

## The Complexity of Transnational Distance Students: A Review of the Literature

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### Abstract

Transnational education is a rapidly evolving and constantly changing field. The Internet has enabled virtually global access to distance education opportunities, however transnational distance students in particular have often been miscategorized, oversimplified, or overlooked in prior research. This literature review synthesizes research and publications over a ten-year period focusing on the emerging phenomenon of transnational distance students. Contrary to the allure of flexible, any time, any place learning often ascribed to distance education, diverse and complex situations are highlighted that paint a more nuanced picture of student circumstances and motivations, counterintuitive and underrepresented conditions that may influence students in their decisions to enrol in transnational distance education programs.

**Keywords:** transnational distance students, transnational education, borderless higher education, globalization, literature review

### Introduction

Today, the phenomenon of distance education continues to be shaped by broad forces such as globalization, industrialization, and socioeconomic change (Haughey, Evans, & Murphy, 2008). Within this shifting landscape is the emergence of newer categories of distance students due to these complex circumstances. Though distance education has traditionally provided alternative pathways to education for underserved populations (Casey, 2008; Lee, 2017; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Saba, 2011; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012; Sun & Chen, 2016), this additional complexity can be seen in the rise of transnational distance students (see Gemmell & Harrison, 2017; Stewart, 2017; Wilkins, 2016). Moreover, while various technological innovations (e.g., print media, radio/satellite broadcasting, computer networking) have enabled distance education over the last 200+ years (Casey, 2008; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Saba, 2011; Simonson et al., 2012), the Internet-era of distance education can arguably be characterized as enabling global, borderless education, or transnational distance education. This change is further evidenced by more nuance in the resulting student body, and is the subject of this review.

### Methodology

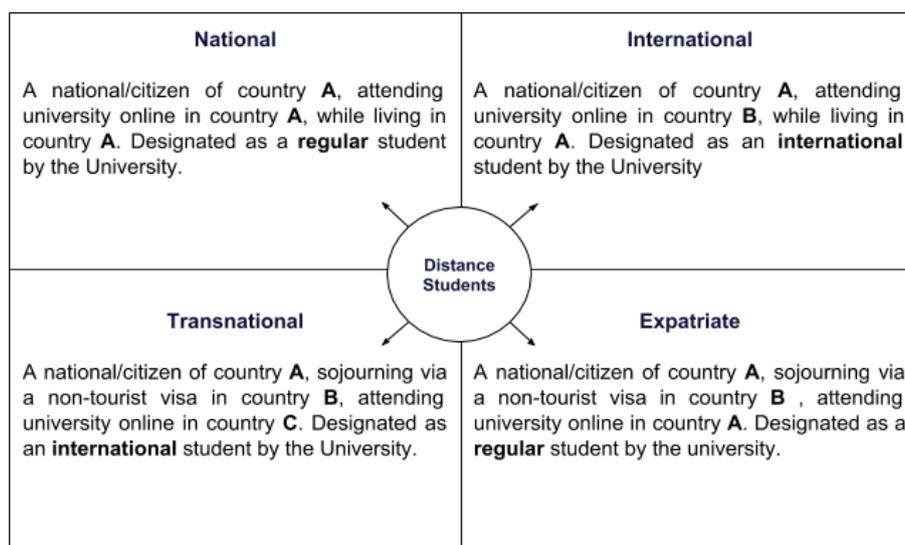
#### *Research Objectives*

Given the complex nexus of distance students in a world where educational borders have greatly diminished in light of the Internet, this review was undertaken to explore what is currently known in the literature about distance students who are situated outside of a conventional/national frame of reference (i.e., transnational distance students). While there is much literature that clearly explores the domestic experience of distance students, as well as the experience of international students in national programs, there is a poverty of recognition of the transnational distance student

(Andrews & Tynan, 2010). Therefore, the purpose of this literature review is relatively humble, intending to bring attention to the specific circumstances surrounding such students.

**Research Design**

The research methodology for this study was to review published scholarship regarding transnational distance students which included studies over a 10 year period from 2008 to 2018. For purposes of this review, transnational distance students were defined using Stewart’s (2017) definitions of the expatriate or transnational distance student (see Figure 1). These categories are distinguished using three criteria: national origin, local sojourn status, and geographic location.



