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Article abstract

This paper investigates how features in students' everyday life influence their participation in online global collaboration, and it suggests that students' local context should be recognised as a significant part of their educational space. In this exploratory case study of students engaged in a global online master's programme, the discussion is organised under three main headings: the social, material, and cultural dimensions of students' daily life. The paper shows how the influence of the students' local context typically creates a situation whereby the online learning space is characterised by inequality. This recognition should be taken into account when providers of online education design courses and make provision for student support. In this way, the inequalities can be seen as a resource for learning rather than as a problem.

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## The Implications of the Local Context in Global Online Education



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### Abstract

This paper investigates how features in students' everyday life influence their participation in online global collaboration, and it suggests that students' local context should be recognised as a significant part of their educational space. In this exploratory case study of students engaged in a global online master's programme, the discussion is organised under three main headings: the social, material, and cultural dimensions of students' daily life. The paper shows how the influence of the students' local context typically creates a situation whereby the online learning space is characterised by inequality. This recognition should be taken into account when providers of online education design courses and make provision for student support. In this way, the inequalities can be seen as a resource for learning rather than as a problem.

**Keywords:** Internet; global education; everyday life; student role; virtual collaboration; distance education

### Introduction

Recent developments in communication technology have enabled new forms of Internet-supported flexible education. The Internet infrastructure, as well as access to it, is now spreading to people and places that were previously largely excluded from the global network of information and knowledge. Accordingly, the range of online education has increased and new groups of potential students have been reached (Tiffin & Rajasingham, 2003). We may now claim to see the contours of the "global village" described half a century ago by McLuhan (1962) or at least a global classroom where students from different places in the world can take part in the global production and acquiring of knowledge (Bates & de los Santos, 1997).

However, some writers, such as Kirkwood (2001), question the appropriateness of the global distance education offered to culturally heterogeneous learners. One concern is that students from developing countries are hindered in their participation in global education due to the weak local technological infrastructure (see also Evans, 1995; Perraton, 2000; Rumble, 2001). With reference to Massey's (1994) concept of "power geometry," Kirkwood also expresses reservations about the cultural bias such students often encounter when accessing global networks. He follows Castells' (1996; 2001) notion of the network society as being geographically organised so that information flows out from nodes in the network to the periphery. This implies that in terms of globalisation, including global education, we may act together, but the individuals' resources available for action vary widely.

This issue is explored further in this paper through an investigation of the ways in which online students rely on the resources available in their daily environment when collaborating with other students through digital networks and how these resources help constitute global collaboration. This approach is grounded in the recent recognition that students' daily environments are important for helping to determine how well students perform and participate in various forms of flexible education. How the local life of students interacts with their global interconnectedness has not yet been widely researched, although these relationships are increasingly characteristic of online higher education. In this paper, we will discuss these issues through an exploratory case study of an online master's programme in development management, in the course of which 24 students from Europe and Africa, mostly in their early twenties, collaborated using the Internet.

We will first briefly discuss what the research literature says about the importance of local context in distance education and how the students' local contexts relate to the global flow of higher education.

### The Importance of the Local Context in Online Distance Education

Recent research literature includes discussion about how various conditions in the students' daily environment may enable or constrain students' participation in different forms of spatially distributed education, such as online, flexible, and distance education. The social relations and obligations in students' daily life are perceived as relevant to student participation in distributed education. Researchers have concluded that family, work situations, and leisure activities are all important in affecting how students perform in terms of the institutional goals associated with their education (Bhalalusesa, 2001; Grepperud, Rønning, & Støkken, 2005; Kember, 1999; Taplin & Jegede, 2001). This indicates that to be a student concerns much more than the individual's connections to an educational institution and to external learning resources. It is also important to consider how relation to the education system interacts with features in the student's daily social world. In various ways, the student's close associations will blend with the distant connections; the place of study, in the words of Massey (2005), becomes a place of *throwntogetherness*, where the local and the global meet.

