

# Trends, Innovations, and Opportunities in Open and Distance Learning

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Universities have always been at the forefront of internationalism. The primary beneficiaries of their interest and activity, it could be argued, have been universities in the developed world. Internationalization, some have argued, has allowed universities in developed countries to attract and retain the world's best brainpower. In the past, many of the thinkers that these institutions have produced have argued that international understanding would end global conflict. While some would insist that it hasn't, others will argue that movements toward increasing international collaboration, through the United Nations and other regional associations, have resulted directly or indirectly from these international exchanges, the roots of which date back at least one hundred years. More recently, many have argued that internationalization is the route to prosperity, that the world is being shaped by a new knowledge economy that knows no boundaries. Learning, therefore, it is argued, is a human right. These declarations are noble and are certainly worth our individual and collective commitment. But where are we now? What have we achieved? What is our future?

Research on the state of learning has been undertaken by agencies of different types: by international bodies like UNESCO, by non governmental organizations like the International Council on Distance Education, by universities and by national agencies. The key questions that these researchers have been grappling with, however, are similar:

1. Firstly, as we advance the rhetoric of the new knowledge economy, what does its ascendancy mean for the resource based economies of the developing world? Some argue that the problems of resource-based economies are being sidelined. Others argue that successful resource based economies will be knowledge driven even at the producer level.

2. Secondly, is learning itself just another commodity, like banking or technology, that should be open to international competition? The various international trade bodies are increasingly pressing to open the educational marketplace to competition. While there may be considerable wiggle room under the GATS for the preservation of national interests, the real issue is not learning itself but its product—intellectual property. IP is being increasingly scrutinized by WIPO, the World Intellectual Property Organization, a United Nations body. WIPO is clear in its direction that nation states should protect the intellectual property of their commercial organizations and citizens. However, certain nation states and educational organizations are exerting considerable pressure to exempt educational

institutions, particularly distance education institutions, from such protection. It must be remembered that copyright laws were initially introduced in eighteenth century Britain to ensure the access rights of educational interests. However, access to the best digital information is becoming increasingly restricted and, most lamentably, increasingly expensive, so expensive, in fact, that many post-secondary institutions in the developed world can afford only a small percentage of what is available.

If knowledge is a commodity rather than a social good, so, increasingly, is education itself. Many corporations have their own universities: General Electric's Crotonville, Motorola University, McDonalds Hamburger University, Sun Microsystems Educational Services, etc., and a number of for-profit universities have sprung up: Apollo Group, Sylvan Learning systems, DeVry University, etc. Virtual universities and the for-profit arms of traditional universities, both of which are strongly oriented toward making money, are further complicating the educational landscape.

And this landscape, which is already complex enough, is changing rapidly in other ways as well. For example, international information vendors, a.k.a. textbook publishers, are moving into the provision of learning. And more confusion is being generated by non governmental organizations that are attempting to build collaborations and partnerships to mitigate what they regard as the worst for-profit aspects of the traditional university world. Lines between private and public are being eroded and many new questions are being asked. Few answers are apparent.

3. A third and key question is What should be the national capacity for learning?

This is a difficult question to answer because any answer suggesting limits might be construed by some as a decision to restrict some citizens' access to opportunities to achieve their full potential. On the other hand, developing countries lack the means to create and staff post-secondary institutions that could achieve even the level of participation common in most developed countries today. Many have decided that the only way to build capacity is to encourage the development of private sector or foreign owned institutions, which are often off-shore. This approach can result in the loss of the very best, but are there alternatives?

4. This leads us to the fourth question. To what degree should government become the regulator of post-secondary learning? To many, the answer might seem obvious: someone has to ensure that students are receiving the quality of learning and the credentials that they are paying for. But this is a relatively new role for government. In some jurisdictions, post-secondary institutions are and have always been essentially self-regulating. In others, governments regulate either through legislation or through national councils. Indirect forms of regulation are also applied, through the control of student support. For example, some jurisdictions will not provide financial aid to students who take distance education programs through foreign providers even though financial support is provided to students leaving the

home country to study abroad. What are the impacts of these kinds of decisions? Do they encourage the best to leave? Do they marginalize those who need support the most? Do these decisions restrict internationalization to an elite?

