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Open Universities and Open Educational Practices
A Content Analysis of Open University Websites

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See table of contents

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Article abstract

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to provide an overview of how open universities depict their current institutional engagement in open educational practices. In view of the growth of programming for non-traditional students by conventional universities, particularly through online learning and increasing interest in open educational practices, the intention is to gain a better understanding of the unique contributions currently made, or potentially to be made, by open universities in comparison to conventional universities. The study is conducted through a content analysis of open university websites, exploring key themes related to access-oriented open educational practices derived from terms and related concepts in relevant literature. With the growth of distance education, online learning, and other emerging access-oriented open educational practices in traditional higher education, open universities should be uniquely situated to provide visible leadership in these domains. The open university website content analysis explores the extent to which this is the case.

Keywords: distance education, open universities, open educational practices, online learning

Introduction

Over the past five decades open universities worldwide have emerged, matured, and in some cases morphed from, or evolved into, new structures. Some are currently under threat of severe financial restraint or even closure, while others are thriving. According to a list maintained by Contact North (2018), there are, at the time of this writing, 70 open universities globally; this number will fluctuate somewhat depending on how the count is made and the types of institutions included. The institutions vary from those that were established as fully open universities, to others that were transformed from earlier types of institutions, such as educational television stations. They range in size from student numbers in the thousands to student numbers in the millions. Some are regionally or locally established; others have been set up by national governments with a mandate for access to education across an entire country. In all, open universities represent an extremely wide range of institutions, serving different purposes as well as existing in different historical, socio-economic, and political contexts.

A large majority of open universities are in Asia (Figure 1), with substantially lower numbers in Europe, Africa, North America, South America, and Oceania.

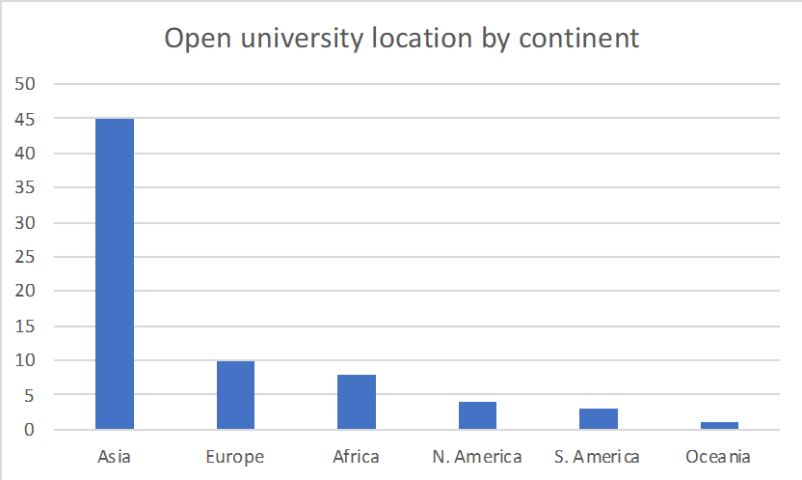

Figure 1. Open university location by continent.

Open universities are not just a phenomenon of the 1970s and 1980s; new open universities have continued to be established in subsequent years although at a sharply declining rate in the current decade (Figure 2).

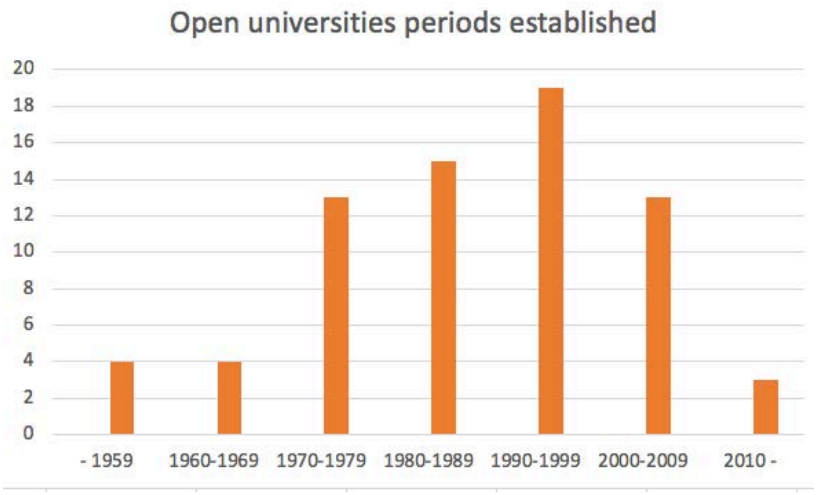

Figure 2. Open universities periods established.