A second consideration in the literature concerns materiality and the role of the technology

present in the distributed students' daily environments (Kirkwood, 1991; 2001; Rye, 2007; 2008; Rye & Zubaidah, 2008). Although it is obvious that Internet access is necessary for participation in online education, precisely how the social organisation of technology influences student participation in various forms of distributed education has not been extensively researched. Online education is not only about having access to the Internet, but also about how connection to the Internet is embedded in social relations in the students' daily life (Rye, 2007). As Beer (2005) observes, digital technologies are now deeply rooted in people's everyday life. It may thus be said that the use of the Internet in online education is not only a matter of digitalisation of education but also a digitalisation of everyday life. Beer (2009) takes this a step further by suggesting that the material feature of Web 2.0, which constitutes the backbone of online collaboration and participation, shapes our lives in a way which we only partly understand. He suggests that we should be aware of the new forms of power that interact in individuals' daily life through their participation in an apparently democratic and equal environment. Beer's argument indicates that power in global online education is as much about hegemonic power exercised through participation as it is about who is being excluded or included.

Handling diversity in cultural backgrounds to create a successful online learning environment is another issue discussed in the literature (Bates, 1999; Bates & de los Santos, 1997; Little, Titarenko, & Bergelson, 2005; Rasmussen, 2006; Williams et al., 2001). A focus in this literature has been on how to facilitate collaboration despite language barriers and across a variety of educational cultures. A significant finding of this research is that one consequence of bringing together students with a range of different cultural backgrounds is that they will gain useful experiences, beyond those gained from the formal curriculum. However, despite the potential benefits of multicultural online learning environments, Parish and Linder-VanBerschot (2010) warn that cultural diversity brings with it implicit potential difficulties as the learning environment is likely to be culturally biased. Sadykova and Dautermann (2009) take this argument further, suggesting that although international online education is usually framed formally within a partner model between two or more specific cultures, the collaboration is typically not equal. They maintain that international online open and distance higher education entails a real potential for educational and cultural imperialism.

Regarding the role of the local context in global online education, it is also interesting to note, as suggested by Marginson (2006; 2008), that higher education is a global competitive field of education institutions with different and hierarchically ordered status. In this field, there is a flow of education from developed countries, particularly the USA, the UK, and Australia, to the developing world. In conventional education, this flow implies students travelling from developing countries to Europe, North America, and Australia. In online education, students retain their location. Ideas and learning resources, however, flow through digital networks from north to south. The result – following Bourdieu (1984; 1998), who understands education as a source of cultural capital – is a digital flow of power and domination where people and places in developing countries may become dominated by external powers.

This approach to global online education reflects that of Castells (1996; 2009), who claims there has been a shift from “space of place” to the “space of flow”; the flow does not exist independently from place, or the local. As Massey (2005) says, most struggles around globalisation are inevitably local. Similarly, she argues that the local will never be only local, but that it is constituted through a set of interconnections that create a temporary constellation of being together, or what she calls throwntogetherness. This throwntogetherness will always demand negotiations, which will influence how places are related to other places, and thereby how the global is constituted.

In summary, the above discussion shows that students’ local context has importance for their participation in online learning and for the educational outcome. At the same time, the local context of the students’ daily life should be considered part of the educational space as it is constituted through the students’ educational participation. This implies that when students meet online, their collaboration is at least partly a product of where they come from and how their study activities are embedded in their daily life. As also noted by Scarino, Crichton, and Woods (2007), international collaborative programmes will in some ways always have to confront a variety of social, political, and economic realities. Similarly, the students, in their daily lives, must negotiate with social and material connections to distant places. In the rest of this paper, we will discuss this from the perspective of students’ experiences gained during their participation in an international, cross-cultural, distance-learning master’s programme in development management.

