



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

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

Transnational Distance Education

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 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?

METHOD

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 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; Grødum, 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,

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 Chrissa 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 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.

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.

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 enrol.

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 Chryssa 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.

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’Creedy & van Mourik, 2016; Gemmill & 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 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.

Implications

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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