**Figure 1: Stewart’s Model of Distance Students**

**Selection Criteria, Sources of Data, and Data Analysis**

The search was conducted in English and limited to English-language texts. Peer-reviewed journal articles from topic-related journals (e.g., *Studies in Higher Education*, *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, *Journal of Studies in International Education*), books, and full texts were the primary sources used in this review. Studies conducted in various countries were used to paint a broad picture, though the educational programs and students represented in this review are largely from the North American, European, Middle Eastern, and Asian regions.

Key words used for the search were *distance students*, *transnational distance students*, *transnational students*, *distance education*, *transnational education*, *transnational higher education*, and *borderless education*. Data was collected from online databases including ERIC, EBSCO, Google Scholar, and Academic Search Premier. Based on the selection criteria, approximately 60 relevant works were initially identified. The excluded material typically did not address students (e.g., partnership models, growth strategies, evaluation methods) and/or fell outside of the imposed time frame from 2008 onwards. 45 works were then used to identify relevant and recurring themes about transnational distance students. Abstracts with similar themes were placed together to organize emerging trends.

After text review and synthesis, more specific themes were identified and used to subsequently structure and organize the corresponding sections presented in this paper.

## Findings from the Review

### *Location Unbound*

Distance education is an increasingly common experience in society today (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2018; Lee, 2017; Means, Bakia, & Murphy, 2014; Ortagus, 2017; Watts, 2016). Allen et al. (2016) noted that 28% of college students in the United States alone take online courses each year. Elsewhere in the world there are Open Universities serving tens of thousands of students annually, in addition to regular brick and mortar universities offering their own catalogues of distance programs (Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Simonson et al., 2012). With so many students participating in distance/online education, it is not surprising to find numerous quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods studies, books, analyses, and literature reviews (e.g., Allen et al., 2016; Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Colorado & Eberle, 2010; Dabbagh, 2007; Dumais, Rizzuto, Cleary, & Dowden, 2013; Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2012; Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2013; Hughes, 2013; Kauffman, 2015; Kaupp, 2012; Liu, Gomez & Yen, 2009; Lee, 2011; Lorenzo, 2015; Means, Bakia & Murphy, 2014; Roblyer & Davis, 2008; Stoessel, Ihme, Barbarino, Fisseler & Stürmer, 2015; Xu & Jaggars, 2013; Yoo & Huang, 2013). However these are typically limited to a single frame of reference for practical reasons, and overlooks the complexities of transnational distance students operating in multiple reference frames.

The Internet has unbound the individual from any particular geographic location, and in light of globalization and the movement of people, distance education opportunities, instructors, students, and institutions are not necessarily confined to national borders (Garret, 2003; Gemmell & Harrison, 2017; Stewart, 2017; Wilkins, 2016). There are numerous reasons, both historically and currently, that are responsible for population movement such as government/military postings, missionary work, overseas corporate assignments, international education, self-initiated expatriation, or marriage. Moreover, there are less benign reasons such as civil wars, natural disasters, or social, economic, and political crises (Dobos, 2011; Froese, 2012; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Students can also choose not to relocate for the sake of attending a given program (Hewling, 2005; Gunawardena, 2003). The intersection of these circumstances is evidenced by the formation of transnational cultures that are not endemic to any one particular place (Gunawardena, 2003; Gunawardena, 2014; Gunawardena & LaPointe, 2008).

Although academic institutions have long made distinctions between national and international students for various practical, logistical, and legal purposes, this is still a work-in-progress in the realm of transnational distance education since students can cross borders electronically (Andrews & Tynan, 2010; Dobos, 2011; Gemmell & Harrison, 2017; Stewart, 2017; Wilkins, 2016). Although a uniform consensus does not exist in regards to transnational policy and adult education (Knight, 2016; Milana, 2012; Wilkins, 2016), transnational education delivery models provide some insight into how borders are crossed. Transnational movement can be quite complicated when it overlaps/merges with the diverse practices of distance education. Like distance education (and online education in particular), there are numerous differences with nationally-based education programs that are unique and separate from traditional education (GATE, 1997). By simply looking at the concept of borderless higher education, Garrett (2003) wrote that this “refers to the crossing various

kinds of 'borders' - geographical, sectoral and conceptual" (p. 113). McBurnie and Ziguras (2001) noted that a hallmark of transnational education is when "learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based" (p. 86). Adding to the difficulty discussing transnational education is the lack of consistency between terms, definitions, and usage depending on the educational service provider or the students in attendance (Caruana & Montgomery, 2015; Knight, 2016; Wilkins, 2016).

