Autoethnographic Reflections on Inclusive and Interfaith Pedagogy in Global Online Higher Education

Thomas Onyebuchi Igwe

Department of Philosophy, Imo State University, Owerri-Nigeria.
Author email: tomigwe26@gmail.com

Direct Research Journal of Social Science and Educational Studies

Vol. 14(1), Pp. 10-25, January 2026,

Research Article
ISSN: 2449-0806
https://journals.directresearchpublisher.org/index.php/drjsses; https://www.ajol.info/index.php/drjsses

Received 21 October 2025, Accepted 20 December 2025 Published 13 January 2026

ABSTRACT

This work offers autoethnographic reflections on inclusive and interfaith pedagogy in global online higher education. Drawing on analytical autoethnography, it reflects on the author's experiences across University of the People (USA), Nations University (USA), Jesuit Worldwide Learning-Education at the Margins, and Monarch Business School (Switzerland) - institutions characterized by cultural, religious, and digital diversity. The study does not seek generalizable claims but situates pedagogical insight within lived practice, institutional contexts, and relational encounters in online classrooms. Methodologically, analytical autoethnography is used to link personal narrative with systematic analysis of pedagogical and institutional dynamics, enabling critical reflection on how inclusion and interfaith engagement are negotiated in digitally mediated learning environments. The analysis demonstrates that interfaith inclusion functions not simply as curricular content or institutional policy but as lived pedagogy, enacted through dialogical practices, course design, and ethical attentiveness to religious/faith difference. The article contributes to scholarship on global online higher education by showing how inclusive and interfaith pedagogy emerges through everyday experience. It offers grounded insights for educators and institutions seeking to cultivate equitable, inclusive, and religiously responsive online learning environments.

Keywords: *Online Learning; Analytical Autoethnography; Interfaith Pedagogy; Inclusive Education; Digital Pedagogy; Global Online Education*

Citation: Igwe, T. O. (2026). Autoethnographic Reflections on Inclusive and Interfaith Pedagogy in Global Online Higher Education. *Direct Research Journal of Social Science and Educational Studies*, *14*(1),10-25.
https://doi.org/10.26765/DRJSSES701265

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of online learning has transformed it from a supplementary mode of delivery into a primary pathway for higher education worldwide. Digital programs now serve diverse learners, including those marginalized by geography, economic precarity, displacement, or religious identity. In such contexts, online learning environments function as complex social spaces where pedagogy intersects with cultural identity, belief, and institutional mission. Questions of inclusion and interfaith or denominational engagement therefore emerge as central pedagogical concerns in global online higher education. This article offers an autoethnographic reflection on teaching and learning experiences across multiple online institutions, including secular, faith based, and professionally oriented programs. The author writes from a dual positionality as student, alumnus, and

instructor, enabling sustained engagement with online education from multiple perspectives. This position allows close attention to how inclusive and interfaith pedagogical practices are experienced and enacted in course design, assessment, and online interaction. Rather than treating inclusion as an abstract policy goal, the study examines its lived expression within everyday pedagogical practice. The analysis considers how institutional mission, accreditation frameworks, and quality assurance processes shape access, recognition, and participation in global online education. It reflects on pedagogical practices such as learner centered design, culturally responsive facilitation, collaborative learning, and intentional interfaith dialogue, while also acknowledging challenges including digital inequality and curricular adaptation across cultural and religious contexts. The contribution of this study lies in its articulation of interfaith inclusion as lived pedagogy. Through analytical autoethnography, the article demonstrates how inclusive and interfaith pedagogy emerges through concrete pedagogical decisions and relational practices in online higher education, offering grounded insight for educators and institutions without over claiming generalizability.

Background and Global Context of Online Learning

Online education has expanded rapidly, reshaping higher education worldwide. During the COVID-19 pandemic alone, nearly 220 million students were affected by the global shift to online learning, accelerating trends already underway across many regions (UNESCO, 2021). Beyond emergency provision, online universities and digital programs have become critical pathways for widening access to higher education, particularly in low-income and conflict-affected contexts. This transformation is exemplified by institutions such as the University of the People, founded in 2009 as the first accredited, tuition-free online university. By 2023, it enrolled over 126,000 students from more than 200 countries and territories, many of whom are refugees, first-generation learners, or members of religious minorities. Similarly, Jesuit Worldwide Learning: Education at the Margins integrates Ignatian pedagogy with digital delivery to support learners in vulnerable settings, including refugee camps and post-conflict communities, foregrounding education as a practice of justice and human dignity (Mayr & Oppl, 2023). Online learning environments are inherently intercultural and transnational. Learners bring diverse religious identities and worldviews into shared virtual spaces, requiring pedagogical approaches that respect spiritual identity while fostering dialogue and mutual understanding. Research shows that culturally responsive and inclusive online teaching significantly enhances student engagement and persistence, particularly among historically marginalized groups (Bennett et al., 2017). These realities call for educational frameworks that attend not only to technical efficiency but also to the relational and ethical dimensions of online learning.

Rationale and Purpose of the paper

This article explores how inclusive and interfaith ideals are experienced and enacted within global online learning environments. Rather than offering institutional critique or policy evaluation, it adopts an autoethnographic approach that treats lived experience as a legitimate source of scholarly insight. Ellis et al., (2011) argue, autoethnography connects the personal and the cultural, enabling reflective narrative to illuminate broader social and pedagogical dynamics. This approach is motivated by two key considerations. First, many international online institutions articulate strong commitments to ethical education, access, and inclusion, yet there is limited research examining how these commitments are translated into everyday teaching and learning practices in virtual classrooms. Second, despite increasing religious diversity among global learners, interfaith participation in online education remains under examined. By reflecting on concrete experiences across diverse institutional contexts, this study seeks to address that gap. The purpose of the article is not statistical representation or generalization but interpretation, comparison, and insight. Through reflective analysis, it aims to deepen understanding of inclusive and interfaith pedagogy as it is lived within digitally mediated higher education.

Significance and Contribution to Global Scholarship

This study advances global scholarship on online and international education in three interrelated ways. First, it foregrounds faith and interfaith engagement as integral, rather than peripheral, dimensions of online learning. While digital pedagogy literature often emphasizes engagement, presence, and assessment, it rarely attends to how religious identity shapes participation, meaning making, and ethical interaction in virtual classrooms. By addressing this gap, the study broadens prevailing understandings of inclusive online pedagogy. Second, the article contributes to comparative international education through reflection on experiences across institutions with distinct missions and learner populations. The juxtaposition of secular models such as the University of the People with faith informed contexts including Nations University and Jesuit Worldwide Learning illuminates how mission driven education is translated into online practice across diverse settings. Third, the study demonstrates the scholarly value of autoethnography in international education research. Reflective, experience-based inquiry offers a nuanced lens for understanding pedagogical complexity in globally dispersed, digitally mediated learning environments.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the rapid expansion of online higher education and the frequent articulation of institutional commitments to inclusion, interfaith respect, and learner centered

pedagogy, the lived experiences of students and instructors in virtual classrooms often diverge from these stated ideals. Online programs commonly prioritize scalability, efficiency, and standardization, sometimes at the expense of relational depth, cultural sensitivity, and ethical participation. As a result, inclusion is frequently framed as an institutional aspiration rather than examined as a pedagogical practice shaped by everyday teaching and learning encounters. Much of the existing research on online education implicitly treats learners as culturally and religiously neutral participants. This assumption obscures the ways in which religious identity, worldview, and moral commitments influence motivation, participation, interpretation, and interaction in online classrooms. The limitation is particularly pronounced in global programs where learners from Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and nonreligious backgrounds engage within shared digital spaces. When interfaith experience is overlooked, pedagogical design risks reinforcing exclusion, misrecognition, or silence around difference. This gap limits both policy development and pedagogical effectiveness. Institutional strategies for inclusion may remain abstract or symbolic, while educators lack empirically grounded insight into how interfaith dynamics are actually negotiated in online teaching practice. Consequently, policies and pedagogies designed to promote equity, and access may fail to address the relational and ethical dimensions of learning in religiously diverse online environments. This study addresses this problem by examining interfaith inclusion as it is lived and enacted within global online higher education.

