input indicators—open access, sponsored, and international coauthor—were examined due to their interrelationships to amplify the visibility and impact of research. Research has demonstrated that open access and funded research factors are often related, as scholars and their affiliations are more willing to pay publishing fees to expand to a broader audience (Pinfield et al., 2016; Solomon & Björk, 2012). Building on these two factors is international coauthorship, similarly used for funding purposes and potentially for increasing readership globally (Abramo & D'Angelo, 2023).

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From this conceptual framing, Table 2 displays results examining the effect of research inputs on citation counts from Equation 1. Each column in Table 2 includes controls for the number of authors on each paper, an indicator variable identifying whether the journal is still actively publishing, and year fixed effects to control for the length of time since the article was initially published.

Table 2

Effect of Research Inputs on Citations

Variable	Open access (1)	Sponsored (2)	International coauthor (3)	All research inputs (4)
Author count	0.018* (0.001)	0.016* (0.001)	0.015* (0.001)	0.012* (0.001)
Active	0.828* (0.023)	0.740* (0.018)	0.806* (0.020)	0.721* (0.018)
Open access	0.245* (0.035)			0.154* (0.028)
Sponsored		0.641* (0.050)		0.556* (0.044)
International coauthor			0.501* (0.031)	0.400* (0.022)
Time FE	Year	Year	Year	Year
Observations	609,365	609,365	609,365	609,365
R^2	0.315	0.350	0.333	0.367

Note. FE = fixed effects.

* $p < .01$

Author Count and Active Journals

The coefficient estimates on the author count and active journal variables are positive and statistically significant in every column of Table 2. Also, the coefficient estimates for the continuous author count variable indicate that the number of citations increases as the number of authors on a paper increases. This finding is intuitive because an increased author count helps increase the article's exposure and reach (Acedo et al., 2006). Moreover, authors have more opportunities to self-cite their publication in their future work (Aksnes, 2003). The coefficient estimates on the active journal indicator variable in Table 2 suggest that articles published in active journals at the end of the study period (i.e., 2022) received, on average, 72.1% to 82.8% more citations than articles published in the same year in journals that are no longer active. Again, this finding is also intuitive as active journals likely have a higher readership than inactive journals (James et al., 2018).

Open Access

The first column of Table 2 includes the open access indicator variable identifying whether the journal article was an open publication. The open access coefficient estimate indicates that, on average, open publications received 24.5% more citations than non-open articles published during the same year. This result diverges from those of previous studies (Davis, 2011; Sotudeh & Estakhr, 2018) that have questioned a citation advantage to openly accessible articles and found no significant difference.

Sponsored Research

The second column of Table 2 includes the sponsored indicator variable identifying whether the journal article was funded. The analysis results indicate that, on average, studies that received funding have 64.1% more citations than non-funded articles published during the same year. This result aligns with prior research demonstrating that funded studies are cited more often (Larivière et al., 2010; Roshani et al., 2021).

International Collaboration

The third column of Table 2 includes an indicator variable identifying whether the journal article included international collaboration among authors. The international coauthor coefficient estimate indicates that, on average, articles with international collaboration have 50.1% more citations than articles without. This result is consistent with the literature (Alamah et al., 2023; Onyancha, 2021); international research collaboration yields more citations worldwide.

Finally, the fourth column of Table 2 includes all three research input variables from Equation 1 simultaneously. Again, the coefficient estimates remain positive and statistically significant. However, the magnitude of the coefficient estimates decreases.

International Research Collaboration

The second finding addresses the effect of open university affiliation on citation counts using the regression framework presented in Table 3. Each column in Table 3 includes the same controls and the three research input variables explored in Table 2. The variable of interest, open university, indicates whether one of the authors is affiliated with an open university. The indicator variable equals 1 if one of the authors is affiliated with Anadolu University, the Open University in the UK, or the University of South Africa; otherwise, the indicator variable equals 0.

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Table 3

Open Universities and Citation Counts

Variable	Baseline (1)	Supergroup (2)	Parent (3)	ASJC (4)	ISSN (5)	ISSN (6)
Open university	-0.307* (0.027)	-0.238* (0.018)	-0.248* (0.020)	-0.216* (0.015)	-0.049* (0.009)	-0.043* (0.008)
Author count	0.012* (0.001)	0.011* (0.001)	0.012* (0.001)	0.013* (0.001)	0.008* (0.0004)	0.008* (0.0004)
Active journals	0.715* (0.017)	0.707* (0.017)	0.705* (0.020)	0.650* (0.019)		
Open access	0.149* (0.027)	0.086* (0.018)	0.092* (0.018)	0.096* (0.019)	0.117* (0.016)	0.117* (0.016)
Sponsored	0.545* (0.043)	0.490* (0.040)	0.467* (0.038)	0.428* (0.036)	0.113* (0.015)	0.113* (0.015)
International coauthor	0.393* (0.022)	0.349* (0.018)	0.319* (0.017)	0.296* (0.016)	0.122* (0.006)	0.123* (0.007)
Open university: International coauthor						-0.022 (0.031)
Time FE	Year	Year	Year	Year	Year	Year
Observations	609,365	609,365	609,365	609,365	609,365	609,365
R^2	0.370	0.381	0.398	0.417	0.600	0.600
Adjusted R^2	0.370	0.381	0.398	0.417	0.585	0.585

Note. ASJC = All Science Journal Classification; ISSN = International Standard Serial Number; FE = fixed effects.
* $p < .01$.

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Open University

The first column of Table 3 introduces the open university variable with no additional fixed effects outside of the year fixed effects included in every column of Table 2. The open university coefficient estimate in column one indicates that journal articles authored by faculty at an open university in this study received, on average, 30.7% fewer citations than journal articles published in the same year by faculty at comparison universities. These results do not control for the faculty at the comparison universities, which may differ in research disciplines, sciences, and journals in which they publish. Therefore, columns two through six attempt to control these differences using increasingly granular subject area fixed effects.

Sciences

The second column in Table 3 includes fixed effects for the supergroup, classifying the journal into one of three groups: life sciences, social sciences, or physical sciences. After controlling for this high-level classification, journal articles authored by faculty at an open university in this study received, on average, 23.8% fewer citations than journal articles published in the same year and supergroup by faculty at the comparison universities.

Subject Area

The third column of Table 3 includes fixed effects for the ASJC parent codes. Interestingly, the open university coefficient estimate in column three increases slightly, to 24.8%, relative to the less granular supergroup fixed effects estimates in column two.

The fourth column includes fixed effects for the ASJC codes. Including the more granular subject area controls has the expected impact in that the open university coefficient estimate in column four decreases relative to the previous three columns. The coefficient estimate suggests that journal articles authored by faculty at one of the three open universities in this study received, on average, 21.6% fewer citations than journal articles published in the same year and ASJC code by faculty at the comparison universities.

Journal

The fifth column in Table 3 reports the results, including fixed effects for the journal in which the article was published. Including journal fixed effects allows the comparison of citation counts for articles published in the same year and the same journal, thereby alleviating concerns about journal quality, distribution, and readership. However, the active journal indicator variable in column five is not included because it perfectly correlates with the journal fixed effects. The open university coefficient estimate in column five indicates that journal articles authored by faculty at an open university in this study received, on average, 4.9% fewer citations than journal articles published in the same year and journals by faculty at the comparison universities. Further, the R^2 increased considerably in column five relative to the previous columns. This suggests that the journal in which an article is published is a crucial determinant of how many citations that article will receive. It also highlights the need to carefully control for differences in faculty research interests and subject areas when evaluating the effect of research inputs and university affiliations on citation counts.

International Collaboration

Finally, the sixth column in Table 3 addresses the research question: How does international research collaboration affect knowledge production and dissemination in open universities compared with non-open universities? The results suggest that international coauthorship matters, and there is little effect on the type of university. The international coauthor coefficient estimate in column six indicates that journal articles that include international coauthorship received approximately 12.3% more citations than journal articles without international coauthorship published in the same year and in the same journals. However, the coefficient estimate on the open university-international coauthor interaction term is negative; it is not statistically significant. This finding indicates that international collaboration similarly affects citation counts for faculty at open universities and their comparisons.

Although previous studies on international research collaboration have not explicitly examined the impact on open universities, scholars have found that international research collaboration positively influences academic excellence and high-quality research outcomes (Li & Yin, 2022; Velez-Estevez et al., 2022). Therefore, this study contributes to the growing body of literature suggesting the influence of international research collaboration with the inclusion of open university research outputs.

Conclusion

Today's knowledge society is evolving, and the role of internationalization in higher education is gaining universal importance as a form of knowledge diplomacy (Knight, 2022) and as a proxy for quality and academic excellence (Knobel et al., 2013). The outputs of international research collaboration can serve as a quality indicator to measure the globalization of knowledge. This study aimed to understand the effects of international research collaboration on three open universities by examining the relationship between national comparative universities through citation metrics between 2000 and 2022.

The findings suggest that open institutions actively produce knowledge with fewer active researchers and research funding sponsors than comparative universities. Furthermore, results from the multiple regression analysis indicate that the number of authors, activeness of a journal, open publishing, international coauthors, and sponsorship support citation advantages by year across sample universities.

Unlike previous studies regarding the effects of open access on citations (Langham-Putrow et al., 2021), this examination found that open access publication offers a 24.5% citation advantage when compared with articles published in the same year that are not openly accessible. Open access publishing has increased worldwide; however, publishing openly often comes at a cost. Interestingly, this study found that comparative institutions receive more funding than open universities, and their sponsored research articles typically receive a 64.1% increase in their citation margins. Although studying the relationship between open access and funding is outside the scope of this study, more research is needed to examine the impacts of these variables on articles published by researchers affiliated with open universities, given their institutional missions for educational access.

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Researchers affiliated with open universities are less often cited than their comparative peers in this sample; however, once the fixed effects were applied and compared against international research collaboration indicators, the difference in citation rates between the two groups was reduced to only 4.3%. This finding demonstrates the significance of international research collaboration and the degree to which scholars affiliated with open universities participate in globalized knowledge production and dissemination. Additionally, the results suggest a strategic shift in the functions and outputs of open universities in a relatively short period. This study indicates that open institutions have evolved from providing educational access for workforce development to institutions engaging in internationalization and demonstrating academic excellence at national and international levels through collaborative research and publication.

Finally, more research is needed to examine journal and subject-level attributes that appear to affect the number of citations that open university researchers create. This study suggests that open university researchers publish in journals or subject areas with less impact. Future studies should consider other measurable outputs, outcomes, and impact factors from international research collaboration with open universities, including the economic effects of knowledge spillover and transfer at localized levels and the international mobility of open university researchers as a result of their publications.

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Chapter 3. Contributions of Knowledge

This second publication aimed to accomplish the three objectives outlined in the introduction of this chapter, including examining international research collaboration as a quality indicator in open university contexts, expanding my methodological skill set as an emerging scholar, and highlighting the production and dissemination of knowledge developed by active researchers affiliated with open universities as a proxy for quality and academic excellence.

Firstly, by examining international research collaboration as a quality indicator in open university contexts, this manuscript bridged the gap between previous studies demonstrating the significance of international research collaboration (Chen et al., 2019; Velez-Esteves et al., 2022) and introduced the contextual element of open universities. My research findings suggest that articles with international coauthors receive 12.3% more citations than those without; this trend is similarly observed in open universities and their comparisons. The importance of this contribution is that it strengthens the validity of international research collaboration as a more generalizable quality measure. It also demonstrates that the indicator identified in Chapter 2, *The institution has strong links to and collaborates with various international, national, governmental and non-governmental agencies in undertaking research*, is a measurable quality dimension for transnational distance education. This finding may encourage scholars and practitioners to use this indicator to evaluate internationalization efforts.