With a conservative estimate of well over 20 million students worldwide—based on the partial enrolment statistics provided in the Contact North (2018) record—and with the existence of some open universities with student numbers in the millions, open universities will continue to make an impact into the foreseeable future.

From the 1960s onward, open universities used traditional broadcast media (television, radio) and correspondence or print materials to provide increased access to learning. Some of them continue in this tradition, while others combine broadcast media with print-based distance education or fully online learning, or use a variety of hybrid approaches, including blended programming with regional centres for face-to-face contact. Some have moved fully into the use of the internet and mobile technologies to deliver programming, depending largely on available infrastructures nationally or regionally, and accessible by targeted populations. Yet for many open universities, print-based learning materials remain a core or important ancillary technology for the delivery of education. Typically, the courses offered are developed by course teams with supporting faculty or tutors providing content expertise in development and tutorial support during delivery.

Open universities were established to fulfill specific governmental purposes, ranging from social and economic development to promotion of state ideology, with their purposes embedded in the larger economic and political setting (Tait, 2008). In their approach, open universities "embrace openness in terms of open admission, multiple exit points for studies, easy access to learning resources and flexible modes of learning" (Li, Yuen, & Wong, 2018, p. ix). Their novel designs aim to achieve economies of scale, with specialized course teams, media technicians, and learning technologists building courses for delivery to large numbers of learners, usually with the support of distance tutors. They are designed to meet learning needs at a scale that conventional universities have been unable to achieve, owing both to limitations of government funding and to restrictive organizational models (Daniel, Kanwar, & Uvalic-Trumbic, 2009). Today, discussions about the meaning and challenges of openness are rapidly expanding in the discourses of higher education and open distance learning, more often than not in relation to conventional higher

education. The challenge for the present research study is to sharpen the focus on open universities in general and provide a snapshot of their current role in open educational practices.

Openness in Higher Education

"Openness" in higher education is a somewhat amorphous and evolving concept (Peter & Diemann, 2013). Since the early days of open universities, mainly in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the definition of openness in education has expanded in multiple directions, captured in part more recently in the concepts of open educational resources (OER) and open educational practices. An early definition of OER makes reference to "teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use or re-purposing by others. Open educational resources include full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials, or techniques used to support access to knowledge" (Atkins, Brown & Hammond, 2007, p. 4).

While a complete definition of open educational practices remains emergent in open education discourses, it includes a number of aspects that either extend or exist outside of the early methods of open universities in relation to their founding purposes. Weller, Jordan, DeVries, and Rolfe (2018) find that in research in the field, distance education emerges in the 1980s

> with a focus on the growing phenomenon of open and distance universities. Two notable shifts occur which link distance education to other subsequent themes in the development of openness. From the mid 1980s, the term "open learning" becomes more prominent, signalling a shift towards learner-centred pedagogy and removing barriers. Towards the end of the decade, technological advances such as computer-mediated communication and the nascent World Wide Web become increasingly important. Both lay some of the groundwork for the subsequent theme of "E-learning" and "online education." (p. 116)

Since the early 2000s, an additional theme that appears is open educational resources (OER) and open access publishing, which are seen as helping to reduce the cost barrier of education to students. More recently there has emerged the "omnibus" (Mishra, 2017, p. 376) term "open educational practices" which, by Mishra's definition, includes the following characteristics:

- *Open access*: inclusive and equal access to educational opportunities without barriers such as entry qualifications and ability to pay.
- *Open learning*: the ability to study and learn at anytime, anywhere, and at any pace.
- *Open scholarship:* comprises releasing educational resources under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation, and redistribution by others (p. 376).

Cronin (2017) further describes open educational practices as involving "collaborative practices that include the creation, use, and reuse of OER, as well as pedagogical practices employing participatory technologies

and social networks for interaction, peer-learning, knowledge creation, and empowerment of learners" (p. 4).

The practices described by Mishra support access to flexible education more broadly, and can be linked to open and distance education, and in particular online learning given the availability of online social networking tools in both open and more conventional universities. In addition, Cronin moves open educational practices into the pedagogical space using participatory technologies and collaborative networks. What is increasingly evident in higher education generally, then, is a broad landscape of potential overlapping emphases, priorities and practices related to openness that can cross over and interweave among open universities and conventional universities that are adopting various open educational practices, either in whole or as part of isolated initiatives or specialized departments such as continuing education, lifelong learning, or open learning/education.

How do open universities engage beyond distance education in more recent open educational practices? Various open educational practices may well be at play to one extent or scale or another in almost any university, whether an open institution or not. Further, other open educational practices are distributed among consortia or internationally among institutions in a manner that shares the development and support of OER and other practices.