Research Questions

This article is guided by the following research questions:

(i) How are interfaith and inclusive values experienced by learners and educators within global online learning environments?
(ii) In what ways do institutional missions shape pedagogical practices and student engagement in online education?
(iii) How can analytical autoethnographic reflection contribute to improving inclusive and mission driven online pedagogy?

Research Objectives

(i) To critically reflect on lived experiences of online learning and teaching across diverse institutional contexts.
(ii) To examine how interfaith sensitivity and inclusive practices are enacted in virtual classrooms.
(iii) To analyze the relationship between institutional mission and everyday pedagogical practice in online education.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Theories Relevant to Online Learning and Digital Pedagogy

The Community of Inquiry framework created by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer is relevant for this reflection. According to the concept, social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence are crucial components of successful online learning (Garrison et al., 2000). Strong social presence is especially crucial for promoting trust, communication, and participation in culturally diverse online classrooms, according to research. This study is further informed by Moore's idea of transactional distance. Moore contends that the quality of distance education is determined by psychological and communicative distance rather than physical separation (Moore, 1993). When students see that their identities are misinterpreted or ignored in interfaith settings, transactional distance may increase. Additionally, adult learning theory emphasizes the importance of relevance, reflection, and respect for learners' prior experiences. Knowles' principles of andragogy highlight the role of learner autonomy and meaning making, both of which are critical in global online education (Knowles et al., 2015).

Conceptualizing Interfaith, Inclusive, and Mission Driven Education

In this article, interfaith education is defined as the deliberate establishment of learning environments where various religious and nonreligious identities are recognized and valued, rather than as theological instruction. Beyond access, inclusive education encompasses dignity, voice, and belonging. Institutional commitments that influence curriculum design, pedagogical decisions, and learner support systems are referred to as "mission driven education." While secular organizations may express ideas of equity, social justice, or global citizenship, faith-based institutions frequently base their mission on religious heritage. Concern for the full person rather than just obtaining credentials is what brings these approaches together. This paper presents online learning as a relational and moral practice rather than just a technological one by including these ideas.

METHODOLOGY

Autoethnographic Approach

This study adopts analytical autoethnography to examine inclusive and interfaith pedagogy as lived experience in global online higher education. Autoethnography is particularly appropriate because it situates personal experience within wider cultural, institutional, and pedagogical contexts, allowing reflective narrative to illuminate systemic practices and meanings (Ellis et al., 2011). Rather than reporting institutional performance, the

method enables critical interpretation of how inclusion and interfaith engagement are enacted in everyday online teaching and learning. Following Anderson (2006), analytical autoethnography is employed to maintain a clear distinction between experience as data, interpretation as analysis, and institutional context as background. Descriptive narratives are therefore consistently followed by analytical transitions such as *"this experience illustrates"* or *"analytically, this suggests"*, ensuring that narrative richness does not replace critical examination. The aim is not generalizability but interpretive insight into pedagogical practice across diverse digital environments.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher occupies a dual and shifting positionality as student, alumnus, and instructor across multiple online institutions. This position provides close access to pedagogical practice while requiring sustained reflexivity to guard against over identification. Reflexivity is treated as an ongoing analytic process rather than a preliminary declaration. Reflexive journaling, analytic memos, and iterative narrative review were used to separate description from interpretation and to examine how religious identity, theological formation, and professional role shaped meaning making.

In line with Tracy (2010), transparency regarding positionality strengthens analytical credibility rather than diminishing it.

Data Sources and Sampling

Data consists of first-person teaching narratives, learning reflections, course interactions, and reflexive journals developed over several years. Supplementary sources include syllabi, discussion prompts, and publicly available institutional documents used solely for contextual framing. Sampling was purposive and criterion based, limited to institutions serving culturally, religiously, and geographically diverse learners. Direct participation defined the sampling boundary, preserving ethical clarity and methodological coherence.

Analytical Process and Coding Illustration

Data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, following repeated familiarization, open coding, and theme construction. To address reviewer concerns regarding illustration, Table 1 provides an example of how narrative data informed thematic development.

Table 1. Example of Narrative Coding and Thematic Development

Narrative Excerpt (Experience)	Initial Code	Analytical Interpretation	Theme
A student hesitated to contribute to a forum discussion referencing faith due to fear of misinterpretation	Religious self-censorship	This experience illustrates how perceived neutrality discourages faith expression	Interfaith Inclusion as Lived Pedagogy
Instructor reframed discussion guidelines to affirm respectful faith-based perspectives	Pedagogical accommodation	Analytically, this suggests inclusion emerges through facilitation choices	Relational Pedagogical Practice

Moments of tension, adaptation, and learning were prioritized analytically, as these often reveal how inclusive ideals are enacted rather than assumed.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

All narratives are anonymized, aggregated, and presented without identifying individuals or institutions. The study avoids evaluative judgment and does not claim institutional representation. While autoethnography offers depth and contextual insight, its interpretive nature limits generalizability (Ellis et al., 2011). Reflexive practices and analytic transparency mitigate, but do not eliminate interpretive bias. Quantitative performance metrics lie outside the scope of this reflective inquiry and are identified as a direction for future research.

Results, Narratives, and Comparative Analysis

The findings in this study do not function like conventional "results" extracted from an external sample. Instead, they emerge from analytical autoethnography where lived experience is treated as data and then interpreted through systematic reflection, coding, and thematic synthesis.

The danger in a multi-institution manuscript is that narrative can drift into institutional description. To prevent that drift, the section is structured so that every "story" is followed by explicit analytic transitions and then situated in a comparative frame. As shown in Tables 1, 2, and 3, the results are presented through: (1) a comparative table outlining key institutional characteristics, (2) a cross-institutional thematic synthesis, and (3) brief narrative episodes that function as *analytic windows* into practices of inclusion and interfaith engagement rather than as standalone stories. This organization makes the study's contribution visible: interfaith inclusion as lived pedagogy rather than interfaith inclusion as policy rhetoric.

Analytically, this table suggests that the "same" words (inclusion, dignity, ethics, global access) behave differently across institutional ecologies. Accreditation and mission shape legitimacy and structure, but they do not automatically produce inclusive or interfaith learning. Those values become visible primarily through pedagogical action (Table 3).

Table 2: Objective-to-results mapping.

Research objective	Where it is demonstrated in this section	What counts as fulfilment here
1. Reflect critically on lived experiences of online learning and teaching	Narrative Episodes A–D	Experiences are presented as data and followed by explicit analysis
2. Examine how interfaith sensitivity and inclusivity are enacted in virtual classrooms	Thematic synthesis; Episodes A–C	Themes show how inclusion appears in facilitation, assessment, and interaction
3. Analyze the relationship between mission and everyday pedagogy	Comparative table; Comparative analysis	Institutional mission is treated as context; pedagogy is treated as practice
4. Generate experience-based insights for strengthening inclusive and interfaith pedagogy	Practice implications	Recommendations are grounded in the themes and episodes, not general claims

Table 3: Comparative institutional characteristics relevant to inclusion and interfaith pedagogy.