Secondly, as a personal objective, I aimed to design a study that would push me out of my comfort zone and lay the groundwork for my future research agenda. Once bibliometrics analysis was determined as the best approach to address the research question, I needed to familiarize myself with extracting and cleaning the bibliometric data (Goutsmedt, 2022). The process of obtaining Scopus data and utilizing it for my dissertation was initially a foreign

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concept that required me to study Elsevier's Developer Portal and API documentation in order to access their database for research purposes. Once I understood the technical specifications, I had to connect the data to R programming (R Core Team, 2021) to make sense of the data, develop the data visualizations and eventually run the linear regression analysis. Through this learning process, I established a baseline for my research agenda and built my confidence. For instance, in my analysis, I revealed that comparative institutions receive more funding than open universities. Sponsored research articles from these institutions experience a 64.1% increase in citation margins. Although I do not explore the relationship between open access and funding, the data collected for this manuscript can be reexamined to investigate the effects of these variables on articles produced by researchers associated with open universities as a future contribution to the field.

The third objective was to add to the growing body of literature on the evolution of open universities and highlight their valuable contributions. Based on the descriptive analysis, my findings indicate that open universities, despite having fewer active researchers and research funding sponsors compared to traditional universities, are actively producing and disseminating knowledge. This challenges the conventional belief that research capabilities solely depend on an institution's size and funding (Bloch & Sørensen, 2015; Muscio et al., 2013), it also suggests that open universities are doing more with less. Furthermore, it also draws into question a strategic shift in the mission and goals of open universities. The three institutions in this sample appear to have evolved from their original purpose of providing educational access for workforce development to actively participating in internationalization and demonstrating academic excellence at national and international levels through collaborative research and publication.

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In summary, this chapter presents significant findings that lay the foundation for future research. One of the most significant findings discussed is the evolution of open universities and international research collaboration as a measurable quality dimension for internationalization. Finally, as an active researcher at an open university, I had the opportunity to participate in an international research collaboration to gain further insights through experience. In the third and final manuscript, I put into practice my findings from the previous two manuscripts while prioritizing the transnational distance education student experience. As a result, Chapter 4 illuminates quality factors and attributes from the transnational distance education student perspective, thereby completing this comprehensive body of research.

Chapter 4. Defining Quality from the Transnational Distance Learner Perspective

Until this chapter, this body of research has primarily used secondary data from existing quality assurance frameworks and the Scopus database. In order to take a more human-centred approach which aligns to my pragmatic paradigm, this chapter brings to light the transnational distance student perspective, an emerging student population that is often overlooked. This third manuscript results from an international research collaboration among scholars located in three countries. This study focuses on quality dimensions of transnational distance education from a student's perspective to guide practice and research. Additionally, the intent of this manuscript is to recognize transnational distance learners as a distinct student population rather than categorizing them as international or distance learners (Mittelmeier, 2022; Stewart, 2019). As the final manuscript in this body of research, this manuscript embeds the QAA framework from the sample in Chapter 2 and models international research collaboration from an open university as a quality practice as described in Chapter 3.

This manuscript results from a programmatic internationalization effort at Athabasca University to engage in transnational distance education with prospective graduate students in Greece. However, by the time I applied to become a research assistant for this study, the transnational distance students who were part of the study had already graduated. The lapse of time allowed the transnational distance students to reflect on their experiences and consider how their degrees contributed to their current outcomes and future plans. Unlike most research assistant positions posted at the university, this position required the applicant to be a transnational distance student, which also assured my eligibility to serve as well as draw from my own experiences. Additionally, I was interested in the research assistant role because it involved working alongside the primary investigator at the outset of the study to design all

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aspects of the research collaboratively. Once we negotiated the design of the study, we implemented our intentions, which included submitting an ethics review board proposal (Appendix A), developing the research team, executing our methodology, analyzing our findings, and disseminating our results, including this manuscript, a short paper (Appendix C) and a conference presentation (Appendix D). Additionally, we obtained an extension to our ethics approval certificate (Appendix B) in order to complete and publish the third manuscript presented in this chapter. Our final report to the ethics review board marked the completion of this study (Appendix E).

We chose collaborative autoethnography as the appropriate method for this study because transnational distance learners experience a "poverty of recognition" (Stewart, 2019, p. 23), and this method can magnify their perspectives. Collaborative autoethnography is a participatory, data-driven, qualitative research method that empowers the researched as co-researchers (Chang et al., 2016) to lend insights to represent beliefs from a particular group of individuals (Adams & Herrmann, 2020). Collaborative autoethnography enables individuals to analyze and evaluate their experiences in social and cultural contexts and share their perspectives in reflective practice (Ellis, 2004). Consistent with the methodology, the findings of this manuscript are written in a first-person narrative, combining the transnational distance learners' voices into one to illustrate the depth of self-reflexivity in an engaging, accessible, and ethical form (Lapadat, 2017).

The research objective of this manuscript is to describe and inform, from the student perspective, what is a quality transnational distance education experience and to highlight this emerging student population. My literature review identified three research gaps that this manuscript attempts to address. The first gap is that transnational distance education students are underrecognized in research and practice. From a research perspective, two scholars dominate

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my literature review: Mittelmeier (2022) and Stewart (2017; 2019), who conceptualize the transnational distance learner population. From a practice perspective, Gemmell and Harrison (2017; 2023) and Gift and Bell-Hutchinson (2007) draw attention to barriers and challenges in the transnational distance learner experience. The second gap is that student stakeholders are absent from informing practice, including quality dimensions, in transnational distance education. Student perspectives are present in quality assurance distance education (Jung, 2011, 2012, 2022), internationalization (Absalom & Vadura, 2006; Ma & Yue, 2015), and adult education literature (Hill, 2014; Tan, 2021) but have not fully been studied in transnational distance education which combines these concepts. Lastly, this manuscript attempts to address the third gap, which is to situate the student experience as a measurable progression. To enhance quality, it is essential to connect the student experience to a systems model that includes inputs, progress, outputs, outcomes, and impact (Esfijani, 2018). Drawing from the deductive codebook utilized in the first manuscript in Chapter 2, which was informed by OECD's Education at a Glance report (2021), a systems framework was applied to structure the findings of this manuscript to identify areas for continuous improvement. This framing was strategic to support and conceptualize future research and inform practice.

At the time of presenting this body of research, the final manuscript shared in this chapter was submitted to a peer-reviewed journal for publication. In the remainder of the chapter, I share the tentative reference, the final draft submission to the publisher, and a summary of the contributions of knowledge to conclude the presentation of manuscripts.

Manuscript 3.

Heiser, R. E., Lazou, C., Mavraki, A., Psychogiou, M., Palalas, A., & Walsh, P. (in press). How do transnational distance education graduate students perceive quality?: A collaborative autoethnography. *Journal of International Students*.



How do transnational distance education graduate students perceive quality?: A collaborative autoethnography

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ABSTRACT

Driven by competition amongst higher education institutions, increasing recognition of the benefits of international academic mobility, and the global pandemic, transnational distance education has accelerated in recent years. Despite its many advantages, quality assurance issues can pose significant obstacles to success. Using a collaborative autoethnography approach, this study aimed to conceptualize quality dimensions from the perspectives of three Greek graduate students shaped by their collective experience at an open university in Canada. The findings suggest that quality encompasses accessibility, learner-centred instructional design, social-emotional support, and applying acquired knowledge and skills in local contexts. The significance of this study further illustrates the emerging transnational distance student population and highlights their experiences to inform quality internationalization practices in higher education for all students.

Keywords: collaborative autoethnography, quality assurance, quality dimensions, student perspectives, transnational distance education

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Introduction

Transnational distance education is an emerging, disruptive higher education model that enables learners and faculty to engage through communication technologies without physically travelling across geographical borders. The global pandemic and competition amongst higher education institutions have recently accelerated virtual forms of internationalization in higher education (Bruhn-Zass, 2022); however, transnational distance education models have been discussed and practiced for over 30 years (Moore, 1994). By leveraging online technologies, universities can increase access and scale educational programs to learners worldwide (Teixeira et al., 2019) while diversifying the learning community and learning experience (Gemmell et al., 2015). Stakeholders, ranging from students to policymakers, are motivated to participate in the internationalization of higher education for social, cultural, political and economic reasons (Knight, 2004). Across the globe, there is a strong appreciation for the benefits of international academic mobility. Researchers identify these benefits as gaining a competitive edge and improving visibility, participating in international research collaboration and knowledge diplomacy, developing intercultural skills and worldviews, and contributing to the growth, innovation, and social impact of higher education institutions (Barbosa & Neves, 2020). Successful international distance education requires careful consideration of institutional infrastructure, student support, contextual factors, and quality assurance (Skinner, 2008). Barriers can arise from inadequate translation of standards, curriculum, and resources, as well as challenges in pedagogy and accreditation across borders (Tran et al., 2023). If these challenges go unaddressed, students may experience personal setbacks, including obtaining unaccredited degrees, encountering academic probation and disciplinary challenges, experiencing social and emotional conflicts, or concluding their program without applicable knowledge or skills for their context, all at their expense (Lee, 2022). Due to an evolving landscape and continuous negotiation to build consensus on quality internationalization practices and strategies, transnational distance education student perspectives suffer from a “poverty of recognition” (Stewart, 2019, p. 23). Consequently, learners metaphorically lack a seat at the table to describe and inform the intricacies of quality in higher education. To address this problem, our study aimed to conceptualize quality dimensions from the perspectives of three transnational distance education graduate students to interpret what quality means from the voices of student stakeholders.

Literature Review

The internationalization of higher education and the development of communication technologies have blended the boundaries of knowledge exchange in formal education models. Transnational distance education can be defined as learning that flows across national borders where learners and educational providers are geographically separated, and knowledge is distributed and constructed through a fidelity of communication technologies to support access and managed through organizational processes (Knight, 2016; Ziguras, 2008). Technology can provide high-quality learning experiences and blur geographic barriers when used effectively (Lima et al., 2020). Within the past three decades, transnational distance education has experienced tremendous growth (Banner, 2016). The upward trajectory is expected to continue (GUNi, 2022) as transnational distance education increases access for marginalized and lifelong learners, offers flexible learning models, and is perceived to be more environmentally sustainable and scaleable (Sabzalieva et al., 2022). However, transnational distance education is not without challenges. Documented issues are often related to cross-cultural factors and quality dimensions (Latchem & Ryan, 2013), as well as demonstrating quality by measuring internationalization practices, processes, and strategies (Gao, 2019).

Defining Quality

Researchers and practitioners have yet to reach a consensus on defining what quality transnational distance education is, how it is measured, and for whom it is intended to benefit. Conceptually, defining quality is complicated and entangled in three compounding factors. Firstly, worldwide, higher education lacks a universal definition of quality (Elken & Stensaker, 2018). Quality is shaped by political, social, cultural and economic value systems and individual paradigms (Harvey & Green, 2006). Secondly, research has examined the challenges and implications of quality in the internationalization of higher education, often citing issues with cooperation among national policies and regulations, institutional quality evaluation practices and impact metrics, and theoretical discourse on quality and the balance of power (Carvalho et al., 2022). Thirdly, shifting attention to distance education contexts, online education has been criticized for its perceived lower quality than in-person education, which is often considered the gold standard (Jung, 2022). Gaskell and Mills (2015) suggest that the negative perceptions regarding distance education are due to institutional quality measures and assurance practices, student outcome metrics, infrastructure and access issues, and skepticism from employers. However, institutions, national and international non-governmental

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organizations have been engaged in evaluating quality models and assurance systems (Ossiannilsson et al., 2015), demonstrating student satisfaction and learning outcomes (Jeong et al., 2019).

Despite the challenges of defining and measuring quality in transnational distance education, stakeholders advocate for holistic frameworks that monitor institutional inputs, progression, outputs, outcomes, and impact (Esfijani, 2018). According to Ubachs and Henderikx (2022), quality assurance systems should purposefully integrate all stakeholder perspectives, including students, to support continuous improvement efforts. Unfortunately, our literature review did not reveal many studies (Gemmel & Harrison, 2017; Ren & Zhou, 2022) that examined transnational students' quality expectations, experiences, and outcomes in distance education contexts.

