

# *Global Perspectives on University Policies and Management*

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*Theme: from Educational Practice to Social and Cultural Inclusion*

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## **Introduction**

I am delighted to have the opportunity to address this important conference. My admiration for the work of Costa Rica's UNED goes back many years and I congratulate UNED on over thirty years of good work in open and distance learning. I bring greetings from the Commonwealth of Learning to all of you in San Jose and at the many other sites in Latin America.

You have given me an interesting and challenging title: *Global Perspectives on University Policies and Management for Distance Education*. I shall stick closely to that title but keep it simple.

First, I shall attempt a global perspective on the aims of distance education. Today there is a lot of talk about the convergence of distance education and education on campus. Conventional universities are making more and more use of modern technologies in their teaching. Many of them are putting in place policies for eLearning. But we must not be misled by this convergence over methods into thinking that there is a convergence of aims. I shall argue that distance education should have a fundamentally different set of aims from campus education. If distance education institutions like open universities forget that they are doomed.

Second, I shall talk about the means of distance education. Technology is evolving daily and we have a wonderful set of tools at our disposal. This should allow us to do an even better job of pursuing the aims of distance education.

Third, I shall move to the question of policy. The title that you have given me refers to university policy, and I shall address that. But it is also necessary to talk about government policies. Universities exist within a national context and the policies of governments have a considerable impact on their effectiveness. Having suggested the policies that governments should adopt I shall look at policies for distance education from the perspectives of both open universities and campus universities.

Finally, policies are necessary but not sufficient conditions for success. For success you need good management and I shall draw on my own experience of three decades of managing universities and distance education to make some suggestions.

## Why Distance Education?

That is my menu, so let us go back to the starter course and ask about aims and objectives. Distance education has its own possibilities, but the issue is not the aims of distance education. The great strength of distance education is that it can harness itself to a variety of aims. So the question becomes: what are the aims of global higher education in these early years of the 21st century?

## The Access Imperative

The major global policy agenda for higher education today is to raise access in developing countries (Daniel et al., 2006). Access is commonly measured by the age participation rate, or APR, which is the proportion of 18-23 year olds who go into higher education. It is not an ideal measure because today many people outside that age group want to engage in university study. But the APR serves our purpose because it does highlight the huge differences in access across the world. Today APR levels of 35% or more are considered necessary for a country to achieve sustainable development in a global knowledge economy. Yet the vast country of India has an APR of only 10%, and in parts of Africa APRs are well below even that figure.

The countries with low APRs want to raise them 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 richer countries. Ministers of education in developing countries express their policy agendas 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 agendas 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 with distance education we can challenge that 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.

## New types of students

Minister of Education may have their aims but higher education is about students. Students are changing. They are already much more varied than the 18-23 year-old full-timers that were the main clientele for higher education for much of the last century. Students are now very diverse, but within their diversity they share common features in countries both rich and poor.

First, they all want to obtain credentials of value. In addition, because many students must now earn a living, their daily study schedules 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. Today's students look for learning that uses a variety of technology-mediated approaches that are asynchronous and self-paced.

Along with their new attitudes and behaviours students have the same aspirations for higher education as ministers. They want higher education to be accessible, of good quality and available to them at as low a cost as possible.

## An extendible triangle

Distance education is potentially a revolutionary approach to education because it allows both the students and the ministers to have their wishes. It can make the iron triangle into an extendible triangle. The key to this revolution is the media and technology that distance education uses. The key principle is economies of scale. Even the older media of print, broadcasting, audio-cassettes, CDs and DVDs cost little to reproduce at scale once you had made the first copy.

These economies of scale are even more radical with the newer knowledge media (Daniel, 1996). Once a student has a connected laptop it costs almost nothing to access learning material, to download it, and to

interact with others. So to the extent that distance education relies on learning material, it can be scaled up at low cost.

## Independent and Interactive Learning

I used to make the distinction between two types of learning: independent learning where students work on their own with materials of various kinds; and interactive learning where they communicate with another person. For most people both types of learning are necessary for success.

I also used to make the point that whereas the independent learning benefited from the economies of scale associated with the reproduction of learning materials, interactive learning did not. That is because the more students you have the more teachers or tutors you need, so the interactive component makes the total cost of the distance education system increase more steeply as student numbers increase.