Institution	Accreditation type (as publicly reported)	Target population	Dominant pedagogical model	Interfaith orientation in practice
University of the People (USA)	WASC Senior College and University Commission; DEAC listed by CHEA (note: UoPeople also states it withdrew DEAC effective Dec 31, 2025)	Global, high-access learners; many nontraditional students	Asynchronous forums, structured weekly learning, peer learning	Often implicit: pluralism emerges through dialogue and classroom diversity
NationsUniversity (USA)	DEAC accreditation (renewal reported through June 2028 in public reporting)	Christian theological learners globally; ministry/service oriented	Self-paced online learning with structured coursework	Faith-centered pedagogy; intercultural classroom experience
Jesuit Worldwide Learning: Education at the Margins	Programs delivered via partnerships and learning centers; public reports emphasize community learning centers and course participation.	Refugees, displaced learners, marginalized youth	Blended model (online + local facilitation), Ignatian pedagogy	Explicit interfaith and peace building orientation in learning ethos
Monarch Business School Switzerland	Private provider with professional validation claims; entered CEEMAN IQA process (public statement); professional program accreditation reported for BBA via CIM/NCMA	Working professionals, executive and doctoral learners	Flexible asynchronous study, research supervision model	Ethical pluralism: interfaith diversity largely carried by global cohort

Thematic synthesis across institutions (what repeats, what differs, what matters)

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic logic, the narratives were coded and then organized into cross-institution themes. Three themes appeared consistently, even though each institution's mission and structure differed. These themes align with the literature: CoI emphasizes presence and interaction (Garrison et al., 2004); transactional distance highlights the need for structured communication to reduce relational gaps (Moore, 1993); culturally sustaining pedagogy argues that identity is not an add-on but part of how learning happens (Paris & Alim, 2017). Interfaith education scholarship similarly insists that dialogue must be designed, not assumed (Patel., 2012).

Narrative episodes with explicit analytical transitions

What follows are condensed narrative episodes presented as data (experience), followed immediately by analysis (interpretation) and then comparative implications. This structure is intentional, addressing so that the manuscript does slip into institutional reportage.

Episode A: "I did not want to be misunderstood"

Experience (data)

In one forum discussion about ethics, a learner wrote privately that they preferred not to mention faith-based reasoning because they feared others would "misread" their intentions. The learner continued to participate, but their posts became increasingly cautious: short, neutral, and carefully detached from personal belief.

Interpretation (analysis)

This experience illustrates that online "neutrality" is not always inclusive. The absence of embodied cues in online settings can intensify self-monitoring. The learner was not refusing dialogue; they were protecting themselves from interpretive risk. Analytically, this suggests that inclusion requires more than allowing diversity. It requires a classroom culture where difference is treated as legitimate knowledge, not as disruption.

Comparative implication

The same dynamic appeared across settings: in secular spaces, faith talk can be treated as "private," while in faith-based contexts, minority positions can feel invisible. Either way, silence becomes the price of belonging unless facilitation explicitly makes room for religious identity.

Episode B: A small change in facilitation changed the whole tone

Experience (data)

In a week where discussion became tense, I introduced a structured guideline: "Name your view, name your reason,

and name what you learned from someone else." Participation changed. Students quoted one another with more care. Disagreement did not vanish, but it became less personal.

Interpretation (analysis)

This narrative reflects the practical truth that inclusion is often built through small pedagogical moves. The guideline created interpretive safety without forcing agreement. Within CoI terms, it strengthened teaching presence and social presence (Garrison et al., 2004). Analytically, this suggests that interfaith inclusion is not mainly a curricular unit; it is a facilitation practice that shapes how learners take intellectual and spiritual risks.

Comparative implication

This kind of micro-structure is especially important where transactional distance is high, including asynchronous multinational cohorts (Moore, 1993). Without structure, difference can become noise or conflict; with structure, difference can become learning.

Episode C: "Mission" became visible in the assessment rubric Experience (data)

In one course, the rubric rewarded only technical correctness. In another, the rubric included respectful engagement, evidence of listening, and constructive response to difference. Students adapted to what was measured. Where engagement was assessed, dialogue deepened.

Interpretation (analysis)

This experience illustrates that mission is not what an institution says, mission is what a course rewards. Analytically, this suggests that educators often carry the burden of translating mission into practice, and the strongest lever is assessment design. If inclusion is not assessed, it becomes optional. If it is assessed, it becomes part of academic seriousness.

Comparative implication

This dynamic matters across institutional types. Whether the institution is tuition-free, faith-based, humanitarian, or professional, values become durable only when they enter course architecture.

Episode D: Inclusion is also infrastructural, not only interpersonal Experience (data)

In some contexts, students were fully capable intellectually and spiritually but were limited by bandwidth, unstable access, or life precarity. Participation could look like disengagement when it was actually survival.

Interpretation (analysis)

This narrative reflects why inclusive pedagogy cannot be reduced to "tone" or "attitude." Inclusion is also infrastructural and economic. Analytically, this suggests that pedagogical compassion must be paired with flexible design (UDL logic) and trauma-responsive sensitivity (CAST, 2018; Carello & Butler, 2015).

Comparative implication

This is especially visible in education-at-the-margins contexts, where participation is shaped by displacement and constraint. Public reporting on JWL's learning centers and course volume underscores that pedagogy is built to travel into fragile settings, not merely to serve stable ones.

Comparative discussion with facts and figures

The comparative value of this study becomes clearer when "scale," "mission," and "pedagogical form" are interpreted together. Online education expanded dramatically during the pandemic era, with widely cited reporting noting that roughly 220 million higher education students were affected by disruption and online shifts (UNESCO, 2021). But the point here is not the pandemic as a historical event. The point is that global online education now operates as a normal habitat for learning, not an emergency alternative. Within that habitat, access-oriented institutions demonstrate what scale can look like. University of the People publicly reported record-breaking 2025 enrollment exceeding 170,000 students, with representation across 200+ countries and territories. NationsUniversity publicly reports that 35,800+ students since 1995 and 1,400+ enrolled, with 120+ countries represented. Jesuit Worldwide Learning public-facing materials report large course participation and learning-center models, including reporting that over 8,000 students studied in 2023 across 16,000+ courses and community learning centers. Monarch presents itself as internationally networked, emphasizing a faculty and community spanning 90+ countries and documenting professional and quality initiatives such as entering CEEMAN's IQA process and professional accreditation for its BBA through CIM/NCMA. This is where (Figures 1 and 2) support interpretation rather than decoration. Figure 1 (scale) shows that "global online education" spans very different magnitudes of participation, which affects how community and inclusion can realistically be designed. Figure 2 provides a simple geographic reference: two institutions are US-based, one is Swiss-based, and JWL's work is inherently transnational, and learning-center distributed.

Analytically, the key comparative insight is this**:** scale and structure create different risks for interfaith inclusion. In high-scale asynchronous settings, students can

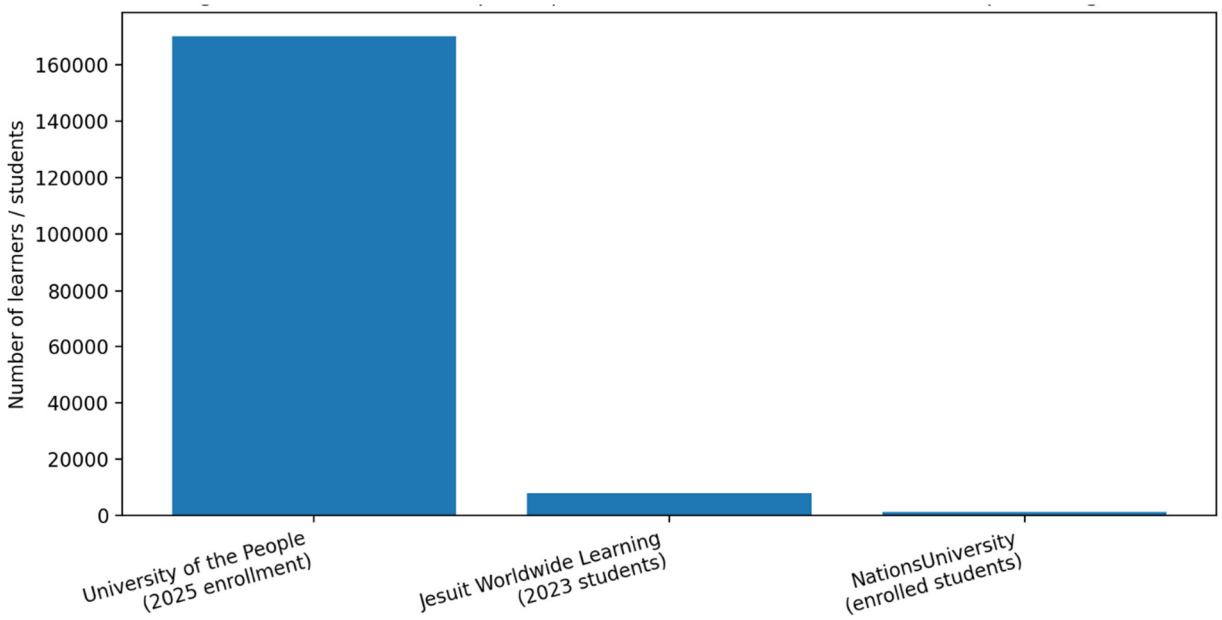

Figure 1: Scale of learner participation across selected institutions (reported figure).

