# The Right to Education : A Model for making Higher Education equally accessible to All on the Basis of Merit

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ABSTRACT :

We commend this collaboration between leading journals in the field to promote the role of distance education in achieving the aspiration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. In this Paper we review the past models of higher education institutions, with respect to how well they address the three core aspects of providing access, quality, and cost, and propose a new model that might best provide wider access, quality assurance and at low cost. This new model draws from a new business model that advocates individualization of courses and utilizing global resources. Our model becomes practical when institutions focus on supporting learning, and separate out the role of examinations to central or regional bodies. Adoption of this model, particularly in developing countries, could bring forward significantly the day when the world can say that higher education is equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

## 1. INTRODUCTION :

We commend this collaboration between leading journals in the field to promote the role of distance education in achieving the aspiration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. There is still a yawning gap between this 60-year-old ambition and current reality for most of the world. Distance education has made commendable strides in bridging this gap but much more is needed. In this paper we propose a model that combines examinations with distance learning *à la carte*. While the antecedents of this model go back to the nineteenth century it also accords well with contemporary ideas on innovation that consider business processes to be about the co-creation of value through global networks.

## 2. ACCESSIBILITY : THE GLOBAL IMPERATIVE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION :

A new model for higher education is needed for three main reasons.

### 2.1 Access, Quality, Cost : An Iron Triangle ?

First, the major global policy aim for higher education in this first part of the 21$^{st}$ century is to make it more accessible in developing countries. Accessibility is usually measured by the Age Participation Rate (APR) which is the proportion of the 18-23 year-old age cohort enrolled in higher education. Today APR levels of 35% or more are considered necessary for a country to achieve sustainable development in a global knowledge economy. This is a major change from the situation that prevailed when the Universal Declaration of Human

Rights (UDHR) was developed and agreed. At that time even developed countries were content with APRs of up to 10%. Expectations of accessibility have changed much more radically in higher education than other levels.

Developing countries want to raise their APR towards the APR levels of rich developed countries now. They want to provide wider access to better quality higher education before they have become prosperous enough to roll out higher education at scale using the traditional models of the industrialised countries.

Ministers of education in developing countries express their policies for higher education in terms of access, quality and cost. They want to see wide access, high quality and low cost. Making a triangle from these three vectors gives us a simple way of assessing different models of higher education and points to the need for a new approach.

For most traditional models of provision, the vectors make up an inflexible triangle – an iron triangle with sides that cannot readily be altered to deliver the ministerial goals of wider access, higher quality and lower cost. Expanding access usually means reducing quality, especially if it is done at lower cost.

This iron triangle has been the bugbear of education throughout history. It has created an assumption in the public mind that quality and exclusivity must go together. Under this assumption, an institution with tough admission requirements is a quality institution, regardless of what happens within its walls. Under this assumption it is futile to think that poor countries can ever extend quality higher education beyond the elite.

But can we challenge the assumption? The triangle of the vectors of access, quality and cost gives us a way of looking at models of higher education and asking whether the inflexible triangle could be made flexible. We address that question below, but emphasise here that the first reason for a new model is that most current models of provision do not combine quality and access at a cost that is scalable for most countries.

## 2.2 New Types of Students :

The second reason we require a new model is that students are changing. They are already much more varied than the 18-23 year-old full-timers in education that constituted almost the sole clientele in higher education for much of the last century. Because students are now very diverse, it is futile to look for a stereotypical student around which to plan. However, within the diversity there are some frequent traits which are found in countries rich and poor.

The most common trait is that they all want to obtain credentials of value. In addition, because many students must now earn a living, their daily schedules for study vary greatly. Many are mobile, not simply between institutions in their own countries, but around the world. Thanks to technology they are better able to find learning resources on their own. They place limited value on physical presence and face-to-face communication because the Internet gives them access to social networking tools that did not exist even five years ago. These characteristics of students are an increasingly difficult fit with the 'one faculty – one class – one timetable' model of instruction that is still widely prevalent. Today's students look for learning in other settings using a variety of technology-mediated approaches that are asynchronous and self-paced.

