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***ONLINE INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS:
THE POSSIBILITIES OF A US AND UKRAINIAN PARTNERSHIP***

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This article examines the development of online courses as part of international programs and explores the use of online courses to overcome visa and other limitations in recruiting faculty and students to the United States. It specifically explores the possibility of joint-program partnerships between US and Ukrainian universities. It concludes that there are no major barriers to such partnerships that cannot be overcome through proper course design and adequate access to technology.

Keywords: *online course, joint-program, higher education, technology.*

Introduction

The early 21st century is marked by the progressive globalization of many industries, including higher education. The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and international educational efforts such as the Bologna process are driving the gradual globalization of many higher education systems within some nations [1]. This produces new levels of international competition, a growing need for standardization among national and international programs, and increased pressure on immigration laws restricting the flow of international students and faculty.

This article examines the strategic opportunities and limitations of online courses and programs as tools for internationalizing programs within the US and other nations. It specifically examines the possibilities of joint online education between US and Ukrainian universities.

US Higher Education and the Global Market

Higher education in the United States has long been a global business. US colleges and universities routinely attract over 600,000 foreign students each year according to the Institute for International Education. Many US schools have active international recruitment programs for both faculty and students.

Some programs, especially in mathematics and the sciences, would be hard-pressed to continue without a source of international faculty. Congressional limits on H-1B visas for skilled workers in technology fields, for example, bring howls from university administrators desperate to attract skilled teachers and graduate students [2].

Online courses are extremely popular with a majority of US colleges and universities, according to the 2008 Sloan Consortium annual survey of online higher education in the United States. In fall of 2007, 3.94 million students were enrolled in online courses in the US – up 12% from the previous year. Since 2002, when the survey began, online enrollments have grown at a compound annual rate of 19.7% versus a total student enrollment rate of 1.6%. Online enrollments in the US are growing steadily and rapidly in both absolute numbers and as a share of total higher education enrollments. Over 20% of all American students have taken at least one online class and 58% of all surveyed institutions rated online programs as being critical to their future strategic plans. Online courses and programs are clearly a key part of many colleges and universities in the US and are expected to continue to grow for the foreseeable future [3].

Online Education in Cross-border Higher Education Programs

Given the popularity of online classes and programs among US institutions and the large existing base of courses and course platforms/technology, online education seems to be a natural tool to circumvent visa limitations and attract more foreign teachers and students into globally competitive US programs. Internationally, however, there are significant barriers to online programs and courses.

Surveys among Asian students in 2006 showed a significant sector of the population considers completely online coursework to be of poor quality and lacking the effectiveness and quality of traditional classroom-based courses with face-to-face teacher-student interaction. There are also concerns that access to online coursework is limited in many nations by a lack of Internet and computer access among prospective students [4].

This and other research has also identified the need to tailor online courses to the specific cultural backgrounds of international audiences. The differences in language and in cultural response to images or the organization of information and the design of evaluations means that a course designed for US students may not work well among students from other nations, even when they have an adequate command of English. Hofstede’s matrix of international cultural differences is a frequently used tool for identifying potential cultural mismatches between online courses and international students [1]

This presents significant barriers to the promised economies of scale of online courses and programs. If courses must be tailored to each national group, then the market for a given course is limited to a single national group. If online classes become ineffective at aggregating demand – one of their most attractive economic characteristics, then their use in international cross-border programs is likely to be reduced.

Cultural and Technical Limitations

The research of St. Amant suggests that the designers of international online courses should consider four specific aspects of course development: access, design, scheduling, and language. Access deals with the availability of broadband Internet connections and computers for students and teachers. Design addresses the cultural differences in response to design elements in an online course, particularly as regards imagery. Scheduling addresses issues of synchronous timing or references of time in asynchronous courses. Language involves what language is used within the course. Miliszewska reported similar conclusions among Asian students studying in online courses from Hong Kong or Australian universities [4].

This analysis suggests that the developers of prospective international online courses should select partner universities in areas where there is adequate access to the Internet, where schedules can be organized, where cultural bases are similar enough to allow standardization of course design, and where a common language can be used.

US and Ukraine: A Possible Partnership

To determine if the United States and Ukraine are possible partners in online course development, we can compare them culturally and technically.