### A Global Online Master’s Programme in Development Management

The master’s programme discussed in this paper originated from a United Nations meeting on sustainable development held in Johannesburg in 2002, when an agreement was made to establish the Global Virtual University (GVU) as a branch of the United Nations University (UNU). The main actors in addition to UNU were the University of Agder (UiA, formerly Agder University College) in Norway and GRID-Arendal, a branch of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The first task of the GVU was to establish a set of master’s programmes within the field of sustainable development. This Master’s in Development Management (DM) became in 2005 the first programme offered. It was developed by UiA in cooperation with several other universities in countries in the global South. Altogether, 28 students from five countries were initially accepted to enrol in the programme: 14 from the North (Norway) and 14 from the South (Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Ghana). The academics directly responsible for delivering the instruction were mainly drawn from the Norwegian university, with only one exception. Academics from developing countries were involved in course development and in face-to-face sessions with the students.

Although this programme was basically an online course, the structure can be considered a hybrid between conventional higher education and new alternative forms of flexible learning as several of the students, particularly the Norwegian students, regularly used a university campus as a place for study. It was intended that all the students should be offered

study facilities on campus at one of the participating universities. However, in reality, campuses were not used much as the formal agreement with partner universities was not clearly communicated to most of the African students, while some of the Norwegian students lived too far from the UiA campus. Regardless of their place of study, all the students received their learning materials and instructions via the Internet.

The main instruction tool was a learning management system (LMS) facilitating file distribution, synchronous and asynchronous communication, and online group collaboration among the students, which was a core element of the programme. Almost every week one or more group assignments had to be completed by teams of students from different countries. The students also met face to face on two occasions: in Kristiansand, Norway, at the start of the programme, and a year later in Pretoria, South Africa. All the academic staff members were from UiA, except for two of the tutors responsible for handling the daily activities relating to the LMS and one with course responsibility. English, which was a second language for all the students and most of the staff, was used for instruction and communication.

The authors of this article have followed the development of this programme from the start because they are affiliated to the Norwegian university that took the initial initiative to this programme. The authors were, however, not directly involved in the development and implementation of the programme, apart from giving feedback from the research reported in this article, which was externally funded. The next section presents further methodological consideration regarding this research.

## The Current Study

The data discussed in this paper is mainly drawn from semistructured qualitative interviews and observations of 14 students during their fourth semester of registration in the master's programme. The students were selected with reference to the principle of maximum variation (Patton, 2002). We looked for variations in gender, family obligations, and geographic locations. Four of the students interviewed lived in Ghana, four in Uganda, and six in Norway. The interviews were accompanied by an interview guide that focused on the students' experiences and their reflections on being students in a global programme. The students were asked to explain how they organised their study activities in the place where they lived or studied and how they viewed and organised their online activities. We also asked the students about what they considered the main challenges associated with participating in the programme and their expectations about the outcomes of participation in the programme. We also offered students an open-ended opportunity to comment about how they had experienced their participation in the programme. The students were all interviewed face to face at a location close to where they conducted their daily study activities. Each interview typically lasted for about an hour. Further elaboration of issues raised in the interview typically occurred in more informal ways when the researchers observed and explored the student's daily study environment. During data collection, the researchers took extensive interview notes as well as field notes.

Another source of data was an online survey sent to all students just before they finished their programme of study. The questionnaire consisted of 26 items, covering six themes: background information, work situation, family situation, study situation, motivation for studying, and the use of information and communication technology. The questions were formulated to elicit factual answers as in “Have you studied previously in a foreign country?” Responses were organised through ticking answers at one of four levels of intensity, such as “very often,” “sometimes,” “seldom,” or “not at all.” The questionnaire ended with an open question, asking the students to give any extra information which they felt might be relevant to the questions they had answered. The LMS was used as the forum for distributing the questionnaire. In total, 20 of the 24 students responded. The survey also asked the students about how the study activities were embedded in their daily life and environment. The cross-cultural dimension was emphasised. The survey sample was limited in number, so its size did not allow any statistical analyses. The survey data are only used descriptively in this paper. However, the data made it possible to map the students’ characteristics and their experiences.