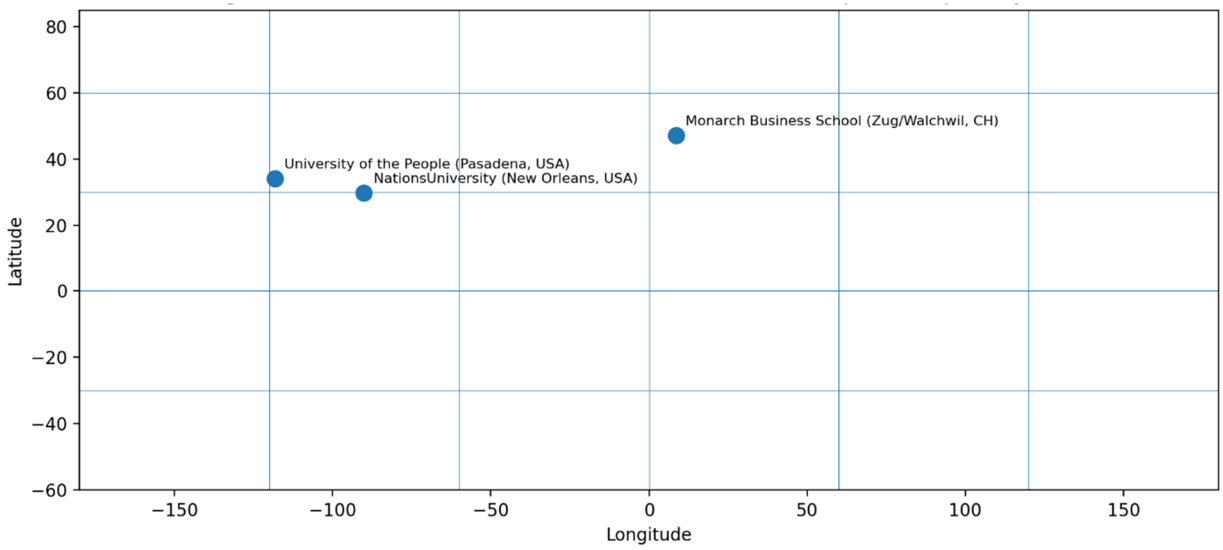

Figure 2: Reference locations of institutions discussed (Headquarters/Primary base)

disappear into silence. In strongly faith-framed settings, minority identities can self-edit. In professional doctoral settings, interfaith differences may appear indirectly through ethics, leadership, and governance discourse rather than explicit religious dialogue. The solution is not a single policy. It is a pedagogical ethic expressed in facilitation, assessment, and course design. This is where the literature review material becomes functional rather than decorative. CoI helps interpret why inclusion is relational (teaching and social presence) (Garrison et al., 2004). Transactional distance explains why structure and feedback reduce misrecognition in asynchronous settings (Moore, 1993). Culturally sustaining pedagogy clarifies why identity must be welcomed as part of learning (Paris & Alim, 2017). Interfaith education scholarship clarifies why dialogue must be intentionally designed (Patel, 2012). Inclusive design frameworks argue that access must be built through multiple means of participation (CAST, 2018). Trauma-responsive pedagogy explains why learners in precarious conditions need flexibility and agency rather than punitive assumptions (Carello & Butler, 2015). Finally, ethical reflection literature reminds us that education

always forms values skills.

What do these results contribute?

The contribution of these findings is not that one institution is "better" than another. This contribution is a clearer description of how inclusion becomes real in global online higher education:

(i) Inclusion becomes real when facilitation legitimizes difference. Students need cues that faith is permitted as meaning making, not merely tolerated as private preference.
(ii) Inclusion becomes durable when assessment rewards relational learning. What is graded becomes what matters.
(iii) Interfaith engagement works best when structured. Structure does not restrict dialogue; it protects it.
(iv) Equity is also infrastructural. Bandwidth, time zones, precarity, and life conditions shape participation as much as motivation does.

Comparative Insights

Positioning This Study within Existing Scholarship

Research on online learning has expanded significantly over the past two decades, with strong emphasis on engagement, persistence, instructional presence, and inclusive practices (Garrison et al., 2004; Moore, 1993; Dixson, 2015; Bennett et al., 2017). However, much of this literature approaches inclusion primarily through cultural responsiveness, accessibility, or engagement metrics, often treating religious identity as either implicit or irrelevant. Interfaith education scholarship, by contrast, has developed robust conceptual frameworks for dialogue, religious literacy, and ethical coexistence (Patel, 2012; Cheetham et al., 2013), yet these insights are rarely integrated into mainstream online learning research. Unlike Bennett et al. (2017), who demonstrate that culturally responsive online instruction improves engagement and persistence primarily through instructional design and communication strategies, this study shows that religious identity itself functions as a pedagogical variable that shapes participation, silence, risk-taking, and meaning making in online classrooms. In other words, inclusion is not only cultural or technical; it is also spiritual and ethical. Similarly, while Dixson (2015) highlights the importance of instructor presence for student satisfaction, this study extends that finding by showing that instructor presence also mediates whether interfaith difference becomes a site of learning or a source of withdrawal. Presence is not neutral; it is value laden. This section therefore positions the present study as bridging three bodies of literature:

(i) Online learning pedagogy
(ii) Interfaith and multicultural education
(iii) Ethical and mission-driven higher education

Through comparative autoethnographic analysis across four global online institutions, the study contributes empirical depth to debates that have often remained theoretical or policy oriented.

Comparative Institutional Models in Relation to Previous Studies

To clarify how this study advances existing scholarship, the following table situates each institution in relation to dominant themes in prior research. Analytically, this comparison reveals that previous studies often under-theorize the role of faith as a lived dimension of learner identity, particularly in transnational online environments (Table 4).

Table 4: Institutional Models Compared with Dominant Findings in Online Learning Literature.

Dimension	Dominant Findings in Literature	Evidence from This Study
Scale and access	Large-scale online learning increases access but risks depersonalization (Moore, 1993)	University of the People shows that scale can coexist with dialogic learning when peer structures are intentional
Faith and learning	Faith is often treated as private or peripheral	NationsUniversity and Jesuit Worldwide Learning: Education at the Margins show faith as epistemic and pedagogical
Engagement	Instructor presence improves engagement (Dixson, 2015)	This study shows presence also governs *interfaith safety*
Inclusion	Cultural responsiveness supports persistence (Bennett et al., 2017)	This study shows inclusion must also address *religious self-censorship*
Legitimacy	Accreditation ensures trust and recognition	Monarch Business School Switzerland demonstrates professional accreditation as an alternative legitimacy pathway

Comparative Scale and Global Reach

Global reach fundamentally shapes how inclusion is experienced. While Bennett et al. (2017) focus on underrepresented students primarily within national systems, this study demonstrates that transnational diversity introduces interfaith dynamics that cannot be reduced to culture alone (Figure 3).

