

Global Tendencies in Open and Distance Learning

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Abstract

Today, the important facts such as the globalization, the changes in population movements, the transformation into an information society, the increasing competition in economics, the changes and progresses in information and communication technologies have an ongoing impact on all fields of life, including higher education. The areas that these factors affect in higher education range from the administration of higher education institutions to institutional structuring, from the diversity of services offered to financing structure, and from R&D activities to international cooperation. In this regard, in order to eliminate deficiencies, develop strategies and policies for the future of open and distance learning, it is of particular importance to have knowledge about the different approaches, applications and experiences of the universities from different countries which provide open and distance learning services. These will also allow institutions to find new stakeholders and to develop academic studies and programs. Better understanding the different approaches and experiences of the other higher education institutions will serve as guidance and assist in the remedy of the deficiencies and solution of the problems for open and distance education institutions. This study aims to describe and analyze the global tendencies in the administration, education and R&D processes of mega universities. For this purpose, by carrying out a research project, mega universities offering open and distance learning services in 6 countries (Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, South Korea, People's Republic of China) were determined and analyzed as the sample of the study. The examined institutions reflect current tendencies in open and distance education, which are governed by the socioeconomic and socio cultural characteristics of their countries, and also offer some practices that set examples. We also compare our findings with the corresponding applications and preferences of the Anadolu University and suggest that some remarkable practices are worth to be considered as valuable perspectives.

Key Words: Open and Distance Learning (ODL), e-Learning, Mega University, Open Education, Distance Education

1. Introduction

In order to discuss the future of open and distance learning in the world, it is important to be aware of the global economic, demographic, sociological and technological advancements and changes. It is also necessary to follow the global tendencies related to the administration, education and R&D processes in mega universities. Besides the phenomenal effects of Internet, several other emerging technologies have also begun to change the landscape of education and particularly the open and distance education. The field of distance education is certainly at the center of dynamic growth and change (Oladejo & Gesinde, 2014: 132).

Open and distance learning (ODL) provides education for all, promotes lifelong learning, and improves on the economies of scale in education management. From this point of view, the outstanding features of ODL can be summarized as flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and learner-centeredness.

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Because of being learner-centered, ODL programs are different from those of the conventional university system where both instructional activities and course materials are lecturer-centered. Hence, academic programs in an ODL institution seek to satisfy the needs of learners, not the other way round (Onwe, 2013: 124). Open learning is a learning philosophy which maintains openness (in access, delivery and interpretation) as its core value. So, the main characteristics of open learning can be identified as a strong emphasis on flexibility, the removal of barriers and a learner-centered philosophy (Davis, 1996: 22)

When flexible learning is considered, two important aspects can be mentioned: Flexibility with regard to time and place, and flexibility with regard to student needs. First aspect - the desire to make education less dependent on time and place- is mainly related to the increasing number of people who combine study and work because of staying well prepared for changes in job requirements, improving career perspectives and realizing personal growth. The second aspect of flexibility is related to the idea that products and services are more and more produced on demand according to the specifications of an individual client. So, it may be said that there is a movement in education from 'same for all education' towards demand-oriented, in other words 'just for me' education. (Jochems et al., 2004: 4). This also provides a learner-centered and a more customized perspective to the distance education area.

Many countries of the world need capable educational systems for handling very large bodies of students totally 100.000 or more students at a time competently. At the point of meeting the higher education needs and demands, distance education system have played very important role. Today most governments in the world are providing distance education. When the features of distance education are generally evaluated, firstly it can be said that it is flexible and open in terms of its admission requirements. When compared to conventional education systems, it differs in some points as providing freedom in terms of place and time of study, and composition of study program, content and didactic approach. Distance education both shares the goals of conventional education, and it also aims at providing access to historically under-served, place bound, and highly motivated population. Distance education offers useful learning opportunities to the students at a convenient time and local environment for them. Contacts between the student and institutions are provided through interactive and non-interactive media and also through some contact at study center (Keegan, 1996).