It is still true that live teachers are more expensive than learning materials. However, even there the newer technologies have changed the situation by making the cost curve less steep. By using the web and the techniques of eLearning tutors can be more efficient and more effective. Websites with answers to Frequently Asked Questions are a simple example of how technology increases both cost efficiency and user friendliness. Moreover, and this is most important, the connected world is a world of rapid feedback.

Research has shown for a long time - and it seems pretty obvious anyway - that students learn better if they get immediate answers to their questions and rapid feedback on their work. The Internet makes this possible.

## Scalability

Just now I said that distance education was potentially a revolutionary approach because it can make the iron triangle extendible. My plea to you, and the single most important point in this keynote address, is to urge you to exploit that potential. The fundamental difference between distance education and conventional approaches is that distance education is scalable. You can expand student numbers at low cost while retaining high quality.

Putting it the other way around, if you do not conduct distance education in a way that is scalable then you are wasting all that potential. Scalability is not automatic. You have to ensure that all aspects of the teaching and learning system are scalable. As you know, distance education systems have three key components: learning materials, student support and logistics. Learning materials are readily scalable. With modern computer systems and sensible division of labour the logistical and administrative functions are also easy to scale up too. The most challenging component is student support, but here too the basic technological principle of division of labour is the key to success.

The large and successful open universities train and employ large numbers of part-time tutors to provide individual support to students, to comment on their assignments and to mark their examinations. This

makes student support scalable too.

I am aware that there are open universities that do not scale up the student support function in this way. They insist that the full-time academic staff of the university must do all the tutoring and marking. Operating like this makes an open university just like any other university. It is condemned to remain small and it fails to exploit the fundamental innovation of distance education, namely that it makes the iron triangle into an extendible triangle.

People sometimes argue against using part-time academics on grounds of quality, but this is a spurious argument. With proper training, qualified part-time tutors do a better job of supporting students than full-time staff because they specialise in that function. That was our experience at the UK Open University. We were happy if full-time staff occasionally took on tutoring work to get the experience and to see how their courses were being received by students - but we made them go through the same training as the part-time tutors first.

### What kind of student support?

My final point about student support is to alert you to the work of Bob Bernard and his research team at Concordia University in Montreal. They conducted a meta-analysis of 600 papers on distance learning (Bernard et al., 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. They analysed the papers to ask which type of interaction does most to enhance student performance when it is increased. Their findings were that increasing student interaction with content was most effective. Increasing interaction between students in turn did more for their performance than fostering greater interaction between students and teachers.

These conclusions have important implications for practice. Previously, when challenged to increase completion and success rates, distance learning programs 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 are a simple example, as I just noted.

So much for the aims of distance education: the purpose of distance education is to achieve the revolution of scalability and to make the iron triangle into an extendible triangle.

### Distance Education: The Evolving Technologies

I turn now to the evolving technologies for distance learning I shall say less about this because there is abundant writing on the subject. Sometimes the focus on technologies for distance education can obscure

the fundamental purposes that I have outlined.

My basic message about technologies is that they are getting better and better and cheaper and cheaper so they reinforce the advantages that distance education already had with the older media.

But as well as being cheaper and better new technologies also bring new and powerful concepts. I shall mention two of them, and they are related.

## Web2

First, there is the general development that we now call Web2. Today's Web is a thoroughly interactive affair, very different from the one-way display system of its early days. Colleagues, friends and communities of practice now use Web2 applications as common means of communication.

These applications have 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 all attract a heavy volume of traffic, especially from young people even though only a tiny fraction of world's population in the age range from 15 to 25 is yet online. The evolution of these platforms and services is mostly happening outside schools and academe. I suggest that your institutions should get more involved with it.

Today we preach constructivist theories of learning and, when asked to list the capabilities that we want our students to have, we cite communications skills, critical thinking, problem solving, ICT skills, initiative, flexibility and a blend of independence with the ability to function in a team.

Yet much of our teaching, both in classrooms and at a distance, is still done in the objectivist style. We act as if knowledge is defined by experts. It is there to be learned and understood by students and then reproduced in examinations. There are right answers and proper ways of thinking. University teachers strive to be correct and authoritative, speaking with the clarity that comes from well-structured knowledge.