Transnational Student Stakeholders

Transnational distance education learners are highly nuanced and cannot be exclusively categorized as “international” or “distance” learners (Mittelmeier, 2022). Instead, for this study, students who enrol in courses or programs offered by a foreign educational institution and access the educational experience through communication technologies from a different country are known as transnational distance learners. Further, transnational distance education may be the only accessible modality for students to engage in formal cross-cultural exchanges and internationalization strategies due to limited mobility, resources, and time (Aquino et al., 2023). Special considerations regarding course and curriculum design, operational processes, and student services must be addressed to support and sustain transnational distance learners in culturally diverse learning environments. Reiffenrath and Thielsch (2022) note that the learning design needs to integrate social, cultural, political, and economic attributes at the curriculum and course level. Additionally, educational providers must balance sharing internationalized knowledge with teaching learners how to apply it locally (Caniglia et al., 2018). Researchers advocate for highly collaborative course development and administrative processes, including students, to overcome challenges to design internationalized and inclusive curricula (Leask, 2013; Tjulin et al., 2021).

Despite how the learning experience is created and implemented, research suggests that meeting the needs and expectations of transnational students requires specific educational components and attributes. Schueller and Şahin (2023) report that these factors apply to all levels of an educational system, from the students themselves and the people they interact with during their studies to the institutional processes that support their progress and outcomes. For example, Alexiadou et al. (2023) claim that the subject areas students study can affect their perception of knowledge relevance and openness to intercultural practices. Additionally, Crowley et al. (2018) found that transnational students value instructional and timely feedback to contextualize meaning. In addition to effective feedback and clear expectations, research suggests that technology readiness and familiarity with distance learning environments (Ren & Zhou, 2022), as well as English language proficiency (Zhang & Kenny, 2010), are critical factors. To achieve the goals of internationalization and distance learning, strategic integration of resources is crucial. This involves planning, faculty development, technical support, and evaluation processes for continuous improvement across an institutional system (Fakunle et al., 2020). By doing so, institutions can create the conditions for success in distance learning environments.

Our literature review revealed gaps in the research and often categorized transnational distance learners as “international” or “distance.” Although some studies acknowledged the diverse aspects of transnational distance education learners, they have not explored how these students perceive quality. Studies have identified factors and characteristics of transnational learning experiences that correspond with quality dimensions previously reported by Jung (2011) concerning distance course-level experiences. These perspectives provide insight at the micro-level but do not investigate the complete picture of the transnational distance learning experience before, during, and after a program of study. Therefore, the question remains: What is quality in transnational distance education from the student's perspective?

Methodology

This study explores the experiences of Greek students who graduated from a two-year master's program at a Canadian open and distance university, the challenges encountered during the program, and the factors contributing to their success. Participatory and data-driven, collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is an appropriate method for providing voice and representation to a small number of transnational students as it privileges them as co-researchers and participants who contribute to the analysis and critique of their own experiences as situated in the social culture

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contexts of their communities, university, and virtual classrooms (Chang et al., 2016). Potentially reducing power differentials between researchers and the researched, CAE contributes to the democratization of inquiry (Ngunjiri, 2014) and serves as a method to describe personal experiences by representing beliefs from a particular group of individuals (Adams & Herrmann, 2020).

Data Collection

A research team consisting of two faculty members, one bi-cultural and immigrated from Poland to Canada, and the other from Canada, initiated this study and served at the beginning and end of the learning experience of three Greek female graduate students. Additionally, an American doctoral research assistant, who is also a transnational distance education student and was not part of the program of study, collaborated in the research design, as well as the collection and analysis of the data to facilitate impartiality and interpretation. The research team followed an iterative process that involved receiving approval from the ethics review board before collecting data, reflecting individually and as a group, making meaning, and identifying common themes (Chang et al., 2016). We gathered information from four sources: personal memories, recorded semi-structured individual interviews followed by open-ended questions to prompt recollection and reflection on experiences before, during, and after the program, written reflections on cultural identities, and archival data from discussion forums, assignments, and capstone ePortfolios. Additionally, the interview data collection instrument was informed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) quality evaluation for transnational education, particularly their reporting from Greece and Cyprus (2015), to align the study with the context and established practice. Data was interpreted through values coding to explore cultural values, beliefs, and identity (Saldaña, 2021), and the researchers collaborated to negotiate meaning.

Collective Narrative

Throughout this manuscript, we utilize a first-person narrative to adhere to the CAE method and illustrate the depth of our Greek transnational student co-author's self-reflexivity. This approach aims to convey the diversity of their experiences and combine their stories into a cohesive collective narrative. In the following section, we shift to projecting the voices and situating the context of Anastasia, Chryssa, and Maria.

Contemporary and Classical Contexts

Informed by our cultural identity reflections, our stories are interwoven and reflect the dynamic tension between Greek tradition and progress. We live in a country that values its ancient history and Enlightenment ideals but is also at the forefront of generational social change, striving for equality in gender roles, immigration, and diverse social norms (Charalambis et al., 2004; Grørdum, 1995). We are daughters of mothers and grandmothers who have inspired us with their ability to balance their career and family responsibilities flawlessly, showing us that achieving success is possible. With the support of our fathers and families, we broke the mold and succeeded in secondary educational opportunities previously unavailable to women. As mothers and educators, we use our knowledge to impact our communities in Athens to Kavala, Greece. Our ability to adapt was tested during the migration crisis of 2015 to 2018 (Shutes & Ishkanian, 2021), which profoundly impacted our personal lives and reverberated through our education system, including our professional careers. As contemporary Greeks, we sought to enrich our understanding and foster educational equity for multicultural refugees. Individually, we embarked on a trajectory to reshape our perspectives and support inclusive learning practices. Our educational paths intersected between 2016 to 2019 when we enrolled at an open university in Canada located thousands of kilometers and nine time zones away to pursue a graduate degree in distance education. In the following sections, we reflect on our experiences as transnational distance education students to identify what quality means to us.

Results

Factors

We had a desire to pursue a graduate degree in education. Still, the challenge was finding a program that would allow us to balance family and professional responsibilities without causing too much financial strain. Also, we wanted to acquire practical and theoretical knowledge from an institution outside of Greece to gain a global perspective. Based on these criteria, we knew this would be a specialized program that could enhance our careers and transform our lives. We found our program through different methods, Anastasia reports,

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I conducted a web search on a Greek university's website. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to earn a graduate degree from a North American university.

Our stories center on the desire to learn from an institution in a foreign country that was still accessible. For example, while Maria was researching international graduate education programs, she recalled,

I learned about it through an advertisement written in both English and Greek. The bilingual approach was a critical factor in my decision to enrol.

Accessibility continued to be a theme in our decision-making. Additionally, we wanted to apply our learnings to our professional contexts while completing our degree, as Chryssa shared,

I liked the idea that the online learning model could enable me to collaborate with others worldwide without giving up my other commitments.

Eventually, our paths converged after we logged in through the online university portal and into our virtual classroom. To summarize, the quality factors we value in a transnational distance education experience are flexibility, affordability, international perspectives, and an accessible learning model. These factors allowed us to overcome geographical limitations and fulfil our ambitions while balancing our family and professional obligations.

Beginnings

Transitioning to an international online learning environment posed new challenges for us. We categorize these challenges as time, understanding multicultural perspectives and expectations, and effective communication.

In our first semester, we began to adjust to the cross-cultural differences and shift our approaches to communicate more effectively with others in the asynchronous learning environment. The time zone difference made it challenging to keep discussions coherent, as forum posts often appeared when we were offline. Initially, we spent much time crafting our discussion posts because we wanted to share well-developed ideas with our classmates. Most of our peers came from Canada and the United States, giving us new and diverse perspectives while questioning our ways of knowing. We tried to comprehend unfamiliar contexts and allocated extra time to investigate the meaning of colloquialisms and abbreviations. We felt it necessary to understand the Canadian education system to comprehend the system we were now learning within. Also, the discussion forum activities required us to use APA formatting and include cited references in our posts. Although skilled in English, we faced a new hurdle with APA standards while discussing cross-cultural content. Anastasia reflects,

At first, participating in the discussion forums was a daunting task. It required me to research the topic thoroughly and look up terminology in my classmates' posts to ensure I understood the meaning. Then, I would diligently reference my findings before constructing my thoughts into a single post.

In addition to the expectations in discussion forums, we found the course assignments intimidating and different than our educational experiences in Greece. The assignments defied the conventions of previous academic experiences, demanding more critical thinking and reflection. Maria expressed her initial hesitation,

I questioned my ability to meet the standards of the course assignments. Greek and Canadian professors differ in their instructional feedback and subject matter expectations. The feedback from my Canadian professors helped me delve deeper into innovative concepts; it was invaluable for my learning.

Once we understood the program expectations, it transformed our approach to course assignments, research projects, and critical reflection in our ePortfolios. Additionally, we began to build social connections with the faculty and our classmates. There were opportunities to meet synchronously using video conferencing technology, especially for group learning activities. As Chryssa illustrates,

I engaged in a group project with classmates in four countries- Greece, Germany, Canada and the United States. The group decided to work synchronously to foster a deeper personal connection. Although finding a time to meet

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was difficult, we made a compromise. I found the experience rewarding and enjoyed learning others' worldviews. I also discovered that I was not alone in my learning journey.

During our first semester, it became evident that time was crucial to our learning experience. Despite the additional effort it required us to interact in our courses, we found the time. The days and nights blended together, with even weekends offering little relief. The reality of the situation surpassed our initial expectations.

From our perspective, at the beginning of a transnational distance experience, quality components should include clear course expectations and resources to support us in acclimating to the educational system. We may encounter difficulties due to differences in cultural values, educational content, and communication methods. Therefore, it is crucial to establish a shared understanding among all participating in the learning experience. By respecting these differences and offering support, providers can improve the learning experience for everyone.

Progressions

During the program, we felt supported by our peers, professors and administration. Considering the quality factors of our experience, we recognize the individuals involved and the timely operational procedures that contributed to our success.

Our peers were our motivators, and we established lifelong friendships. We worked together with other Greek students, either meeting late into the evenings or calling on each other for help. Professors also organized special, synchronous sessions where we could discuss the difficulties we were facing. Surprisingly, during these sessions, we learned that Canadian students faced similar challenges. This realization strengthened our sense of unity; we were not alone. We recognized the importance of forming connections with others through technology and how these connections can expand our perspectives; as Chryssa shares,

Working with classmates of different backgrounds and perspectives allowed for a diverse collaborative experience that encouraged innovation. Through group projects, I discovered the power of collective thinking and how it often surpasses individual efforts.

We often collaborated with our classmates; we knew that if we could not solve a problem together or understand course or curriculum expectations, we could email our faculty for assistance. Most of our instructors were consistently helpful in answering our questions and promptly providing clarification. However, a few outliers were less responsive to our needs, increasing our stress and frustrations in those courses. Additionally, our professors encouraged us to pursue relevant and meaningful topics in our course assignments. We valued the real-world application of putting our knowledge into practice to fit our needs; as Anastasia describes,

In one of my course assignments, I found a project that aligned with my passion for working with the Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports. I gained valuable knowledge about financial budgets and learned about Greece's socioeconomic and educational landscape. With this knowledge, I created a credible and compelling business plan that was funded the following year.

These assignments improved our understanding and confidence. In another example, Maria articulates,

I developed my technical skills and acquired new competencies, such as utilizing augmented reality (AR) in my science classroom. Before this program, I never imagined using innovative technologies like AR. Not only did I learn how to critically analyze and integrate AR from a technical and pedagogical lens, but it brought me personal and professional value in my doctoral dissertation and class field trips.

As we continued, we became more aware of our progress in the program and the life of a transnational distance student. The professional staff were well-organized and kept us informed in a timely manner about course registrations and requirements. We felt part of the learning community and did not find the program policies and university procedures overwhelming or inaccessible. Typically, we received well-structured emails that guided our planning and progress, which we found helpful.

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Therefore, as we categorize quality attributes of the support systems we encountered during our experience, we recognize the consistent communication we received from our peers, professors, and administration. Their encouragement, prompt assistance, and emphasis on applying our learning to our contexts motivated us to succeed.

