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by Heather Michel

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Distance Education in Germany and India: Case Studies

Introduction

This paper examines the similarities and differences between forms of distance education in developed and undeveloped countries by looking at well-known universities in Germany and India. Germany has practiced distance education since 1974 when FernUniversität was founded (Peters, 2010). In India, the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) was established in 1985 with a budget of 20 billion Indian rupees (Indira Gandhi National Open University, n.d.) and has gone on to become one of the largest universities in the world with over three million students. These institutions are compared and contrasted in the following dimensions: mission and population served, history/reason for existence, values espoused/inherent to the institution, organization/ systems of operation, model of teaching and learning, and technologies used. Throughout this paper, the influence by these dimensions on each organization's form of distance education is addressed.

Global Similarities in Distance Education

Institutions offering distance education vary in their targeted populations, origination, values, organization, pedagogical models, technologies, and more, but there are some globally common factors. In general, the mission of distance education has always been the democratization of higher education so that underserved and educationally disadvantaged populations can be reached (Peters, 2010). Many distance education institutions were created by governments for purposes relating to advancing their country's economy (Moore & Kearsley,

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2012). Though different cultures place value on diverse factors, distance education around the globe strove to achieve high quality courses to be offered at an accessible rate of tuition. New types of distance education institutions, including single-mode institutions, open universities and consortia, could serve large numbers of students with economies of scale (Peters, 2010). The required systems approach consists of management, design, learning, teaching, and communication processes. Typical ² forms of teaching and learning are not speaking and listening, as used in face-to-face classrooms, but presenting printed teaching material and analyzing it in order to acquire knowledge. There is currently a global paradigm shift from expert-centered instruction to autonomous, student-centered, lifelong learning (Peters, 2010, Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Technology such as the printing press, radio, television, teleconferencing, telecourses, and the Internet contributed to changes in distance education, and supported distance education's response to those changes (Miller, 2010).

All of these factors influenced the practice of distance education and created an educational paradigm shift into what distance education is becoming today (Speaking Personally, 2011). These globally common factors apply to both case studies, FernUniversität and IGNOU. Distance universities are treated in literature as a generic group, yet they actually are at variance with one another in many aspects as well (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999)

Differences between Distance Education Institutions

Mission and Population Served

In Germany, FernUniversität's mission is similar to the mission of the institution it was based on, the Open University of the United Kingdom (OUUK). FernUniversität declares that it stands for the trend of lifelong learning and has a long tradition of innovation and modern

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thinking. The university targets the working people who enable the knowledge of FernUniversität to be transferred directly and quickly to practical applications in society and industry (FernUniversität Hagen, n.d.).

In India, IGNOU, also based on OUUK, was launched due to the desire of the government to open 1 higher education to large segments of the population (especially disadvantaged groups), “bring higher education to the doorsteps of all those who look for it” and to maintain educational standards by offering a vast array of programs using current technology and diverse techniques with standardized curriculum throughout the country (Reddy & Srivastava, 2001, p. 5).

History/ Purpose

Distance institutions do not share the same purpose. Governments of developed countries recognized their need for many more highly educated employees to propel their post-industrial economy forward into the Information Age while developing country governments needed to educate workers who could not access the traditional institutions, either because of physical distance or limited discretionary time (Miller, 2010).

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Opened in 1975, FernUniversität is a public research university in Hagen, focused on distance education. Now Germany’s largest university (Federal Statistical Office of Germany, 2014), FernUniversität was an early follower of OUUK as a distance university awarding higher education degrees and offering continuing education for programs of multi-media and systematic courses (Holmberg, 2005). Another purpose of establishment was to relieve the overcrowding on German university campuses (Peters, 2010). The German government gave ten months to prepare for 1300 students in the winter academic term of 1975/6 who had two choices of study:

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economics and mathematics (FernUniversität Hagen, n.d.). The university's study centers, integral to the blended learning concept, began operations simultaneously with the university itself (FernUniversität in Hagen, n.d.).

When it first opened in 1985 in New Delhi, IGNOU, like FernUniversität, offered students two choices: management and distance education (IGNOU, n.d.). 4 It has tried to increase the gross enrollment ratio by offering high quality open and distance education, establishing a new, flexible and cheap system that offers opportunities to those excluded from the formal system, equalizing educational opportunity, and 2 "breaking the rigidities of the traditional university system with regard to curricula and modes of study" (Nair, 2012, p. 322).