However, if we truly believe our declared aspirations for students' capabilities we should be putting the onus on them to construct knowledge. This means giving greater space for reflection, discussion, questioning and argument and for adopting greater equality between teacher and student. The Web2 applications are a powerful expression of this equality for they discourage any sense of hierarchy.

eLearning is not a constructivist approach to learning in and of itself; but it can facilitate such an approach if used well. Incorporating some of the Web2 applications that we have mentioned gives students the possibility of creating and adapting content and finding valuable information from sources that may be unknown to the teacher.

This accords well with two key principles of modern business articulated by Prahalad and 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'. I would argue, of course, that much of the success of distance education is to have created standard products of quality, in the form of learning materials, and made them widely available. However, distance learning has always been a combination of standard learning created by institutions and the individual academic creations that are student assignments.

Students now have the opportunity to produce much richer assignments through processes of co-creation using the second of Prahalad and Krishnan's principles, which they call R=G, where R stands for resources and G for global. Through today's web students have access to rich global resources and constructing their own knowledge from these resources improves their critical thinking skills.

## Open Educational Resources (OERs)

Second, I point to the development of Open Educational Resources, or OERs, as an important example of Web2 at work. If you believe, as I do, that we should treat knowledge as the common wealth of humankind, then the rapid development of OERs is a trend full of promise. I said earlier that learning materials were cheap to reproduce at scale. Historically, however, good materials have been expensive to produce because they require significant investments of time by academics and other skilled people.

OERs have the potential to reduce the cost of the creative process because we no longer need to start from scratch but can draw on the growing corpus of OERs, which are not only freely available, but freely adaptable. OERs are the subject of a keynote address in themselves. Here I simply urge you to be aware of them, to use them, and to contribute your own material to the growing pool of OERs - this global intellectual commons that is the common wealth of humankind. Let me here pay tribute to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, which has done so much to foster the development of the OER movement with seed funding.

## Policies for Distance Education

My title is *Global Perspectives on University Policies and Management for Distance Education* and it is now time to say a word about policy for distance education. First, it sounds obvious, but is worth repeating, that putting in place a foundation of policy is important. The Commonwealth of Learning has been advising governments and institutions about distance education for 20 years. Over that time we have observed that initiatives in distance education, be they at the national or institutional level, are more sustainable if they start from a foundation of policy. Applications of educational technology have always been bedevilled by *ad hoc* approaches. Starting with some policy reduces that danger.

## Government policy

At the national level governments should have policies about distance education as part of their wider educational policy - and they should be part of that wider policy and not just an add-on. Over the last decade COL has helped a number of African governments to develop such policies. This is not the place to say what such policies should contain, but they should make clear how the nation intends to use distance education to widen access to education in a perspective of lifelong learning in a knowledge society.

I don't believe that such policies should restrict the offering of distance education by saying which institutions can use it and which can't. However, policies should make clear any arrangements for state funding of distance learning and also, very importantly, arrangements for quality assurance. These arrangements should apply to everyone, public or private, national or foreign, who is offering distance education programmes in the national territory. I realise that is easier said than done, especially where foreign eLearning providers are concerned (UNESCO/OECD, 2006).

As part of their policy on distance learning some governments are establishing a national technological infrastructure that all providers can use. This can be a very helpful way of giving students access to information and communication technology without obliging each institution to set up its own network. Three examples of what I mean are Thailand's Cyber-University, Sri Lanka's Distance Education Modernisation Programme, and Ontario's Contact North/Contact Nord network. All these projects include networks of well-equipped centres. All institutions can use them to facilitate the offering of eLearning programmes by giving students ready access to computers with broadband connections.

## Institutional Policy

Policy is just as important at the institutional level. My earlier comments about the aims of distance education made clear what I think the main thrust of such policy should be, namely to ensure that distance learning programmes are scalable, of good quality and cost effective. Some institutions, such as Canada's Athabasca University, have policies and standards about student support, for example that a student will always get a response to an e-mail query within a set time limit.

Because they operate at scale and focus exclusively on distance learning most open universities will have a framework of policy in place. Such frameworks are essential in organisations that practice specialisation and division of labour so that many people contribute in different ways to the overall student experience.

