Chapter 2
Equity in Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

Within the context of distance education, an understanding of the impact of social justice issues is crucial for informing research, practice, funding, and policy. Equity and the related concerns of access, social inclusion, and ethics impact all levels of distance education, from the macro (research and development, including the globalisation of distance education), through the meso (community and open learning, including choices in educational technology), and down to the micro (teaching and learning, including choices in curriculum design). As a consequence, a modification to the macro-meso-micro framework of distance education is called for: one that situates equity at a meta level. This meta level encompasses all aspects in the field of distance education, and acts as a guide for policy-makers, academics, and administrators on planning, decision-making, and practice within the discipline.

INTRODUCTION

The principles of social justice are equity, equality, access, and participation. In the context of distance education, these form the basis of ethical considerations in educational access for all. In a broader context, such social justice principles have been the basis of governmental reports and reform agendas across many Australian state and federal departments for the past 30 years. For example, Hawke’s National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 1989) was an action plan which envisioned a multicultural nation that was based upon social justice principles to reduce potential inequalities derived from cultural, racial, religious or linguistic differences.

Similarly, social justice principles have been applied to the reform policies within the Australian higher education sector. To guard against potential educational disadvantage, non-dominant groups in our society should be supported and also resourced so that social justice occurs (McIntyre, Volkoff, Egg, & Solomon, 2004). That is, educational disadvantage should be acknowledged, and students experiencing disadvantage need to be supported in order to achieve equitable educational outcomes.

Distance education, argued by many to be the means to address equity, access and participation issues in the context of higher education, goes some way to enabling a number of sub-groups
of the student population social justice, yet other
groups continue to remain under-represented and
marginalized despite such opportunities.

This chapter explores the issue of equity in dis-
tance education, using as an analytical framework
the three levels of common themes in distance
education research: the macro, meso, and micro
(Zawacki-Richter, 2009). In so doing, it highlights
equity as an issue that is pervasive, affecting in
turn every aspect of consideration in distance
education. The chapter calls for the inclusion of
a fourth level in the framework: an overarching
meta level which situates equity, and the related
concerns of access, social inclusion and ethics, at
a meta level encompassing all facets of distance
education from guiding and planning, through to
decision-making.

DISTANCE, TRANSNATIONAL,
AND BORDERLESS EDUCATION

Historically, distance education—or correspon-
dence study as it was then known—grew out of
the need to make education accessible to those
who wanted a formal education, or to obtain key
industry-related qualifications, but could not
gain these through the traditional on-campus,
post-secondary pathways. Before this time, as
Gunawardena and McIsaac (2004, pp. 356–357)
note that:

"Education had been available primarily to males
in higher levels of society. The most effective form
of instruction in those days was to bring students
together in one place and one time to learn from
one of the masters...Correspondence study, [al-
ternatively] was designed to provide educational
opportunities for those who were not among the
elite and who could not afford full time residence
at an educational institution..."

Early correspondence style modes evolved
during the 1800s to answer this call for widening
participation beyond privileged males in society.
While on one level, this appears to have made
provision for early equity and access solutions,
it masks the reality that it still did not provide
educational access for all. For example, one of
the earliest forms of distance education, Pitman’s
correspondence courses (Matthews, 1999) trained
participants in the abbreviated sign system of
shorthand. However, this was still only provided
accessibility for a small percentage of the popu-
lation training for professional careers. These
students were already literate in terms of their
reading and writing abilities, and hence in the
position to take on the study of a second language
via correspondence mode (in this case, the second
language being Pitman’s short-hand).

Continued growth in distance education was
related not solely to an extension of pathways
into education by those who might have been
traditionally marginalized, but also due to changes
in communications technologies, such as radio
and television. This in turn has helped facilitate
the gradual trend towards the “massification of
education” (Ajadi, 2009, p. 577) over the past
120 years. Further, with the addition of flexible,
online, mobile, and e-learning, the opportunities
for on-campus learners growing, and with more
students opting for mixed methods of participation,
the blurring of boundaries between on-campus
and off-campus (or distance) modes of study is taking
place. Chatterjee and Moore (2009, p. 2) write
that “[a]s universities expand their geographical
reach, the distinction between the demograph-
ics of on-campus and online distance learners
decreases”. The once ‘poor excuse’ for the ‘real
thing’ (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004, p. 357),
distance education is now for many successful
participants, mainstream education.

Today, the terms distance education, trans-
national education, and borderless education are
becoming blurred. Distance education is defined
by DEHub (2010a) as “a system of education
delivery in which the majority of learning takes
place with the learner and the teacher separated by
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