

Widening access through openness in higher education in the developing world: A Bourdieusian field analysis of experiences from the National Open University of Nigeria

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Abstract

Bourdieu has argued that higher education is a field that reproduces social inequality, thus complicating how openness widens access to higher education in the developing world. Drawing on the experiences of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), this paper critically analyses and evaluates the rationale, approach, difficulties, opportunities, outcomes and benefits of NOUN's experience in widening access to higher education in Nigeria using Bourdieu's field theory. We argue that the success of efforts for openness in higher education in a developing world context involves steering the contradictory tensions of openness and access across competing policy and practice fields. We offer this theorisation as a future social theoretical agenda for reflexive research for improving the effectiveness of praxis to widen access through openness in higher education in the developing world.

Keywords: access, Bourdieu, field, higher education, openness, reflexivity

Introduction

Today, openness has ascended into the contemporary debate on higher education (HE) globally. This is due largely to the increasing popularity of open and distance learning (ODL) approaches, or the academic interaction between learners, their tutors, and HE institutions (HEIs) from remote locations with the support of synchronous or asynchronous media, technologies and resources. Against this rupture, higher education historically has been perceived to "require as a minimum condition of admission the successful completion of secondary education or evidence of the attainment of an equivalent level of knowledge" (Assié-Lumumba, 2006, p. 87). This restriction has prevented a large number of people from gaining access to higher education because of a lack of the prerequisites necessary for participation. Because these restrictions often fail to account for a variety of socioeconomic and cultural factors that may cause the inability of candidates to participate in higher education effectively, Unterhalter and Carpentier (2010) argue for the need to identify the factors that may affect participation in higher education to open up access effectively. This is particularly true in the case of groups hitherto marginalised from HE due to differences in income levels, quality of life, and discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation and disability.

In tackling the complex issues that constitute widening access through openness in HE, two significant structural and theoretical challenges have emerged. On the one hand, ODL has given rise to the transformation of higher education from an elite to a mass system of higher education. A larger numbers of participants from diverse backgrounds now ostensibly have greater choices and opportunities to participate in higher education. On the other hand, this change has vexed HE researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, leading to debates over the purpose of higher education, who should control it, how and where it should be organised and provided, what should be taught, and how it should be financed (Davies, Williams & Webb, 1997). These questions reflect

and interact with a wider debate on the massification movement of higher education, particularly in developing country contexts (Preece, 2006).

Given this highly charged, volatile and politically sensitive background to the nature of openness and access in HE, this paper critically reflects on and evaluates the experiences of institutionalising 'openness' as a radical higher education philosophy and practice to widen access at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). We first map out the historical origins and dominant conceptual definitions of 'openness', drawing on different interpretations from the literature. We then interpret the openness philosophy and practice sociologically, using Bourdieu's framework for understanding HE. We discuss the rationale, approach, difficulties, opportunities, outcomes and benefits of NOUN's experience in operationalising openness using Bourdieu's concept of the field. Finally, we interpret the implications of NOUN's experience to outline a social theoretically informed agenda for future research to improve the impact of praxis to widen access through openness in HEI in the developing world.

Openness: Origins, meanings and interpretations

The earliest mention of the term 'open learning' was found in the Pitmans Journal in 1929 (Rowntree, 1992). The debate about openness in higher education gained prominence after the establishment of the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) in 1969 as the first Open University in the world. Open learning is a philosophic construct which refers to the general aim of democratising access to education and training. This implies the provision of equity, that is equal opportunities, to previously underrepresented or socially excluded groups to participate in higher education. It also means that 'open learning' is an "organised educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which constraints on study are minimised either in terms of access, or of time and place, pace, methods of study or any combination of these" (Perraton, 1997, in Perraton 2007, p. 12).

The UKOU's openness philosophy aspired to pursue four key dimensions to widen access—being "open as to people, open as to places, open as to methods, and finally open as to ideas" (Crowther, 1969, p.1). However, in implementing this philosophy, a variety of organisations and programmes describe themselves as 'open', although their interpretation has been restricted to one or a few of these dimensions of openness (Daniel, 2011). For example, while the UKOU focused on being open as to people by not insisting on any formal entry qualifications for its programmes, some open universities in developing countries, such as the University of South Africa, the National Open University of Nigeria, and the Indira Gandhi National Open University, India, have not embraced this dimension of openness. These HEIs interpret the 'people' dimension of openness to mean increasing the rates of participation of candidates who have the formal entry requirements required to gain admission into traditional higher education institutions. This is certainly not due to a lack of willingness to commit to openness by admitting candidates who may not satisfy the formal entry requirements. In trying to understand the different applications of openness by HEIs, analysts have contended that 'openness' operates along a continuum, with a variety of factors at play when institutions decide which dimensions of openness they have chosen to embrace at specific points in their institutional history. Reddy (1987, in Biswas & Gaba, 2002, p. 20) argues that:

Open learning, therefore, is not always synonymous with Open University or distance education. Several open universities and open learning institutions prescribe certain entry qualifications and they debar those who do not fulfil the conditions laid down by them. Therefore, if the idea is to provide educational facilities to a larger number of people scattered all over, i.e., providing greater access to education, the term 'distance education' would be more appropriate.