(i) University of the People serves over 170,000 students from more than 200 countries, many of whom are refugees or first-generation learners.
(ii) NationsUniversity enrolls students from over 120 countries, often integrating ministry with local social realities.
(iii) Jesuit Worldwide Learning embeds education within refugee camps and conflict-affected regions, directly engaging ethical and interfaith tensions.
(iv) Monarch Business School Switzerland serves

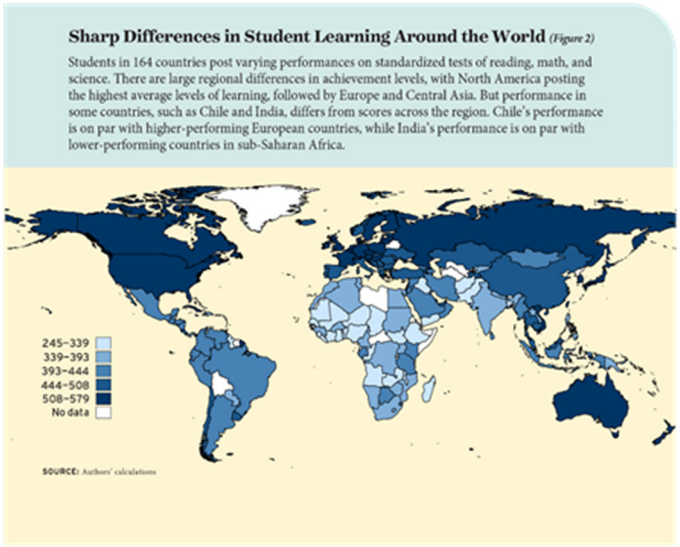

Figure 3: Sharp differences in student learning around the world

international professionals from over 90 countries, where religious difference is refracted through leadership and ethics discourse rather than explicit theology. Unlike much online learning literature that assumes a stable socio-economic context, this study shows that global scale intensifies ethical and interfaith complexity, requiring pedagogies that acknowledge vulnerability, belief, and lived experience.

Autoethnographic Narratives Compared with Prior Empirical Studies

Autoethnography remains underutilized in online learning research, which often privileges surveys, analytics, and completion metrics. While Braun and Clarke (2006) legitimize thematic analysis of qualitative data, few studies apply this approach to first-person pedagogical experience across multiple institutions. Unlike large-scale survey-based studies, this research does not claim representativeness. Instead, it offers interpretive depth that reveals dynamics often invisible to metrics, such as:

(i) Religious self-censorship in discussion forums
(ii) Faith-based ethical reasoning shaping peer feedback
(iii) Interfaith collaboration emerging organically in project-based learning

Bennett et al. (2017) show that inclusive practices improve persistence. This study complements that finding by explaining why some learners persist silently while others withdraw discursively. Silence, here, is not disengagement but strategic self-protection. Similarly, Cheetham et al. (2013) argue that asynchronous dialogue can deepen interfaith reflection (Table 5). This study confirms that

Table 5: Pedagogical Models and Interfaith Implications

Institution	Pedagogical Model	Interfaith Implication
University of the People	Peer assessment, asynchronous forums	Faith emerges through ethical reasoning and lived experience
NationsUniversity	Self-paced theological study	Interfaith engagement occurs through cultural interpretation of doctrine
Jesuit Worldwide Learning	Blended learning with local facilitation	Interfaith dialogue is explicit and mission-driven
Monarch Business School Switzerland	Applied leadership and research	Interfaith difference framed as ethical and governance diversity

claim but adds that such depth only emerges when facilitation explicitly legitimizes religious voice. Unlike Moore (1993), who conceptualizes transactional distance primarily as a communication problem, this study shows that transactional distance is also moral and spiritual. Learners calculate not only when to speak but whether it is safe to speak from faith.

Accreditation, Legitimacy, and What Previous Studies Miss

Accreditation literature often treats legitimacy as binary: accredited or not. This study complicates that assumption.

(i) University of the People demonstrates how dual accreditation enables global portability and trust.
(ii) NationsUniversity shows how faith-based accreditation sustains theological rigor while remaining globally accessible.
(iii) Jesuit Worldwide Learning illustrates partnership-based legitimacy, where recognition flows through accredited collaborators.
(iv) Monarch Business School Switzerland exemplifies professional legitimacy, validated through international networks rather than state systems.

Unlike prior studies that equate legitimacy with state recognition alone, this research shows that learners navigate multiple legitimacy regimes simultaneously, especially in global professional and humanitarian contexts.

Interfaith Engagement Compared with Multicultural Education Literature

Multicultural education literature emphasizes identity affirmation and epistemic justice (Paris & Alim, 2017). This study affirms that framework but extends it by showing that religious identity carries distinct risks and responsibilities. At UoPeople, faith is often embedded implicitly within ethical narratives. At NationsUniversity, theological plurality deepens scriptural interpretation. At Jesuit Worldwide Learning, interfaith cooperation is a

pedagogical objective tied to peace building. At Monarch, religious differences surface through leadership ethics and governance norms. Unlike Paris & Alim (2017), who focus primarily on culture and language, this study demonstrates that faith operates as a moral epistemology that shapes how learners interpret justice, authority, and responsibility.

Ethical Formation and Comparison

Igwe (2025), argues that education is inherently ethical and formative. This study empirically substantiates that claim within online higher education.

(i) Learners do not merely acquire skills; they negotiate values.
(ii) Interfaith encounters shape moral imagination.
(iii) Online classrooms become sites of ethical rehearsal.

Unlike purely theoretical accounts of ethical education, this study shows how ethics is enacted through mundane pedagogical decisions: forum rules, assessment criteria, facilitation tone, and recognition of vulnerability.

Synthesis: What This Study Adds That Others Do Not

Across the comparative analysis, four original contributions emerge:

(i) Interfaith inclusion is a pedagogical practice, not a policy condition
(ii) Instructor presence mediates religious safety, not just engagement
(iii) Accreditation is plural and negotiated in global online education
(iv) Autoethnography reveals invisible dynamics of silence, risk, and meaning-making

Unlike Bennett et al. (2017), Dixson (2015), or Moore (1993), this study centers lived religious identity as a core analytic category, without reducing it to culture, motivation, or engagement metrics.

Concluding Comparative Insight

Taken together, University of the People, NationsUniversity, Jesuit Worldwide Learning, and Monarch Business School Switzerland do not represent competing models but complementary pathways within global online higher education. Each illuminate how access, legitimacy, mission, and pedagogy interact differently under conditions of global inequality and pluralism. This comparative analysis demonstrates that inclusive and interfaith online education succeeds not through uniform models but through pedagogical intentionality grounded in respect, reflexivity, and ethical clarity.

DISCUSSION

Interfaith Inclusion as Lived Pedagogy in Global Online Education

This discussion interprets the findings of the study by returning to its central analytical claim: interfaith inclusion in global online higher education functions most coherently as lived pedagogy rather than as institutional policy or abstract commitment. Across diverse institutional contexts, the data show that inclusion is not primarily secured through mission statements, accreditation status, or platform design alone, but through everyday pedagogical practices that shape how learners encounter difference, express identity, and negotiate meaning in digital classrooms. This section synthesizes the results by situating them within existing scholarship on online learning, inclusive education, and interfaith pedagogy, while clarifying the distinctive contribution of this study (Garrison et al., 2000).

Interfaith Inclusion beyond Policy and Design

Much of the literature on inclusive online education emphasizes access, engagement, and instructional design. Studies grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy and inclusive teaching practices demonstrate that thoughtful course structure, instructor presence, and supportive learning environments positively influence student persistence and satisfaction, particularly for underrepresented learners (Bennett et al., 2017; Dixson, 2015). While these insights are confirmed by the present study, the findings extend this scholarship by showing that religious identity introduces a distinct layer of vulnerability and risk that is not fully captured by cultural or demographic categories alone ((Moore, 1993).

