

Openness Dimensions of Distance Teaching Universities

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INTRODUCTION

Distance teaching universities are often referred to as *open universities*, even if they are not called an open university. The use of the term open supposes that education and learning have traditionally been closed by various barriers, such as entrance requirements, time constraints, geographical location, and so forth, and assumes that an open learning institution purports to overcome these barriers or part of them.

Distance education and open learning are used synonymously by some scholars and practitioners. Many scholars attribute similar characteristics to both of them—such characteristics as extending access to various educational frameworks, employing flexible schedules, and enhancing self-directed learning. Others distinguish between them. The fact is that the adjective open is qualitative, value loaded, and highly relative. Its use is confusing unless the context indicates the dimensions of openness that relate to it. Education can be open or closed in many different ways, and open learning can take place either in a classical university or in a distance teaching institution.

In Holmberg's view (1995), today's usage blurs the distinction between the two terms because of "the strong influence of the British Open University and other distance teaching organizations that have adopted practices corresponding to and names containing the adjective 'open'" (p. 4). For Daniel (1990), the tendency to use the terms distance education and open learning interchangeably sprang from an "understandable desire to identify new institutions with the overall purpose for which they were established rather than with the instructional means they intended to use" (p. 106). Rossetti (1989) defined six major characteristics of open learning: open entry, individualized learning, self-

assessment, learner support, self-pacing, and many start dates.

Confusion still reigns among scholars as to the precise definitions of open learning and distance education. One might surmise that it is not entirely accidental that universities that decided to adopt an open-access policy have defined themselves as open universities, while most of those imposing entry requirements define themselves as distance teaching universities. However, it is important to keep in mind that admission criteria constitute only one aspect of openness. This paper examines the major openness dimensions of distance teaching institutions, focusing mainly on the large-scale distance teaching universities that were established since the 1970s, following the model of the British Open University. Unquestionably, many other universities all over the world that currently offer distance study through various operating models adopted most, if not all, of the openness dimensions of the single-mode distance teaching universities. But a few decades ago, the latter were pioneers in opening up the gates of academia to heterogeneous and diverse clienteles, which for a variety of reasons remained outside the conventional university (Bell & Tight, 1993; Daniel, 1996; Guri-Rosenblit, 1999, 2001). They contributed most notably to the democratization of higher education by reaching out to students dispersed at a wide range of locations by enabling part-time study, designing flexible curricula, and providing networks of intensive support throughout the study process.

This short overview examines the major openness dimensions of distance teaching universities. It focuses on widening access to higher education and on the place of study, pace of study, flexible study programs, and student-oriented policies.

WIDENING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

All distance teaching universities reflect a concern with widening access to higher education. One conspicuous factor that distinguishes most of the stand-alone distance teaching universities from their early predecessors is their being a product of governmental planning as large-scale higher education institutions set to fulfill national missions, namely, to absorb large numbers of students at a relatively lower cost as compared to campus universities (Bell & Tight, 1993; Daniel, 1996; Guri-Rosenblit, 1999). The establishment of distance teaching universities constituted an important solution to the increased demand for higher education and the growing political concern for providing greater equality of opportunity of access to higher education. Distance teaching universities have equalized opportunity of access to higher education by opening up admission requirements to hitherto underprivileged groups. Through their operation, they have contributed greatly to the move from elite to mass higher education.

In order to widen access to higher education, many of the distance teaching universities laid down flexible access policies, ranging from open admission to special preparatory courses for particular populations. The British Open University, the Dutch Open Universiteit in Herleen, the Open University of Israel, and Athabasca University in Canada have adopted an open-entry policy. The opening of access to university education without setting any entry requirements broke drastically with the traditional meritocratic concept of selective admission to university studies. In the context of the elite higher education systems of Britain and Israel, it was particularly revolutionary. It put the open universities in a most sensitive and vulnerable position.

Lord Perry (1976), the first vice-chancellor of the British Open University, admitted that the principle of open entry was a frightening one to most academics. It was by no means clear how to plan academic courses divorced from a certain entry behavior and prior knowledge. The underlying philosophy behind the open-access policy is that anyone willing and able to undertake academic studies is entitled to try, irrespective of prior education. In order to succeed, the student has to cope with high-level academic standards.

One of the natural consequences of an open-admission policy is a high dropout rate at the beginning of the studies (Daniel, 1996; Guri-Rosenblit, 1999; Hülsmann, 2004). In many distance teaching universities, the first course acts as a kind of admission test. Exit requirements are most stringent in most distance teaching universities. The distance teaching universities constitute an illuminating example of how it is possible to combine equality of access with the ability to absorb huge numbers of students whilst insisting on high-quality teaching and high-level exit requirements.

The two major concerns that have burdened both politicians and academics with regard to the massification of higher education are the deterioration of academic standards and the high costs to the public purse. One of the most important lessons that can be drawn from the experience of the single-mode distance teaching universities in the last three decades is that open-access or flexible admission policies do not necessarily imply the lowering of academic standards. The accumulated experience of the distance teaching universities suggests that their large size allowed them to invest in producing high-quality materials and assist independent learners by comprehensive and cohesive support networks. Paradoxically, teaching large numbers of students provided the distance teaching universities with a sound economic base from which to create a close interaction between individual students, various faculty ranks, support personnel, and means for cutting the per-student cost of university education.

Interestingly, only a handful of the nearly 30 distance teaching universities that operate currently in various parts of the world decided to adopt an open-admission policy. Most of the distance teaching universities require the same entry qualifications as their conventional counterparts, with some modifications (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999). The Spanish Universidad de Educacion a Distancia (UNED), for instance, offers a special access course for those who are 25 years and older and who do not have adequate entry qualifications. Those who complete this direct-access course successfully are admitted to degree-level studies. Additional flexible admission mechanisms have been formulated in other distance teaching universities. In sum, all of the distance teaching universities have contributed greatly to the widening of access to higher education.

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