## 2.3 Globalism and Nationalism :

The third reason for a new model is that higher education has to balance globalism and nationalism. Today the local is connected to the remote. Students want to log on to the world. Yet greater global awareness also creates greater national awareness. How does higher education create global citizens who can also make an authentic contribution to the development of their own countries ?

These are three reasons for a new model : higher education must meet new objectives, cope with a diversity of students, and live the tension between globalism and nationalism. We shall now focus on models of provision. What are the current models, and what is wrong with them ?

## 3. MODELS OF HIGHER EDUCATION :

We shall describe those models in very simple terms and examine them from four angles. First, their economics: are these models scalable to give wide access with good quality at low cost ? This is essential if we are to make higher education equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. Second, do the models meet the needs of a diversifying student body ? Third, how do these models fit with the evolving thinking about quality assurance and standards? Fourth, how do these models square with modern approaches to providing services ?

Nearly all higher education provision combines, in various proportions, three models which, for ease of recollection, we shall call the community model, the communication model, and the commodity model

### 3.1 Higher Education as Community :

The learning community is the oldest model. Tradition has it that Oxford University began in the 13th century students when English students, who had been thrown out of the University of Paris for rowdiness, moved to the city, rented houses as groups and brought in scholars to interact with them. This model was given its theoretical underpinning in the 19th century by John Henry (Cardinal) Newman who once wrote : 'If I had to choose between a so-called University which dispensed with residence and tutorial superintendence, and gave its degrees to any person who passed an examination in a wide range of subjects, and a University which had no professors or examinations at all, but merely brought a number of young men together for three or four years… I have no hesitation in giving the preference to that University which did nothing, over that which exacted of its members an acquaintance with every science under the sun.'

It is hard to imagine any government today funding Newman's model of a university as simply a community of students. However, it still evokes nostalgia in academe and continues in the form of institutes of advanced study at the post-doctoral level. Indeed, one of the challenges of expanding higher education in many Anglophone developing countries is that the small residential campuses of their first universities, created under the influence of Newman, are completely unsuited to the numbers now crowding into them.

### 3.2 Higher Education as Communication :

Almost as old as the community model is the model of higher education as communication. It was expressed first as scholars reading books aloud to students (lectures). Today faculty compose their own classroom presentations but still call them lectures. The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, speaking in the community tradition, disparaged this model as 'lecture bazaars under the absurd name of universities'. Yet this, of course, is the primary model of higher education around the world today and the implicit point of reference for debates about higher education.

### 3.3 Higher Education as Commodity :

Newman and Coleridge expressed their views in the context of a lively debate around the methods adopted in the 19th century by the newly-created London University. Its first methods downplayed community in favour of lectures and examinations, arousing Coleridge's anger. London then went much further and provoked Newman by completely delinking its examinations from study in any institution. Sir Robert Lowe, the member of Parliament for London University, summed up this model by saying, 'what I mean by a university is an examining board'. We call this the commodity model – commodity is not a pejorative word in our vocabulary – because examinations can be adapted to many purposes and reproduced inexpensively at scale.

Examination systems can also occupy the moral high ground from the point of view of the purpose of higher education. Dr. Robert Barnes, one of the graduates who campaigned for London's external system in the 19th century, extolled the virtues of examination by stating : 'knowledge alone must be tested. There is no substitute for it. The University and the public are not

concerned to inquire 'when or where' it was obtained. …Unlike more worldly stores, knowledge can hardly be acquired dishonestly, or without elevating the character of him who has achieved it'.

## 4. What's Wrong with These Models ?

We shall now examine these models in terms of their cost structure, their capacity to absorb student diversity, their fit with evolving notions of quality assurance and standards and their relationship to evolving thinking about business processes.

In its pure form the learning community model has problems in all four areas. It is not scalable at reasonable cost ; it does not fit the lifestyles of many students ; its confidence in the benefits of simply putting students together sits uneasily with quality assurance that is based on clear statements of purpose ; and it is hard to subsume under modern models of service businesses based on explicit processes.

