

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Transforming Universities with Digital Distance Education: The Future of Formal Learning**

MARK NICHOLS

New York Routledge, 2020, pp. 167

ISBN 978-1-138-61471-0 (hbk)

ISBN 978-1-138-61470-3 (pbk)

ISBN 978-0-429-46395-2 (ebk)

*Transforming universities with digital distance education: The future of formal learning* arrives at a timely demarcation point to consider the future for digital universities. The author provides an insightful and occasionally provocative analysis of how universities might reframe what they do, how they do it, and most importantly how they can best serve students using digital distance education in both traditional higher education and vocational and technical education.

Indeed, the reader will not agree with many of the assertions made in this book. At the same time, this book will make you think, which is exactly what education should do according to the author – make the student think differently about the world – and be engaged, enlightened and empowered. This book focuses on Commonwealth country universities, specifically drawing upon the UK, Australia and New Zealand. The references, case studies and examples are largely, but not exclusively, from these three countries.

Indeed, institutional transformation and change require staff, money and time and these all are part of the resource continuum. This could be construed as meaning the DDE model is suited primarily for well-resourced institutions in developed countries. This is not the case. The DDE model can be incrementally adapted, hence making it feasible for institutions to progress their distance learning enterprises in developing nations even if they are in the early stages of development.

The Commonwealth focus is not a major limitation, however, having some comparative examples from outside the Commonwealth as well as from *developing* Commonwealth nations would have been very useful to the reader. A discussion of US higher education, given it is the standard for quality and excellence globally, would also have been a good addition for the reader as a comparative metric with other institutional models and approaches, particularly those dual mode universities that balance campus and distance education missions.

The Digital Distance Education (DDE) university built around *accessibility, scalability* and *personalisation* is the primary goal of this book. The DDE university, in fact, should engage, enlighten



and empower its students. The paradox here, however, is subtle yet provocative: access, scalability and personalisation mean different things to different educators and as noted they require sustainable resources.

Access in the developing context usually means basic needs, technology and then university programmes. Scalability has been the mantra of open universities and is equated with serving tens of thousands of students. Conversely, scaling with DE is not a factor in US dual mode universities primarily due to funding and state control structures that make it virtually impossible to scale big numbers.

The heart and soul of this book are Chapters 4-7. Chapter 4 presents the DDE model and reflects a synthesis of the foundations of access, scale and personalisation in concert with the goals of engagement, enlightenment and empowerment presented earlier. The author argues the DDE university should be built around eleven (11) core elements. These include: consistency, data analytics driven, digitally agile, evidence-based, expert taught, flexible, learning-activity oriented, AI assisted, relational, success-driven and systematic.

The reader may note these eleven characteristics or building blocks are not new. All are used across the higher education spectrum in different types of institutions and different contexts. What Dr. Nichols has done is astutely bring these together in one model designed to create a new composite model for the DDE university. The reader will find this chapter to be an exciting shift in focus targeted at redesigning open and distance learning enterprises. The author argues that a DDE university should include all eleven components. This position will likely evoke diverse perspectives and vantage points.

Chapter 5 is a perfect change of pace where four Module Narratives are provided for two students, a tutor and a lead faculty member and describes their roles and self-assessments of learning and teaching experiences. These portraits are composites take from students and staff at the Open University. Chapters 6-7 detail key teaching roles, including the lead academic, learning designer, tutor and student support team. It is clear this chapter builds upon the Open University's globally recognised *team approach* for designing and developing open education.

The final chapter focus is on operating models and organisational change, both areas that are incredibly complex and very contextual and culturally specific. The real disconnect for this final chapter is it could have summarised and emphasised the key elements and themes of the book targeted directly at the DDE model.

The most conspicuous omission from this book is a discussion about *leadership*. Whether transforming an open or dual mode university or leading change towards a future vision, leadership plays and even more important role than technology. This is also where a discussion of leading change and organisational models could have been included, perhaps in two chapters. Change models are predicated on visionary and creative leadership. Change initiatives, more often than not, fail.

In summary, my final critique recognises that despite some limitations, this work makes a valuable contribution to the field. Dr. Nichols has presented a sound argument for reframing what we mean and need in a Distance Education University. He knowingly articulates his focus on access, scale and personalisation with the expectation that there will be debate, critique and resistance to his postulates.

Indeed, the most important contribution of this book is the author has expanded and reframed the dialogue of what it means to be a Distance Learning University. Even the novice institution new to distance education can take the basics of the model, the delineation of teaching roles, and module development to begin the process of learning for development, particularly and rightly in developing countries.

This book is a refreshing and candid analysis of some of the key issues facing distance education institutions. The timing for this book could not be better to stimulate much needed discussion and debate across the profession. Leaders and DDE practitioners committed to positioning their institutions for the future will find this book a valuable resource to compete and thrive in the new normal for digital distance education.

**Reviewed by:**

**Professor Don Olcott, Jr.**, FRSA, is a global ODL consultant based in Romania. He holds appointments at the University of Maryland Global Campus (USA), Oldenburg University (Germany) and as Honorary Professor of ODL at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Email: don.olcott@gmail.com

Cite this paper as: Olcott, D. J. (2020). Book Review: Transforming universities with digital distance education: The future of formal learning. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 7(3), 494-496.