Learning Outputs

As our learning experience concluded, we realized that the different perspectives and opportunities we encountered were transformative. Here, we share examples of our learning outputs, which we define as measurable results of our learning. We achieved these outputs during our graduate experience, serving as quality indicators in transnational distance education and highlighting pivotal moments in our experience.

We engaged in presenting our knowledge and research contributions at academic and professional conferences. For Chryssa and Maria, they reminisce on a shared accumulation of events,

One of the most meaningful experiences we had emerged during a course on inclusive educational leadership. We could apply our experiences accommodating the needs of refugees and immigrants in Greece to a course assignment. With the instructor's support, we were encouraged to present our work online at a university-hosted graduate student research conference and an international conference in Dubai. This was the beginning of something significant for us. It allowed us to expand our reach to a more extensive global network.

Similarly, for Anastasia, she achieved one of her goals: to contribute to the field of research and publish an academic paper. As she shares,

I co-authored a published manuscript in an international research collaboration with classmates and my faculty mentor. For me, this marked the culmination of knowledge I acquired during the program and an achievement that I am proud I accomplished.

These examples demonstrate not only our personal and professional growth but also notable contributions to the field of distance education. We surpassed our expectations, made valuable academic contributions through knowledge acquisition, and transferred these skills into our professional contexts. As transnational distance education students, we believe quality can be defined as establishing connections from learning to application across diverse contexts in the form of praxis.

Outcomes

After graduation, we continued to experience the positive effects and translate our knowledge with our communities. In this final section, we explain how we recognize quality through the lens of our reflections and experiences post-graduation.

In 2019, we were called to serve as leaders on an intensive training project for educators across Greece responding to the global pandemic. This was one of our most rewarding initiatives, as we played a crucial role in designing educational materials and conducting professional learning. We shared our knowledge to benefit the entire country; as Chryssa exemplifies,

I found great satisfaction in assisting others in their professional development. I shared my expertise with my community and leveraged my collaborative skills to lead projects. The transnational experience made me feel I was a part of a universal learning community where each individual brings a unique and valuable perspective. This feeling resonates with me as I continue to work with diverse populations in Greece to support more inclusive learning.

As Maria looks back,

I cannot help but recognize the tremendous confidence boost I gained. It empowered me to create post-secondary courses, participate in projects that promote equality in education, and guide professional learning during the COVID-19 crisis.

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Similarly, we believe that our transnational experience offered us new opportunities, which Anastasia expresses,

The transnational program opened new doors for me that were previously unavailable. I pursued a career path to become an instructional designer, allowing me to incorporate learning theory and technologies in my designs. Also, designing materials to support educators during emergency remote learning allowed me to explain complex concepts to those who were previously unfamiliar, giving me a sense of achievement.

The transnational program fulfilled our initial goals and made us more confident, informed, and empowered educators who continue to make a meaningful impact in our communities. On reflection, we understand that quality is a multidimensional concept that continues to evolve as we learn and grow. With the distance of time and space from our experience, we can see the transition of our learning outputs to significant outcomes that have positively impacted others worldwide. In the following section, we move beyond our stories to explore how our experiences can inform quality practices and contribute to the growing field of transnational distance education.

Evaluating Transnational Distance Education

Informed through the collective narrative of three transnational graduate students, the full research team identified quality dimensions from the student perspective. Our findings suggest that transnational distance students perceive quality to include dimensions of access, program and course design, social and emotional support, and the ability to apply knowledge and skills in localized contexts during and after their program of study. We compared these themes with literature in adult education and lifelong learning, distance education, and internationalization of higher education since there are few studies on student perspectives of quality in transnational distance education. In the following sections, we discuss the transnational distance student experience to conceptualize the significance of this emerging learner population.

Consistencies

Our study shows that the students embodied Mezirow's (1997) principles of lifelong and transformative learning. Specifically, they demonstrated the ability to change their perspectives through personal reflection, communicate with others in academic and cross-cultural discourse and share beliefs that justify their actions. Other themes align with Holmberg's (2003) approach to distance education, including the preference for independent, self-paced learning and various modes of interaction. Distance education provides greater access to education for learners, regardless of personal or professional barriers such as geography or financial constraints (Lei & Gupta, 2010), which were critical factors in their decision to enroll.

By comparing our findings to research that explored student perspectives on quality in the internationalization of higher education, we discovered commonalities in the belief that international programs signify quality, status, exposure, and personal growth (Li et al., 2021). According to Chapman and Pyvis (2006), students viewed enrolling in an international program as a personal investment. As a result, they established goals and executed their plans to fulfill their identity aspirations of becoming more worldly through these programs. Our study reported similar findings: a desire for an international degree to fulfill personal ideals. For example, before enrolling in a Canadian institution, Anastasia and Maria conducted thorough research on international graduate education programs as a key determinant for their professional growth. Research demonstrates that international students in Canadian institutions value engaging in academic freedom, applying learning to personal needs, and increasing self-confidence through cross-cultural communication and social experiences (Guo & Guo, 2017). Similarly, our study shows that transnational students valued the opportunity to personalize learning activities to suit individual needs, such as Anastasia integrating her assignment with a business proposal for the Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports. Also, students in our study reported a feeling of self-confidence as they acclimated to the program and formed relationships, especially Chrysta when she worked on a group project with students in Germany, Canada, and the United States.

The reflections shared in our study align with the intersection of three areas of study: adult education and lifelong learning, distance education, and the internationalization of higher education. However, there remains a dearth of evidence on defining quality of transnational distance models from the student perspective. Therefore, the following section clarifies the nuances of the transnational distance education student experience.

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Nuances

Communication technologies have enabled new models of higher education, including transnational distance education, which bridges the attributes of distance education and internationalization. The benefits of these technologies, including video conferencing and asynchronous platforms, have allowed time and distance to converge, enabling culture to travel and be created by the actors within these online spaces (Jung & Gunawardena, 2014) without setting foot in physical learning environments. From the experiences reported in our study, there was an increase in the perceived value of synchronous opportunities with classmates and instructors, as Chryssa explained how relationships and collaboration could be formed through technology in group learning activities. The sentiment in our study was that synchronous interactions fostered social and emotional connections, which increased motivation and cross-cultural learning. Consequently, as per Lee and Bligh (2019), the Greek transnational student perspectives may have culturally enhanced their classmates' learning. Additionally, we found that the transnational students appreciated the asynchronous discussion forums in their courses and ePortfolios. In these spaces, they encountered cross-cultural references, such as abbreviations or acronyms, references to the Canadian educational system, or colloquialisms like "closing the loop" that they were unfamiliar with, creating a dual learning curve while interpreting course concepts. However, the asynchronous nature of these tools provides greater autonomy in time management and enables learners to interpret others' posts, reflect on their learning, and refine their communication in a second language before posting online (Kefalaki et al., 2021). Although existing literature on transnational distance learners is scant, our findings highlight the cross-cultural benefits of emerging transnational models and support the growing body of literature.

Unfortunately, this marriage of distance and internationalized education has not been without obstacles; it has also introduced new challenges. Stewart (2017) suggests that transnational distance education students require tailored academic support that is unique to being both "international" and "distance" learners. Like international students, as Mittelmeier et al. (2021) argue, transnational distance students face challenges in adapting to the educational system of the host country. They also encounter translation difficulties ranging from foreign exchange tuition fees and scholarship eligibility to understanding local colloquialisms in the course content and discussion forums (Fenton-O'Creevy & van Mourik, 2016; Gemmell & Harrison, 2017). However, issues can arise when these exchanges and translations occur through communication technologies—increasing potential challenges and, sometimes, unintended consequences ranging from accreditation and quality issues (i.e. degree mills) to Western-dominated, homogenized curricula that marginalize cross-border and unique perspectives (Knight, 2009). Our findings did not suggest negative consequences, but we did find preliminary concerns about learning at a distance with internet-based technologies. For example, in the early stages of their experience, there were concerns about technology readiness and feeling socially isolated, specifically in their first semester. By solely accessing education through internet-based tools, transnational distance learners must have reliable connectivity and readiness skills to participate fully (Jack & Glover, 2020). These conditions are neither equitable nor transparent to prospective students, including those in our study, although they did not encounter any serious issues. According to Sadykova and Dautermann (2019), institutions are responsible for ensuring that course expectations and requirements are aligned with the needs and abilities of their learners. To reduce misalignment, potential strategies include offering cross-cultural faculty development, providing accessible academic support for students across different time zones, communicating course objectives and syllabi before registration and enrollment, and utilizing course delivery models that reduce the need for technology readiness among faculty and students (Kung, 2017). These strategies can lead to quality learning experiences for transnational distance learners.

Quality

We found quality in transnational distance education to encompass accessibility, inclusive curriculum design, emotional and social support, as well as application of acquired knowledge and skills during and after the program. Collectively, these quality dimensions demonstrate that the transnational distance education experience was learner-centred (Wolcott, 1996) and aligned with values and expectations. Studies show that students' personal beliefs, previous educational backgrounds, and values impact how they perceive and expect quality education (Jung, 2012), with significant emphasis on responsive communication, supportive services, instructor rapport and professional outcomes in local contexts (Hoare, 2012). When these expectations are unrealistic or incompatible, students' learning approaches may be affected, negatively impacting learning outcomes (Biggs, 1993). Furthermore, students who do not achieve their expected outcomes may feel dissatisfied with their overall learning experience (Trapani & Cassar, 2020). Therefore, Tsiligris and Hill (2021) argue that institutions should explore transnational student expectations early in their academic journey to identify unrealistic expectations and adjust them to avoid dissatisfaction. Our research revealed that the expectations of the transnational students were achievable and matched the program's

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objectives. They felt they were given sufficient assistance to apply their learning to real-world situations and reach their desired outcomes. Furthermore, they self-regulated to accomplish their goals, specifically focusing on their time management to interact in their courses and translate content generated by their peers in discussion forums. Finally, they found their transnational distance learning experience to be high quality and satisfying.

Conclusion

It is essential for all stakeholders, including NGOs, national governments, universities, faculty, prospective students and students enrolled in transnational programs, to prioritize high-quality education as transnational distance learning accelerates and expands. To ensure a high-quality transnational distance education experience, all stakeholders must take responsibility for creating the conditions for success. One crucial aspect is to consider the perspective of transnational students, who have been overlooked due to challenges categorizing this unique population of learners as well as a lack of research on their perspectives in this emerging educational model. This study identified quality dimensions as perceived by the student stakeholders throughout their journey in transnational distance education. Our findings suggest that quality dimensions include access, program and course design, social and emotional support, and the ability to apply knowledge and skills in localized contexts during and after the program of study.

In transnational distance education, providers and students should work together to reach educational objectives. This cross-cultural exchange can create a more balanced partnership between institutions and their students, learning from each other and increasing quality. Both parties must collaborate and respect each other's expectations and values to achieve desired educational outcomes. Failure to do so can negatively impact students' learning experiences and hinder their success, adversely affecting the program of study and the institutional provider's performance measures of university internationalization.

As we reflect on the limitations of our study, our research only included successful Greek transnational distance education students. Therefore, future research should include a more diverse sample of students to inform practice and improve quality. Designing distance education experiences tailored to transnational students who need greater support can increase success and overall perception of quality education for all students, not only transnational distance learners. Furthermore, a limitation inherent in qualitative studies is the challenge of researchers confronting presumptions about personal experiences, potentially casting doubt on their authenticity. While CAE acknowledges and diffuses the power dynamic among researchers through collaboration, allowing for a combination of multiple voices in examining social phenomena, there remains the potential limitation of self-absorption. Nevertheless, CAE studies underscore the significance of being context-conscious and engaging in critical dialogue (Chang et al., 2016). We suggest future research should consider data collection and analysis methods to enhance the generalizability of results, as well as examine transnational experiences in the Global South and non-Western perspectives.

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Pamela Walsh, Ed.D., Associate Professor, joined Athabasca University in 2007 and held leadership positions at the director and vice-president levels. Before Athabasca University, Pamela spent six years as president of a Canadian college. While in this role, she worked with a team to establish a Canadian branch campus in Qatar. Engaging with transnational and other distance education students at Athabasca University at the graduate level since 2014, her current position allows her to work as an associate faculty member. Pamela is passionate about supervising and mentoring master's and doctoral students completing their degrees.