Daniel (1999) disagrees with Reddy's claim, arguing that "distance education is a means of pursuing some dimensions of openness. Open learning may or may not involve distance education, whereas distance education may or may not contribute to open learning" (p. 293). However, returning to the dimensions of openness articulated by Lord Crowther for the UKOU, enrolling students scattered across different national and international geographical boundaries would qualify as being open under the 'open as to places dimension'.

Another dimension of openness credited to EDUCAUSE bears reporting in full:

a central pillar of the academic community is its commitment to the free flow of information and ideas. This commitment to sharing is essential to scholarly discovery and innovation. It is also central to helping educators and learners engage with, contextualise, and apply scientific knowledge in order to construct practical knowledge to advance personally and academically. Finally, this commitment to the open sharing of ideas provides a foundation for leveraging resources, both within and among institutions, to strengthen the creation, transmission, and preservation of knowledge (Feldstein, 2008, p.1).

Because one of the key features of both open and distance education to widen access has become the ubiquitous use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a resource for learning and sharing (Anderson, 2007), the role of ICTs in enabling openness now deserves critical consideration in the 21st century. Wiley (2006) argues that technology makes openness and sharing more feasible today than in the past print-on-paper world, having provided us with an "unprecedented capacity to share and thus an unprecedented ability to educate" (p.5).

One significant development in this area has been the rise of the open education resource movement. Open Educational Resources (OERs) are digital materials that can be re-used for teaching, learning, and research. OERs are made available freely through open licenses, which allow uses of the materials that would not be permitted under copyright alone (D'Antoni, 2009).

But recent work suggests OERs are problematic. Analysts have argued that most open source solutions originate from the global north, while the consumption clientele are those in the global south (Richter & McPherson, 2012) and that OERs may not meet the prescribed criteria for openness by the agencies like UNESCO and COL that are driving the OER movement. As they currently exist most OERs contain restrictions of different sorts that limits their openness (Wiley & Hilton III, 2009). A full discussion of these restrictions is beyond the scope of this paper, however the restrictions create an imbalance that is resonant of the era of foreign aid to countries in the global south. Thus OERs raise questions as to what can be freely shared on the web, what is the nature of adaptation, how do these changes and processes enable openness, or do they reproduce historically asymmetric power relations? This challenge has led to a new interpretation emerging of openness to widen access to HEIs because of the tensions and opportunities precipitated by today's emerging digitally mediated and networked social structures (Castells, 1996)—a call for opening up the curriculum and permitting students to design their own programmes.

While there is generally support about the potentials of the technology dimension of openness and OERs, analysts have also raised concerns that ICTs may serve to exclude the marginalised, and widen the "digital divide" (Lane, 2009; Wiley & Hilton III, 2009). Addressing these wider socio-economic and cultural issues that affect the dimensions of openness that can be enabled hence requires considering the role of HE in developing societies.

Daniel (2004) opines that the most important aims of education that cut across different societies are access, quality, flexibility, and innovation. This is an extension of the arguments by educational philosophers that the aim of education—in the fullest and deepest sense of the word—is in keeping with the nature of the human personality or "human nature" (Harman, 1992, p.15), because it is when quality education is accessible and flexible that it can truly raise its recipients to their fullest potentials.

Overall it is clear that the meaning and interpretation of openness in HE continues to evolve since its early origins. The growing role of ICTs also adds another crucial dimension to understanding the relationships between openness and widening access to HE. Finally, the issue of how openness in HE contributes to social change is a crucial unexplored area in the literature, yet important to develop a critical perspective on the added value and impact of initiatives for openness. To understand this issue requires a social theoretical approach that grasps the role of HE “in contributing to the maintenance and reproduction of social inequality” (Naidoo, 2004, p. 457). To go beyond the interpretations and dimensions of ‘openness’ within different educational aims presented above, a social theoretical approach to HE research that can contribute to improving the conceptualisation of the openness philosophy is the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

Openness philosophy and the work of Pierre Bourdieu

Globally, higher education institutions operate within historical and cultural settings contexts that are shaped by different factors. However, issues of access and equity are common threads that link HEIs across regions with their host societies. A key issue in contemporary research into higher education is how to address inequities in access and achieve as far as possible, a student population that replicates the composition of society as a whole (Eggins, 2010, p. 6).