Having a policy framework in place is even more important for institutions that operate in dual mode: both in classrooms and at a distance. I observe that it is difficult to operate in dual mode successfully, which is another reason for having clear policies, especially about the respective roles of individual academic staff members and of central university services in supporting distance learning programmes and their students.

A firm policy framework also helps to avoid the ever-present danger in dual-mode institutions, which is that the distance learning component of the institution comes to be seen as an operation of secondary importance and therefore of lower quality. This is common and happens even in cases, and they are many, where the numbers of distance students are far greater than the numbers on campus.

But dual-mode institutions can function well. Here in Latin America one that impresses me particularly is the Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja in southern Ecuador. Rector Luis Miguel Fernandez has not only combined campus and distance teaching so that the distance programmes can function at scale, but has also integrated the research and technology transfer function into both. It is an inspiring institution (Fernandez, 2008).

## Leading and Managing Universities

I have talked about the aims that distance education should pursue and the means at its disposal. Then I discussed the policies that governments and institutions can put in place to further those aims and take advantage of these means.

All this comes together in institutions, so I shall conclude with some comments about leading and managing contemporary universities. Leadership makes a difference. Research shows that a key determinant of the quality and impact of educational institutions is the quality of their leaders: university presidents, college principals and school heads. This finding is gradually being reflected in the processes by which university presidents are chosen. Governments are realising that in an era when the health of universities is particularly important to the knowledge economy, naming individuals as university presidents for political reasons, without regard to their skills and experience as leaders and managers, is not an intelligent policy.

What advice can I give you? I offer five recommendations to those of you with leadership roles in universities at all levels.

### Strategy

Your main task is to create a sense of common purpose in your university. This is called a strategy. Developing a good strategy means paying attention to both content and process. I find this simple quadrant helpful for illustrating this.

You can have good strategies and poor strategies. It is also vital that the people in the university feel that they own strategy because they helped to develop it.

Your aim is to create a strategy for the university that fits into the first box: it is a good strategy which the university community owns. You want to avoid box 4: a poor strategy with low ownership.

The real danger for a university is to find itself in either boxes 2 or 3. Box 2 is sometimes called a

consultant's strategy; meaning that it may be a good strategy but it has been developed without the involvement of the university community. Box 3 is an internally developed strategy that has high ownership but is a poor strategy - probably because hard choices have been fudged by horse trading and compromises to avoid inconveniencing anyone.

Your job as a university head is to create a strategy in box 1 by a combination of top down and bottom up planning. From the top you must inspire the university with a vision of its future. But you must also create a widely participative planning process that allows the university community to build a structure on the foundation of your vision. This can be done.

When I was vice-chancellor of the UK Open University I was fortunate to have a brilliant pro-vice-chancellor, Geoff Peters, a Professor of Systems, who organised a highly successfully bottom-up planning process in which the whole university, faculty, students and staff could take part. I am sure that the success of the Open University in the 1990s, during which its enrolments doubled from 100,000 to 200,000 and it became one of the financially strongest universities in the UK, owed much to the quality of our planning. Such a process also allows the student, staff and faculty associations and unions to be a constructive force rather than machines for generating complaints.

I should add that this type of bottom-up process is also the only way of creating a culture of quality within the institution. Such a process gives people pride in doing things well with the result that quality assurance visits are occasions for showing off the good work of the university rather than exercises in compliance with external requirements (Koul & Kanwar, 2006).

## Leading by example

My second piece of advice is to lead by example. In Latin America people have a greater sense of hierarchy and deference than they do in the three countries where I have worked and you can turn this to your advantage. I give a simple example.

From 1984-90 I was president of Laurentian University in Canada. By the time I left e-mail was the main vehicle for internal administrative communication. When I arrived at the UK Open University in 1990 e-mail was not widely used in the administration. I let it be known that I thought e-mail was an excellent tool for speeding up and democratising communication and that I responded to e-mail messages myself. After a while I also let it be known that anyone who sent me an e-mail message could expect a reply within 24 hours, whereas anyone who sent me an inter-office memo would likely wait at least three days.

The result was that the Open University adopted an e-mail culture very quickly. Is there something that you can do to illustrate by example a direction in which you want the university to move?