When analysing the data, we used the qualitative interviews and observation as a primary source for meaningful categorisation, following the basic principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). The survey data were used to highlight what we found in the qualitative data. It should be emphasised that we do not intend to use the survey data for any kind of generalisations. We do, however, hope that the discussion in this paper might identify valuable information and considerations to be taken into account when developing and running similar programmes.

## The Students’ Global Collaboration

The students in the Master’s Programme in Development Management took part in an education programme that in many ways was global in its reach. After joining the programme, they continued to perform their existing roles in life; most of them continued living at the same place as before. However, becoming a student in the DM programme changed their life dramatically in some ways, especially for the African students, as will be shown later. In this section, we will discuss the students’ participation in the DM programme in terms of three dimensions developed through analyses of the interviews and observation, which appeared significant for the students’ participation in global online collaboration. These are the social, the material, and the cultural dimensions.

### **The social dimension: Negotiation with family.**

The interviews indicated that most of the students had initially believed that as they were participating in a type of online distance education programme, it would be relatively easy to be a student, without it affecting their daily life too much. This preconception was described by a male Norwegian student:

My impression [before I started on the DM programme] was that distant education was an easy, low-status way of studying, for housewives. But in reality, this study is

much more demanding than any other programme. The workload in the beginning was enormous, and it all felt a bit wild.

In the excerpt above, we see how after the first face-to-face meeting, this student revised his views about what it was like to be a student participating in the DM programme. All the other students interviewed, wherever they came from, expressed similar views. On their return home from the first face-to-face session, they began, in various ways, to reorganise their daily life so that they could continue to participate in the programme. This situation initially appeared similar for Norwegian and African students. All the students interviewed expressed that they felt overwhelmed at first. For the Africans, however, the situation was more critical because they felt the pressure more acutely in several respects, as will be discussed later.

The coursework was, however, not the only pressure the students encountered. After returning from the first face-to-face seminar, several of them started negotiations with members of their family regarding their daily tasks and social obligations. Such characteristics of flexible students have also been documented in other research (Bhalalusesa, 2001; Grepner et al., 2005). The role of the student in the family appears to be very important to the students in the DM programme. Like many other students engaged in flexible learning, they had to find time for study activities and to negotiate their various family obligations (Kember 1999; Støkken et.al., 2007). This was despite the fact that the students were relatively young – most of them were aged between 20 and 30. For example, one of the female Norwegian students explained in the interview how she had adjusted her daily study routines to fit better with her partner's working hours. One of the African students reported that she had to leave her daughter with a close relative whenever she had to travel to the campus. She mostly went to the campus when her husband had a week off work and was able to stay at home. When her husband was working, she usually stayed at home and studied while simultaneously taking care of their child.

Although family was important to most of the students, the African students appeared to have wider family networks and more frequent interactions. This was, on the one hand, a potential resource when they were organising their daily routines so they could participate in online collaboration. On the other hand, it left them with obligations that made participation difficult. Interestingly, the survey data indicate that the African students' social life changed most after they embarked on the master's programme. They reported having lost friends, but they were also the ones who most frequently said they had made new friends through the study activities. When the students were asked "To what degree have your studies led to changes in your social life?" eight of the nine African students reported that their social life had changed to a high or very high extent, whereas only three of the Norwegians made that response.

From the interviews, it is apparent that differences in the students' relations with their families are largely associated with the difference between Norway and African countries regarding the position of education in society and the status of being a student. For most



Africans, higher education is difficult to access; it makes a significant difference if one has a master's degree, both in terms of work opportunities and social status. This may indicate that the student role and its expected outcome constitute a resource in negotiations with family members and relatives for time to study and to participate in online collaboration. This is also seen in the survey data. When the students were asked "Why did you embark on this education?" seven of eight African students indicated that they "agree" or "very much agree" to the statement "To increase my wages." For the Norwegians the number was much smaller; three agreed the same way. The spread of responses to the statement "To obtain a higher degree of appreciation and recognition" was similar.

