International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning

Book Review – Higher Education Through Open And Distance Learning

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There is a growing awareness of the important role of open and distance learning in higher education. This awareness has opened the debate around various issues addressed in this text. Where open and distance learning was once seen as an experimental alternative to traditional delivery, new technologies have now made it much more than an experiment. Open and distance learning has grown into a higher education industry on its own and has become one of the main pathways to global education.

Keith Harry, the editor, has put together a valuable collection of contributions, giving the reader a true worldview on open and distance learning in higher education. The contributions include the theoretical, the practical, the factual as well as some reflective contemplation on the issues of open and distance learning. The volume does not read very easily because of the variation in styles of writing. It has nevertheless been very well edited and provides the reader with a well-structured and concise source of information.

There are 31 contributors, each one addressing specific areas of importance for the debate or providing certain facts giving the reader more information on various practices.

Keith Harry and contributor Hilary Perraton introduce the publication with a reflection on the role of open and distance learning for the new society. This reflection acts not only as an introduction but summarises the contents neatly within the general categories of international developments, national responses and institutional change. Attention is given to economic and political change, technological opportunity and regional and international policy and development, with special attention to cooperative ventures (p. 6). The introduction concludes with some serious reflection on the current status of open and distance learning institutions.

According to the authors of the introduction, the convergence of open and distance learning and conventional education has been encouraged by three factors:

the drive for dual-mode status, technology, and the need to meet the demands of new audiences. These underlying factors are found within the discussions of the various authors, highlighting different aspects of open and distance learning throughout the publication.

This book is divided into two parts: Part 1 deals with 5 themes in open and distance learning while Part 2 takes the reader through regions of the globe with case studies of significant open and distance learning institutions presented by various contributors. The regions with their different case studies and authors are:

Africa

- Cooperation competition or dominance: a challenge in Southern Africa (Tony Dodds, Evelyn Nonyongo and Jenny Glennie)

- The Open University of Tanzania (Geoffrey Mmari)

America

- The University of the West Indies (Ed Brandon)

- Distance education in Latin America: growth and maturity (Fabio Chacón)

- University distance education in Canada (Douglas Shale)

Asia

- The Bangladesh Open University: mission and promise (Greville Rumble)

- Distance Education in China (Xingfu Ding)

- The Open University of Hong Kong (David Murphy and Yvonne Fung)

- Developments, networking and convergence in India (Santosh Panda)

- Contemporary distance education in Taiwan (Hung-Ju Chung)

Europe

- Distance education in Central and Eastern Europe (Andras Szus and Janet Jenkins)

- Western Europe (Hans-Peter Baumeister)

- The European Commission and open and distance learning (Corinne Hermant-de-Callatay)

Oceania

- Distance education in Australia (Bruce King)

- The South Pacific: kakai mei tahi (Claire Mathewson and Ruby Va'a)

The afterword to the publication is written by John Daniel.

Part 1 – Themes

The themes under discussion in this section of the book deal with issues universal to open and distance learning. Chapter 2 presents the first of the five themes – the internationalisation of higher education. The authors, Denis Blight, Dorothy Davis and Alan Olsen, approach internationalisation from the view that open learning and distance education are, by nature, not limited by natural and political borders. They address questions arising from this by outlining developments in the internationalisation of higher education, describing how international delivery of open and distance learning takes place and providing highlights of such issues as quality, student support, and curricula. They also mention the impact of technology in international education.

Chapter 3, on the impact of telecommunications, is authored by Robin Mason and deals with the field of "educational telecommunications" (p. 32), which is a rather strange delineation of a hitherto unknown telecommunications field. This immediately raises the question of whether the use of perfectly ordinary telecommunications equipment in the educational environment can lead to a re-classification thereof as being of an "educational" nature. This particular chapter deals with the application of certain technologies to enhance and support distance education offerings. It warns against the creation of a technology divide between able and disabled and advantaged and disadvantaged (p. 35), even in the use of text-based systems. The author deals with both asynchronous as well as synchronous delivery, highlighting advantages and disadvantages. This chapter, although dealing with an important aspect of open and distance learning, has fallen prey to one of the dangers of writing about technology; information that seems to be relevant and timely during writing loses its relevance due to the rapid development of technology and becomes dated when published.

With professional reflective practice and lifelong learning the theme of chapter 4, Patrick Guiton emphasises the significance of open and distance learning to professional continuing education. The fast pace of development of information

technologies and their utilisation by open and distance learning is changing the context in which professionals work. Direct access to upgrading of careers and solutions to day-to-day problems are made possible by the Internet. In this chapter, Guiton examines the possibilities that are emerging for professionals to guide and direct their own career-long learning. He also looks at the changes that need to be brought about by universities to acknowledge the context in which their learners are participating in the learning experience. As professionals will seek more ways to direct their own upgrading and change of career direction, whether it will lead to formal credentials or not, universities also need to develop the capacity to add flexibility to their structures. The danger of universities being marginalized as providers of lifelong learning opportunities will depend on their meeting these needs.

The penultimate chapter of Part 1 deals with flexible learning and university change and expands on the flexibility issues raised briefly in the previous chapter. Louise Moran and Brittmarie Myringer discuss the changes necessary in order for the university to move towards a more flexible learning environment. These authors are of the opinion that the days of distance education, whose "quest for legitimacy also sprang from the desire to distinguish distance education from its predecessor, correspondence study", are numbered and that what is currently occurring is far more than a "simple evolution" (p. 57). According to them an "unsteady, problematic, profound process of change is under way" (p. 57). The authors state that the convergence of distance education methods and systems with those of traditional or face-to-face teaching is "strongly influenced by new electronic technologies" (p. 57). Flexibility, student-centeredness, networked learning, quality and efficiency are today assisted by "triggers for change" (p. 58) such as declining funds, advancing technology and the demography of students. These changes will force a paradigm shift in universities and other providers of higher education. The authors use a brief case study of Mid Sweden University to illustrate the changes brought about by acceptance of flexible learning as a means of achieving the ultimate goal of quality education. The chapter also deals with the role of the academic teacher, learning materials production, real and virtual campuses, and collaboration as issues of flexible learning and university change. These authors provide a fresh and interesting insight into dealing with matters that are of both global and national interest to institutions in the process of change.

