CONCLUSION: WHICH FUTURES FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION?

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In the opening chapter of this handbook we canvassed the traditions, theoretical approaches and practices that constitute distance education from its early forms of correspondence education through to the virtual worlds of today. We invited our contributors from many different countries with the intention of drawing on a wide range of expertise, interests and backgrounds but in this world of competing commitments and decreasing time some were unable to undertake and others complete their appropriate chapters, hence we do not have quite the representation of nations we had hoped for. Life pressures and the intensification of work took its toll and we are very grateful to all those who were able to complete their commitments and enable us to access such rich and diverse perspectives on distance education today. In each section of the handbook at least one chapter provides a critical perspective on the current position of distance education and its directions for the future. We did this deliberately because, as editors, we did not want the handbook to be seen as a series of contemporary, but static, statements of the world of distance education. In this chapter we wish to close with a few further reflections on the future of distance education.

DIVERSITY

The themes we chose for the sections reflect trends in distance education. Diversity was a way to give recognition to the increasing acceptance of the range of student concerns and needs, the ever-widening contexts in which distance education is used and the variety of uses of distance education. As a theme, it highlights the need to engage with this increasing complexity in designing for distance education and the importance of recognizing that personal autonomy and choice are factors that increasingly shape what we as distance educators hope to achieve. As is often the case with new developments in the field of human endeavour, it is the wealthiest people and the wealthiest nations that make the running and reap the benefits. Although distance education has a long tradition of providing educational access for those who "miss out", it has often found that the really poor and disadvantaged remain untouched by distance education's facilities and resources. Agencies, such as the Commonwealth of Learning (http://www.col.orgl), endeavour to work against this trend, but the task is not easy. The potential of the Web to provide easy access to high-quality distance education is difficult to dispute: from the perspective of the wired and literate. But those who are in no position to dispute - the poor and illiterate - may give a contrary view if they could. Nicholas Negroponte's initiative to provide a means to education through the one laptop per child (OLPC) project, made in 2005, is now coming to fruition with the first dissemination of the US$100 laptops through governments starting in 2008. What then does this mean for the future of distance education?
While definitions of openness differ, the construct generally includes being learner centred; providing for flexibility in learning; removing barriers to learning whether circumstantial, personal, financial or educational; and recognizing prior learning experiences. The roots of distance education have often been concerned with access and equity, whether it has been about providing schooling (see, for example, Gibb, 1986; Haughey and Roberts, 1996) or higher education (see, for example, Harris, 1987; Hay et al., 2002), and this is partly a statement about previous policies for distance education being about "empowering" the poor, persons with disabilities and those who missed a fair share of educational opportunities, especially through reasons of distance from educational institutions. Distance education has served people in these circumstances over previous decades, however, this agenda can be used by others as Harris (1987) showed so clearly in the 1980s, where the UK Open University was used in the earliest days by the educated middle classes (especially teachers) to improve their careers. The Open University goals which were delineated as being open to people, to places, to methods and to ideas, needed its leaders to be vigilant that unanticipated contextual factors such as easier access to financial or technical resources did not distort unduly the original intent. The present emphasis on "customer service" has reinforced the importance of meeting needs and providing individualized student support especially in collaborative and peer learning environments. Inclusiveness and recognition of diversity are not only considerations at the outset but must be ongoing aspects of how we think about distance education.

TRANSFORMATION OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

What does it mean for those who teach and learn in today's distance education institutions?

Our second theme, transformation of teaching and learning, speaks of the changes we see through looking back at earlier eras and examining contemporary transformations in organizational and programme structures, provision of services and in teaching and learning theories.

Over twenty years ago, Evans and Nation posed the question "Which future for distance education?" (Evans and Nation, 1987). In their response they criticized the rise of "instructional industrialism" in distance education (Evans and Nation, 1989~) partly basing their argument on Harris's (1987) work at the UKOU and argued for distance education to involve dialogue (Evans and Nation, 1989b). More recently, they lamented the rise of those "weapons of mass instruction" (PowerPoint lectures, learning management systems, etc.) that have been dominating university education systems and their impact as globalizing forms of distance education (Evans and Nation, 2003). Much has been written about the "technology fix" in distance education but authors in this handbook section point out that the issue is not so much one of fascination with technological toys but the greater issue of its impact on the transformation in society and how this is calling into question previous perspectives in distance education. Historically, visions of the future and the ability to seize on technological innovation and development have long been hallmarks of distance education. Over 150 years ago, Caleb Phillips and Isaac Pitman can be credited with the introduction of correspondence education (Jegede and Naidu, 1999) by grasping the opportunities offered through the emerging technology of a fast and reliable postal service. The well-documented vision and foresight of distance education pioneers during the twentieth century has led us to the current global significance of this mode of education. The role of the UKOU in the remarkable growth of distance education is acknowledged here and elsewhere. What then are the visions for the future which will seize on present technological innovations to transform the next versions of distance education?
The introductory chapter (Chapter 1) reviewed the main theoretical positions and their practical implications for distance education and its mutation into various forms of virtual learning environments. However, as Pauling's chapter (Chapter 20) in this handbook shows, all "traditional" education is under challenge from the new media. Articles in this section point out the renewed emphasis on communications in society and its increasing importance in educational writings from constructivist theories and collaborative learning environments to social software (Anderson, Chapter 9) and connective knowledge (Downes, 2005, 2006). The assumption of course content as already designated, so much a mark of previous forms of distance education, is now being challenged by content creation strategies of today's participants such as e-portfolios and personal learning environments. As we noted in Chapter 1, it is the power relations behind these changes that are important to understand, hence, our question "in whose interests?" posed in various chapters of this handbook.