### ***Paradigm Shift: International to Transnational***

Francois (2016) provided additional definitions from the Asia-Pacific European Cooperation (APEC) describing a situation "in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based" (p. 3), while UNESCO and the OECD described it as one where "the teachers, student, programme, institution/provider or course materials cross the national jurisdictional border" (p. 4), as well as the British Council where "students study towards a foreign qualification without leaving their home country" (p. 4). By extension, it is easy to see how distance education can also fall into the realm of transnational education as any given education program, its resources, students, and faculty can all cross borders electronically.

Like the variety of formats of online courses in distance education (see Lowenthal, Wilson & Parrish, 2009), transnational education also encompasses a wide variety of concepts and modes of operation. Knight (2016) argued that despite the variability in terms and definitions at present, an overlooked but key factor is "whether the TNE program involves collaboration between a foreign and local provider" versus "situations where only facilities are provided by a host country HEI or organization" (p. 38). The same advice that Lowenthal et al. (2009) offered about the oversimplification of how online courses are talked about is equally valuable and warranted in the transnational context as well. The focus on delivery modes or program characteristics, however, does not address the complexity in student demographics that is the result of transnational education, and described in other scholarship to varying degrees (see Andrews & Tynan, 2010; Dobos, 2011; Gemmell & Harrison, 2017; Stewart, 2017; Wilkins, 2016).

Wilkins (2016) provided elegant descriptions of transnational distance students with the examples of Smita, from India but living in Dubai, where she studies at the international branch campus of a British university, or Olawale, who while living in Nigeria, is taking a MOOC offered from Harvard University in the United States. The key features of these examples are: a) student nationality, b) national origin of the educational provider, and c) actual geographic location of both. In transnational education, at least two of the three characteristics differ. Stewart (2017) described this complexity in a simple descriptive study in Korea by virtue of sojourn status (i.e., visa classification of non-citizen residents) while Gemmell and Harrison (2017) addressed student categorization through tuition fee classification in the United Kingdom due to complexities of EU membership.

Since distance education requires a mediating technology, it comes as no surprise that Francois (2016) classified all methods of distance education, from correspondence, broadcast, and online courses, as transnational education modes (see Table 1). However, the Internet has acted as a catalyst and enabler of transnational distance education in ways and scales that are fundamentally different (Andrews & Tynan, 2010). International distance student enrollment in the United States (see Allen et al., 2016), international, transnational, and "home" distance student enrollment in the United Kingdom (see Gemmell & Harrison, 2017), the phenomenon of expatriate and transnational distance students in Korea (see Stewart, 2017), or even national MOOC platforms with a disproportionately globally distributed student body (see Glass, Shiokawa-Baklan & Saltarelli, 2016) illustrate this effect. What Francois (2016) pragmatically highlighted, however, is that in transnational education, distance education is a part of the family.

**Table 1: Overview of Transnational Education Delivery Modes and Methods**

Mode	Format	Characteristics	Source
In country	Overseas / Offshore Branch Campus	run or managed directly by the home institution offering programs and degrees	Francois, 2016; Latchem & Ryan, 2013
	Franchise	home institution licenses a local institution to offer various education programs and products that are recognized and honored by the institution of origin	Francois, 2016
	Credit Validation	credit is transferred between institutions by applying to transfer course credit after it has been assessed for equivalency	Francois, 2016
	Dual Degree Programs	students enrolled in one program can simultaneously earn a degree or certificate from the other without having to relocate	Francois, 2016
Blended	Twinning	credit has already been certified between institutions and transfers without question by means of memorandums of understanding (MoU)	Francois, 2016
	Fly-in / Fly-out	certain courses are taught exclusively by faculty from the home institution who are sent out to the local site, while other courses may be taught by local faculty	Francois, 2016; Latchem, & Ryan, 2013; Arunasalam, 2016; Hou, Montgomery, & McDowell, 2014, Smith, 2014
	Double Degree with Mobility	students earn two degrees but spend time taking courses in both the home and host nations	Francois, 2016
	Joint Degrees	students spend some time studying in both countries but earn a single degree bearing the names of both institutions	Francois, 2016
	Consecutive Degrees	students earn an initial degree in one country (e.g., an Associate's degree) and earns an additional, consecutive degree in the other country (e.g., a Bachelor's degree)., or where a graduate certificate in the home country fulfills portions of a Master's degree abroad	Francois, 2016
Distance	Online	courses are conducted 100% online	Francois, 2016
	Hybrid	some degree of courses are conducted online	

