
TOWARDS GLOBAL GOVERNANCE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

*Elif Toprak, Mehmet Firat, Serpil Koçdar, N. Gizem Koçak, Seçil Kaya Gülen, Erhan Akdemir,
Kazim Demirer, Anadolu University, Turkey*

Abstract

Increasing transnational cooperation in open and distance education provides opportunities for non-state actors to meet around common interests, objectives, values and create a synergy. Besides transnational cooperation, these members of global civil society also motivate intergovernmental cooperation processes. International organizations and professional networks in the field, share common normative values and lead to the construction of a regime. This presentation is about the findings of a research project that aims to make a comparative analysis of the communication networks and cooperation models of international distance education organizations. The major research question asks “the extent to which decision making procedures of the regional organizations are transformed into a regime and provide tools for sustainability of cooperation”. The theoretical framework of the research is epistemic regime theory which concentrates on epistemic communities (such as academicians, professional networks, practitioners, associations, organizations, companies and interest groups) and their roles in creating implicit and explicit common principles, norms, rules and procedures towards regime building.

Implications of Regime-Building for Global Governance in Distance Education

“International regimes are principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge in a given issue-area” (Krasner, 1983). Regimes are also defined as ideas and beliefs that actors have through mutual consent and learning (Keohane & Nye, 1987). This is why they are open agreements that regulate behaviours. The cognitive approach in the regime theory drives our attention to epistemic communities that have effects on the “consensual knowledge” paving the way to transnational cooperation. A transnational regime is composed of institutionalized regulatory structures, members of which are non-governmental actors and aim to solve problems faced by the global civil society (Young, 1999). Institutionalization of regulatory bodies does not always mean enforcing agreements but soft law as well, such as declarations by public authorities that announce the general principles in a given area. Global governance is the sum of international and transnational regimes, embracing governmental and non-governmental cooperation. What is important is the extent to which consensual knowledge embedded in oral and written resources (such as documents) lead to social practices in the specific issue-area and shape decisions and behaviors of actors. The agents may not be able to exert pressure for agenda formation at governmental levels however they

can influence the decision-making mechanisms through networking. A regime becomes operational when the generally agreed on principles are put into practice and get institutionalized. The factors that affect this process are (a) the role of locomotive actors, (b) other players/parties in the subject area, (c) collective problems that necessitate collaboration, (d) context, (e) tactics used and (f) design (Young, 1998). These concepts in the literature point to the collaboration and communication models of actors (including organizations) to determine the level and efficacy of interaction needed for regime-building. A collective problem in the area of ODL (Open and Distance Learning) is the issue of quality assurance in distance education e.g. The regimes may be classified according to different criteria such as their functions, location and members. For the effectivity and sustainability of regimes, besides the common interests and applicability of the procedures; the transparency achieved through monitoring and reporting regime outcomes become pivotal (Mitchell, 1998). The access to data and monitoring whether the members comply with the common rules or not, may be achieved more easily by individuals rather than institutions themselves. The quality assurance frameworks for transnational education and external evaluation by third parties can be given as an example for the case of ODL where actors' expectations converge around standard criteria.

Scope and Methodology of Project UZENET

Project UZENET is designed as an interdisciplinary research related with disciplines of International Relations, Open and Distance Learning and Communication Sciences. The qualitative research techniques are utilized in the collection and analysis of data collected from the websites and legal documents of distance education (DE) organizations. A scale has been developed for evaluating the level of regime-building in ODL which serves as a control list for researchers in evaluating the applicability of normative components of regimes to DE organizations and determining their places on a continuum ranging from an epistemic community towards a regime. The comparative analysis of findings shall be followed by correspondence with representatives/administrators of the DE organizations in the sample group, in order to compare their self-understanding and evaluation with findings of the research team. The list of the nineteen (19) organizations has been compiled by purposive sampling from a list provided on the website of ICDE (International Council for Open and Distance Education), which is a global organization in the field. The websites of these organizations are in English, some of them have translated web pages to other languages as well.

Key Findings and their Relevance

According to the regime theory, principles are “beliefs of fact and causation”. In Project UZENET, principles in the field of ODL have been defined as strategic management, internationalization, openness, lifelong learning and quality assurance by the research team. Norms are “standards of behavior defined in terms of rights and obligations”. In the project, norms are defined as cooperation, social responsibility (civic engagement) and open resources. Rules are “prescriptions or proscriptions for action” which means that they regulate behaviors through prohibition. Non-governmental transnational actors might lack enforcement mechanisms however networking may appeal to some actors more than formal credibility

issues. For the case of ODL, rules are exemplified by statutes of organizations and their other legal documents such as reports issued, in addition to agreements with members and third parties. The last component of a regime, the decision-making procedures are the accepted practices in the collective decision-making. They can be exemplified by institutional communication and collaboration models of DE organizations. It may be difficult to distinguish between these normative concepts; principles, norms and rules, for which the legal documents are the places to look for. They gradually determine and shape the actors' preferences and behaviors.