Chapter 4. Contributions of Knowledge

This third and final manuscript of this body of research aimed to conceptualize quality from the transnational distance student perspective to inform research and practice. Our research, which is based on the deductive codebook and the QAA quality framework utilized in Chapter 2, analyzed the transnational distance learning experience in terms of the pre-, during, and post-stages. Our findings indicate that quality dimensions in this context include access factors, curriculum design, social and emotional support, and applicable learning that could be localized to their personal contexts.

Since existing research on transnational distance learners is scant, we grounded our findings in adult education and lifelong learning, distance education, and internationalization of higher education because these three concepts are interrelated to transnational distance education. To the best of our knowledge, this intersection of concepts has yet to be explored. By studying the consistencies and nuances of a quality transnational distance education experience from the student perspective against these three concepts, this manuscript provides additional evidence to differentiate transnational distance learners as their own student population. For example, we found that transnational distance learners highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of technology-enabled learning environments. They emphasized that reliable internet and readiness skills were crucial for their participation and success (Jack & Glover, 2020). The learners discussed how synchronous and asynchronous communication technologies helped them to gain access, overcome translation barriers, and provide relevant cross-cultural learning experiences to achieve their objectives. However, they also expressed concerns about their technological readiness and initially perceived distance learning as a socially isolating experience. In addition to the role of communication technologies and readiness, our findings

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suggest that transnational distance learners require tailored academic support to help them adapt to the educational system of the host country, translate content, and comprehend clear and consistent online communication, including curriculum and course expectations.

Through the use of collaborative autoethnography, I discovered that research could also serve as a means of creative reflexivity (Popoveniuc, 2014), a pathway to transformative learning (Aberasturi-Apraiz et al., 2020; Blalock & Akehi, 2017) and an expression of gratitude (Hernandez et al., 2017). The knowledge that arises from collaborative autoethnography is not solely derived from thematic data analysis but also from weaving multiple voices together into a cohesive whole in the reporting process to demonstrate the depth and dimensionality of the researched (Gale et al., 2013). Apart from being a research assistant and sharing knowledge, this experience also allowed me to deeply engage with Canadian and Greek values and build lifelong relationships. As I immersed myself in the interview transcripts, reflected on the initial interviews, reviewed ePortfolios and other learning artifacts, examined the identity documents, and travelled to Athens, Greece, to present our research at a conference, I gained a deeper understanding of Canadian and Greek culture. Developing this final manuscript for my dissertation is a way for me to share my profound appreciation to the research team for allowing me to observe and reflect on their experiences from a distance. This manuscript also serves as a vehicle to elevate collaborative autoethnography as a rigorous form of qualitative research for praxis (Hernandez, 2021; Lapadat, 2017).

In summary, this final manuscript reflects and demonstrates the findings from the previous two chapters. It offers a nuanced perspective on the quality dimensions outlined in Chapter 2 by incorporating the experiences of individuals who have participated in transnational distance learning. Additionally, this manuscript demonstrates a quality internationalization

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practice at an open university through international research collaboration as described in Chapter 3.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

This body of research comprises three manuscripts in Chapters 2-4 to better understand quality in transnational distance education, a rapidly expanding and more accessible model for internationalized education. The exploratory sequential mixed methods design guided the research from a qualitative content analysis to a quantitative bibliometrics analysis, concluding with a collaborative autoethnography method to address three research questions. My research findings begin with presenting a typology of quality dimensions and 27 indicators for transnational distance education in Chapter 2. Then, in Chapter 3, one of these dimensions was tested in three open universities and their three national counterparts to demonstrate how they contribute to academic excellence by participating in international research collaboration, a significant indicator for evaluating internationalization efforts. Lastly, this body of research concludes with the perspectives of transnational distance learners in Chapter 4 to further conceptualize this emerging student population and identify key quality attributes, including access, curriculum design, social and emotional support, and application within local contexts.

In this final chapter, I summarize the findings as a cohesive body of knowledge, addressing the three research questions and highlighting nuances from each chapter to demonstrate the significance of these studies. I conclude with a brief discussion, including the implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research to elaborate on what has already been provided in the manuscripts presented in Chapters 2-4.

Summary of Findings

To summarize, this body of research comprehensively explores the multifaceted dimensions of quality in transnational distance education. It conceptualizes quality at a macro

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level across five international quality frameworks, then moves to a meso level to examine international research collaboration as a measurable indicator in nine institutions before concluding with a micro-level view of three transnational distance education learners detailing their perceptions of quality. By studying quality holistically across all levels (e.g., macro, meso, and micro as referenced in the first manuscript shared in Chapter 2) of education systems, this dissertation unfolds around three primary research objectives, each detailed in the preceding chapters. In the remainder of this section, I address my findings related to the research objectives, including the answers to my research questions.

The first objective is grounded in qualitative data from five international quality assurance frameworks to reflect a macro cross-cultural understanding of a subjective concept, quality. The aim was to address *What are the quality dimensions to support internationalization efforts for transnational distance education?* and to deduce a dimension for quantitative examination. This initial phase of analysis laid the foundational groundwork to inform the remaining two phases of analysis. Twenty-seven internationalization indicators were identified, the majority situated in curriculum and governance dimensions, according to Gao (2019), and categorized as input and contextual components of an educational system, presenting a misalignment with research and practice. However, one of these indicators, *“The institution has strong links to and collaborates with various international, national, governmental and non-governmental agencies in undertaking research,”* was deemed accessible for further evaluation.

The second objective was to measure an internationalization quality dimension determined by the first analysis phase to understand how *international research collaboration affects knowledge production and dissemination in open universities compared with non-open universities* as a proxy for academic excellence and quality. My findings indicate that academic

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articles featuring international coauthors receive 12.3% more citations than those without international collaborations, a similar trend in open universities and their three most frequently collaborated national university peers. This finding is significant because it enhances the credibility of international research collaboration as a reliable quality indicator and suggests that open universities are engaging in an internationalization strategy to similar degrees as their national counterparts.

The third and final objective is to conceptualize quality dimensions of transnational distance education from the student experience at the micro level. This objective was addressed in an international research collaboration that sourced primary data from transnational distance learners who completed their graduate studies at an open university. We asked, *How do transnational distance education graduate students perceive quality?* and found that quality dimensions include access factors, curriculum design, social and emotional support, and knowledge that could be localized. By basing our findings on literature beyond transnational distance education, where information is limited, we added more evidence to distinguish transnational distance learners as a distinct student group.

This body of research constitutes a thorough exploration of the intricate dimensions of quality in transnational distance education. By taking a comprehensive approach across three phases of analysis, I examined quality in transnational distance education from multiple perspectives, including macro, meso, and micro levels, to contribute to knowledge in this growing field of study. My findings highlight the multifaceted nature of quality from a global perspective, an institutional level, and the intricacies of the individual student experience, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced and informed understanding of quality in transnational distance education.

Discussion

After synthesizing the discussions presented in Chapters 2-4, this section threads together my findings and suggests implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research. The key interwoven areas in this section focus on guidance, practice, and research to propose opportunities to enhance transnational distance education for stakeholders worldwide.

International Guidance

Informed by the extensive literature reviews and the analysis described in Chapter 2, this body of research suggests that practice is outpacing not only research but also international guidance, which refers to advice, recommendations, or standards provided at a global level to facilitate consistent and effective practices (Cabezudo et al., 2010). For instance, out of the 2109 indicators analyzed from five quality assurance frameworks, only a small fraction (1.3%) was deemed as potential indicators for supporting quality in transnational distance education. Most of these indicators also fell under the input and contextual dimensions category based on the *Education at a Glance Report* (OECD, 2021), which primarily relates to educational resources and environmental factors. This finding suggests that the frameworks analyzed do not guide educational institutions in measuring output, outcome, or impact indicators, which have the potential to measure tangible results to support continuous improvement or broader impacts on the educational process or outcomes. Without guidance to identify measurable indicators, institutional stakeholders are left to navigate the complexities and challenges of transnational distance education independently, which may limit their ability to make informed decisions and implement effective strategies to support internationalization practices.

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As previously stated in Chapter 2 and reinforced by the findings in Chapters 3 and 4, there remains an opportunity for quality assurance frameworks to be more reflective of internationalization practices as well as measurable indicators to support continuous improvement efforts. While Gao's framework (2019) is an extensive approach to measuring the internationalization of higher education, it falls short in terms of distance learning models. Furthermore, as the distance education literature suggests, quality frameworks (Jung et al., 2013; Ossiannilsson et al., 2015; Staring et al., 2022) need to be more systemic, with a focus on learner support and progression, performance and outcomes-based, and promote a culture of continuous improvement. My findings suggest that the five quality assurance frameworks studied do not reflect what many scholars, practitioners and leaders have advocated (e.g., Darojat et al., 2015; Khamis & Scully, 2020; Stella & Gnanam, 2004; Tattersall et al., 2006; Zawada, 2021). Therefore, my findings from this body of research conclude and indicate a need for a transnational distance education quality framework or a comprehensive international quality framework that embeds all delivery modalities and facilitates university internationalization.

Internationalization Practices

This body of research presented in three studies demonstrates that open universities are actively involved in internationalization practices. I identified 27 quality indicators that suggest that open and online universities may be engaged in various forms of internationalization. One of these indicators, international research collaboration, was deemed a feasible quality indicator to measure research outputs and describe the degree of internationalization in practice, as presented in Chapter 3. Additionally, of the 27 quality indicators, most describe administrative actions, and only four indicators reflect the quality attributes and factors identified by the transnational distance learners in Chapter 4. The four internationalization indicators that align between the two

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studies relate to curriculum that reflects global trends, relevant course design, assessment as instruction to support the learning process, and institutional cooperation with external organizations. This finding indicates a disconnect between students who perceived a positive transnational distance experience and what the frameworks recommend in providing a quality transnational distance experience. Furthermore, the attributes highlighted by the transnational distance learners in Chapter 4 are not present in the 27 quality indicators from Chapter 2, which include themes such as student support as well as technology and language accessibility. This finding further suggests that existing quality indicators may not adequately address or reflect the concerns and priorities of transnational distance learners, potentially leading to a gap in understanding and addressing the quality dimensions relevant to their learning experiences.

Insufficient data on the transnational distance learner population compounds the disconnect between their perspectives and quality standards. Tannock (2018) argues that there is a lack of detailed and demographic data on transnational distance learners, which is not easily accessible. This problem may result from the issues discussed in Chapters 1 and 4, which suggest that transnational distance learners are under-conceptualized. Furthermore, the OECD (2018) recognizes that international comparative data is inadequate in identifying the different types of mobility, including distance learning, among foreign and international students. Therefore, the three Greek transnational distance learners' experiences discussed in Chapter 4 should not be ignored, as "there is very little research on the experiences and outcomes for this growing number of students on transnational online distance learning programmes" (Gemmell & Harrison, 2023, p. 136). Our research in the third manuscript can serve as a benchmark for stakeholders to inform their practice and encourage further research on the transnational distance student population to enhance the relevance of the findings.

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Effectively addressing this complicated issue that quality indicators may not reflect transnational distance learners' concerns and priorities, necessitates a multifaceted approach. To begin, there is a critical need to enhance awareness and understanding of this emerging student population. This involves collecting more comprehensive data to discern the origins of these students, their educational destinations, and their experiences participating in transnational distance education. Recently, during the global pandemic, institutions and organizations began identifying metrics to track international students participating in education through distance learning modalities, offering a glimpse into current trends. For example, in the United Kingdom, 686,710 transnational students were reported to be learning in distance, flexible or distributed learning modalities before and after the height of COVID-19, with many enrolled at The Open University (Universities UK, 2021). This study from the UK is one of the first to categorize and measure transnational distance learners, highlighting the significance of this overlooked student population and establishing a benchmark for future studies. Next, as Tasopoulou and Tsiotras (2017) suggest, implementing benchmarking processes can establish valuable metrics for comparison and assessment, serving as a tool for ongoing quality improvement tailored to the specific needs of transnational distance learners. In Chapter 4, we emphasize the importance of involving transnational distance learners in quality assurance by recognizing it as a collaborative effort between students and educational providers to manage expectations. Implementing standards and guidance using a multilevel and multiple-stakeholder approach can increase the inclusivity and effectiveness of the quality assurance frameworks (Ubachs & Henderikx, 2022).