Nevertheless, in addition to the work of conventional universities, there continues to be a need at the global level for higher education models that can specialize in the unique requirements of distance education, as well as, in some cases, work at a very large scale where the needs of massive populations remain unmet and the construction of new conventional universities is infeasible (Taylor, 2007; Daniel, Kanwar, & Uvalic-Trumbic, 2009). In some cases, such large-scale institutions are linked to national infrastructure projects to connect remote areas with Internet access as a means of extending opportunities for the delivery of education. For the purposes of this study, the focus of exploration is focused mainly on open educational practices that are generally engaged in, and broadly supported at, the institutional level as part of an open university's promoted identity and strategy. For this reason, open university websites were searched as sites for institutions to portray and promote their distinctiveness in relation to openness in education.

Methodology

The data-gathering method was content analysis (Stemler, 2001) of open university institutional websites, in a process that analyses and explores correlations between texts and possible themes or concepts (Hasim, Hashim, Ariff, Sapeciay, & Abdullah, 2018. Included institutional websites addresses were obtained from an open university registry maintained by Contact North (2018). Websites provide a window into institutions, and generally have a strong marketing and recruitment function and a mandate to highlight comparative advantages of institutions. Institutional websites are not all designed or to provide systematic comprehensive accounts of their institution; however, the analysis proceeds on the assumption that important features of open distance education will manifest in institutions' focus on recruitment and accessibility, and their desire to portray leading, high quality open educational practices.

A manual search (Hasim et al., 2018) was conducted of all listed open university websites for terms related to distance education and open educational practices. The search focused on key terms and concepts interpreted and semantically derived from Mishra's (2017), Li, Yuen, and Wong's (2018) and Weller, Jordan, DeVries, and Rolfe's (2018) accounts of distance education, open educational practices, and open universities. The terms selected for searches were "distance education" (including web-based, print packages, broadcast television and radio, mobile, and other remote e-learning methods such as CD ROMs, apps, and/or software programs); "open admission" (minimal/no mandatory entrance requirements); "flexible scheduling" (including non-fixed registration and semester terms); "recognition of prior learning" (including advanced entry or recognition of non-formal credit obtained elsewhere), "OER and open textbooks"; "open access publishing"; "research"; and "innovation." The searches included evidence of any related concepts that would imply the terms selected, wherever they might appear within the website. It is recognized that "distance education" and "online/e-learning" are overlapping terms; where necessary, some items were included in both. While outside the general scope of open educational practices, the presence of research is a factor in the quality of distance education and innovation was included mainly to find any relevant practices not directly captured by the preceding terms and related concepts. Examples of such innovation include interactive virtual classrooms, open science, virtual labs, and simulations.

The search included "any publicly available data including relevant PDF documents linked to the universities' websites" (Hasim et al., 2018, p. 3). Where language difficulties were encountered, the translation feature of the Chrome Web browser was used. Websites that were inaccessible for technical reasons (i.e., that would not load or function in any major western browsers) were excluded from the study resulting in a total of six such exclusions of the initial 70 websites visited. Based on the website searches and analysis, the numbers of open university websites that contain either the words or descriptions of the dimensions represented in the columns were tabulated and converted into a chart. Each dimension was counted only once for each website, regardless of the number of times it appeared.

Analysis

Reviewing open university websites is not a simple task. They vary greatly in quality, some loading very slowly or not at all and some designed for a low-bandwidth infrastructure, while others approach the glossy stock-photo-brochure style of many conventional universities. Some have sophisticated navigational structures while others seem outdated and poorly organized. In some cases, the websites are highly operational in nature and designed for practical use, with detailed course schedules and registration forms on the main page. Where strategic plans were present, they provided helpful information about institutional priorities. Results of the search are presented in Figure 3.