Several of the African students described how support received from their family was entirely to be expected as the programme was of great importance for the family as a whole. To be a student was thus a family project. Making an effort and some sacrifices so that a student could receive a degree would probably be well rewarded for everyone involved. In contrast, none of the Norwegian students described the master's degree as particularly special, but rather as just one of many possibilities in their individual career planning.

### **The material dimension: Accessing the Internet.**

During the course of their study, some students experienced financial problems due to loss of employment or failure of their own small business. These problems particularly afflicted the African students. For these students, money was important not only for daily living but also for access to the Internet. As one of the female African students explained when asked about the most important challenges that confronted her as a student in the master's programme,

Access to the Internet. I mean, that is not easy in this city and it means everything for my study. If there is a day when I'm not online I lose a lot, and there is even more that I have to do when I'm online again. [I'm] often spending much time and money looking for a good place to study [on the Internet.]

The survey revealed that there were three main access points for using the Internet: home, campus, and Internet cafes. The only free solution, the campus, was used "sometimes" or "often" for accessing the Internet by 17 of the 19 students who responded on this question. However, several students explained in the interviews that their right of access to the facilities of the local university was unconfirmed or that they lived too far from campus for it to be useful. Consequently, home Internet connections or Internet cafés were commonly used alternatives, both of which cost money. It was necessary to cover these expenses if the students were to continue their studies; hence, they needed some kind of financial support. The Norwegian students said in the interviews that they were able to take advantage of financial support from the Norwegian educational loan fund, which also enabled them to buy their own computer. In contrast, the African students explained that they were not entitled to receive support from this institution; they were dependent on a monthly scholarship pro-

vided by UiA through support from the Norwegian Aid Agency (NORAD). In addition, each of the African students was entitled to borrow a laptop for use during their period of study.

However, using laptops for Internet-based collaboration with students in other places was not easy for most of the African students. Large parts of Africa have a generally weak technological infrastructure; what is taken for granted in most European countries may prove a great challenge in many areas of Africa. For instance, the instability of the electricity supply was frequently demonstrated during our observations of the African students' environment. In the interviews, the African students frequently mentioned this as a major challenge that created serious problems for them as the study programme required much online study time. When the power supply was down, so too were the servers, and the students had to start searching for an Internet connection at a place that still had electricity or that was supplied by a generator. In Kampala, for example, the solution was often an Internet café in the city as the campus there was poorly equipped with generators.

In contrast, for the Norwegian students interviewed, the material and financial problems involved in using communications technology were not considered a major issue. They had good access to broadband connections at home or on campus; the Internet provision and electricity system were stable and reliable. The Norwegian students explained that their main problem regarding technical issues was that in their joint projects their progress was constrained by their African partners' difficulties and delays associated with IT connectivity. This could have been a serious problem because the course activities were tightly scheduled and a delay by a student in one place easily created problems for students in other places. The network of students as a whole depended on each of its members to complete the tasks assigned by the educators. When the server was down in Kampala, the students lost contact, which in turn also affected fellow students in other African countries and in Norway.

The quality of infrastructure was also reflected in differences between African and Norwegian students regarding previous experience and skills in using the technology. This was evident from the data in the survey where only one of the African students reported they had "much experience" in the use of computers and the Internet before their enrolment in the programme. This is also evident in the interviews. Although the survey showed that only a few of the Norwegian students had experience of online learning programmes, they had all in some way or other used the Internet in their previous education. The Norwegian students also confirmed that they were familiar with the use of the LMS; some of them had experience of a system identical to the one used in the DM programme. The University of Agder appeared to be aware of the potential differences in computer literacy: at the first face-to-face meeting, much time was spent ensuring that all of the students knew enough about using the LMS to be able to participate in online course work. Several of the African students said in their interview that this introduction, before the start of online collaboration, had been essential in enabling them to participate in the online discussions. Still, several of them also expressed that they would have liked the session to have been longer and more detailed.