Values

The German culture values scholarly academics over accessibility (Holmberg, 2004). FernUniversität favors the general practitioner approach to university study where the counselor will establish contact with the student first, but afterwards assumes that the student will initiate contact if and when a problem arises. The computer is also used in counselling in an impersonal pre-study advisory system developed at FernUniversität (Holmberg, 2005).

IGNOU is committed to quality education, training, research and extension activities based on the rich heritage of the country and promote education of the disadvantaged groups of the population (Panda, 2005). It has continuously focused on inclusive education and has been networking with public and private entities to enhance educational opportunities.

Organization

FernUniversität and IGNOU both have the traditional organization of research and teaching, though they are open universities with non-traditional policies concerning entrance

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requirements, flexibility of access, cost of tuition and teaching/learning methods; the term “open university” is multidimensional. FernUniversität even had its own scholarly periodical series, ZIFF Papiere (Holmberg, 2005). German universities, pressured to raise third-party funds, increased interest in the continuing education market, and FernUniversität has a growing CE department. (Zawacki-Richter, Knust, & Hanft, 2009). The organization of the operating technological system of both exemplar universities is that of a systems approach: “course creation, production and distribution, student services, management of tutors and counselors and quality control” (Peters, 2010).

Models of teaching and learning

FernUniversität has employed several education models over the years. In the beginning, it relied heavily on the correspondence model which meant mailing packages and completed assignments back and forth between the student and the instructor. The first FernUniversität students complained that “the mountain of course material piled up in front of them” was intimidating because all of the work was sent before the study began. (Holmberg, 2005, p. 101) Some courses used the autonomous model which develops independent thinking. Currently, FernUniversität also employs the network-based education model which requires students to use the Internet in order to construct their own knowledge from the course material presented (Peters, 2010).

3 IGNOU has presented a multimedia approach to teaching and learning since its establishment. The instruction packages consist of printed self-learning materials, audios, and video programs, in addition to practical manuals and project guidelines when appropriate. The

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3 learner is supported in various ways through study centers, face-to-face counseling sessions, and hands-on labs. (Reddy & Srivastava, 2001)

Technology

1 FernUniversität uses broadcast technologies such as radio, television, audio, video, and teleconferencing, and telecourses. They provided FernUniversität students “with increased opportunities to collaborate with one another, setting the stage for the emergence of professional organizations, consortia, partnerships, and inter-institutional collaboration” (Miller, 2010). CD-ROMs, DVDs and podcasts carrying professors’ lectures were also produced. Today, this media is enhanced by the use of the computer and the Internet, with synchronous and asynchronous software (FernUniversität in Hagen, n.d.).

3 Similarly, IGNOU uses mass communication, emphasizing interactive radio counselling and tele-counselling, synchronous tele-conferencing, voice mail, email and Internet-based learning. Also, IGNOU uses limited television broadcasts and radio and cable television from several centers. “Even the printed self-learning materials are designed to be interactive. The style is that of guided didactic conversation, with the teacher built into the text” (Reddy & Srivastava, 2001, p. 6).

Conclusion

While there are both similarities and differences in the forms of distance education practiced in Germany and India, there may not be as many differences between distance education institutions in developed and undeveloped countries as one might think.

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Simultaneous and global trends converged at the point where distance education was ready for a metamorphosis (Peters, 2010). Both developed and underdeveloped nations are using and building distance education in its newest stage. Older stages are found still operating in those countries that had distance education when those stages were predominant. Therefore the countries that had distance education the longest have the most variety as far as forms of distance education offered.

Countries acquiring or upgrading their distance education today aim to produce the cutting edge in pedagogy and technology of distance education. To expect otherwise would be like expecting a customer who finally saved enough money for a cell phone to shop for the oldest (presumably cheapest) phone available, one that was prominent when s/he first wanted a phone. Instead, consumers shop for what is current, even if s/he can only afford the lowest quality of the current stage of technology. Similarly, distance education is progressing in the same trend all around the world. Developing countries may be forced to put less money into the technology, but the current stage of distance education is the only one being purchased.

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