International Research Collaboration

My findings conclude that open universities are engaged in international research collaboration, which is an internationalization practice, innovative strategy, and measurable

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quality indicator (Wysocka et al., 2022). Based on the significant and positive variables examined in Chapter 3, international research collaboration appears to be a reliable measure of internationalization and a proxy for quality. The study presented in Chapter 3 investigated peer-reviewed research publication outputs as international research collaboration. However, many other forms of international research collaboration were not expressed in this chapter, including research centers, academic journals, patents and innovations, professional learning seminars and conferences as described by the Greek transnational distance learners in Chapter 4, associations such as the organizations that provided the quality frameworks in Chapter 2, and other forms of published media, including books, whitepapers, and digital content (Black, 2019). Two of these forms of international research collaboration are presented in this body of research. First, the quality frameworks analyzed in Chapter 2 highlight the importance of international collaboration as the frameworks themselves are a result of a collaborative effort across national borders. Second, as a form of praxis, the manuscript presented in Chapter 4 is an international research collaboration. The Greek transnational distance learners, integral to this phase of the study, identified their involvement in international research collaborations as a significant and transformative aspect of their graduate experience, which involved presenting their research at international conferences or publishing in academic journals.

Across the three manuscripts, my findings indicate that various stakeholders highly value international research collaboration due to its potential to improve the quality and impact of research, foster cultural understanding, and position academic institutions and researchers as significant contributors to global knowledge. Therefore, international research collaboration is the thread that ties this body of research together. The significance of international research collaboration is that it is not only a measurable quality indicator, but it is also perceived as a

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quality practice and strategy across macro, meso, and micro levels. As education and knowledge development are increasingly recognized as forms of soft power (Evans & Jackupec, 2021; Knight, 2022; Noddings, 2005) and gaining economic and political dominance in our globalized, knowledge society (Stehr, 2012), a deeper understanding of international research collaboration and its outcomes becomes imperative to inform political guidance, practice, and research.

Limitations

Although limitations are discussed in the three manuscripts, the design of this dissertation research rests on my worldviews, biases and pragmatic decisions that shaped and limited its scope. In this section, I introduce my grounding and the embedded biases that situated the research design. Then, I discuss my design decisions to ensure the three studies were logical and conducted within the research timeline and project plan, which created limitations to this body of research.

At the core of this study is my bias to advocate and elongate the affordances and implications of quality distance education, which is grounded in the seminal theorists (e.g., Wedemeyer, Holmberg, Moore, Garrison) of the field. My formal entry into distance education began when I worked closely with Moore's colleagues at The Pennsylvania State University's World Campus to design courses for the Adult Education and Lifelong Learning graduate program with a certificate in Distance Education. My experience as a learning designer and applied researcher at the World Campus formed my identity as a practitioner and a researcher. My appreciation for the foundations of distance education led me to pursue a doctoral program at Athabasca University that would introduce me to new concepts, research methods, and global perspectives.

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Once enrolled in the doctoral program at Athabasca University, my objective within the first year of study was to design a mixed-method, non-comparative dissertation study that addressed quality in a novel way to elevate distance education. Early on, I learned from my supervisor, Dr. Pamela Walsh, that a manuscript-based dissertation was a new, accepted format that I could try to pursue to demonstrate my ability as an emerging scholar and increase the likelihood of earning an academic position post-graduation. I was intrigued by the challenge to be one of the first at Athabasca University to follow the manuscript-based dissertation path, as well as the potential to publish three peer-reviewed manuscripts accepted by my dissertation committee. By choosing to pursue a dissertation by manuscript, our approach to my doctoral experience dramatically shifted to fulfill the requirements (i.e., one manuscript published, one manuscript submitted, and one manuscript intended to be submitted).

The intent of the mixed-methods design was to expand my skills as a researcher and strengthen the validity of my findings (Wasti et al., 2022) across three manuscripts that could be publishable by teams of peer reviewers. Fundamentally, I believed that a comparative study would continue to perpetuate the differences between distance education and traditional forms of education, thereby still recognizing “traditional education” as the preferred or dominant mode. Additionally, at a conceptual level, the term “traditional education” suggests that education is not innovative or a form of cultural and social values (Boateng, 1983; Dewey, 1986), thereby rendering the term, in my perspective, an oxymoron. Finally, quality is a subjective, context-dependent concept that operates on a continuum informed by value systems and individual paradigms. Due to its multidimensionality, the concept of quality served as a vehicle for me to identify a research gap across cross-cultural systems, various fields of study (i.e., internationalization of higher education, distance education), and an ongoing universal desire to

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improve education (i.e., Sustainable Development Goals 4). Quality is a messy construct that will always be riddled with opportunities for exploration and examination. Therefore, my objectives, informed by my worldviews and positionality, were contingent on the peer-reviewed publication process and, to a degree, are limitations to this body of research because they were targeted and restricted opportunities beyond the scope of this project.

In addition to my biases as research limitations, three significant design decisions were made that limited this body of research. The first decision, which was previously discussed in this chapter and Chapter 2, regards the quality assurance frameworks that situate this full study, which are devoid of contextual analysis. Although the inclusion criteria for the sample, presented in Chapter 2, were rational and rigorous, I did not conduct an in-depth investigation regarding the formation, objectives and contextual dimensions of the quality frameworks themselves. By reducing the frameworks to data and limiting their value as artifacts of an international collaboration, this body of research does not reflect the negotiations and meaning-making of the individuals and institutions who defined quality in their regions. Building from this premise is the second limitation, which is that this study elevates the perspectives of three transnational distance learners but lacks the perspectives of other stakeholder groups and the experiences of non-Western individuals. While the perspectives of the three transnational distance learners provide valuable insights, it would be beneficial to include the perspectives of other stakeholder groups, such as faculty, administrators, policymakers, and those residing in the Global South and non-Western cultures. A diverse sample would provide a more complete picture of the experiences and perspectives related to quality in transnational distance education. Unfortunately, diverse human-subject data collection was not feasible due to language barriers and perceived difficulties in identifying and recruiting a representative sample of participants

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within the timeframe allocated to meet the criteria of a manuscript-based dissertation. To address this limitation, the studies presented in Chapters 2 and 3 used geography criteria to control for culturally diverse perspectives and Chapter 3 included non-English publications to be more inclusive.

Finally, scholarship and academic excellence are more than research outputs in the form of peer-reviewed publications, as previously discussed. Article-level metrics like citations are widely used in assessing publication impact and visibility (Lindgreen et al., 2020), but they also have flaws. Citation metrics may not fully capture the impact of an article, as valuable research may go unnoticed or experience a “sleeping beauty” effect where scholars discover an interest in a topic after its publication and cite the research much later (Gingras, 2016, p.30). Additionally, the number of citations an article receives may not reflect its true impact in the field (Cuellar et al., 2016), as articles are susceptible to biased citation practices and self-citations. Therefore, a mix of research output metrics (e.g., altimetric, download and usage metrics, journal impact factors, h-index) and qualitative assessments could overcome these limitations and gain a more extensive understanding of research impact.

Recommendations

In culmination, this research yields a set of comprehensive recommendations spanning practical applications and theoretical considerations. Although recommendations are provided for each manuscript in Chapters 2-4, this final section shares an overview of critical considerations for researchers, educators, and policymakers who lead in the transnational distance education space.

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First, my findings advocate for evolving international quality assurance frameworks to be measurable and aligned with institutional system components. These components, encompassing inputs, student support and progression, contextual dimensions, as well as output, outcome, and impact indicators, should be integrated with measurable internationalization strategies. The effectiveness and sustainability of internationalization efforts, particularly in transnational distance education, depend on their seamless integration into the fabric of educational institutions, spanning cultural, policy, planning, and organizational processes (Qiang, 2003). Institutions must embed a global dimension across their policies, practices, services, and research to effectively support internationalization, aligning them cohesively with institutional goals and structures (Knight, 2011). This implementation should be pervasive, involving all stakeholder groups, and manifest through a distributed, international learning network supported by globalized universities and educational policies (Armengol, 2002). Based on my extensive research, I conclude that at the macro level, existing quality assurance frameworks require significant updates to support and guide the expansion of transnational distance education. Furthermore, my findings indicate a potential opportunity for an international collaboration of stakeholders to convene and formulate a quantifiable quality assurance framework explicitly tailored for transnational distance education. With a new or updated framework conceptualizing quality internationalization dimensions and transnational distance education, stakeholders can reflect and assess to inform and improve practice (Gao, 2019).

Second, my analysis of existing literature and findings across my studies indicate that transnational distance education is expanding rapidly; however, the lack of consensus conceptualizing the terminology, definitions, and measurements is delaying advancements in this field of study and practice. In order to gain a deeper understanding of quality in transnational

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distance education, more applied and empirical research (Gulbrandsen & Kyvik, 2010) is necessary. My findings call for intensified research and evaluation efforts, specifically in evaluating quality assurance frameworks and their development, international research collaboration beyond citation metrics, and educational practices sensitive to the distinct needs of transnational learners.

Further research could involve a thorough analysis of the existing quality assurance frameworks themselves or generate a new framework to support transnational distance education. This may entail carrying out a Delphi method study (Linstone & Turoff, 1975) and conducting interviews or surveys with key stakeholders to create and implement quality frameworks in order to gain a deeper understanding of their international formation, objectives, and contextual dimensions. Additionally, international collaborative partnerships exist, including the formation of transnational distance educational programs and curricula, but practical work, including educational practice and stakeholder experiences, may not translate to formal research and dissemination. To address the disparity between practice and research, there is a need to incentivize and support practitioners to share their findings beyond their institutional boundaries. Applied studies give insight into experience-based knowledge on how institutional stakeholders are engaging in innovative transnational distance practices such as “portal pedagogy” (Monk et al., 2015, p.62), international collaboration curriculum development (Tjulin et al., 2021) and navigating student perceptions and expectations of quality support services (Mokoe & Nsamba, 2019). These micro-level studies, taking place at the course, program and institutional levels, are necessary to continue conceptualizing transnational distance education and inform practice, policy, and future research.

Finally, further examination of international research collaboration can shed light on how, as an indicator of quality, it contributes to improving not only the outcomes and impact of scientific endeavours (Jong et al., 2021) but also knowledge transfer and application generated by researchers affiliated with open universities. Few studies (e.g., Chinchilla-Rodriquez et al., 2011; Aldieri et al., 2018; Kwiek, 2020) investigate the role of international research collaboration and how it contributes to social, economic, and cultural development among affiliated countries. Even fewer, if any, research exists on research outcomes and impact from open universities engaged in international research collaborations. Many studies (e.g., Onyancha, 2020; Paphawasit & Wudhikarn, 2022; Pino & Ortega, 2018; Pohl & Lane, 2018), including the one presented in Chapter 3, focus on citation performance indicators and other descriptive analyses to demonstrate quality (Aksnes et al., 2019), or recommend practices for researchers to improve their personal citation metrics (Knobel et al., 2013; Lindgreen et al., 2020), further gamifying the publication, funding and ranking systems. Therefore, future research should move beyond citation metrics and publication performance measures to explore the effects of knowledge development (Dumon & Meeusen, 2000; Qiu et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2022) as a result of international research collaboration with open university researchers. Additionally, future research should include a descriptive content analysis of open university research initiatives, resources, and strategic plans to provide a more detailed picture of the evolution of open universities (Guri-Rosenbilt, 2019; Garrison & Shale, 1987) as knowledge creators and disseminators.

Chapter 5. Summary

In conclusion, this comprehensive research explores the intricate dimensions of quality in transnational distance education, a rapidly expanding and more accessible model for

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internationalized education. Using an exploratory sequential mixed methods design, the study progressed from qualitative content analysis to quantitative bibliometrics, culminating with collaborative autoethnography to address three core research questions. The findings traverse macro, meso, and micro levels, presenting a typology of quality dimensions, exploring international research collaboration's impact on academic excellence in open universities, and concluding with transnational distance learners' perspectives on quality attributes of their transnational distance experience.

