

In 1,200 words, critically examine Mason's predictions concerning the globalisation of education. You should carefully (but briefly) summarise Mason's position, move to your views on the strengths and weaknesses of that position, make reference to the work of other authors as you proceed to your own conclusions.

I. Article Summary

In her article, Mason draws five conclusions and makes numerous predictions regarding global education. To maintain a manageable length of discussion, this paper will look at just two of her conclusions and three of her predictions.

The first of Mason's conclusions is that English is the dominant language of instruction in global education. She attributes this fact to two factors: (1) the dominance of English in some of the most common subjects for global courses, namely business and information technology, and (2) the dominance of English-speaking countries in the development of the technologies supporting global communications (and thereby global education). Second, Mason believes that the challenges of addressing the cultural issues of global education have received only cursory attention. According to Mason, there is an awareness of the problems and some superficial attempts to 'show sensitivity'; however, there are few actual strategies that focus on "how to give equal voice to local cultures, institutions, and educational approaches" (1998: 140).

In her predictions for the future of global education, Mason focuses on three areas: (1) the future of the University, (2) the cultural and social impact of global education, and (3) the educational use of new technology. She sees the future of the University residing in its ability to re-think and refine its educational and administrative practices. In terms of the cultural and social impact of global education, Mason points to the importance of avoiding 'cultural domination' and presents several recommendations for doing so. Lastly, Mason identifies several educational applications of new technologies, with the majority of her discussion focusing on the Web.

II. Strengths and Weaknesses

In this section, I will discuss my views on the relative strengths and weaknesses of Mason's position. It is important to note however, that as Mason's article was published six years ago, any discussion of the relative weaknesses of her argument should be tempered by the adage that hindsight is always 20/20.

Mason's Conclusions – English, culture, and technology

Mason's astutely points out that English-speaking countries have "dominated the development of the technologies which support global communications" (1998: 139). As such, she espouses a position wherein these dominant English-speaking "early adopters" must set high standards for global education as those who follow their example will be "less innovative, less culturally sensitive, less enthusiastic, and less experimental" (1998: 140). It is my belief however, that especially when it comes to matters of technology, to lead is not always of benefit. Chairman and CEO of Microsoft Corporation Bill Gates expresses a similar opinion when he says, "[s]tarting out behind is sometimes an advantage. [...] Late adopters can skip steps and avoid the mistakes of the trailblazers" (1996: 297). Indeed, while it is true that English still dominates on the Internet, that dominance is steadily decreasing; Korean is currently the second most used language on the Internet (Philipson 2004). As the use of languages other than English on the Internet becomes more prevalent, it is only a matter of time before the same occurs in global education content.

Accordingly, Mason's notion concerning the joint development of courses deserves a great deal more attention. Mason correctly observes that jointly developing courses and course materials is an effective way to avoid the "trap of the dominant provider and the dependent receiver" (1998: 155). However, in chapter 12 she mistakenly attributes the scarcity of such jointly developed courses to problems resolving copyright issues. Her discussion in chapter 11

is more accurate, but still fails to mention one critical point: translation. Given the amount of focus Mason gives to technology in her discussion, I find it surprising that she would exclude the possibility of machine-based translation in joint course development. Perhaps this is so because in the late 90s the technology behind this type of translation was still terribly inefficient. More recently however, some machine-based translation has reached 95 percent accuracy (Kim 2001). As this technology improves and as its use becomes commonplace, the scope of global education will become truly global. Education providers will be able to work across linguistic boundaries to create courses that incorporate divergent academic and cultural approaches to the material. Students of any language will be able to study in any language irrespective of their mother tongue or of the language of instruction. Be it through the joint development of courses and materials, or through expanding the breadth of global education via machine-based translation, reducing the reliance on English as a vehicle for global education delivery will serve well those who seek ways of globalising without colonising (Mason 1998; Marrow & Torres 2000).

Mason's Predictions – the University, culture, and technology

As I have already discussed Mason's views on the interrelation between the influence of culture and the application of technology in global education, I will turn my attention to the future of the University in global education.

It is my belief that the notion of the University as an institution that is somehow 'too good' for the ideals of capitalism is a romantic one. Mason's discussion on the future of the University ignores the role of profit—or at the very least funding. I feel, however, that of the many challenges confronting the University, funding (and its commercial cohort profit) will be the largest. Faced with decreasing government spending for tertiary education and increasing operating expenditures, the University has had to turn to new sources of income, both traditional (student enrolment, endowments/alumni, research grants) and non-traditional (commercial sponsorship, brand

marketing, distance/online courses). As has been done for many years, the University has turned to international students and the higher tuition paid by them to bolster its bottom line. A natural extension of this practice is the distance and online education market (AKA global education).

The shift towards global education has mirrored another capitalist phenomenon, namely the shift towards increasing numbers of part-time workers in the workforce. Just as part-time workers represent savings for employers because of reduced benefits, distance/online students represent the same savings for the University. These students do not require as many support services as 'traditional' students, and as such represent—to use the language of commerce—costs savings and a higher profit margin. The ultimate manifestation of this practice would be a completely virtual university, with no physical structures whatsoever, thereby offering students reduced tuitions, while simultaneously providing the University higher profit margins. Naturally, the initial investment needed to establish such an operation and the ongoing costs of maintaining and upgrading the technology driving it are of considerable concern. Maintaining academic standards and/or reputations is also of great concern.

III. Conclusion

Before global education can be heralded as the saviour of the University, there are two important points that must be considered. The first is the cognitive advantages and/or disadvantages of global education. The second, which is closely related to the first point, is the relationship between content and presentation in the delivery of global education material.

As to the first point, I agree with Mason's position that jury is still out as to the cognitive effects, either positive or negative, of technology-based learning. As the medium ages, and as more providers attempt to employ the medium, future studies will be able to measure its

effectiveness. I suspect that in its current stage, and especially when weighed against the resources required to create it, technology-based learning offers few, if any, cognitive advantages over 'traditional' learning.

It is the second point that I believe is the most important. I believe that the relationship between content and presentation is what will have the most influence on the cognitive effects of global education. There must be a concerted effort to avoid, in the quest to employ high-tech, what I call 'why-tech'; that is, technology for technology's sake. A classic example of why-tech comes from early space exploration. When faced with the problem of having to write in a gravity-free environment NASA is reported to have spent millions of dollars developing anti-gravity pens; the Russian space agency however, faced with the same problem, simply used pencils. The point being that sometimes technology can truly overcome obstacles, however it is not a 'cure-all'. If used without careful thought and planning, the use of technology can be wasteful, even detrimental, to the given objective, be it writing in space, or delivering educational content around the world.

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