OPEN UNIVERSITIES AND THE SOCIAL AGENDA OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

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Background to the Study

Modern distance education emerged in the 1960s in response to demands for greater and more equitable access to postsecondary education (Haughey, Evans & Murphy, 2008; Holmberg, 2003; Keegan, 1996; Peters, 2006). Beginning in 1969 in Great Britain, open universities were established around the world with a clear mandate to help eliminate the social and financial barriers to higher education that had effectively limited access to the middle and upper social classes (Peters, 2006). This situation was particularly acute in the developing world and the open universities that were established in countries such India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Thailand have made a significant impact on postsecondary participation rates in those regions (Bates, 2005).

The success of the single mode distance education institutions lent credibility to a mode of delivery that had hitherto been looked on with suspicion and doubt by the traditional educational community. The reputation of distance education had been tarnished by the questionable practices of commercial correspondence schools that became known as "diploma mills" (Reid, 1960). As legitimate distance education institutions gradually established their credibility as providers of quality education, traditional postsecondary institutions began to establish their own distance education programs and by the end of the last century, most universities and colleges in North America had distance education programs of varying sizes. And like the single-mode distance education institutions, the distance education programs in the traditional institutions were driven by a social agenda of access and equity. They were targeted at non-traditional adult learners who, for a variety of social reasons, missed the opportunity to pursue postsecondary education in contrast to the more mainstream postsecondary target population composed mainly of 18-24 year olds directly out of high school

The Emergence of E-Learning

In the late 1990s technology-mediated forms of distance education emerged and, in particular, the use of the Internet as method of delivering education became increasingly popular (Bates, 2001, Collis & Moonen, 2001). This further enhanced the reputation and credibility of distance education because it allowed for much greater and more meaningful interaction

between instructors and students and amongst students. Concurrent with these technological and educational developments were financial pressures on public postsecondary institutions that forced them to look for cost-saving alternatives to deal with increasing demand (Bates & Poole, 2003; Meredith & Burkle, 2008). Many turned their attention to the newly-legitimized forms of technology-supported distance education because it was seen as a way of avoiding the costly construction of new buildings. However, instead of using these technology-supported approaches primarily to reach the non-traditional learner, they were incorporated into on-campus teaching to create what was termed blended learning approaches and more recently has been called e-learning (OECD, 2005). Driven primarily by a functionalist agenda, this form of e-learning gradually began to overshadow the socially-oriented distance education programs. New organizational units emerged in traditional universities to deal with this new form of e-learning, often competing for funds with the distance education units (Bullen, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

With most conventional universities having abandoned any commitment to using distance education to broaden access in favour of increasing the flexibility of on campus students, we wondered if open universities were still championing the social agenda of distance education 50 years after the founding of the UK Open University.

Founding beliefs of ODL institutions differ somewhat. Yet many have some common principles stated in their mission statement, which are summarized by Tait (2008) and Perraton (2000):

1. To help national and economic development –nation building in the wider sense;
2. To respond to increased public demand for education;
3. To widen access to education to new groups of students;
4. To change education in terms of quality and innovation.

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study is to explore the how select national open universities have responded to the social agenda of distance education as articulated in the key founding principles of the open university movement. We will attempt to understand how these institutions have addressed national development, public demand, access, and quality issues and the extent to which the focus on these foundational principles has shifted since their inception.

Conceptual Framework

Distance education is a highly under-theorized field, especially at the macro-level of defining an institutions mission, plan and agenda. However, Sen (1985) and Nussbaum's work on creating capabilities underpin Tait's framework (2013), about a capabilities approach to defining the mission of open universities. This framework provided a useful point of entry to this study. Raivola's (1985) methodological considerations for comparison in education also

served as an important framework when considering how to compare and analyze different open universities.

Research design

A basic interpretive qualitative study design was used to understand whether and how open universities might be changing their mission in light of changes to national economies, technology access and use, and government policies. The interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions informed by the work of Özdem (2011, 2008, 2013) on the changing role of open and distance teaching universities, and based on current issues that open universities are encountering based in an era of increased IT access.

Sampling and Data Collection

Twenty-one open universities were approached to participate in this study. Geographical diversity was the key principle underlying sample selection. We also attempted to include the largest (in terms of student numbers) open universities around the world as well as some of the smaller institutions. To date, senior administrators from 10 institutions have been interviewed. They are from open universities in Japan, China, Indonesia, Taiwan, Tanzania, South Africa, Spain, Netherlands, United Kingdom, and the West Indies. All interviewees were at the Associate Vice-President level or higher at their institutions (i.e. presidents, vice-chancellors, pro vice chancellors, and rectors).

Four institutions have so far provided background documents or brochures about their institutions. All institutions websites were perused and analyzed for factual data about the institution (e.g. enrolments, reach) and their mission.

All interviewees were given a copy of data that was analyzed about their institutions, and they were given an opportunity to provide feedback about this analysis. This process served as a member check of the interpretation of the data.

Preliminary Results

Initial analysis indicates that open universities are still strongly committed to their original missions to provide open access to a broad range of learners. However, external pressures are providing challenges. In Europe open universities are challenged by economic austerity and national educational policies that are changing the educational landscape in their countries. This includes the growth of online offerings from other institutions who did not historically do so. In Africa, open universities are racing to keep up with growing demand for formal and non-formal education. They are considering different opportunities based on this demand, the growing access points for distance education via ICTs (information and communication technologies). In Asia, the demand for DE courses is growing exponentially. There is also the increased awareness and interest in massive open online courses (MOOCs). However, issues of quality assurance continue to be important as a priority. Comparing institutions, it is notable just how varied the term open is among them and how it has changed since the original founding of most of these open universities. Most open universities leaders were not

concerned about universities, especially from the United States, aggressively trying to expand their educational influence and prominence via online education.

At the time of submission, data collection was still underway with several additional interviews scheduled with open universities in Asia, Europe and Africa. By conference time we hope to have a more complete analysis.

Significance of Study

Open Universities are facing internal pressures from their governments about issues of cost and effectiveness of programs. They are also facing pressures from students about access and quality. As demand for higher education continues to grow globally, open universities have the experience and capacity to expand educational offerings at a greater rate than conventional institutions. Yet issues of mission, planning, and quality will need to be addressed thoughtfully if they are to address these demands effectively. This study identifies challenges and initiatives of open universities in this changing educational landscape.

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