HE has long been a field in which power circulates, such that it regulates particular forms of social and cultural knowledge that are accessible to different groups in society. This is because HE functions within political and economic parameters of the society, therefore it is a site that owes its sustenance and continuity to other social arenas. HE tends to respond to internal and external pressures from these larger competing social arenas in pursuit of access and equity for diverse groups (Guri-Rosenblit, 2010, p.9). Two of these recent changes in the situation of HEIs in a developing country are the issues of openness and access, as explained above. HEI must respond, so research on how they respond is urgently needed to explain outcomes. Hence it is instructive to interpret HE social critically to improve models and strategies for operationalising openness to widen access effectively.

Bourdieu, a social critical theorist, argued that the interaction between social, cultural and economic capabilities and mental dispositions influence social positions in various social sites, called ‘fields’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). This perspective suggests that openness does not automatically translate into access; rather access is a product of a dynamic interaction among several mechanisms in the social ecology.

Bourdieu sees HE as a powerful contributor to the maintenance and reproduction of social inequality (Naidoo, 2004, p.457). His ‘theory of fields’ attempts to explain the mechanisms that mask and help to perpetuate social domination by misrepresenting it, (Wacquant, 1993, p. 233) both for the dominant institutional policymakers and those whose roles it is to implement the policies.

The conceptual tool of Field advanced by Bourdieu to explain social conditioning and change based on how group cultural experience and capabilities can determine dispositions to access and participation in higher education, can be used to unearth these mechanisms and their influence on higher education more significantly.

A field according to Bourdieu is a network of historical and current relations between people, groups and institutions, each of which can be perceived objectively as having social positions that are anchored in capitals (Webb, Schirato & Danaher, 2002). In relation to higher education, Bourdieu sees the field as independent of external pressures, but capable of generating its own values and behavioural imperatives that are relatively autonomous from the forces of politics and the economy. According to Naidoo (2004, p. 458) “the field is structured in hierarchy in the sense that agents and

institutions occupy dominant and subordinate positions". The dominance of either the agent and/or the institution is determined by the strength of social and symbolic capital that are possessed by each party. Bourdieu & Passeron (1990) further argue that academic success or failure by students is not attributable merely to natural aptitudes such as intelligence and giftedness, but to cultural capital inherited from the social \ field occupied by students. Using the Field as a tool for social research unpacks the relationships between the mechanisms for social and capital formation of agents such as students, academics and institutional leaders in HEIs. These practices within higher education systems are referred to as 'strategies' which can be deployed for specific ends, such as openness to widen access to higher education for diverse groups.

Agents like students approach the field of higher education relying on their social and cultural capital, and agents like academics and institutional leaders also come with their symbolic capital, all trying to negotiate a position within the HE architecture. These positions reflect their practical orientations based on what is perceived as objective possibilities. However, because their objectives are dissimilar and the strategies of practice employed are not in tandem with one another, the field of HE is constantly bedevilled with tensions between different agents and the institutions. Consequently, the HE system often reproduces the principles of social class and other forms of domination under the cloak of academic neutrality.

A Bourdieusian understanding of HE as a social field is insightful for our purpose because using his thinking tools can reveal how efforts to widen access through openness in higher education grapple with the tension between the two concepts as various players in the field of HE respond to changes in the wider social and political fields. In the next section of the paper, we use Bourdieu's notion of the field to critically evaluate the experiences of NOUN in operationalising openness in order to illuminate this tension.

Openness at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)

NOUN was established as a dedicated, purpose built distance learning university in 2002 with the key objectives of providing wider access to university education in Nigeria; ensuring equity and equality of opportunities in university education; providing inclusive education and lifelong learning for all; and, reducing the cost and inconveniences of participating in higher education in Nigeria (Federal Ministry of Education, 2002).

One of the approaches adopted to fulfil its objectives is that no applicant is denied admission, since the university does not have a restriction on the number of students that it can enrol. In Nigeria, candidates applying for admission into bachelors' degree programmes are normally required to pass the Universal Tertiary Matriculation Examinations (UTME). Although candidates applying to NOUN are exempted from this requirement, they must meet the National Universities Commission's (NUC) minimum requirement of five credits at the Ordinary level in the Senior Secondary Certificate Examinations. Students who lack the required number of 'O' level credit passes are 'stepped down' to the Access Programme.