Despite distance education's inclusion in the overall body of transnational education modes, distance student voice is not adequately represented in its scholarship (Andrews & Tynan, 2010; Wilkins, 2016). By contrast, there is more work describing modes of delivery (e.g., Caruana & Montgomery, 2015; Francois, 2016; Knight, 2016; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012) and faculty experiences (e.g., Wilkins, Butt & Annabi, 2017; Ziguras & Pham, 2014). There are also investigations into the "international" student experience which may or may not fall into a transnational space given the conventional use of the term (see Erichsen & Bolliger, 2010; Habib, Johannesen, & Øgrim, 2014; Gemmell, Harrison,

Clegg & Reed, 2013; Selinger, 2004; Selwyn, 2011a; Selwyn, 2011b; Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013). This single homogenous label, however, oversimplifies potential nuance in a transnational population (Andrews & Tynan, 2010; Gemmell & Harrison, 2017; Stewart, 2017; Wilkins, 2016). This subtlety can be more tangible and better understood by looking at some examples of transnational education as they exist in the real world.

### ***Real World Examples***

The variety of formats (as largely outlined by Francois, 2016) in transnational education are not hypothetical or uncommon, however. There are numerous programs currently running, as well as numerous research studies conducted in various programs around the world. Hou et al. (2014) identified 511 transnational programs in China alone at both undergraduate and graduate levels. The literature also indicates many transnational programs operating in Malaysia (see Arunasalam, 2016; Dobos, 2011; Sidhu & Christie, 2013; Wilkins et al., 2017), the Middle East (see Miller-Idriss & Hanauer, 2011; Wilkins et al., 2017), Vietnam (see Ziguras & Pham, 2014), Taiwan (see Yung-chi Hou, Morse & Wang, 2015), Indonesia (see Sutrisno & Pillay, 2013), Pakistan (see Kanu, 2005), Korea (see FSU, n.d.; IFEZ, n.d.; IGC, n.d., UCRX, n.d.) and Singapore (see Dobos, 2011) to list a few. Several programs located in Korea and known to this author are illustrated below.

One example from Framingham State University's Louis C. Cedrone Center is a program that offers education degree programs to educators living and working overseas (FSU, n.d.). Depending on the host country, faculty may fly in and exclusively teach all of the courses with the option to take some courses online, whereas in other countries, there may be partnerships in place with local universities where local faculty teach some of the program's courses in a blended transnational, hybrid online class mode. Another American example is the University of California Riverside Extension Center (UCRX) which operated an offshore branch campus in Seoul, Korea from 2001-2018 (UCRX, n.d.). It offered several of UCRX's programs, granting UC credit, in addition to providing pathways to degree programs at UCR (UCRX, n.d.). Similar to this offshore branch campus, is the Incheon Global Campus that was built in partnership with the national and a local municipal government to serve as a regional educational hub (IGC, n.d.). It was built to house 10 international branch campuses, though as of 2018, there were a total five universities in residence (4 American [Stony Brook, FIT, University of Utah, George Mason], 1 Belgian [Ghent]) (IGC, n.d.). The programs offered are the same as the ones run at their home campuses, are conducted in English, and require one-year to be spent at the respective home campus (IGC, n.d.).

While the variety of delivery modes may seem overwhelming with seemingly trivial differences, these features underscore the complexity in partnership agreements, local/foreign accreditation standards, and government regulatory compliance. Moreover, it underscores the variety of possible educational situations around the world. In an effort to meet student needs/increase educational access, these delivery modes represent a number of creative responses.

### ***Diverse Global Circumstances***

Distance education is often advertised as a practical solution providing flexibility and the ability to learn any time, any place. Hewling (2005) also noted that at the very least on "a broader level, diversely located students spread nationally, or internationally, may be able to attend programs previously only accessible to students willing and able to accept the disruption of physical relocation" (p. 337), but this oversimplifies the complex circumstances that are anything but uniform in a global setting.

There are more contextually pertinent difficulties (e.g., discrimination, political unrest) beyond just the benign idea of anywhere, anytime learning, and makes this assumption a limiting or cliché one (Pyvis, 2011). Selwyn (2011a) cautioned that there is a “need for educators, educationalists and policymakers alike to remain mindful of the limitations of globalised distance education in the twenty-first century” (p. 381); there are also limits to that distance education alone cannot overcome such as the digital divide (Gunawardena & LaPointe, 2008). Nevertheless, there are numerous instances where distance education provides a distinct benefit.