In summary, the significance of this research provides a nuanced understanding of quality in transnational distance education, offering practical insights and theoretical considerations for educators, policymakers, and researchers. The outcomes underscore the need for a transnational distance education quality framework and emphasize the importance of bridging the gap between practice and research in this emerging field.

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Appendix A: Certification of Ethical Approval



CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The REB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

Ethics File No.: 24488

Principal Investigator:

Dr. Pamela Walsh, Associate Professor
Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences\Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies

Project Team:

Dr. Agnieszka Palalas (Co-Principal Investigator)
Ms. Rebecca Heiser (Student)

Project Title:

Experiences of Transnational Distance Education Graduates: A collaborative Autoethnography

Effective Date: October 20, 2021

Expiry Date: October 19, 2022

Restrictions:

Any modification or amendment to the approved research must be submitted to the AUREB for approval.

Ethical approval is valid *for a period of one year*. An annual request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

A Project Completion (Final) Report must be submitted when the research is complete (*i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable)*) or the research is terminated.

Approved by:

Date: October 21, 2021

Carolyn Greene, Chair
Athabasca University Research Ethics Board

Appendix B: Certification of Ethical Approval - Renewal



CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL - RENEWAL

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The REB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

Ethics File No.: 24488

Principal Investigator:

Dr. Pamela Walsh, Associate Professor
Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences\Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies

Project Team:

Dr. Agnieszka Palalas (Co-Principal Investigator)
Ms. Rebecca Heiser (Student)

Project Title:

Experiences of Transnational Distance Education Graduates: A collaborative Autoethnography

Effective Date: November 1, 2022

Expiry Date: October 31, 2023

Restrictions:

Any modification/amendment to the approved research must be submitted to the AUREB for approval prior to proceeding.

Any adverse event or incidental findings must be reported to the AUREB as soon as possible, for review.

Ethical approval is valid *for a period of one year*. An annual request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

An Ethics Final Report must be submitted when the research is complete (*i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable)*) or the research is terminated.

Approved by:

Date: November 01, 2022

Paul Jerry, Chair
Athabasca University Research Ethics Board

Appendix C: Conference Paper Presentation

Heiser, R., Lazou, C., Mavraki, A., Psychogiou, M., Palalas, A., & Walsh, P. (2022, September 13-16). *The transnational student learning experience: Giving voice to internationalization practices that enhance lifelong learning and transformation*. [Paper presentation] Tenth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, Calgary, AB. Canada. <https://doi.org/10.56059/pcf10.1025>

The transnational student learning experience: Giving voice to internationalization practices that enhance lifelong learning and transformation

Rebecca E. Heiser, Athabasca University
Chrysoula Lazou, International Hellenic University
Anastasia Mavraki, Food and Agriculture Organization UN
Maria Psychogiou, National and Kapodistrian University, Athens
Aga Palalas, Athabasca University
Pamela Walsh, Athabasca University

Abstract

Transnational distance education is a strategic practice that contributes to the internationalization of higher education. However, little is known about the transnational student learning experience and the practices necessary to support intended outcomes, including preparing post-graduates with essential skills and competencies for employment and lifelong learning within their local communities, country of origin, and globalized economy. Therefore, this study explores the factors contributing to the success and challenges encountered during a graduate program undertaken at an open, distance education university in Canada from the perspective of Greek female graduates. By employing a collaborative autoethnography approach, researcher-participants explored critical components including accessibility, communication, international perspectives and application, and transformation for lifelong learning to support quality dimensions in internationalization practices. As a result, we find a need for a more purposeful and comprehensive integration of internationalization practices across an institution to support and enhance the knowledge process that flows across borders through online learning environments and communication.

Keywords

Transnational Student Experience, Internationalization Practices, Open Online Distance Education

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Introduction

This qualitative research study explores transnational learner experiences, including factors contributing to their successes and barriers or challenges encountered during their graduate program between 2016 and 2019 at an open distance education university in Canada. Framed within an arrangement between a university in Greece and a university in Canada, Greek graduate students were offered an opportunity to take two courses each semester at reduced tuition in Canada. This commitment involved a professor at a university in Greece who acted as a point of contact for interested applicants and students and enhanced student support services from Canadian faculty and staff.

Consistent with collaborative autoethnography, Greek colleagues are researcher-participants, and the entire research team is co-collaborators in this study (Chang et al., 2013). In order to address the gap in research and recognize the nuances of the transnational learner experiences, our research team includes three former transnational students from Greece who are graduates of a Master of Education (MEd) program, a transnational doctoral student, and two faculty members from the open Canadian university. In addition, we are all female educators and lifelong learners. This study examines the experiences of these former students.

Anastasia *I am an educator committed to lifelong learning. I am also a wife and a parent of two lovely children. I have worked in secondary and adult education since 2003. My students include expatriates, immigrants, and children with disabilities. In 2015, I needed to stay home and care for our children. The idea of working in distance education, especially after my experience tutoring Asian students online, seemed ideal. Still, I knew I needed more education in the field. So, I decided to register for the MEd program and began my new learning journey. I currently work as an instructional designer with substantial expertise managing e-learning projects involving research and curriculum design for European organizations. I create customizable learning solutions to promote sustainable e-learning and facilitate train-the-trainers workshops in many countries. My publications raise awareness of mindfulness in distance education.*

Chryssa *I am an EFL educator and School Life Counselor in secondary education in the public sector. I participate in international exchange programs, focusing on inclusive education and teenagers' multiliteracies enhancement. Since my MEd program graduation in 2019, I have coordinated projects based on my new knowledge, skills, and competencies from all courses in this program. Also, I have been a member of the team of authors and trainers of the Distance Education program in Greece. Presently, I am attending a second Master's program in Immersive Technologies, and I am pursuing a doctorate in technology-enhanced learning for digital and media literacy education in an interdisciplinary approach. I am a mother to twin daughters and a lifelong learner, always pursuing new paths in my learning journey.*

Maria *I am an educator and researcher. I currently teach science at a secondary school in Athens, Greece, and I have been teaching for more than 25 years. I hold a Ph.D., and I'm presently undertaking postdoc research regarding the systemic approach to teaching Earth Sciences. I am enthusiastic about taking my students on field trips and using augmented reality (AR) applications. Through the MEd program, I first encountered technologies such as AR and incorporated them into my Ph.D. thesis. I was looking for an online degree that would introduce me to international teaching practices and a solid theoretical background. I practice mindfulness whenever I get stressed, preferably somewhere in the forest.*

Literature Review

As the world continues to become more accessible due to the forces of globalization and innovative communication technologies, learners are more able to transverse across geographical borders without leaving their physical location or country to continue their education (Altbach & Knight, 2007). This practice, also known as transnational education, is defined by Knight (2016) as “the movement of academic programs and providers between countries” (p. 36). Expanding upon her definition, we have applied a contextual lens of open, online and distance learning modalities to support lifelong learning in order to situate our exploration of the transnational student experience. Transnational distance education is a strategic practice that contributes to the internationalization of higher education.

QUALITY TRANSNATIONAL DISTANCE EDUCATION

Scholars have not settled on a singular definition of internationalization because it's highly contextual due to the cultural, political, societal and economic priorities of countries and education systems and has quickly evolved over the past three decades due to globalization (Gao, 2019). However, internationalization can be understood as a country's or university's dynamic and proactive response to enhance intercultural relationships across borders (de Wit, 1999; Marginson, 2010). According to Qiang (2003), internationalization "...must be entrenched in the culture, policy, planning and organizational process of the institutions so that it can be both successful and sustainable" (p. 257-258). Students, faculty, administration, research, innovation, service, and practice flow across borders, thereby contributing to higher education's internationalization.

With a focus on access and equity, internet technologies transform the availability, affordability, and accessibility of education across borders and cross-cultural contexts (Daniel et al., 2005). Online distance education is a multidisciplinary field that utilizes internet-enabled technologies and new pedagogical models to shorten the time and space separation of the learner and instructor in the learning process (Bozkurt et al., 2015; Guri-Rosenblit & Gros, 2011). Transnational distance education can provide more equitable access to learning across borders and cross-cultural contexts and contribute to internationalization in post-secondary online distance education. However, with the commercialization of higher education, "degree mills" may fulfill the educational access gap (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2015). This situation leaves vulnerable recipients, often from countries without a national quality assurance system, at greater risk of receiving unaccredited degrees or completing their program of study underprepared to contribute to their localized workforce or engage in the global economy (Eaton & Uvalic-Trumbic, 2008; Moore, 2009). Therefore, it is pertinent that international agreements guide the practice of internationalization and regulate the exchange of scholars, students, and academic programs to assure intended outcomes.

The literature and terminology related to the student experience in higher education is diffuse. For example, Potschulat and colleagues (2021) note that the concept has political and commercial undertones and represents various practices that make it difficult to define. Similarly, a systematic review of the literature published between 2011 and 2021 by Matus and colleagues found that "student experience" is used widely in the literature, but there is no consensus on what it entails. Nevertheless, their analysis shows an increasing trend toward conceptualizing the term as an indicator of quality and satisfaction. Additionally, the authors report that the relationship between students' experiences, satisfaction and quality is more evident when the association between those experiences and university accreditation by bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency are scrutinized (Matus et al., 2021).

As we consider a universal design to meet the needs of all transnational student stakeholders, defining quality is a challenge because it is multidimensional and shaped by cultural values and individual paradigms (Garrison, 1993; Jung & Latchem, 2007). There is a growing body of knowledge across the landscape of quality assurance frameworks in online distance education, including efforts to expand the understanding of cross-cultural perspectives, similarities and distinctions to develop and practice quality (Jung et al., 2011; Khamis & Scully, 2020; Scull et al., 2011; Shelton, 2010; Smith, 2010). Unfortunately, these efforts often overlook the transnational student experience and perspective. Empirical literature in the emerging field of transnational distance education tends to analyze administrative perspectives and omit the transnational student perspective on quality learning experiences (Buchanan, 2019). According to Stewart (2017), the transnational student circumstances are nuanced and "suffers from a poverty of recognition" (p. 463). Therefore, this study explores the factors and challenges contributing to transnational learner experiences and the practices necessary to support successful outcomes, including preparing post-graduates with essential skills and competencies for employment and lifelong learning.

Methodological Approach

In order to give voice to transnational learners, this study used collaborative autoethnography a qualitative research method that uses rigorous self-reflection and reflexivity on individual and group experiences which are then analyzed and interpreted within sociocultural contexts (Chang et al., 2013). Autoethnographic methods are widely used to "articulate insider knowledge of cultural experiences" (Adams et al., 2017, p. 3). Collaborative autoethnography, therefore, is an appropriate method to gain insights into how three Greek graduates of a Canadian university describe and interpret the quality of their educational experiences.

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Data collection and analysis

Consistent with collaborative autoethnography, we started our inquiry with “interactive interviews” (Chang, 2013, p. 58) guided by open-ended questions about graduates’ experiences as transnational distance education students. One co-author interviewed each graduate separately using Zoom, in which the sessions were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were shared with all Greek colleagues for feedback, and additional probing questions were asked and addressed asynchronously before the final transcripts were coded individually by two researchers. While appropriate for most qualitative studies, values coding was chosen because it focuses on cultural values, beliefs, and identity (Saldana, 2021, p. 171). The researchers negotiated to produce an agreed-upon set of themes and then shared coded transcripts with the Greek colleagues for feedback.

Findings

Common themes identified across the three transcripts were related to accessibility, communication, challenges, international perspectives, and transformational and lifelong learning. While the categories are not mutually exclusive, the narratives represent the collective voice of Greek MEd graduates unless otherwise indicated by quotation marks.

Accessibility to a multicultural experience online

Because we have families and careers in Greece, we could not attend a place-based university, yet we wanted an opportunity to enhance our personal and professional growth. We believed that a North American university offering an online graduate program in education would know about the global trends that can further prepare us as educators by providing theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge. We valued the opportunity to have a multicultural experience with exposure to different cultures and diverse teaching and learning perspectives.