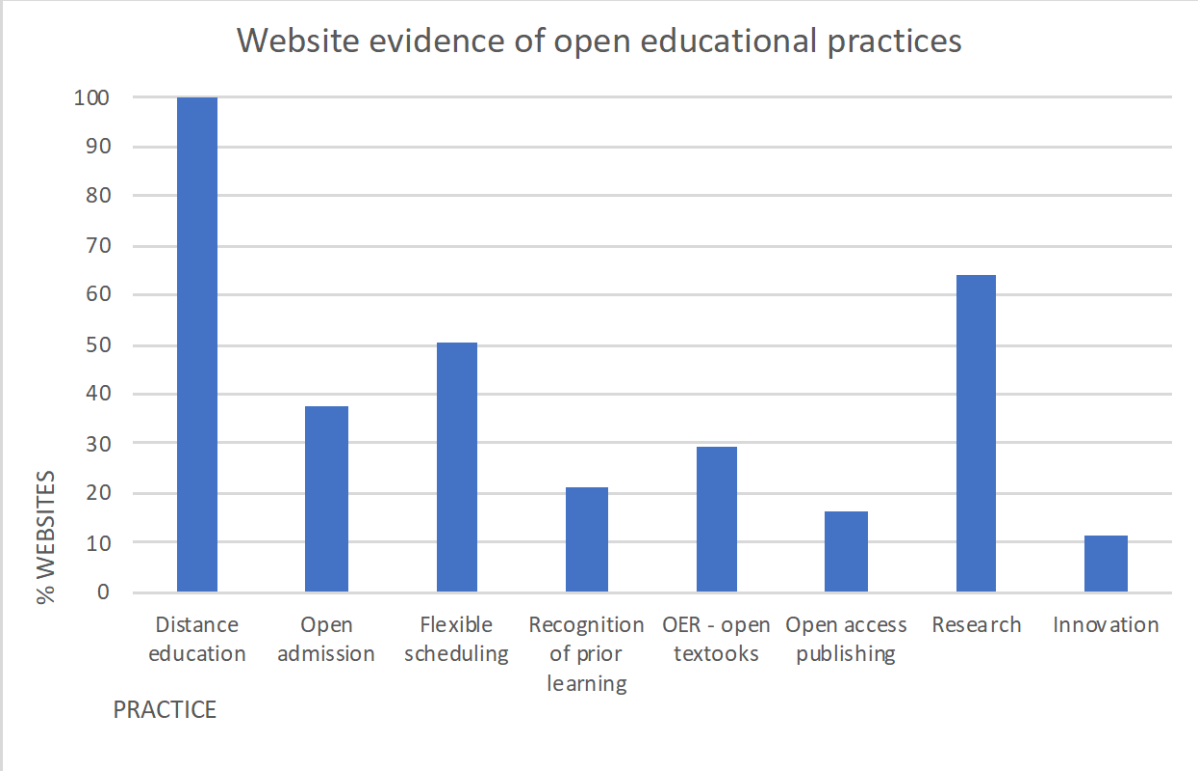

Figure 3. Website evidence of open educational practices.

Consistent with the early roots of open universities, distance education is indicated in all websites searched. Evidence of open access admission policies, such as those that have minimal or no mandatory entrance requirements or prerequisites, were found at 33% of institutions, primarily in developing countries. This is a difficult result to reconcile given the emphasis on access as an early core purpose of open universities. In a number of cases it was difficult to ascertain the nature of admission in general and this percentage should be looked at with a fair degree of caution. Recognition of prior learning is evident at 19% of institutions. Of the institutions reviewed, 45% indicate the use of flexible scheduling of programs on a time basis (Li & Wong, 2018) as opposed to fully scheduled semesters or course start and end points. Again, universities in developing countries generally featured more rigid course scheduling systems. Shifting toward more recent open educational practices appearing more broadly across higher education, there is evidence of such practices as OER adoption, including open textbooks was evident on 27% of institutional websites, with 16% of institutions making reference to open access publishing. There is no apparent regional pattern of use for either OER or open access publishing among open universities. References to innovation in educational practices were found on 9% of sites, including such examples as open science, MOOCs, competency-based assessments, and collaborative e-learning. A research focus is evident in slightly over half the institutions (56%), either in academic disciplines or in online and distance education. Research can be seen as an indicator of quality for both course content, and the mindset to review and update delivery methods and course content over time. Surprisingly, references to mobile learning are minimal, given the ubiquity of devices globally. A further item of interest is that there seem to be a number of institutions announcing expansions of central and/or distributed regional campuses.

Discussion

While one of the original purposes of open universities was to address educational needs not met by conventional universities (Tait, 2008; Lane, 2009), as early as 1987 Shale observed "it has proven difficult to define what an open university is (or is not). A university may be "open" in some aspects yet remain conventional in others. Conversely, conventional universities may be open in ways similar to the open universities while at the same time remaining firmly rooted in their tradition" (1987, pp. 9-10). To some extent, then, the lines blur between some aspects of open universities and conventional universities, particularly with regard to the presence of distance education and, more recently, in some open educational practices more generally. As noted by Orr, Weller, and Farrow (2018),

> expectations on higher education institutions to widen participation through reaching out to potential student groups while recognising their own personal circumstances puts new demands on the flexibility of time and place of studying. Whilst such considerations led to the establishment of specific national institutions in many countries. ...the expectation is now for all or at least most higher education providers to contribute to widening participation (p. 13).