## Show faith in your university

I am always amazed when I hear university heads talk disparagingly about their academic staff, their

students, and sometimes their institutions as a whole. I do not think you can do this job well - and you certainly cannot be happy doing it - unless you believe in your university, in its community and in the academic ideal generally. This does not mean that you have to delude yourself about the institution's shortcomings but it does mean displaying the trust and faith that brings out the best in people.

One way that I did this, in all the six universities where I worked, was to take courses from the university as a student myself. That is my third recommendation to you. It is perhaps easier to do this in an open university than in a university where you would have to attend lectures, but I strongly recommend it as a practice. Apart from its other merits, it is by far the best way of finding out what the university's teaching and student support systems are really like!

## Informed opportunism

Most of you are from institutions that are striving to improve their reputations for teaching and research. My fourth recommendation is to do this by a process of informed opportunism - and I stress both words in that combination (Daniel & Bélanger, 1989). What I mean is that you should be on the lookout for areas where your university can leverage a good department into an excellent department or create a new centre that answers some regional or local need. I have found that all parts of the university community are proud - even if a little jealous - when a particular centre or department becomes celebrated for its success.

Informed opportunism is an increasingly successful strategy because the knowledge economy is placing more demands on universities, regional and local governments have a new appreciation of their importance, and the big national universities that used to cover the whole academic waterfront can no longer aspire to do so and are dropping the disciplines in which they are not equipped to excel.

I take an example from Laurentian University, which is located in Sudbury, Ontario, one of the world's leading regions for metal mining. In the 1990s it was clear that to modernise this industry needed greater local intellectual support. Furthermore the University of Toronto was losing interest in Mining Engineering which no longer fitted its profile and attracted few students. The stage was set greatly to expand teaching programmes in mining and to build excellence in research and development. The governments of Ontario and Canada supported this move, notably by moving the Ontario Geological Survey from Toronto to the Laurentian University campus in Sudbury.

When I left in 1990 Laurentian University had no Ph.D. programmes. Today, thanks to the seeds that we planted in the 1980s through the policy of informed opportunism, it has six Ph.D. Programmes and has just opened a medical school. This is also a reminder that university rectors must work in a long term perspective. It may well be your successor but three who reaps the academic benefits of the seeds that you plant today.

## Government relations

This brings me to my fifth and final piece of advice. Give government relations your full and

conscientious attention, even when the government that appointed you changes. Your accountability to government does not mean you have to be obsequious in bending to its every whim. Indeed, your colleagues will expect you to defend the legitimate academic independence of the university. This is easier if you remember that, in the knowledge economy, there is much that the university can do to help the government achieve its aims for economic, social and cultural development.

## Personal Testimony: Professor Dominique Abrioux

Earlier I said that leaders make a difference to universities. One of the most successful university leaders in Canada in the last decade was Professor Dominique Abrioux. He took over as vice-chancellor of Athabasca University when its fortunes were at a low ebb - there were even rumours government might close it - and transformed it into a highly successful and respected institution. Recently he summarised a study of single- and dual-mode universities in Canada (Abrioux, 2006) by sharing the following lessons, which I pass on to you as our concluding statement.

Professor Abrioux stressed:

- the primordial importance of relationships with governments
- the importance of relationship building with other institutions
- the double-edged-sword nature of inter-institutional collaboration
- the importance of cultivating communities of students and alumni
- the need to ensure that governance structures maximize institutional autonomy, credibility, and flexibility
- the importance of the academic staff for the university's reputation
- the importance of increasing market share through product differentiation
- the need to develop and entrench scalable models of programme development and delivery
- the importance of leadership.

Reflect on this advice, remembering that your context is unique as are the crises you face. Being creative does not mean slavishly following formulae. However, we hope that some of these principles will empower you and enhance the creativity that you bring to the transformation of your institution.

## Conclusion

It is time to conclude. I have tried to give you some Global Perspectives on University Policies and

Management for Distance Education. My final comment is that you are engaged in a very important endeavour. Distance education has the potential to create an educational revolution by bringing education of quality to everyone at low cost. You are the people who must have the courage to drive that revolution forward. It is the most important educational task of the 21st century.

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