Unlike models that treat learners as culturally neutral participants, the autoethnographic narratives reveal that learners often engage in religious self-censorship, particularly in globally diverse online environments. Faith-based reasoning, moral language, or spiritual perspectives are frequently withheld not due to disengagement, but due to uncertainty about how such expressions will be received in asynchronous, text-based settings. This finding complicates prevailing assumptions within online learning research, which often equate participation with visibility and silence with disengagement (Dixson, 2015). Instead, silence here emerges as a strategic and protective response, highlighting the ethical dimensions of participation that remain under-theorized in much online pedagogy literature (Brookfield, 2006).

Instructor Presence as Moral and Relational Mediation

The Community of Inquiry framework emphasizes the interdependence of teaching, social, and cognitive presence in sustaining meaningful online learning

(Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison et al., 2004). The findings of this study affirm the relevance of this framework, while also extending it by demonstrating that instructor presence functions not only pedagogically but morally in interfaith contexts. Instructor decisions regarding discussion framing, feedback tone, and assessment criteria actively shape whether religious difference becomes a resource for learning or a source of withdrawal. This study shows that instructor presence mediates what might be described as religious safety, the degree to which learners perceive the online classroom as a space where faith-informed perspectives can be expressed without misrecognition or marginalization. While Dixson (2015) links instructor presence to engagement and satisfaction, the present findings suggest that presence also governs learners' willingness to take interpretive and ethical risks. In this sense, teaching presence becomes a form of ethical stewardship, responsible for cultivating conditions in which plural identities can coexist without being flattened into neutrality or conflict.

Transactional Distance as Ethical Distance

Transactional distance theory conceptualizes distance in online education as a function of dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy (Moore, 1993). The findings of this study affirm the relevance of this framework in global online contexts, particularly where learners participate asynchronously across time zones and cultural settings. However, the data also suggests that transactional distance operates not only communicatively but ethically and relationally. Learners do not merely calculate when and how to participate; they also calculate whether participation is safe. In interfaith settings, high transactional distance can intensify misinterpretation, reinforcing tendencies toward silence or superficial engagement. Conversely, structured dialogue and clear facilitation norms reduce ethical distance by signaling respect for difference. This insight reframes transactional distance as a moral condition shaped by pedagogical choices, rather than as a neutral structural variable.

Interfaith Pedagogy as Intentional Practice

Interfaith education scholarship consistently emphasizes the need for intentional pedagogical design to foster respectful dialogue and religious literacy (Patel, 2012; Cheetham et al., 2013). The present study supports this claim and extends it into the domain of global online education. The findings demonstrate that interfaith engagement rarely emerges spontaneously in online classrooms; rather, it is enabled through explicit pedagogical cues, such as discussion guidelines, assessment rubrics that value respectful engagement, and facilitation practices that legitimize diverse moral frameworks. This observation aligns with multicultural education scholarship that emphasizes the affirmation of learners' identities and epistemologies as central to meaningful learning (Paris & Alim, 2017).

However, the present study highlights that religious identity carries particular epistemic and ethical weight. Faith-informed perspectives often shape learners' understandings of justice, responsibility, authority, and community. When such perspectives are excluded or marginalized, inclusion becomes superficial, reinforcing what the findings identify as intentional pluralism rather than neutrality (Tracy, 2010).

Accreditation as Ethical Infrastructure

While accreditation is often discussed in terms of quality assurance and institutional legitimacy, the findings of this study reveal its indirect pedagogical implications. Accreditation frameworks shape assessment practices, faculty expectations, and support structures that influence how inclusion is enacted at the classroom level. For example, institutions with strong advising systems and clear academic standards provide scaffolding that supports learner participation across diverse contexts. Conversely, accreditation alone does not guarantee inclusive practice; it must be interpreted and enacted through pedagogy. This insight resonates with broader ethical reflections on education as a value-laden practice rather than a neutral transmission of knowledge (Biesta, 2009). Accreditation, in this sense, functions as ethical infrastructure a system that can either enable or constrain pedagogical responsiveness to diversity. The study demonstrates that legitimacy is not a single pathway but a plural and negotiated reality in global online education, with implications for learner agency and recognition.

Universal Design, Trauma Responsiveness, and Lived Realities

Frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning emphasize flexibility, accessibility, and multiple means of engagement as foundational to inclusive education (CAST, 2018). The findings of this study affirm the importance of such frameworks while grounding them in lived experience.

Learners navigating displacement, economic precarity, or infrastructural instability encounter barriers that extend beyond technical accessibility. Trauma-responsive pedagogical approaches, which acknowledge learners' lived conditions and support agency, are particularly relevant in global online contexts (Carello & Butler, 2015). Importantly, the study demonstrates that inclusive design is not merely technical but relational. Flexibility in deadlines, responsiveness to connectivity challenges, and recognition of contextual constraints signal respect for learners as whole persons.

These practices reinforce the claim that inclusion is enacted through pedagogical attentiveness, not solely

through platform features.

Interfaith Inclusion as Formation

Across institutional contexts, the findings reveal that interfaith inclusion contributes to learner formation rather than functioning as a discrete curricular component. Ethical reasoning, intercultural competence, and reflective judgment emerge through engagement with difference over time. This observation aligns with holistic approaches to education that treat learning as moral and relational formation rather than cognitive acquisition alone (Mezirow, 1997). In professional contexts, such as those represented in applied leadership education, interfaith engagement often appears indirectly through ethical deliberation and governance discussions. In faith-based contexts, theological plurality deepens interpretive rigor rather than undermining coherence. In access-oriented contexts, pluralism emerges through lived experience rather than explicit dialogue. Taken together, these patterns suggest that interfaith inclusion is most effective when embedded across pedagogical practices rather than isolated within thematic units.

Methodological Contribution of Analytical Autoethnography

This discussion underscores the methodological contribution of analytical autoethnography in online education research. While survey-based and analytics-driven studies offer valuable insights into patterns of engagement and retention, they often obscure the nuanced ethical and relational dynamics revealed through lived experience. By connecting personal narrative to broader pedagogical structures, analytical autoethnography enables systematic reflection on phenomena that resist quantification (Ellis et al., 2011; Anderson, 2006). The use of thematic analysis further strengthens this approach by ensuring that narratives are analytically grounded rather than merely descriptive (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In doing so, the study demonstrates that autoethnography can contribute rigorously to international and comparative education scholarship, particularly in contexts where learners are geographically dispersed and institutionally diverse.

Synthesis and Interpretive Claim

Taken together, the findings support a central interpretive claim: interfaith inclusion in global online higher education is best understood as lived pedagogy enacted through relational, ethical, and contextual practices. It is not secured by policy statements alone, nor guaranteed by accreditation or platform design. Instead, it emerges through facilitation choices, assessment practices, and sustained attentiveness to learner diversity. This interpretation deepens existing scholarship on inclusive online learning by foregrounding religious identity as a pedagogically significant dimension of learner experience. It extends theories of presence and transactional distance by revealing their ethical implications, and it affirms interfaith education scholarship by demonstrating the necessity of intentional design in digital environments. By integrating these insights, the study offers a coherent framework for understanding inclusion as a formative and relational practice within global online education (Garrison et al., 2004).

Accreditation and Legitimacy: Opportunities, Challenges, and Best Practices in Global Online Education

Accreditation and Legitimacy in Global Online Higher Education

Accreditation occupies a pivotal position in global online higher education, functioning simultaneously as a mechanism of internal quality assurance and as a signal of external legitimacy. For institutions operating across national, cultural, and regulatory boundaries, accreditation is not merely a technical requirement but a key determinant of trust, recognition, and learner mobility. In online and blended contexts, where learners and employers may never encounter a physical campus, accreditation becomes one of the most visible markers of institutional credibility (Figure 4).