This phenomenon is due in no small part to the longer-term trend of shifting student population demographics at many traditional universities from the "conventional" age range to older adult learners (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002; Hanover Research, 2015), and the potential economic advantages to institutions of recruiting from this latter demographic especially if enrolments in certain areas are declining among conventional student populations. These "non-traditional" students are described as "new groups of students who, for a complex range of social, economic and cultural reasons were traditionally excluded from, or under-represented in, higher education, have come to participate in higher education in increasing numbers" (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002, p. 312.). However, as has been learned over time, reaching out to "non-traditional" students, while potentially reaching more learners quantitatively, does not necessarily address other types of unequal access to higher education:

> For example, older people without traditional entry qualifications for higher education, people from working class backgrounds, those living in remote or rural areas, those from ethnic minority or immigrant groups appear to have done less well. They are all still largely under-represented in higher education because they still face greater barriers than the "traditional" students. Therefore, high participation rates do not automatically imply that the functions of higher education in social selection and social reproduction are obsolete, or issues of inequality or access are features of the past. The evidence from our study strongly suggests that the massification of higher education has not been sufficient to eliminate unequal rates of participation by different social groups (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002, pp. 313-314).

Among such inequalities in South Africa, for example, are persistent social injustices related to colonialism and apartheid, severe socio-economic disparities, ineffective school systems, skill shortages and population health issues (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). Additional efforts need to be made by higher education institutions to address social inequities beyond simply increasing the numbers of "non-traditional" students through various techniques. As noted by Prinsloo and Subotzky (2011), "(m)ost developing-world research tends to use northern models uncritically as if they have universal validity" (n.p.).

The presence of these many needs and challenges returns us both to approaches beyond distance education to the fuller suite of open learning approaches and open educational practices such as flexible learning, OER, open admission, and assessment of prior learning, as well as a broader mandate of specific institutions to deploy the tools and methods of distance education and open educational practices. These approaches are intended specifically to improve access to education on a wider scope of dimensions and to promote more learner-empowering educational practices.

In spite of their relatively modest appearance on open university websites, OER and open access publishing are of growing interest in many conventional universities, largely to reduce costs to students, a strategy that would seemingly be a logical fit for open universities and their mandates to promote access to education. Organizations such as UNESCO (2018) and the Commonwealth of Learning (2018) promote the use of OER. It is also surprising that information about recognition of prior learning, potentially a strong distinctive for open universities given their access mandates and non-conventional structures, is not more prominent. Initiatives are in place at the national levels in South Korea, possibly the Philippines, Thailand, and Japan, as well as formal recognition of credit for OER and MOOCs at the national level in India among other possible areas (Harris & Wihak, 2018). While it would seem likely that there would be linkages between open universities and national or cross-jurisdictional programs of recognition of prior learning, this is not substantially visible in open university institutional websites.

Conclusion

This review of open university websites reinforces the earlier-noted observation by Shale (1987) concerning the blurring of lines between open and conventional universities, particularly with regard to distance education. While open universities have always been strongly characterized by the use of distance education modalities, conventional universities also continue to grow their distance education offerings, particularly with the expansion of online learning via learning management systems in place of the still-ubiquitous legacy of print packages in many open universities, a challenge due in no small part to available infrastructure, funding, and expertise. In terms of e-learning, there remains limited indications across the board of use of mobile and other advanced learning technologies. Recognition of prior learning is growing among conventional universities, particularly with developments in recognition of open courses and MOOCs around the world. Of the remaining areas that might characterize open universities and their mandates, flexible scheduling and open admission are present in a way that is not seen in most conventional universities outside of specialized departments. This is a potential distinctive that does not appear to be exhibited to the extent that might be expected in open universities. As these features are both challenging to implement in conventional universities given their structures and organizational models, they have substantial potential to distinguish open universities in overcoming important barriers to higher education.

As noted earlier, the present study has been limited to open university websites, which provide a variety of levels of detail and information about their institutions, their commitments and activities. Further follow-up research could reach beyond websites to include a more detailed analysis of institutions and their context over time, including their geographic, economic, social and political settings, policy frameworks, and

learner demographics. Specific lines of research may include changes in relation to specific open educational practices and such phenomena as the MOOCs and microcredentials.

An evolving mix of universities and other higher education institutions worldwide is becoming increasingly involved in online education and open educational practices. The snapshot generated from this study would indicate that while open universities continue to use distance education in various forms, their participation in a variety of open educational practices appropriate to their contexts remains unclear.

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