The cultural comparison matrix developed by Professor Geert Hofstede is arguably the most widely-known tool for comparing national cultures along standard axes. While it is not universally accepted, its wide use makes it an appropriate choice for comparing the cultures of the United States and Ukraine, as they relate to possible joint online programs or cross-border teaching [5]

Table 1 shows the comparison between the United States, Ukraine, and the world average for each of Hofstede’s primary measurements. The US and world average figures are from Hofstede’s own research. The Ukrainian figures are from a contemporary study by researchers at the National University School of Business, using the same collection methodologies as Hofstede [6]

Table 1

<i>Hofstede Cultural Index Values for the US and Ukraine</i>			
	World Average	United States	Ukraine
Power Distance Index (PDI)	55	40	23
Individualism (IDV)	43	91	51
Masculinity (MAS)	50	62	13
Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)	64	46	57
Long Term Orientation (LTO)	45	29	56

Power Distance Index – This describes the degree to which a culture is comfortable with differences in respective power between different people. A high number suggests that people are more comfortable with strong differences in relative power. Both the US and Ukraine are below the world average in this area, although the US ranks higher than does Ukraine. This suggests that students in both countries are likely to expect relative closeness to their professors and will be uncomfortable with strong displays of power or privilege.

Individualism – This describes the degree to which people see their roles and responsibilities as individuals, versus as part of a larger group. Both Ukraine and the US are more individualistic than the world average, although the US is far more so. It is worth noting that, within Hofstede's own research, the US is consistently one of the most individualistic cultures on Earth. These results suggest that both US and Ukrainian students will be comfortable in a course design that challenges them as individuals. Ukrainian students, however, will be more comfortable in group settings and more satisfied with assignments by group rather than by individual. Van Hook found similar responses in 2000 [7].

Masculinity – This index describes the degree to which gender roles and activities are defined in a culture. A high ranking suggests that men and women pursue very different roles and destinies in the culture. The US is slightly more masculine than the world average while Ukraine is significantly less so. This suggests that cross-cultural teachers should be sensitive to the portrayal of gender roles in class materials. They should also recognize that Ukrainian and American students will tend to see gender roles differently in many professional situations.

Uncertainty Avoidance Index – This describes risk aversion – the degree to which members of a culture are likely to avoid uncertain or risky/new situations. The US and Ukraine score very close to one another in this index and are both somewhat below the world average. This suggests that both US and Ukrainian students can be expected to display a moderate appetite for risk and should not sharply differ between themselves. They are likely to agree on the relative value of risk in business situations.

Long Term Orientation – This index describes the degree to which members of a culture are likely to think about the long term results of an action, versus the short term possibilities. Ukrainian are somewhat more likely to take the long term view than the world average. Americans are far less likely to take the long term view and are notoriously short-term in their thinking. This suggests that Ukrainian students are more likely to judge a business situation or possible action by its long term possibilities while American students will focus on the short term outcomes. Teachers may wish to use this to show students the need to consider both aspects of a decision.

The fact that Ukraine and the United States have strong cultural similarities as well as differences suggests that professors designing joint online programs will need to carefully balance the differences and similarities of their two sets of students. The differences do not appear great enough, however, to preclude Ukrainian and American students from participating in the same online class.

Language and schedule may remain as barriers, but both can be overcome. The use of the English language is increasingly common in Ukraine, especially within university schools of business and economics. The scheduling issue becomes trivial if asynchronous course design is used. While Painter-Morland et al identified some significant advantages in using a synchronous model in an international online course between US and South African students, the values of this approach may not be such that it is allowed to interfere with the development of a successful joint course [8].

The only other significant limit to the spread of online classes globally is the need for access to a broadband Internet connection and a computer. Ukraine currently has over 500,000 Internet access providers and 10 million people (about 22% of the current population) are regular Internet users [9]. In addition, many universities and other institutes of higher education in Ukraine have broadband Internet connections. These numbers have grown steadily for the last seven years in Ukraine. While some students in rural areas may have trouble accessing online courses requiring broadband connections, there does not appear to be any significant technical limitation to the

participation of most Ukrainian university students in joint online programs between US and Ukrainian universities.

Conclusion

There is a strong demand for professional faculty members in the United States, to support existing programs. Current visa requirements are likely to limit the ability of US universities to recruit faculty members and even students from abroad. Online classes appear to be an excellent way to bridge this gap, allowing international teachers and students to participate in classes with US students without physically crossing the border.

At the same time, online classes and programs from the US can be attractive to international students. By developing joint online programs that can serve international audiences, it is possible to help both international and domestic students and their universities.

Universities in the United States and Ukraine have a significant opportunity for partnership in this area. The cultural differences between them are not so great as to preclude sharing a single online course and teachers from one nation could be effective with students from the other. There are no significant technical limitations to such a partnership in either nation. It should be possible to develop effective joint online programs and partnerships between US and Ukrainian universities.

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