LEADERSHIP

In discussing possible scenarios for the future of distance education, King (2003) posits that while one might be the maintenance of the status quo, and another international expansion, other equally likely were the "diminution of the field through disaggregation of function, and (4) loss of identity" (n.p.). The influence of the Internet and the web on societies in general has challenged the utility of previous distance education structures and suggested their absorption into traditional educational structures under blended or hybrid learning options except where the "mega" open universities (Daniel, 1996) can exercise their power. Such discussions led us to focus on leadership as our third theme.

From a clearly positive perspective, some look to the future with a firmly optimistic vision, seemingly preferring to replace the question "What future for distance education?" with the claim that "Distance education is the future!". The most well known of such proponents is Daniel (2007), who has argued that:

the growth of higher education in the developing world is a tectonic shift that will break up the old order. In a decade or two most university and college students will be in the developing world, which will, by definition, redefine the norms in higher education globally.

How will both the public and the private sector provide higher education to the millions of new students in the developing nations? Much of it will likely follow traditional patterns of classroom teaching on locally owned campuses, but distance learning, offered both locally and across borders ... will have an increasingly high profile.

The prime exemplar Daniel uses to buttress his argument is India, where over two million students (representing 24% of enrolments in higher education) study by distance education. The Indian government is aiming to increase this to 40 percent by 2010. Fundamentally, the argument appears to be that the demand will be such that only by applying distance education systems can it even begin to be met. The note of caution, though, is that distance education proponents must heed "the five A's of affordability, accessibility, appropriateness, accreditation and acceptability" (Daniel, 2007, n.p.) King's suggestion that we are moving to transnational education concurs with Daniel's analysis.

Vision and goals are tightly aligned with leadership. Leadership has been conceptualized as process rather than procedures, focusing on the development of an enabling
culture where individual professional development is closely aligned with the desired goals of the group and many of the section's authors have focused on leadership development as key to this process. Equally important are questions of purpose: What leadership goals and in whose interests?

ACCOUNTABILITY

One of Daniel's key indicators, accountability, was chosen as the focus of the next handbook section because the present orientation in management practices believes that support for education should no longer be based on its value to society and future generations; it must also show how well it has used the society's resources and what its can show as system "outputs". This rationalization of educational spending has greatly influenced how funding is allocated and results reported, so much so that governments have added accountability to their access and equity agendas. One result has been a much greater focus on measurement, whether of practice (and hence "best practices") or of learning "outcomes" through standardized assessments of the total system using key performance indicators. At the same time, the changes in orientation to learning and the results of brain-based research have suggested the value of authentic assessment practices. The use of quality as a marker of high achievement and simultaneously of accountability is a contested terrain.

While many of the accountability practices might seem to be common sense financial practices which provide ways of measuring "the bang for the buck" it is their underlying premises that we must consider. Accountability, efficiency and competitiveness are aspects of a market economy ideology that is reshaping how we think about education. The adoption of a way of thinking about learning and work as performative (Ball, 1998) and productive for society rather as being for individual and societal development is cause for concern. This infusion of neo-liberal thinking has emphasized responding to the needs of the individual, greater competitiveness within the educational sector and an increasing reduction of public-funding sources. All of this has placed greater emphasis on accountability as educational organizations have turned to buying and selling products and marketing services, what Slaughter and Leslie refer to as "academic capitalism" (1997). How then do distance education organizations place them in this landscape of greater managerialism and what does the future hold for them?