Principles

The majority of the distance education organizations have clear mission statements on their websites that focus on distance education and/or lifelong learning. Five (5) organizations (out of nineteen-19) that do not have mission statements have stated their objectives in their documents. Eleven (11) organizations are regional in terms of their representation and membership, the remaining eight (8) are global organizations due to their outreach (members and partners in different geographies). Two (2) of the organizations are national foundations with international membership. On the regime scale, relations between the international organizations are evaluated on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 10; 1 standing for weak relations (interaction and communication) and 10 for strong relations. Five (5) organizations have a score above 5 since they emphasize in their strategic documents, communication and cooperation with the other organizations in the field. Some of the organizations have closer national frameworks for cooperation among higher education institutions (HEIs) in their own geographies. European organizations are more assertive about cooperation with other regional and global organizations. Eight (8) of the organizations have emphasized the importance of "equal opportunity" as a common principle in lifelong-learning which may also be regarded as a common norm. Another common principle is openness in access to information; sixteen (16) of the organizations provide access to their materials and information. Flexibility in learning is another principle and six (6) of the organizations have put emphasis on flexibility as a value, on their websites and in their uploaded documents. Lifelong learning is another principle seven (7) of the organizations have stated, besides quality assurance for which eleven (11) organizations have put priority on. Three (3) of them have their own quality frameworks and evaluation criteria.

Norms

In order to evaluate the effect of different norms (which are cooperation, civic engagement and openness) in shaping the relations of international actors in the field of distance education, some indicators are defined by the research team. For cooperation as a norm; the indicators are projects, agreements, conferences, networks, mobility programs, memberships and scholarships. The majority of the organizations are evaluated to be strong especially in terms of their conferences, networks and membership that provide venue for cooperation. For civic engagement the indicators are social responsibility projects/task forces, activities and open resources. The organizations are evaluated to be strong in the fields of activities and open resources. As another norm, openness is measured through the number of MOOCs, academic

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publications, bulletins, journals and workshops. The organizations have higher scores in publications and training/workshops. The findings related with the concepts operationally defined as norms indicate a mutual understanding as regards cooperation, social responsibility, open resources and are exemplified by different activities of the organizations in the sample group. The lower level of interest towards open resources is a significant finding.

Rules

What are the common rules applied and observed by international distance education organizations? And to what extent they can be determinant and binding on actors' behaviors? These two questions are important to discuss the level of cooperation and regime-building in the field of ODL. Rules are given in the statutes/agreements/annual reports and membership criteria of the organizations. Eleven (11) of the organizations have their statute/constitution/manual uploaded to their websites. Some of the legal documents are not in English. Twelve (12) organizations have specific agreements with their members, ten (10) have agreements with other organizations/institutions. As regards their membership criteria, ten (10) of them have clearly defined criteria for membership available on their website; seventeen (17) have specified their membership fees and seven (7) of them provide scholarship and rewards policy (e.g. fellowship). Rules are expected to regulate behaviors through prohibition however their enforcement may be difficult in the case of non-governmental organizations such as associations and foundations where the members are volunteers for participation. However the case may change when the individuals and institutions become members through paying certain amount of fees for their participation and if they benefit certain advantages such as gaining prestige and credibility.

Decision-making procedures

The communication and cooperation models of the organizations are lessons for benchmarking and evaluating where they stand on a continuum from a professional network (epistemic community) to a regime. Fifteen (15) of the organizations have clearly defined and transparently reflected their organizational structures and policies. The common denominator is the meetings serving as a decision making mechanism. Fourteen (14) of them have strong communicative network and use social media effectively. Eleven (11) of them have active Secretariat for coordination of tasks and eight (8) of the organizations have their annual reports on their websites as the output of their decision making processes. The missing reports may be available in the members' area which the research team could not access. Thirteen (13) of them have institutional social media accounts and twelve (12) have printed materials for exchange of information; fifteen (15) are strong in hosting academic activities that provide platforms for exchange of ideas and synergy. The common elements in the ways and means distance education organizations use for cooperation and communication provide opportunities for collaboration and determine the future of ODL together.

Conclusion

In Project UZENET, the normative issues of regimes such as principles, norms, rules and decision making processes are searched for, in the websites and documents of nineteen distance education organizations active in the field of ODL with an eye to the regime theory. The findings reflect common understanding towards cooperation and increase the expectations for regime-building which shall further institutionalize international cooperation. The governmental organizations are key players in this endeavour since they can enforce common decisions on members more than their non-governmental counterparts and professional networks. This second group of stakeholders act as catalyst in regime-building through fast exchange of information in the media provided by the organizations. The global reach of the organizations increase with the number of their members however smaller and regional organizations may have stronger infrastructure for cooperation embedded in their culture such as in the case of European organizations. On the other hand national institutions may be stronger in shaping the trends in technology and standardization in quality assurance based on the experiences of their members. This is why regime-building towards global governance of distance education requires a multi-level approach and transnational cooperation. There is also need for a sociological approach in order to see the changing socio-economic needs in different regions, cultural values and changing levels of identity with common norms, shared ideas and collaborative learning.

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