5. How do we maximize brain gain and minimize brain drain. Africa, for example, sends a higher percentage its post-secondary students abroad than any other part of the world but also loses the highest percentage to host countries. Sending students overseas, often at the expense of the receiving institution, is the cheapest way to build post-secondary capacity, but at what cost? Firstly, too few students return to help reshape their societies and nations. Secondly, the capacity to develop a national learning strategy based on the national and regional culture is compromised. Others might argue that, on the other hand, this practice has helped develop truly international solutions to the problems facing the post-secondary world and that it has helped to internationalize business.

6. This leads to the sixth key question. How do we manage the research outcomes of post-secondary institutions so that they have the maximum positive impact? WIPO suggests that this goal is best achieved by controlling patents and copyrights. Others suggest that knowledge is universal and that the best knowledge must be freely accessible. Those who support WIPO will argue that all economic modeling suggests that knowledge has commercial value and that in order to secure capital for investment in the future that commercial value must be protected. There are alternatives to this view, and some are well expressed in Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams' *Wikinomics*.

These questions are complex and few answers have yet to be derived or agreed upon. Our governments, our societies and our students are increasingly turning to the university sector for answers. What answers have we generated to these six key questions? I would argue that the post-secondary sector has for, the most part, engaged in defending their existing hegemonies, in protecting the status and value of their brands and in ensuring that whatever the brain drain, it flows in their own direction. Let us look at how the universities have responded to one of the key issues outlined above. How have post-secondary institutions responded to the increased cost and control of new knowledge? They have reacted in four different ways.

Firstly, in the developed world, most have either paid significantly more for or significantly reduced the size of their collections. Others have formed national consortia to purchase materials for the nation as a whole. Some argue that while this approach may control costs now, it will ultimately result in increased costs.

Secondly, throughout the developed world there has been an aggressive move to open access. It has manifested itself in various ways: faculty open access archiving, supporting open access publishing and the retrospective digitization of materials in the public domain. This open access movement has probably done

more to ensure the internationalization of knowledge than any other initiative. However, it has had its challenges as well. Firstly, most of the free information has been in the humanities and social sciences, which have always been undervalued in any case. Secondly, development of most of the free information requires the support of very expensive infrastructure, so the flow of knowledge has been largely one way, from the developed to the developing world and from the English-speaking to the non-English-speaking world.

Universities have also responded by offering their courses freely online to anyone or any institution who wishes to use them. But has this practice really accomplished anything other than increasing the value of certain elite university brands, those of universities that are inaccessible to the vast majority of the world's citizens anyway. Some have also argued that this sharing really represents a form of intellectual neo colonialism since the course content was not collaboratively created and, further, since the perception that it is free will undermine the will of nation states to create their own knowledge.

Thirdly, in the increasingly competitive international marketplace, the universities of the developed world have been able to attract the best minds through aggressive marketing and lucrative incentives. The flow of internationalization is still one way.

Finally, the post-secondary sector has made one major leap forward through distance and e-learning. For the first time, post-secondary learning has broken free from the fetters of geography and is now available to anyone who can access the technology, still a major issue in much of the world but less so with mobile learning on the horizon. Yet while e-learning offers so much hope, it too has its detractors, who argue that it lacks quality. Many of the new information and learning initiatives would seem to reinforce the ability of open and distance universities to massify learning, but if this is so, why has it not yet happened? There are I believe several reasons:

- a. The traditional universities are resistant to open and distance universities, basing their reservations mostly on the quality argument. They know that if open and distance education can offer similar or better quality at lower cost, their arguments for additional resources might be challenged.
- b. Distance and open universities are, for the most part, still modeled on the conventional, residential university. One of the great benefits of the e-world is the ability to harvest the creativity of many for the benefit of even greater numbers of people. However, academics come from a culture of craft rather than that of industrial production. It is the connection between student and master not the connection between knowledge and learner that is valued. Indeed the master-student relationship is so ingrained that technology is often used to recreate that model rather than to individualize learning as an

independent act. Is it any surprise that the open courses offered by many of the world's universities have had so little uptake.