Part 1 of the book concludes with a relevant and much discussed general topic, the costs of distance education, comprehensively dealt with by Thomas Hülsmann. The rising demand for education worldwide normally oversubscribes the budgets allocated to provision of services to students. Hülsmann analyses costs and effects in distance education in order to provide some guidance for managing distance education. He draws attention to structural features of distance education, case study evidence and a framework for cost-effective media choice. Dealing with costing issues, institutional costs and the costing of media, and using the student-learning hour as a basis for calculation and comparison, he

provides guidelines for calculating costs. The four main conclusions drawn from his argument are: (a) text is important, (b) text can be presented either in print or on screen, (c) teaching by networked computers has a substantial effect on the cost structure and development costs, and (d) more advanced technology tends to increase reception costs which are passed on to the learner.

Part 2 – Regions

Through a number of case studies, the second part of this book gives insight into and information about aspects of open and distance learning in different regions of the world.

In a contribution from Southern Africa, Tony Dodds, Evelyn Nonyongo and Jenny Glennie deal with issues of whether cooperation, competition or dominance will prevail in the Southern African region. Attention is first given to the development of tertiary education in the smaller states, Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Swaziland with special reference to the development of distance education under its "former guise of correspondence education" (p. 96). The authors discuss certain issues and challenges for the future in the region, highlighting two major challenges: cost effectiveness and quality. A discussion on South Africa sketches the policy environment and development with special attention given to the post-apartheid era. The history of the development of tertiary (higher) distance education is briefly given and some attention is given to issues and challenges for the future. As cooperation between institutions of higher education is very much in evidence in South Africa, the authors give a fairly comprehensive overview of collaborative activities in this sector.

Geoffrey Mmari provides an interesting description of developments preceding the establishment of the Open University of Tanzania and goes into a fairly detailed description and analysis of the organisational structure and management of the university.

The section on the Americas deals with the West Indies, Latin America and Canada. A case study on the University of the West Indies is authored by Ed Brandon and gives an outline of the regional context and the structure of the University. Fabio Chacón discusses the growth and maturity of distance education in Latin America by providing the reader with a historic view on the development and current situation of distance education in Latin America. Attention is also given to a definition of "the new educational paradigm" (p. 142) under the two headings – new methods and new principles. In "University Distance Education in Canada", Douglas Shale gives an overview of the Canadian scene by looking at the political framework, communications network and the impact of technology on Canadian distance education. He also gives a brief overview of contemporary Canadian university education.

The fact that there are and have been significant distance education endeavours in the United States of America merely gets attention in the introduction to the contributions of this region. The reader is simply referred to the "American Journal of Distance Education" as a source of information about issues of open and distance learning in the United States (p. 124). This is perhaps the biggest shortcoming of this book

In the introduction to the Asian region is the statement that "the largest growth area of single-mode open universities during the 1970s and 1980s was Asia" (p. 162). Greville Rumble gives a very good case study of the Bangladesh Open University and David Murphy and Yvonne Fung discuss the Open University of Hong Kong in the same vein. Xingfu Ding provides a discussion of distance education in China. This discussion deals more with issues and the political framework in general than with specific institutions. A similar contribution is made by Hung-Ju Chung in the discussion of contemporary distance education in Taiwan. By looking from the viewpoint of developments, networking and convergence in India, Santosh Panda draws a picture of distance education in a country where open and distance learning institutions have developed at a very fast rate since the 1970s. Moving from a previous elitist higher education system to a mass education system has given impetus to this growth.

The disappearance of the Soviet Bloc has lead to a tremendous increase in the demand for European distance education. Europe has well-established open universities in Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom. This section of the book divides Europe into Central and Eastern Europe, and Western Europe. In their contribution, "Distance Education in Central and Eastern Europe", Andras Szücs and Janet Jenkins provide the reader with well-structured information on the influences that political and economic change have had on educational development in the region. Hungary and PHARE (a multi-sector distance education programme sponsored by the European Union) are given as examples. The role and impact of Western assistance in the development of higher education is also highlighted with some attention given to the possibility of using new technologies to improve distance education. Hans-Peter Baumeister addresses the issues of distance education in the European Union while Corinne Hermant-de-Callatay looks at open and distance learning sponsored by the European Commission.

In a final section dealing with different regions, Oceania is represented by Australia and the South Pacific. In his discussion of Australia, Bruce King focuses on reforms by John Dawkins, the Australian Labor Party Minister for Employment, Education and Training who brought about major changes in the sector in 1988. In their discussion of the South Pacific, Claire Matthewson and Ruby Va'a give an overview of specific developments there by referring to changes in institutional structures and audiences.

The publication is aptly rounded off by an afterword written in the usual reflective style of John Daniel. In his contribution titled "Open learning and/or

distance education," Daniel reflects on the rich variety of activity that goes under the name of open and distance learning, such as that described in this publication. By asking "What else is left to say?" he indicates that there is an inherent "conceptual fuzziness that is endemic in open and distance learning" (p. 292). He then succeeds in clarifying some issues in a satisfactory way, ending a well put together publication beautifully.