Although the communication model – or lecture bazaar – is the one that most of us take for granted, it is not much better. Economically it remains within the paradigm of the iron triangle because it does not make it possible to increase access, lower costs and improve quality all at the same time. It used to be a good fit to the lifestyles of many students, who liked to go to classrooms at set times and listen passively to teachers, but this is becoming progressively less true as alternative paths to learning multiply. Thirdly, as lecture bazaars multiply, those who fund such institutions are becoming less satisfied with approaches to quality assurance that simply ask whether institutions are fit for their declared purposes. They would really like to make judgements about the integrity of those purposes. Finally, modern business models, such as that proposed by Prahalad & Krishnan (2008), argue that each client should be treated individually and should co-create the transaction with the supplier, drawing on global networks of resources. The lecture model assumes a standard product received from a single supplier in a passive manner.

By contrast, the commodity model, again in its pure form of examinations, is almost the mirror-image of the others. Its cost structure turns the iron triangle into a extendible triangle because it is scalable at low cost. Quality, understood as the standards set by examinations, can be set at whatever level is desired. However, from the students' perspective it is a double-edged sword: it presents maximum convenience but also the greatest chance of failure. Moreover, while an examination system does not fit comfortably with approaches to quality assurance that look at teaching and learning processes, it sits easily with reviews based on standards. Finally, while an examination may seem like a standard product, it can be versioned for many different purposes. Moreover, as we argue below, the process of getting to the examination gives great opportunities for co-creation drawing on global resources of distance learning.

## 5. Elements of a New Model :

This analysis shows that each model has its shortcomings, which is to be expected. If there were already an ideal model of provision for 21$^{st}$ century higher education we would no longer be writing papers about how to make higher education accessible. Furthermore, few would propose any one of the models in its pure form. Learning communities always have some formal teaching, lecture bazaars usually have examinations, and testing systems must at least offer guidance in how to prepare for the examinations.

A successful model for the 21$^{st}$ century will be a blend of these three models. But how must it be different from the blends we have now? The economic analysis suggests less emphasis on learning communities and lectures and more on examinations because this gives the possibility of scaling up higher education inexpensively to meet the great demand for access in the developing world. Furthermore, changing student lifestyles also call for fewer face-to-face elements of community and communication.

A key development today is that vital elements of community and communication can be provided through technology with a new and favourable cost structure. Most importantly, technology is also the answer to the major shortcoming of the commodity model based on examinations. Technology almost makes communicating communities into commodities because it allows them to be expanded to match new needs at low cost. Furthermore, each new generation of technology further cuts costs and boosts communication capacity, most recently with the appearance of social networking tools.

Today's Web 2.0 is a thoroughly interactive affair, and communities use its applications for a variety of purposes: there are sites for social book-marking; for custom searching; for organising micro-content; for social networking; for blogging; for podcasts; for videocasting and webcasting; for collaborative writing; and for project management. These sites attract a heavy volume of traffic especially from young people, even though only a tiny fraction of the world's population in the age range from 15 to 25 is yet online. So far, however, with the exception of repositories of open educational resources, the evolution of these platforms and their applications and services are mostly happening outside higher education.

Even the older forms of distance learning, based on the mass media of print and broadcasting, had made the iron triangle extendible. Today's media, and the emerging trend of open educational resources, further cut the cost of producing and finding learning materials and of distributing them. Quality is also higher.

In designing models of higher education provision for the 21st century, we should recall the results of the meta-analysis of 600 papers on distance learning conducted by Bernard, Abrami, Borokhovski, Wade, Tamin, & Surkes (2008) as part of a long-term programme to put research in distance education on a firmer footing (Abrami, et al., 2008 ; Lou et al., 2006 ; Bernard et al., 2004). They distinguished three types of interaction in support of learning : student – content; student – student; and student – teacher. Bernard et al. (2008) asked which

type of interaction does most to enhance student performance when it increased and found that increasing interaction with content was most effective. Increasing interaction between students in turn did more for their performance than fostering greater interaction with teachers.