- c. Universities have given little thought to the construction of their own economic realities. What is the value chain in the post-secondary world? Can it be disaggregated? If it can, what would the points in the value chain be? Can tuition for teaching, costs of mentoring, costs of student services, the cost of information, the cost of examinations, the costs of quality assurance, the costs of research and the costs of credentialing be separated? Can the private sector assume some of these responsibilities at a lower cost? What real values do universities provide? How would learners react to a disaggregation of the value chain?

Perhaps a fresh examination of the learning value chain could help us come up with new approaches to open and distance learning universities. Rather than do an exploration of various alternatives to this value chain, I will make a simple proposal, one which I have already offered to various organizations: the development of a best first year that could be adopted or adapted by any post-secondary institution in the world. This proposal is divided into several economic and learning components for the purpose of argument:

1. Recruitment: All universities spend a great deal of money in this area. But why? Is it to excite students to learn or is it to ensure their market share? If it were to excite students to learn then collaboration among institutions would be possible. But then the real issue becomes whether the students are ready to learn and whether they have the competencies to succeed.

2. Course materials or information: Recent studies by publishers have indicated, for example, that 80 per cent of the first-year engineering program is common to most universities. Other studies have indicated that, while there might be similar expectations in other disciplines, there is considerable variation in content, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. What would happen if the 12 to 15 most common courses were developed and designed, along with appropriate readiness modules, so that there was in effect a common, worldwide, first-year standard. The courses would be available at no cost to any learner, faculty member or institution to use or adapt. The investment to create such a common year would be 20 to 40 million Canadian dollars, not an insubstantial amount, but such a dream is fiscally possible. However I do recognize that learners would need access to affordable technology needed to gain competencies at the highest first-year university level on one's own. And that may be for a while yet, a major impediment.

3. Learning Support: Of course, many students need support to help them develop their learning skills, to overcome learning impediments and to move to the next stage of learning. Learning support involves faculty and professionals at rather intensive levels. Learner support could be obtained from existing universities, from

private sector providers or from groups that form on the Internet. Learning support from institutions would have to be charged back to learners; however, there is no doubt that with enough students enrolled in the courses, existing or new social software sites could be used as a vehicle for no-cost support.

4. Examinations: Examinations are, to some, learning tools that help learners measure whether they have gained competencies in a certain discipline. The varying learning modules would have self-exams at frequent points. However, both private and public institutions could offer rigorous testing opportunities at a fee so that students could determine whether they had mastered the subjects and skills.

5. Credentialing: The biggest single issue will be credentialing. No institution would be prepared to credential a course or an entire first-year program without a rigorous set of exams to determine whether the student had mastered appropriate competencies. Post-secondary institutions could charge for invigilated exams and for ensuring the appropriateness of the first-year credential. Some universities would have to be willing to participate in the credentialing exercise. Twelve in Canada have already expressed a willingness to do so.

I know that there are key questions that immediately come to mind? Who is paying the professors to write the courses? Who is paying for the research that underpins all learning? Remember, this is a proposal for a best first year. If it actually worked, academics and their institutions could focus on the second to fourth years of undergraduate study and on graduate studies. The scheme hold the promise of

- creating international standards
- focusing universities not on student readiness but on advanced knowledge
- initiating a re-evaluation of the post-secondary learning value chain
- forcing institutions to collaborate for the benefit of students

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