The Access Programme is another strategy designed by NOUN to adequately prepare weak candidates for their undergraduate studies. It offers such candidates a series of remedial courses for one academic year and upgrades them to full degree programmes on successful completion of the Access Programme.

The university also offers another stream of admission referred to as Concessionary Admission. Under this scheme, matured candidates of 40 years and above, with 10 years of work experience, who fail to meet any of the prescribed requirements may apply for admission into the four year programme.

The NOUN philosophy of openness seeks to enhance participation opportunities by diverse groups of interested learners (FME, 2002). Thus, NOUN also adopts a flexible learning approach that does not prescribe a minimum duration for the completion of degree programmes. Consequently the print medium is the most predominant means of instructional delivery, though the print materials are also available online through the university website as non-interactive content. It uses multimedia and ICT resources that can be afforded by the majority of its students. Overall, NOUN's approach to access extends to the people, places and methods dimensions of openness (Crowther, 1969; Daniel, 2011).

The field of Nigerian higher education

The National Universities Commission (NUC), the regulatory agency governing all universities in Nigeria, prescribes a set of guidelines that are designed to provide a framework for implementing open and distance education in Nigeria. The intention is to bring Nigerian distance learning in conformity with global best practice, not just at NOUN but also in the entire Nigerian university system. Thus the NUC (2009, p. 5) confirmed that

“true openness especially in terms of entry requirement is to be considered a longer-term objective against the backdrop of the reality in the nation's university education scenario which is characterized by perennial mismatch between the demand and supply side of the access equation. The current situation is that there are thousands of young qualified candidates seeking university admission who cannot be absorbed into the nation's universities”.

This declaration implied that the NUC preferred that NOUN focused attention on taking up the unadmitted population of applicants to conventional institutions in Nigeria, rather than groups of non-traditional university students.

This policy contradicted the philosophy of openness adopted by NOUN, which derives from the original philosophy of the UKOU and similar institutions around the world: that Open Universities are 'open to people' of all creeds, colour and orientation, irrespective of factors such as age, gender, disability and socio-economic background.

Instead, what the NUC stance implied was massification. However, widening access through openness is not limited to increasing numbers and enhancing equal opportunities to all applicants. It also involves providing opportunities for those with certain types of 'deficits' to develop to the required standard. Therefore equity is as important as expanding access to higher education.

In order to ensure the kind of development that low and middle income countries like Nigeria are seeking, all groups of people must be reached to educate and empower them to contribute meaningfully to social development. To realise equity, those that are marginalised, disadvantaged, underprivileged and underrepresented in higher education must be provided adequate opportunities to higher education. However, the NUC policy directive prevented NOUN from fully embracing this broader concept of openness.

The rationale of the NUC in prescribing the policy was based primarily on the need to sustain quality in higher education delivery. The NUC contended that dual-mode distance learning institutions admit more part-time than full-time students. Although this is against the regulations establishing such institutions, more often than not, part-time learners are regarded as sources of additional income for the faculty, who pay little or no attention to their intellectual progress.

Perhaps the NUC is right that these emerging institutions are transitioning from running of part-time/ sandwich courses to distance learning and may require a phased-enrolment increment process. However expansion of scale has been one of the hallmarks of distance learning, whether through a dual-mode institution, or a single mode institution. Forcing institutions to admit only

traditional groups of higher education participants as is being done in the case of NOUN prevents the achievement of the fundamental tenets of open distance learning. So is limiting the expansion of numbers of potential distance learners, as is the case for dual-mode institutions.

Implications

A Bourdieusian field analysis shows how implementing an openness philosophy in a HEI in a developing country context was difficult because of the tension with a dominant policy actor—NUC—that influenced the meaning, definition and interpretation of openness in the field. This difficulty is resonant of Bourdieu's argument that the field of HE acts as a mechanism for reproduction of inequalities. The HE field mirrored the social space in which there are dominant and dominated agents and institutions engaged in continuous struggles for usurpation and exclusion (Naidoo, 2004).

NOUN was established to provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied. It has a specific mandate to massively democratise access to higher education opportunities. According to Trow (1974) massification implies an increase in numbers; it involves *inter alia* more open access and a more heterogeneous student body. Yet these goals were contradicted by the policy restrictions imposed by NUC to widen access only to those already qualified but lacking a spot because of overcrowding in traditional institutes. This tension reduced the potential benefits of openness in widening access to marginalised groups.