These conclusions have important implications for practice. Previously, when challenged to increase completion and success rates, distance learning programmes have tended to increase the amount of personal tutorial support. This would now appear to be the least cost-effective way of helping students. Facilitating student – student interaction through self-help groups and meetings is also common and is more cost-effective. Much less effort has been devoted to enriching student – content interaction although this is potentially the most cost-effective strategy. eLearning methodology provides new and inexpensive ways to do this ; websites with answers to frequently asked questions being a simple example.

Putting all this together suggests an effective model that builds higher education around credible examination systems run by national bodies or established institutions, and then encourages a market of support providers to develop. Although the range of examinations would need to match the wide array of higher education programmes on offer, there is considerable room for aggregation and for some existing institutions to act as examining bodies for others.

Placing the functions of teaching and examining in different institutions may seem radical but it has numerous advantages. It makes issues of quality and standards much easier to address. Teaching institutions are challenged to raise their teaching to the level of the external examinations, rather than softening their examinations to fit their own teaching. Comparisons of institutional and student performance are made much easier. Having a few specialized examining bodies in any country will reduce the considerable corruption that mars internal institutional examinations in some places and could put degree mills out of business.

Students who register for examinations should have freedom to choose the amount of support that they need and can afford, creating a market for these services. There are many potential players in such a market including local public and private institutions teaching face-to-face as well as at a distance. There will also be organizations of various types operating across borders, but instead of expecting students to enrol for a complete package of teaching and assessment, institutions will unbundle the different elements of their support so that students can pick and choose.

Removing a major part of the examining function from many institutions will not eliminate the need for institutional quality assurance. UNESCO's *Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Cross-Border Higher Education* (UNESCO /OECD, 2006) are as relevant to the cross-border provider giving partial support to students registered for the examinations of a third party as to the provider offering a complete teaching and assessment package. However, some quality assurance systems could operate with a lighter touch, placing more emphasis on the quality of the processes for supporting students and for the development of an institutional quality culture (Koul & Kanwar, 2006).

Indeed, adopting this model would help higher education bring closure to the current debate about quality and standards. Some governments are unhappy with current approaches to quality assurance by their national agencies because they concentrate on determining whether institutions fulfil their missions rather than on the standards of performance of students expressed as learning outcomes.

The examinations component of this model would provide assessment of outcome standards and free quality assurance to concentrate on the processes of teaching and learning using process standards like ISO 9004.

This model could allow developing countries to expand access rapidly at low cost with good quality. Elements of it are already present in some places. Although our focus is on developing countries, we suspect that elements of the systems we describe will gradually be adopted within established systems in rich countries – after all, they are not new.

The model also accords well with the two key principles of modern business articulated by Prahalad & Krishnan (2008) in their book *The Age of Innovation : Driving Co-Created Value through Global Networks.*

Their first principle, which they summarise as N=1, is that value is created, not by standard products, but is 'determined by one consumer-co-created experience at a time'. At present examinations are hardly 'co-created experiences' but it is possible to envisage examination systems which do tailor examinations to individual needs for the certification of skills and knowledge. However, giving examination candidates the freedom to choose the nature and extent of support for their study gives abundant opportunities for the co-creation of learning experiences.

This also accords with the second of Prahalad & Krishnan's principles, which they call R=G, where R stands for resources and G for global. The core idea is that whereas in former days firms were vertically integrated and manufactured most components of their products in-house, today's firms outsource production all over the globe. As they put it : 'access to resources is increasingly becoming multivendor and global'. They call this the second pillar of innovation of businesses. Most higher education institutions are also vertically integrated operations in which, apart from a library full of external inputs, the teaching-learning process is based on the model of one faculty member teaching one class at one time.

The R=G principle also protects the model we propose from accusations of cookie cutters and a 'one size fits all'-approach. We are not suggesting convergence on a single model and common worldwide rankings of institutions. National differences thrive in a globalised world. Concepts of quality in higher education and judgements about curricular relevance will vary between countries and regions.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS :

We have described a model for the provision of higher education that centres on examinations and allows students to choose different ways of preparing for them. Although this type of system has a long history, contemporary technologies such as eLearning and open educational resources promise to make it much more cost-effective today. Adoption of this model, particularly in developing countries, could bring forward significantly the day when the world can say that higher education is equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

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