POLICY

While distance education has received greater attention in recent years it has not always resulted in major policy initiatives at national levels. For many countries, including public policies on distance education would mean reformulating their educational landscape and the pressures to do so come from competing ideologies: on one hand is the greater commercialization of education and on the other the reform of the educational system to be more responsive to individual learners as reflected in themes of increased access and equity. Instead, policies that affect distance education have come through legislation on accreditation, access to local markets, quality-assurance systems and funding (Robinson, 2004) and through economic policies that favour flexibility in education and training (Edwards and Tait, 2000). Government legislation has a major impact on the provision of distance education such as when it provides for equivalency of credentials from distance education programmes or when it maintains a separation between the two providers such as requiring that distance education
students need to have a percentage of their programme in classroom experiences before graduation. The impact of external providers on the system may result in legislation prohibiting all external providers, the development of a list of approved universities, a requirement to obtain in-country registration or the requirement that all external providers must partner with local providers. Often governance of distance education is achieved through the implementation of standards, where the major work of providing documents showing how the institution is meeting the benchmarks is undertaken by the institution itself. The impact of accreditation seems to be two-fold: since few organizations fail to achieve accreditation, it can be seen as ensuring a minimal platform of services, but since the tendency of assurance systems is to measure the tangible, questions have been raised about its focus on measurable outcomes. Government policies of lifelong learning and worker mobility are other instances of indirect impact on the values and choices of distance education institutions.

What seems to be occurring is that educational policy with its emphasis on the vision and values of education for society has been confined to the K-12 sector while in the post-secondary sector, this emphasis has been replaced by one on political possibilities and what governments are willing to fund and support during the term of their mandate. Policies mandate and enable change. They exclude certain topics from the educational debate (for a long time, distance education was in this camp) and they institutionalize how certain topics are to be understood. With the impact of new digital communications technologies, aspects of distance education have become visible on the policy agenda. How they are shaped and supported will help determine the future of distance education.

**BUSINESS**

One of the impacts of the new digital technologies has been to globalize the possibilities for the economy of the provision of education for this new knowledge society. At the same time, the introduction of business strategies into education has brought other trends: the reduction of public funding, a consumerist attitude about their education from students and an increase in the number of private-sector providers and entrepreneurial initiatives in transnational education. Increasingly, governments are accepting that private providers have a role in public education provision (Gourley, 2007).

As the "business" of distance education becomes firmly entrenched as an ideological position, and education becomes a "private good" it is to be expected that the benefits will accrue most to those who own the businesses and to the "customers" who pay for the courses. The "customers" may be the "consumers" themselves or their employers or other beneficiaries who are paying the bills. Control over the curriculum and the pedagogy - or, as Pauling (Chapter 20) suggests, after McLuhan, "the medium" and "the message" - is an important part of the business strategy. In a "free market" economy, these matters are to be expected and may work to good effect where competition is sound. However, the notion of education as a "public good" has underpinned the institutional and governmental development of distance education during the Twentieth Century. In democratic societies with mixed economies, the public benefits of an educated citizenry are seen as necessities for electoral participation and national development. That is, without an informed and educated citizenry democratic societies cannot function, neither can mixed (or solely market) economies operate effectively without informed consumers, nor without competent knowledge workers to develop those economies. In this sense, the business and the (public) service of education are essential elements of contemporary societies, especially in an era of global creative economies (Florida, 2003,2005). This is arguably the sort of context that most developed nations are accommodating, and with which most developing nations are having to cope.
These effects of globalization have to be placed in the larger context of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) by the member countries of the World Trade Organization. Many countries are only beginning to recognize the potential impacts of the GATS on their educational provision particularly in relation to foreign provision. In a report for the International Research Foundation for Open Learning and the Commonwealth of Learning, David Hawkridge (2003) noted

Distance education is simply a particular example of the general case. Universities and colleges offering distance education learning face a bewildering range of competition, public and private, at home and from abroad, all of which is fuelled by rapid technological advances. Crucially, the capacity of both governments and individual institutions to make robust choices is not evenly distributed between the industrialized countries and the low-income countries.

(p. i)

Hawkridge goes on to explain that the trends we have been discussing - the need for worker flexibility, "the demand for education and training in the global economy, the need to reduce the brain drain and the pull of new education markets abroad" – are seen as providing the impetus for this initiative but the drive is coming from the "WTO, multinational companies and corporate universities". He concludes, "Sharing distance education and training functions between institutions offers potential benefits across the full range of functions, as many examples show. Each of the options has serious organizational, cultural, legal, political and economic implications" (p. ii). He goes on to ask a series of questions about who provides redress when transnational agreements malfunction. These are likely to be questions for the near future.

This handbook provides a large volume of material for distance educators, planners and policymakers to use in their work. While the substance and media of our activities may change in the coming years, many of the principles, ideas and theories that support them will remain to be adapted to the prevailing conditions. The contributors to this handbook represent, collectively, centuries of experience and considerable diversity therein. We intend that their work will be a resource to enable many people to construct the next generation of the theory and practice of distance education.
REFERENCES


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