Communications with instructors and others

Many of our course instructors connected with students informally; they shared personal information using pictures and videos that we found very welcoming. Instructors' feedback is essential to the quality of the student experience because it is directly connected to the accomplishment of learning objectives. Instructors provided feedback not only on submitted assignments but also in the discussion forums, which helped to guide our learning. Most of our professors were very supportive, helpful, and friendly. Although our interactions were mostly asynchronous, which worked well given the different time zones, we appreciated the opportunities to connect synchronously in some of our courses. Communications with our peers took place mostly in discussion forums and collaborative assignments. However, as students in the same time zone, we collaborated with other Greek students more frequently.

We appreciated the support we received from the university community. We were notified of student awards and scholarships, and research opportunities. The president sent email messages out regularly. These kinds of communications made us feel that we were a part of a larger community.

Challenges as a transnational student

We experienced challenges, particularly at the beginning of our program. We had to get acquainted with so many different people from different places and cultures. For example, other students talked about their education systems and curriculum, but we did not understand their contexts, especially if they used acronyms. We sometimes had difficulty understanding the comments made by Canadian and other students who had different experiences and world views. People who live in the same country or have the same cultural background may understand each other more easily.

We did not know what to expect in our courses, and we were initially intimidated by deadlines. In our first course, we were expected to communicate with other students asynchronously in discussion forums. This was a novel challenge. We had to post responses to our instructors' questions and other students' posts. Because the content of some posts was new to us, it was difficult to reply, and sometimes it took hours to contribute one post. We wanted to make sure that we understood what others were saying before providing our responses. We knew what Greek professors expected from us, but we did not know what the international professors would expect.

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Many of the assignments at our Canadian university were praxis-based. We reflected upon our experiences as professionals and learners so that we could connect practice and theory. Although each assignment was a new challenge, each led to new knowledge. Some of us struggled with academic writing and the appropriate use of APA citations which are necessary to avoid unintended plagiarism. We received informal coaching from one instructor in particular, who was very helpful. While we did very well in our courses and enjoyed the program, structured preparatory sessions would have helped.

International perspectives and application

Our program and instructors helped us interact with people and organizations worldwide through collaborative course assignments, a university graduate student conference, and several international conferences such as the International Association for Blended Learning (IABL).

Chryssa facilitated a MOOC for her Canadian University. Hundreds of international students attended. She also wrote a paper in her mobile learning course which ultimately led to an invitation to participate in a program called “media literacy in the digital era” in Kyiv, Ukraine, as a representative from Greece.

Anastasia wanted to be an instructional designer so that she could work for companies all over the world from her location in Greece. She has since worked with the Erasmus+ Project and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), designing courses for veterinarians who were doing fieldwork in hazardous conditions in an effort to eliminate animal diseases and malnutrition.

Maria incorporated new knowledge of augmented reality applications in field trips with her Geology students and invited other teachers to learn from these experiences. She realized that she could use this new knowledge in her Ph.D. research. She added a separate chapter that included feedback from her students on their experiential learning.

These experiences gave us new perspectives. We became more aware of the significance of our learning and how it provided us with exposure to pedagogies and technologies that could be applied globally.

Transformation and lifelong learning

During our study, many of our assignments were connected to experiences in Greece. We took a course about inclusive leadership and practice in education. We found that we acquired new skills at just the right time. Due to the inflow of refugees in Greek schools, the Greek educational community faced the challenge of accommodating students of different cultural backgrounds. This experience opened our minds to the importance of inclusive practices. Anastasia created a blog to help raise awareness of and suggest guidelines for inclusive practices. Maria and Chryssa did a conference presentation entitled “Embracing Migrants and Refugees: The Challenge, Vision, and Mission of a Greek Effort.” Their presentation connected the concepts of inclusive leadership to the response to the crisis.

While doing a course on Gender studies and with appropriate permission, Chryssa and Maria conducted a study on an e-learning program in Greece called “Training Adult Educators.” Our qualitative research sought to identify whether the learning design and support systems consider gender issues. We learned that distance education was growing in Greece, and people who opted for this mode of learning were mostly women. We found that women needed more support in the use of technologies. “When we presented our findings to our class in our MEd program, many of our female peers from different countries shared personal stories about biases and obstacles they have faced in their lives.” As a result of that experience, Maria shared how deeply and personally she was affected by these stories and reflected on her transition among the different roles she has undertaken “as a woman, as a daughter, as a mother, as a wife, as a friend, as an educator, as a student.”

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Shortly after we graduated, the COVID-19 global pandemic provided us with a unique opportunity to apply our knowledge and skills across Greece. All three of us participated with other colleagues who had graduated from our program in a large project that provided intensive training for all educators in Greece in the public sector. We wrote training material and learning guides for using technology and participated in train-the-trainer programs. We feel proud that we had the skills to contribute in this way. Our Master of Education degree provided a solid base of knowledge and understanding of what it means to be a life-long learner. Beyond content, we have learned new problem-solving and time management skills, how to write academically with citations, apply our learning to our professional lives, and work collaboratively with people from different cultures. We understand the importance of formative feedback in mentoring relationships. We have discovered the importance of research in our careers, volunteer work, and everyday lives. We are no longer afraid of technology. Although we have graduated from our program, our learning journey goes on.

Recommendations and Implications for Practice

As we reflected on our time as transnational students in an online learning program, we agreed that while we encountered challenges, our international experiences were transformative, affording new opportunities both before and after graduation. Our engagement with the larger research team not only enabled us to appraise our personal experiences and accomplishments, but it also empowered us to apply a critical lens to examine key themes in the transnational student learning experience and contribute to a body of knowledge that underrepresents our voice (Stewart, 2019).

Distilled from the collaborative autoethnography approach, the research team found that transnational students describe a quality learning experience consistent with the quality dimensions identified by Jung (2011). Our findings suggest that transnational student stakeholders value social interaction, staff support, institutional quality assurance, institutional credibility, learner support, accessibility, and relevant learning activities. These quality dimensions are holistic in nature and require a systematic approach for all stakeholder groups to engage in a successful internationalization plan (Fischer & Green, 2018). Additionally, we recognize that other institutional stakeholder groups, including faculty members, learning designers and support staff, may not have an inherent understanding of internationalization practices and their cultural underpinnings (Fakunle et al., 2020). Therefore, there is a need for a more purposeful and comprehensive integration of internationalization practices in online learning environments.

This small study adds to the current body of knowledge and demonstrates the value of internationalization practices in higher education and how they provide intellectual, cultural, and employability benefits to online, transnational student stakeholders. Additionally, previous research has found that internationalization practices benefit all stakeholders, not just transnational students (Gemmell et al., 2015; Gift & Bell-Hutchinson, 2007). As Jung and Gunawardena (2014) remind us, cultures travel with learners through communication technologies. This transaction enriches the learning experience for all who interact in the educational process and immerses learners in new perspectives beyond the intended curriculum. We may conclude that internationalization strategies also improve quality dimensions, guidelines, and practices from the learner's perspective. However, it's critical to expand from this micro-perspective and review key conditions which enable the knowledge process to flow across borders.

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Appendix D: Conference Session

Heiser, R., Lazou, C., Mavraki, A., Psychogiou, M., Palalas, A., & Walsh, P. (2023, May 15-18). *Quality and Transformation Through the Lens of Transnational Online Graduate Students and Their Instructors*. [Conference session] 25th Annual International Conference on Education, Athens, Greece.

Abstract

Quality and Transformation Through the Lens of Transnational Online Graduate Students and Their Instructors

Introduction

This research study explored the factors contributing to student success and challenges encountered by transnational Greek students during a graduate program undertaken at an open, online distance education university in Canada. Transnational distance education, defined as the movement of academic programs and providers between countries, is a strategic practice that contributes to the internationalization of higher education. While there are many studies on transnational education, little is known about the transnational student learning experience and the practices necessary to support intended outcomes, including preparing post-graduates with essential skills and competencies for employment and lifelong learning within their local communities, country of origin, and globalized economy. The six-member female research team includes three former transnational students from Greece who graduated from a Master of Education (MEd) program between 2018 and 2019, a transnational doctoral student and two faculty members.

Methodological approach

An analytical approach to collaborative autoethnography (CAE) was chosen. CAE is a qualitative research method that uses diverse data and rigorous self-reflection and reflexivity on individual and group experiences within socio-cultural contexts. An analytic CAE research agenda aims to improve theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected from interactive interviews, documented teaching and learning practices, socialization experiences, and student-created archival materials. Data analysis and interpretation were facilitated by NVivo using an inductive values coding approach. Our findings describe graduate competencies, intellectual, socio-cultural and employability benefits to transnational student stakeholders, and contributions made by graduates to their profession and communities. Recommendations for improving the quality of the online transnational learner experience are offered.

Keywords

Transnational Student Experience, Internationalization Practices, Open Online Distance Education, Socialization of Graduate Students

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(ATINER)

Athens, 3 November 2022

Pamela Walsh, Associate Professor, Athabasca University, Canada
Rebecca Heiser, PhD Student, Athabasca University, Canada
Agnieszka (Aga) Palalas, Associate Professor & Program Director, Athabasca University, Canada
Chrysoula Lazou, Graduate (MEd) Open digital and distance education, Athabasca University/
International Hellenic University, Canada/Greece
Anastasia Mavrak, Graduate (MEd), Open digital and distance education/Athabasca University
Canada/Greece

Our Ref: EDU2023/297049

Dear Colleagues,

I would like to inform you that the selection academic committee has decided to invite you to speak at our 25th Annual International Conference on Education 15-18 May 2023, Athens, Greece, on the topic of:

Quality and Transformation through the Lens of Transnational Online
Graduate Students and Their Instructors

Please be prepared for an oral presentation in English only of 15-20 minutes including discussion. During your presentation you may use PowerPoint. If for objective or subjective reasons because of the new ecumenical situation of pandemics an onsite presentation is not possible, ATINER will accept and facilitate remote (online or pre-recorded) presentations. If this is your first presentation at one of ATINER's small academic events, please read carefully our policy available at <https://www.atiner.gr/policy>.

More information can be found at the conference website <https://www.atiner.gr/education>. Confirm your participation by completing the registration before 2 January 2023 at: <https://www.atiner.gr/product/registration>.

For your convenience, a special conference rate has been arranged with a local hotel to be announced 1-2 weeks before the conference. Please complete the registration form for the nights you want accommodation for. **Please note that participants have the option to pay in Canadian or US Dollars through bank transfer in a North American Bank. If you prefer this option, please send us an email and we will send bank accounts and rates in the two currencies.** Reservations should be made as soon as possible as the offer only stands as long as rooms are available. If you need more information on the accommodation please send us an email to atiner@atiner.gr. The conference's social program is available on <https://www.atiner.gr/social-program>. These are academic events which give the opportunity to our conference participants to further discuss the issues developed during the formal sessions and establish academic collaborations with other scholars from many different countries.

If you want your paper to be considered (peer reviewed) for publication and only then, please submit your manuscript by 17 April 2023 using our website <https://www.athensjournals.gr/paper-submission> following the paper guidelines stated there. For more information, please see point 3 of our policy on <https://www.atiner.gr/policy>. Please do not submit your paper if you do not want it to be published by ATINER.

I look forward to meeting you in Athens.

Yours Sincerely,

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President



Appendix E: Ethics Final Report Completion



November 01, 2023

Dr. Pamela Walsh

Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences\Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies
Athabasca University

File No: 24488

Certification of Ethical Approval Date: October 20, 2021

Dear Pamela Walsh,

Thank you for submitting the Ethics Final Report for your research entitled 'Experiences of Transnational Distance Education Graduates: A collaborative Autoethnography'.

Congratulations on the completion of your research! Your ethics file is now closed. Please note that this file will be deleted on October 31, 2033, in accordance with Athabasca University's Records Management Policy.

Sincerely,

Gail Leicht
Research Ethics Officer
Athabasca University