### **The cultural dimension: The meaning of education.**

Collaboration in the DM programme proved a challenge to the students because of cultural differences within the group. During the first introduction in Norway, the students confronted for the first time the cultural differences that would later accompany them throughout the programme to a greater or lesser extent. One of the African male students described his experiences of the first face-to-face session as follows:

It was remarkable to see how the Norwegian students criticised the Norwegian professors and addressed them by their first names. In [my country] we are accustomed to it being more important to reproduce what the professors say, and not to criticize them. We show them respect.

The above excerpt illustrates how the African students had observed, with some surprise, how the Norwegian students communicated with the academic staff and their fellow students in a very direct and critical way. From the African students' point of view this was, as several of them remarked in their interview, somewhat impolite behaviour, which was a new experience for them to witness within an academic setting. They were uncertain about how to handle such situations. At home, as indicated by the student quoted above, they were accustomed to showing respect to their professors, and they did not see it as their right to question them.

This respect for authority, the students told us, in many ways characterised their previous educational experiences and the expectations placed upon them as students in their home country. Several of the African students explained that they were used to repetition and reproduction of knowledge delivered in lectures and in written materials. Rather than taking their previous experience online, they had to revise their understanding of what it meant to be a student. Some said in the interviews that this was not easy as respect for authority is a deep-rooted value in most African societies. Thus, the first months of global online collaboration was for many of the African students characterised by observation and by wondering about how they might be able to function as a real member of the online community. In the words of one of the male African students:

To begin with, I only read [on the Internet forum] and did not understand how I could become part of it. ... I sneaked around and only took a peek at what the others [the Norwegians] did. But then I received a communication from one of the supervisors who both encouraged and required me to participate. I tried, and received a positive response from [one of the professors]. This was an important turning point. I understood then that I too had something to contribute.

Like this student, several other African students only accessed the Internet when it was absolutely necessary to maintain their status as students. It took them time to release themselves from their previous student role. This somewhat difficult start may, ironically, explain why the African students interviewed declared themselves more satisfied with the experience of participation than did the Norwegians. A difficult start meant that they eventually had a good feeling of progress. Similarly, the African students were more likely to feel that they had developed as students. Although all of the students who answered the survey responded that they agreed to the utterance “I have become a more clever student,” eight of the nine African students said that they “very much agree” with the statement while only two of the Norwegians did.

At the beginning of the programme, the Norwegian students behaved as they were accustomed to do, namely to be direct and critical, both in relation to the staff and toward their fellow students. Still, to some extent this was also a new way of studying for the Norwegian students. In the interviews they said that the volume of the workload and the expectation of regular delivery of assignments were new experiences. However, they were familiar with the basic elements of the programme and could readily understand the lecturers’ expectations. In a way, they just had to do more of what they had done in their earlier educational practice, and they had already been socialised into the academic tradition in which the master’s program was embedded.

When it came to interaction with their fellow students from Africa, the Norwegian students were more uncertain. They experienced that the African students were more reserved and that it was not easy to engage in academic discussions with them. The lack of response from fellow students left them feeling frustrated. This ‘problem,’ however, seemed to be at least partly resolved during the course of the programme. The Norwegian students changed their way of communication, becoming less direct and critical, at least regarding their peers, while the African students learned some of the new academic codes and became more confident, gradually becoming active members of the online community. Both groups had to adjust to their role as students in an online classroom.

## Concluding Discussion

Anderson (2006) concludes that students’ relations with other students as well as with their instructors are critical for their participation in online group discussions. At the same time, he emphasises that each of these actors have their own histories, culture, and structures located outside the online activities. He also argues that the wider social context confronting the different individual parties has to be kept in mind when we attempt to understand what is going on in online forums. The present paper supports this argument by showing how local arrangements were crucial for the outcome of the students’ participation in the DM programme. Following Merriam (2001), the students we interviewed described the global online education programme as a system containing several local learning environments that were interconnected. From each location, the students brought with them constraints and opportunities into the global arena, which according to Castells (1996; 2009) can be

considered a social network distributed in space rather than a virtual reality.