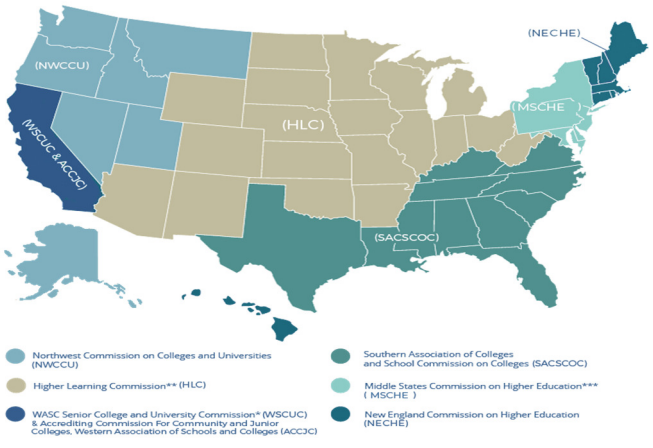

Figure 4: Accreditation Pathways and Institutional Legitimacy

Regional accreditation, such as that held by University of the People through the WASC Senior College and University Commission, aligns institutional practices with internationally recognized academic standards and enhances graduate mobility. National accreditation by the Distance Education Accrediting Commission further signals compliance with rigorous benchmarks specific to distance education (University of the People, 2024). Together, these forms of accreditation shape curriculum

design, faculty governance, assessment practices, and student support structures, reinforcing institutional accountability in a highly competitive global education market. NationsUniversity operates within similar U.S. accreditation frameworks, demonstrating that faith-based online education can maintain academic legitimacy while pursuing explicitly theological and ministerial goals. In contrast, Monarch Business School Switzerland illustrates an alternative pathway to legitimacy, relying on professional accreditation and international quality assurance networks rather than national institutional accreditation (Monarch Business School Switzerland, 2024). Jesuit Worldwide Learning: Education at the Margins, meanwhile, operates through partnerships with accredited universities, embedding quality assurance within collaborative delivery models rather than institutional accreditation alone (Jesuit Worldwide Learning, 2023). Taken together, these models demonstrate that legitimacy in global online education is plural rather than singular. Accreditation remains central, but it is expressed through diverse configurations shaped by mission, learner population, and geopolitical context (Knight, 2004).).

Opportunities

Expanding Access through Recognized Online Pathways

One of the most significant opportunities associated with accredited online education is its capacity to expand access to higher education for populations historically excluded from conventional systems. The tuition-free model of the University of the People has enabled participation by more than 170,000 learners from over 200 countries, many of whom are refugees, displaced people, or working adults balancing education with economic precarity (University of the People, 2024). Accreditation plays a crucial role in ensuring that this expanded access is not merely symbolic but substantively valuable, offering learners credentials that carry international recognition. Jesuit Worldwide Learning extends similar opportunities through blended learning centers embedded in marginalized and conflict-affected regions. By combining online delivery with local facilitation and partnerships with accredited universities, JWL addresses both economic and infrastructural barriers while maintaining academic recognition (Jesuit Worldwide Learning, 2023). These models demonstrate that accreditation, when coupled with mission-driven design, can serve as a powerful instrument for educational equity rather than an exclusionary gatekeeping mechanism.

Accreditation and Intercultural Competence

Beyond access, accredited global online education offers opportunities for the development of intercultural and interfaith competence. Online classrooms at University of the People, NationsUniversity, Monarch Business School Switzerland, and Jesuit Worldwide Learning are characterized by deep cultural, religious, and professional diversity. When intentionally designed, these environments foster ethical reasoning, cross-cultural communication, and collaborative leadership, competencies increasingly essential in global labor markets and civic life (UNESCO, 2020). Accreditation frameworks indirectly support these outcomes by requiring institutions to demonstrate student learning, engagement, and support across diverse populations. In this sense, accreditation does not merely validate content delivery but shapes the pedagogical conditions under which intercultural learning can flourish.

Challenges

Uneven Recognition and Credential Portability

Despite its importance, accreditation does not guarantee uniform recognition across borders. Even when institutions hold recognized accreditation, graduates may encounter complex credential evaluation processes that vary widely by country, profession, and regulatory environment. This challenge is particularly acute for learners seeking cross-border mobility or professional licensure. For example, degrees from nationally accredited institutions may be recognized differently than those from regionally accredited universities, while professional accreditation may hold significant weight in some sectors but limited recognition in others. Monarch Business School Switzerland exemplifies this tension: its reliance on professional accreditation and international networks offers legitimacy within global executive and management education markets yet may require learners to navigate additional recognition processes depending on jurisdiction (Monarch Business School Switzerland, 2024).

Infrastructure Inequities and Learner Persistence

Infrastructure inequities remain a persistent challenge in global online education. Students served by Jesuit Worldwide Learning and NationsUniversity often experience limited connectivity, power instability, or restricted access to devices, conditions that directly affect engagement and completion (Jesuit Worldwide Learning, 2023). Without localized support and flexible delivery models, online education risks reinforcing existing inequalities rather than mitigating them. Accreditation frameworks typically focus on academic standards rather than infrastructural realities, creating a tension between formal quality assurances and lived learning conditions. Institutions that serve marginalized populations must therefore go beyond accreditation requirements, integrating contextual support mechanisms that sustain

learner participation under fragile conditions.

Curriculum Relevance and Epistemic Equity

Another challenge lies in curriculum relevance. Globally standardized curricula may inadvertently privilege dominant epistemic frameworks unless intentionally adapted. Institutions such as NationsUniversity and Jesuit Worldwide Learning mitigate this risk by encouraging contextual reflection and integration of local knowledge systems, while Monarch Business School Switzerland emphasizes applied learning grounded in diverse regulatory and cultural environments (NationsUniversity, 2023; Monarch Business School Switzerland, 2024). Accreditation can support or constrain such adaptation. When quality assurance processes allow for contextualization and reflective pedagogy, accreditation becomes an enabler of epistemic diversity. When it prioritizes uniformity, it risks marginalizing non-dominant perspectives. Effective global online education is characterized by mission-driven design aligned with equity and inclusion. Institutions that embed these values into governance, curriculum, and assessment structures demonstrate stronger learner engagement and persistence. Jesuit Worldwide Learning exemplifies this approach by integrating Ignatian pedagogy with blended delivery and community facilitation (Jesuit Worldwide Learning, 2023). Blended and localized pedagogies represent another best practice. Combining online content with local facilitation enhances continuity and contextual relevance, particularly in low-resource environments. Clear transparency regarding accreditation and recognition pathways further supports informed learner decision-making and realistic expectations for graduate mobility (Table 6).

Table 6: Accreditation Pathways and Pedagogical Implications

nstitution	Accreditation Pathway	Pedagogical Implications
University of the People	Regional and national accreditation	Scalable, structured pedagogy with strong advising and peer learning
NationsUniversity	National accreditation (faith-based)	Theological depth combined with global accessibility
Jesuit Worldwide Learning	Partner-accredited programs	Contextualized pedagogy embedded in marginalized communities
Monarch Business School Switzerland	Professional accreditation and networks	Applied, career-oriented learning with global professional relevance

Pedagogical and Policy Recommendations

Effective online teaching requires intentional design grounded in inclusive pedagogical frameworks. Universal Design for Learning emphasizes multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression, supporting learners with diverse cultural backgrounds, abilities, and access conditions (CAST, 2018). In practice, this includes multimodal learning materials, clear course structure, and flexible assessment strategies. Instructor's presence is critical in sustaining engagement. Research on the Community of Inquiry framework highlights the interdependence of cognitive, social, and teaching presence in promoting retention and deep learning (Garrison et al., 2000). In global online classrooms, personalized feedback, regular communication, and culturally responsive facilitation are particularly important. Interfaith and inclusive engagement must be intentionally embedded rather than assumed. Structured dialogue, culturally diverse case studies, and collaborative projects enable learners to engage in difference constructively. Institutions such as Jesuit Worldwide Learning and NationsUniversity demonstrate that faith-informed education can foster pluralism when grounded in reflective pedagogy and ethical dialogue (Jesuit Worldwide Learning, 2023; NationsUniversity, 2023). Institutional policies must sustain these practices through accreditation-aligned quality assurance, faculty development, and learner support services. Transparent accreditation status, inclusive curriculum review processes, and data-informed equity strategies strengthen accountability and continuous improvement across diverse learner populations.