**Socio Political Circumstances.** Selwyn (2011a) noted that on the simpler end of a spectrum, students sought transnational distance education opportunities due to a lack of local opportunities; for example a Caribbean law program often could not run because of low enrollment. He also highlighted more complex cases where Serbians, living in Bosnia, faced difficulties attending Bosnian institutions due to ethnic discrimination, or the preference/privilege granted to ethnic Malay students applying to university over non-Malay minority groups in Malaysia. Even in the United States, certain students of religious/theological studies sought courses related to theological matters that were not viewed as having “undesirable religious agendas in their curricula” (Selwyn, 2011a, p. 374).

He also brought attention to the circumstances of the nomadic professional by highlighting an interview with a student who stated:

I actually live all throughout the year in three different places between Gabon, Liberia and Greece... At one point I had planned on going back to the States and pursuing a master's or even a PhD but then I met my husband [in Liberia] and life continued here and realised I was not going to obtain that goal. (p. 373)

A core feature of this nomadic, transnational life compared to the greater majority is that of its “irregular circumstances” (p. 373), although with the increasing scope of globalization and ICT, these circumstances may not be so irregular anymore. These can also be seen with the rise of the so called digital nomad who by virtue of ICT based work, is potentially able to work from anywhere in the world. As pointed out earlier by Gunawardena and LaPointe (2008), we are moving towards being a global or planetary community that is “evidenced by transnational cultures that are not wholly based in any single place” (p. 52). The student bodies that form as a result of geographically fluid relationships elucidate the fact that “with the development of modern transportation and advanced communication technologies, migration has shifted from *international* to *transnational*” where fixed, one-way, and permanent paths have become ones that are dynamic and recursive (Guo, 2015, p. 7). Nevertheless, even without such benign or negative circumstances affecting student motivation to pursue distance education opportunities “abroad”, differences in geographic origin may also indicate other relevant factors that make the process difficult.

To put it simply, the motivations and circumstances that lead students to transnational distance education are complex. As has been discussed in the literature, one of the primary purposes of distance education has been to increase access. The scope and scale of that access have been amplified by each successive wave of technological innovation, the most significant of which (to date) is the Internet. This has made transnational distance education possible in numerous intercultural and cross-cultural combinations and environments; and these environments require significant care (Gunawardena, 2003; Gunawardena, 2014; Gunawardena & LaPointe, 2008; Pyvis, 2011).

**Cultural Considerations.** Since the Internet has acted as a catalyst of transnational distance education, the inclusion/addition of students from diverse backgrounds has prompted additional cultural challenges. While distance learning can transcend national borders, the subsequent differences in values, expectations, social, and cultural contexts are arguably greater challenges than technological ones will ever be (Gunawardena, 2014). The inability to learn and/or understand the needs of prospective students will continue to challenge instructors and universities unless additional considerations are made (Gunawardena, 2003; Gunawardena, 2014; Gunawardena & LaPointe, 2008). This point is particularly important in education that is increasingly globally offered and participated in as it affects not only classroom dynamics but the designs of digital learning spaces, curricular content, and pedagogical approaches (Germain-Rutherford & Kerr, 2008; Gunawardena, 2003; Gunawardena, 2014; Gunawardena & LaPointe, 2008; Gemmell & Harrison, 2017; Hewling, 2005; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). And although globalization is a deceptively simple term encompassing a broad range of concepts, it is this interconnected and interdependent network of relationships that more directly affect the transnational classroom (Gunawardena, 2014). While a diverse set of external circumstances may influence a student's decision to take online courses that are not obvious to others in the digital space, they bring with them unique, complex, and inseparable internal cultural identities that are more readily experienced by peers (Germain-Rutherford & Kerr, 2008; Gunawardena, 2003; Gunawardena, 2014; Gunawardena & LaPointe, 2008; Hewling, 2005; Smith & Ayers, 2006; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009).

Even when students share the same national background, this does not necessarily mean they share the same cultural understandings as their peers (Gunawardena, 2014; Hewling, 2005; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009; Stewart, 2017). Or, despite the relatively similarity of one's own culture to a "foreign" one, adaptation, distress, or shock may be more a function of the individual than any particular degree of difference between cultures (Jun & Gentry, 2005). Consider how any:

individual may choose to identify in general with the cultural norms of a nation, but this is by no means the only way in which individuals may locate an idea of culture for themselves. Furthermore, an increase in cross-border movement of people around the world means that many individuals are operating within at least two nation-based frames of cultural reference. (Hewling, 2005, p. 339)

Many of the studies on culture in the academic literature are not without limitations in this regard (see Gunawardena, 2014; Hewling, 2005). Studies are often broad in scope taking a national level view of behavior, oversimplifying culturally diverse nations/regions and as a result, gloss over subcultures/polycultural identities (Gunawardena, 2003; Gunawardena, 2014; Hewling, 2005; Jayatilleke & Gunawardena, 2016). Furthermore, certain expected behaviors such as power distance may prove to be the opposite online since the Internet can act as a socially neutral space due to the absence of physical or visible social markers (Gunawardena, 2003).