In fact, this tension could be perceived as contributing to reproducing marginalisation and reducing access despite recourse to visionary ideals and discursive practices of 'openness'. Because of NOUN's dependence on NUC, it lacked the economic and political resources to react against this policy imposition that clipped its wings and limited openness in HE. Hence, where a HEI is positioned in the social field determines the effectiveness of its openness strategy. As a new player in the field, NOUN lacked the resources to challenge what the NUC saw as the legitimate criteria of an admission policy for openness, prior qualifications. Hence, the lack of social and cultural capital of marginalised and disadvantaged learners in accessing HE was not addressed.

In an era of rapid change in HE in developing country contexts, including the complexities of massification, democratisation, and commodification, the tension between openness and access is likely to become a struggle for power given the permanent conflicts that produce the field of HE.

As this exemplification shows, Bourdieu's social theoretical framework is suitable for analysis and design compared to extant theories of open and distance learning used to widen access. Because of the regulation of HEIs in the developing world, ODL strategies designed to widen access can perversely create restrictions for students from certain socio-economic backgrounds. Competing tension strategies by different players in the field may end up increasing rather than reducing marginalised learners' social distance from HEIs. Openness is therefore not just a problem of equalising access to higher education through distance learning, but a process that reproduces and legitimates the 'ensemble of distances' that constitute social structure (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Nevertheless, one way that NOUN is trying to overcome this challenge is through its 'Access Course' programmes. These provide remedial access routes for applicants aged below 40 who lack the entry qualifications, and a separate concessionary admission route for applicants older than 40. Therefore, one can surmise that despite a rigid regulatory higher education environment, the NOUN still pursues its philosophy of openness, albeit on a modified basis. It has attempted to pursue the dimensions of openness to people and different geographical locations, using a variety of delivery options and innovative strategies to meet its mandate for higher education.

Conclusion

The ideal of openness in higher education is highlighted in Nigerian national policy—

“maximum efforts will be made to enable those who can benefit from higher education to be given access to it. Such access may be through universities or correspondence courses, or open universities, or part-time and work study programme” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004, p. 2).

The National Open University of Nigeria was established in order to operationalise this ideal. However, the university functions within a National University system regulated by another government agency—the National Universities Commission—which has a definitive position on the balance of quality and access in higher education. While NOUN is determined to admit every applicant and reflect full openness, the NUC has prescribed that the University adopts the minimum entry qualification requirements that is applicable to other conventional universities in Nigeria.

In this paper, we have used Bourdieu’s notion of HE as a field and its impact on the strategies of HEIs to reveal the tensions involved in translating an ideal of openness into a reality of equitable access through a critical evaluation of NOUN’s experience. Our analysis suggests that despite the limitations that marginalised learners confront in trying to gain access to higher education, education leaders and higher education policy makers who champion openness can unconsciously constitute themselves into barriers rather than enablers of access to higher education. In Bourdieu’s terms these dispositions turn into strategies that reproduce the existing assembled distances between individuals and higher education institutions.

The productive value of Bourdieu’s field concept is the ability to conceptualise and change HE as sites for praxis across open social systems where there is still everything to play for and nothing is determined. Although our analysis focused on one particular context, it can be applied to other HE developing countries contexts because it poses questions for reflexion. Given the tension our analysis has revealed, how could the reproductive logic of the field of HE be reversed through enabling openness in HE? What kind of positions should educators and institutions take to balance the demands of access, cost, quality standards and innovation in openness? What curriculum and pedagogic designs are strong enough to challenge the dominant forces that determine the meaning, interpretation and outcomes of openness? How does the interaction between learners’ social and cultural experiences and the policies and practices of the higher education field disrupt marginalisation? To deliver on the visionary goals of openness in HE in developing countries, a social theoretically informed research agenda to develop strategies for ODL/OERs to resolve and mediate the contradictory tensions between HE policies and practices of openness and access is urgently needed.

In moving forward openness in HE, we argue that effective strategies for openness in higher education must be situated as multi-channel and multi-networked collaborative strategies across the contexts of policy and practice fields if they are to have any impact on widening access. In particular, these strategies would require structural and discursive mechanisms by reflexive educational researchers acting with political savvy to challenge and disrupt dominant assumptions and build productive understandings between activists, practitioners, researchers and policymakers on:

- What is openness in policy and practice?
- How does it differ from open and distance learning?
- What are the social processes of implementing and evaluating openness, and what principles emerge in practice? and
- What is an appropriate fundamental philosophy of openness that widens access?

Our future work will address these issues and we invite readers concerned with open praxis to take up these questions to improve our understanding of the field of HE in developing countries.

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