Pedagogical Intentionality and Learner Diversity

Global online learning has emerged not merely as an alternative modality but as a strategic avenue for expanding educational access to underserved and marginalized communities.

The distinctive missions, accreditation frameworks, and partnership strategies of University of the People, Jesuit Worldwide Learning, NationsUniversity, and Monarch Business School Switzerland offer substantive lessons for inclusive and quality-oriented online education. At the core of effective global online education is pedagogical intentionality anchored in accessibility, learner diversity, and cultural relevance. University of the People exemplifies such intentionality through its tuition-free model and globally dispersed student body, requiring instructional designs that accommodate variable access, language proficiency, and epistemic frameworks (University of the People, 2025).

Contextual Pedagogy in Crisis Settings

Jesuit Worldwide Learning provides a compelling model of contextual pedagogy, synthesizing global academic standards with local facilitation in crisis-affected contexts. Through partnerships with accredited universities such as Saint Louis University, learners pursue recognized degrees while remaining embedded in their communities (Jesuit Worldwide Learning, 2024; Saint Louis University,

2023). This approach highlights that online education must be relational, not merely digital.

Mission-Driven and Faith-Oriented Education

NationsUniversity illustrates how mission-driven, faith-centered education can remain globally accessible and academically rigorous. Serving approximately 1,400 active students from over 90 countries, it demonstrates that clear mission alignment fosters coherent learning environments that resonate with learners' vocational and spiritual aspirations (NationsUniversity, 2024).

Learner Agency and Skills Development

Learners play an active role in co-constructing educational values. Success in global online environments depends on self-directed learning skills, digital literacy, and intercultural competence. Institutions can support these capacities through clear communication, robust advising, and resources that help learners navigate diverse epistemic worlds.

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that accreditation and legitimacy in global online education are not ends in themselves but enabling conditions for inclusive, ethical, and contextually responsive learning. Across diverse institutional models, excellence emerges when accreditation frameworks, mission commitments, and pedagogical practices are coherently aligned. Inclusion in global online education extends beyond demographic representation to encompass epistemic recognition, interfaith dialogue, and relational pedagogy. Institutions that intentionally center learner diversity, contextual relevance, and ethical formation create learning environments that humanize education and foster shared responsibility across cultural and religious differences. While no single accreditation pathway or pedagogical model can address the full complexity of global online education, the comparative insights presented here highlight best practices capable of advancing equity, legitimacy, and meaningful learning in an increasingly interconnected world.

REFERENCES

Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs. (2024). About ACBSP. https://www.acbsp.org

Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 35*(4), 373–395. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241605280449

Bennett, S., Lockyer, L., & Agostinho, S. (2017). Towards sustainable technology enhanced learning practices. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 48*(2), 400–412. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12422

Biesta, G. (2009). Good education: What it is and why we need it. *Educational Theory, 59*(3), 249–264. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2009.00337.x

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Carello, J., & Butler, L. D. (2015). Practicing what we teach: Trauma-informed educational practice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 35*(3), 262–278. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2015.1030054

CAST. (2018). *Universal design for learning guidelines version 2.2.* CAST Professional Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1234/udl-framework.2018

Council for Higher Education Accreditation. (2024). Database of accredited institutions and programs. https://www.chea.org Distance Education Accrediting Commission profile. https://www.chea.org/distance-education-accrediting-commission

Dixson, M. D. (2015). Measuring student engagement in the online course: The Online Student Engagement scale (OSE). *Online Learning Journal, 19*(4), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v19i4.561

Distance Education Accrediting Commission. (2024). Accredited institutions. https://www.deac.org

Council for Higher Education Accreditation directory. https://www.chea.org/distance-education-accrediting-commission

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 12*(1). https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589

Education Quality Accreditation Commission of Europe. (2024). Accreditation framework. https://www.eqac.eu

Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education, 2*(2–3), 87–105. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(00)00016-6

Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2004). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education, 7*(3), 231–240. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2003.10.002

Jesuit Worldwide Learning. (2023). Annual report. https://www.jwl.org

https://www.jwl.org/about-us/ Our approach. https://www.jwl.org/about-us/our-approach/Our programmes. https://www.jwl.org/our-programmes Research at JWL. https://www.jwl.org/research/

Jesuit Worldwide Learning Annual Report. (2024). Jesuit Conference of European Provincials. https://jesuits.eu/news/2681-jesuit-worldwide-learning-annual-report

Jesuitenweltweit. (n.d.). JWL: Bildung bringt Frieden. https://jesuiten-weltweit.ch/projekte/jwlbildung-bringt-frieden

Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2015). *The adult learner* (8th ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315816951

Mayr, A., & Oppl, S. (2023). *Higher education at the margins – success criteria for blended learning systems for marginalized communities*. *Education and Information Technologies*, 28(3), 2579–2617. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-022-11282-3

Monarch Business School Switzerland. (2024). About Monarch Switzerland. https://www.monarchswiss.edu

Moore, M. G. (1993). Theory of transactional distance. *American Journal of Distance Education, 7*(1), 22–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/08923649309526863

NationsUniversity Catalog & Student Handbook 2025. (2024). NationsUniversity. https://nationsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/NU-Catalog-2025-v7.pdf

Discover NU https://nationsu.edu/discover-nationsuniversity/NationsUniversity General Information and Enrollment Data. (2024.). NationsUniversity official catalog. https://nationsu.edu/catalog/general/

Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2017). *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world.* Teachers College Press.

Reshef, S. (2019). *Unstoppable: The new learning revolution.* University of the People Press. Rovai, A. P., Wighting, M. J., & Liu, J. (2005). School climate and sense of community in online learning. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 6*(2), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v6i2.249

Saint Louis University and Jesuit Worldwide Learning partnership in refugee education. (2024, August 29). International Association of Jesuit Universities.

https://iaju.org/2024/08/29/saint-louis-university-and-jesuit-worldwide-learning-partner-to-provide-higher-education-in-refugee-camps/
Springer, L., Stoller, F., & Resta, P. (2025). Global online learning: Pedagogical, institutional, and learner perspectives. *TechTrends, 69*(2), 215–231. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-025-01021-3
Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight "big tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 16*(10), 837–851. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800409356972
UNESCO. (2020). *Global education monitoring report: Inclusion and education*. https://doi.org/10.54676/AGQK1802
UNESCO. (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education.* UNESCO Publishing. https://doi.org/10.54675/AXQT5347
United Nations Global Compact. (2023). *Principles for Responsible Management Education.* https://www.unprme.org
University of Michigan Inclusive Teaching. (2024). Center for Research on Learning and Teaching: Inclusive teaching principles. https://doi.org/10.1002/crlt.2024
University of the People. (2024). Academic catalog 2024–2025. https://www.uopeople.edu
University of the People. (2025). University of the People records unprecedented enrollment and accreditation achievements.https://www.uopeople.edu/about/worldwide-recognition/press-releases/university-of-the-people-an-accredited-tuition-free-university-announces-record-breaking-enrollment-for-2025-with-unprecedented-student-growth/
University of the People Wikipedia entry. (2025). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_the_People
WASC Senior College and University Commission. (2024). Accredited institutions. https://www.wscuc.org.