Gunawardena (2014) specifically argued that transnational education in particular needs a better model of culture that includes the Internet in its definition since the negotiation of culture also takes place online. This need is highly relevant to the digital space and the implementation of more deliberately cross-cultural instructional designs (Germain-Rutherford & Kerr, 2008). She adopted the term "idioculture" which encompasses the blurred lines between physical and virtual reality, is one that is a locally forming system, and one that "includes multiple cultural selves and hybrid identities on the Internet that interact with each other cross-culturally to form unique cultures of their own" (Gunawardena, 2014, p. 84). Another model meant to address the complexities of multiple cultural selves and their fluid nature was developed by Pollock and Van Reken and simply termed the PolVan Model of Cultural Identity (see Table 2).

**Table 2: PoIVan Model of Cultural Identity Model**

<b>Foreigner</b>	<b>Hidden Immigrant</b>
Look different. Think different.	Look alike. Think different.
<b>Adopted</b>	<b>Mirror</b>
Look different. Think alike.	Look alike. Think alike.

Pollock and Van Reken (2009) captured the essence of logical but overly simple associations (i.e., one looks different, thus thinks different/one looks the same, thus thinks the same) that are far more nuanced in multi- and cross-cultural spaces. Just because a citizen is taking a course online in their country of citizenship does not mean they are living there (Stewart, 2017). Pollock and Van Reken (2009) also pointed out rather pragmatically that cultural clashes are not limited to the interactions of people from different nations. In ethnoculturally diverse regions or societies, this can also occur at local, regional, *and* national levels (Dobos, 2011; Gunawardena, 2014, Gunawardena & LaPointe, 2008; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009; Smith & Ayers, 2006). Examples they gave included the experiences of indigenous populations and ethnic/racial minority groups, as well as immigrants, migrants, and refugees. The adverse effect of these domestic cultural clashes can also be seen to some degree in the studies of online students who were also ethnic/racial minorities (see Kaupp, 2012; Smith & Ayers, 2006; Xu & Jaggars, 2014).

### **Overlooked Student Complexity**

Jones (2001) pointed out that “past assumptions about who the typical college student was and how, what, when, why, and where that student attended college are no longer valid” (p. 108), and this notion is equally relevant in light of the literature covering transnational, borderless, and global distance education (Stewart, 2017). When examining the enrollment of so called ‘international students’ in the United States, Allen et al. (2016) pointed out that American institutions “serve very few international distance education students, less than 2% in any sector”, while an additional 3% reside in a location that is unknown to the institution (p. 15). Stewart (2017) and Gemmell & Harrison (2017) illustrated, however, that contemporary globalization trends make such relatively straightforward statistics problematic.

Distance students who live outside of their country of citizenship may not necessarily provide the university with a current address from their present host-nation, and opt instead to use their legal address in their country of citizenship (Stewart, 2017). In other cases, students may simply use a home of record elsewhere due to frequent movement or convenience (Gemmell & Harrison, 2017; Stewart, 2017). Moreover, in cases of dual or multiple citizenship holders, various types of residency visas, marriage visas, long-term work visa holders, or property ownership/rental in both home and host countries, exactly how students should report their legal address to the university is not necessarily clear; more than one genuine option exists. This can complicate how students are identified and classified in demographic and research statistics (Gemmell & Harrison, 2017; Stewart, 2017). Moreover, in supranational organizations like the European Union where residents of member-states can freely move between nations, ways to identify and classify students are not particularly obvious (Gemmell & Harrison, 2017). These nuances can render such demographic and

classification statistics problematic; especially since such situations, though relatively small, are not uncommon. Likewise, for those in careers that require frequent international movement, especially in dense geographic regions such as Europe or Southeast Asia, or located on relatively populated border regions such as the Canadian-U.S. border, accurate information about their residency locations abroad may have a relatively short half-life (Stewart, 2017). Glass et al. (2016) highlighted additional circumstantial evidence for such discrepancies by noting a potential mismatch between a language, MOOC provider origin, and a student's geographic location.