It should, however, be noted that the assets and experiences that different students bring into the network are not equal, and the resources for negotiating with others regarding the time and space for performing and developing their student role are not the same (Anderson, 2006). In the DM programme the African students had fewer material resources available to them, compared to the Norwegians. Differences in educational experiences before their participation in the global online programme also favoured the Norwegian students as the programme was grounded in an educational culture typically found in most Western countries, including Norway.

To some extent, the African students were also more constrained by social relations in daily life because they had more social obligations than the Norwegian students did. However, these relations also represented resources that supported their participation in the global network, for example by taking over some of the caring duties that the students had before they became students. Nevertheless, altogether the African students experienced multiple constraints affecting their participation in the programme, due to technical problems, financial problems, and unfamiliar academic conventions. This was especially visible in the beginning of the programme. In contrast, the Norwegians largely continued in their normal role as Norwegian students. An important factor in enabling the African students to continue their studies, despite the problems they experienced, appears to have been the possibility of mobilising local social resources, together with their willingness to struggle to maintain their position as students. To some extent, the African students' high level of motivation seems to have compensated for the lack of resources.

This high motivation appears to be associated with the opportunity to participate in an educational programme different to the educational culture with which they were familiar. The changes in the manner of communication between the students in the group illustrate this point. For the Norwegian students, the adjustment in the way of communicating with the African students was mainly a practical issue that never threatened their basic conception of being a student. It was necessary for collaboration within a system that they already knew. Experience gained from cross-cultural collaboration was considered an additional benefit of the course. For the African students, on the other hand, the change in communication was experienced as a totally new way of understanding education, which was related to a main motivation for being a student in such a programme. They were eager to adapt to the new educational culture and saw this as a key outcome of participation in the programme.

It should, however, be noticed that for the African students, in the process of transforming high motivation into online participation, the role of the educators appears to have been of great importance. For instance, they had resources available for empowering the students by making available the technology necessary for them to become members of the online student network. Kirkwood (2001) suggests that e-education will always be most beneficial for those who are already well equipped with educational resources. In this instance, the Norwegian students expressed that they appreciated the DM programme, but not to the same extent as most of the African students. To some extent, the experiences from the DM

programme support the proposition that those who can bring the most resources with them into an online cross-cultural learning environment are those who will gain most from the process, at least regarding the formal curriculum. The African students may, however, have a greater benefit from the study if a broader definition of benefit is applied.

As the students' participation depends on resources accessible in their daily surroundings as well as local arrangements, it may be claimed that global online education largely reflects the localities where students and educators live their daily lives, have experiences, and acquire history. This form of education enables distant people and places to interact. However, rather than creating a new space of equality, the differences between local contexts, and the inequalities between participants, are exposed in such an online environment. Even if educators have limited opportunity to influence the student's daily context, our experience is that educators can make significant contributions towards making this environment function as a good learning environment. However, this requires skilful handling of the differences in resources so that students participating in an international programme can benefit. A first and very important step in this direction is to recognise that global online collaboration typically reflects inequality rather than being a space of equal collaboration.

The next step is to determine how to address this inequality. Students' comments in the current study indicate that educators should not necessarily seek to remove unequal pre-conditions by adjusting the educational structure and culture, making them more closely resemble what is familiar to students from developing countries. If this happens, the students from developing countries may miss one of the main learning outcomes of their participation. Rather, the educators should support students from developing countries when they collaborate in global networks. This might be done by paying extra attention to the process of learning and adapting to the dominant language for global collaboration, as well as by providing practical and material support for accessing the digital networks. If this happens, students from developing countries are given access to important resources that will enable them to compete at an international level. However, there is also a real danger of putting students from developing countries into a role as subordinates in a colonial system, in which they effectively lose out, because they will always be the ones who have to adapt.

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