### ***An Un(der) Represented Population***

Dobos (2011) pointed out that “offshore courses are increasingly offered to students of many nations, making responsiveness to local cultures more difficult” (p. 31), but this challenge is not exclusive to face-to-face programs. She further described an offshore campus in Malaysia with an effort to adapt the Australian curriculum for the local Malay student population. However, it became increasingly apparent that not all of the students were in fact local Malaysians, making the effort more challenging than anticipated. Another example is the International Education Program, offered by Framingham State University, which runs cohorts in South Korea (among other countries) in a fly-in/fly-out transnational, hybrid online model (FSU, n.d.). One might expect to find that the majority of enrolled students are Korean, however, given local regulations, Korean citizens are not legally eligible to enroll since it operates outside of an established economic free trade zone and does not meet regulatory/legal requirements. As a result, the students at any of FSU's program sites in Korea are typically nationals of Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, South Africa, the Philippines, and Australia. There are in fact no local citizen students, creating a counterintuitively heterogenous transnational student body. While this particular case may be a more extreme example, it highlights the need for greater recognition of student diversity in transnational programs (Andrews & Tynan, 2010; Gemmell & Harrison, 2017; Stewart, 2017).

Andrews and Tynan (2010) illustrated that despite the globalization of education, there is little known about *distance* learners in this particular arena. They noted how relatively little has been written directly on this topic, emphasizing that a significant proportion of transnational education literature is focused on face-to-face delivery. Ultimately, “references to distance education are limited, serving only to indicate the lack of research. Issues relating to the distance learner are largely passed over in silence” (Andrews & Tynan, 2010, p. 61). Stewart (2017) voiced this same frustration despite earlier and ongoing calls for more nuanced research, especially since prior scholarship seems to consistently overgeneralize students under the label of “international”. Consider the following example where Erichsen and Bolliger (2010) explored the perception of isolation among international students in traditional and online learning environments in a mixed-methods study. Though the term international is used, these students were in fact living in the United States and taking classes online. As Stewart (2017) argued earlier, this oversimplification in student conceptualization can be confusing as these students may be better viewed as expatriate students given their status of sojourn (i.e., indicating the primary purpose for which they are in the foreign country). Another example is from Selwyn (2011a; 2011b) who conducted two studies with globally situated learners from a large federal university in the United Kingdom. However, despite the wide geographic dispersion with students on all continents, there was no clear distinction if some of these students also happened to be citizens of the United Kingdom, or simply living and working abroad, just as Gemmell and Harrison noted in 2017. Selwyn (2011a; 2011b) also noted that the sample was comprised of both native and non-native speakers of English, but again, this does not necessarily mean that non-native speakers were not nationals of the United Kingdom by virtue of their native language not being English.

Stewart (2017) and Gemmell and Harrison (2017) both argued that in addition to knowing the administrative classification of a student assigned by a university, their national origin and current geographic location would more clearly delineate students and enable more nuanced investigation. This limitation has been seen in relatively recent prior scholarship (e.g., Dobos, 2011, Gunawardena, 2003; Gunawardena & LaPointe, 2008; Selwyn, 2011a; Selwyn 2011b; Ziguras, 2008). Another recurring theme in the literature thus far is the oversimplification of complex realities, as well as the deceptive simplicity of the terms used later to describe them (see Andrews & Tynan, 2010; Lowenthal et al., 2009, Gunawardena, 2014). This oversimplification can adversely affect our perceptions (Lowenthal et al., 2009).

### ***Prior Student Conceptualizations***

Bean and Metzner (1985) posited that changing demographic trends could explain undergraduate student attrition rates in the United States. They concluded that younger, full time, on campus resident student enrollment was declining with an increase in 1) older, 2) part-time, 3) off-campus resident enrollment. To denote this difference, they affixed the labels traditional and non-traditional to better categorize and investigate students. Despite the rather simple labeling, Bean and Metzner (1985) cautioned that the difference is largely a:

matter of extent; traditional and nontraditional students cannot be easily classified into simple dichotomous categories. These two groups of students can be differentiated on the basis of age, residence, and full- or part-time attendance, not to mention ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status, which might have differentiated traditional and nontraditional students a century ago. (p. 488)

Thus, rather than interpreting their model and its characteristics rigidly, the focus should be on, and guided by, the essence that distinguishes non-traditional students from their traditional counterparts; the overall “lessened intensity and duration of their interaction with the primary agents of socialization (faculty, peers) at the institutions they attend” (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 488). Nevertheless, given that many community college students and virtually all adult distance students qualify as non-traditional, the model’s categorizations could benefit from being updated to account for 21st century demographic trends. This is especially true when taking into account the specific national frame of reference in the model. One such attempt at building upon these student categories is Stewart’s (2017) model in Figure 1.

### ***Emerging Student Conceptualizations***

In a world where transnational distance education is increasingly commonplace, the prevalence of more subtle and nuanced global relationships between students and the academy, or new transnational entities need greater consideration (Gemmell & Harrison, 2017; Stewart, 2017). The studies from Ziguras (2008), Dobos (2011), Selwyn (2011a; 2011b), Wilkins (2016), Gemmell and Harrison (2017), and Stewart (2017) highlight the challenge of describing, defining, and understanding the relevant features, similarities, and differences of students in a transnational setting. The various forms of educational technology utilized in distance education throughout history have simply been expanding the possible range of students, and the myriad of complex situations that influence or cause students to become distance students. Stewart (2017) investigated some characteristics that are only relevant in transnational settings such as the average length of time abroad when initiating academic studies, sojourn status, and type of student (i.e., expatriate or transnational); and presumably additional characteristics not currently thought of would be useful.

## Discussion

The Internet has transformed distance education. The change is evident when considering historical scales and access. For example, the Society to Encourage Studies at Home from 1873-1897 in the Boston area in the United States enrolled 10,000 students over a 24 year period (Casey, 2008; Gibson, 2008), while at present hundreds of thousands of students take classes online *annually* at open universities, as well as distance courses offered from brick-and-mortar universities (Allen et al., 2016; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Simonson et al., 2012). Participation numbers are even more staggering considering that *average* MOOC enrollment from well-known, North-American MOOC providers alone (i.e., Coursera, Udacity, edX, HarvardX) is around 45,000 students with the upper end of enrollment numbers potentially in the hundreds of thousands (Jordan, 2014; Jordan, 2015). Nearly 66% of students in these examples were located outside of North America (Glass et al., 2016). The Internet has changed distance education in ways that were otherwise unimaginable (Harasim, 2000).

## Implications

The Internet has not only enabled previously unimaginable scales of distance education, but has connected students, instructors, and universities from all parts of the world (Harasim, 2000; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Simonson et al., 2012). The global expansion of education that the Internet has enabled has introduced more complicated educational scenarios and entities in need of greater recognition (Gunawardena, 2003; Gunawardena, 2014; Gunawardena & LaPointe, 2008; Harasim, 2000; Hewling, 2005; Hoare, 2013; Parrish & Linder-VanBerschoot, 2010; Smith & Ayers, 2006). In the context of borderless, transnational distance education, the complexity of a diverse student body has also often been unexpected and counterintuitive (Dobos, 2011; Gemmell & Harrison, 2017; Gunawardena, 2003; Gunawardena, 2014; Smith & Ayers, 2006; Stewart, 2017; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009; Wilkins, 2016).

## Conclusion

Recurring themes in the literature are the oversimplification of complex student entities in the transnational distance education space, the over reliance on singular (often national) frames of reference, and inadequate recognition of implicit assumptions about distance students. As a result, these students have fallen through proverbial cracks (Gemmell & Harrison, 2017; Stewart, 2017). Wilkins (2016) reminds us that transnational education is a relatively new field of research that has evolved rapidly over the last 20 years. And undoubtedly, it will continue to do so over the next 20. This point provides ample opportunities for future research into this relatively young and shifting landscape.

## Future Research Possibilities

The literature highlights a burgeoning recognition of transnational student body complexities. However, unlike distance students in a national or international context, the voices of transnational and expatriate students are poorly represented. Future research would serve the distance education community well. Additional descriptive studies would allow for regional or global comparisons demographically. Case or collective case studies would more clearly delineate and document the emerging phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; 2015; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2009). Other qualitative methods such as grounded theory studies will help generate hypothesis for the underlying decision making process that can then be tested with additional research (Creswell, 2013; 2015). These decisions are

ultimately the ones that transform “regular” distance students into ones that are potentially expatriate or transnational ones. The use of consistent categorical distinctions will also allow for consistent group-to-group comparisons across any number of dimensions as Gemmell and Harrison (2017) did with help-seeking behavior. In short, to reiterate Wilkins (2016), there are numerous opportunities for research to keep scholars busy.

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