According to the UNESCO's report, it is absolutely clear that open and distance learning will be an important element of future education and training systems. It is becoming more and more accepted within the mainstream education and training so that it will become part of the programs of most educational institutions in the future. The emergence of new forms of distance learning based on new information and communication technologies, especially those supported by the Internet and using the World Wide Web, have significant pedagogical, economic and organizational implications. Furthermore, there is a remarkable trend towards intensifying globalization (UNESCO, 2002).

As a vehicle of social and economic development, open and distance learning is today one of the most rapidly growing fields of education and training. It is becoming an accepted and indispensable part of the mainstream educational systems in both developed and developing countries. It can safely be said that open and distance education is more rewarding for developing countries. This growth has been forced in part by interest among educators and trainers in the use of new information technologies, but also by recognition that tradition always of organizing education need to be transformed by innovative methods if the fundamental right of learning of all the people is to be achieved (UNESCO, 2000).

Among the factors transforming open and distance education are a better developed research, technological innovations, economic changes on a global scale, and an increasing demand for access to educational opportunities (Brindley, 1995: 10). The development of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has greatly helped the emergence of distance education systems. New institutions delivering courses globally are emerging and existing institutions are changing their teaching strategies in order to deliver their courses more effectively on a global basis (Rumble, 2000). At this point, it will be convenient to mention about mega universities briefly. It can be said that universities have historically been classified according to various criteria, including services offered, number of students and type of administration. A mega university is defined as a distance-teaching institution with over 100.000 active students in degree-level courses. Distance teaching, higher education and size are the three criteria that the definition of a mega university combines (Daniel, 1996: 29).

An important characteristic of mega universities is that they offer on-campus (formal) education together with open and distance education. The increase in the number of mega universities, new institutions offering open and distance education services and ever-growing interest in online courses in on-campus programs are the factors affecting the future of higher education institutions.

The common feature of all the mega universities is that they use the technologies of distance education to promote open learning. It can also be said that mega universities have created a rare discontinuity in the evolution of higher education by increasing university capacity dramatically while lowering costs sharply (Daniel, 1996: 32-33).

All over the world, open and distance education serves different purposes according to the level of development of countries. For instance, open and distance education may be offered to support lifelong learning for adults, specialization at the graduate level and on-campus education in developed countries such as the United Kingdom, while it serves the purposes of solving capacity problems in higher education and contributing to vocational education in developing countries such as India, Turkey and Iran.

The mega universities benefit from the economics of scale that flow from teaching large numbers of students. Therefore, teaching in subject areas of high demand is especially an important issue for mega universities (Daniel, 1996: 38). When the student profile is considered, the mega universities all have large numbers of students but the profiles of their students differ. As Daniel stated (1996: 37), today, the motto of the mega universities is shifting from 'second chance to get a degree' to 'first choice for lifelong learning'. Also, the institutions that focused on adults are now attracting more young students.

When the mega universities are evaluated in terms of operating systems, it is seen that they mainly depend on systems that support good learning materials, effective student support, and efficient logistics. Organizing the flow of information and materials efficiently is a basic requirement. Also, division of labour is another important feature of mega universities. Namely, materials design and production is centralized and carried out by multi skilled teams and this orientation makes the components of the system highly interdependent. Also, when comparing to campus universities, focusing on making learning productive have more importance for the mega universities, that's because less back-up is available when a topic is poorly explained (Daniel, 1996: 40).

Another important aspect of mega universities is the academic relationship between staff and students within their university. For being successful, the mega universities should have a direct relationship with their students and they also should have sufficient staff to establish this relationship as a reasonable independence of action (Daniel, 1996: 36).

The mega universities have allowed countries to expand access to higher education much faster than would otherwise have been possible. Mega universities, as they have grown, have played an increasingly integral role in the higher education systems of their countries. Many governments encourage the development of distance education that's because it has been the basis of the success of mega universities. Also, with encouraging campus universities to adopt the methods of distance education, it is gaining more and more importance for all types of universities to work together more closely. At the same time, many of their programs will have a greater focus on lifelong learners in the home and the workplace (Daniel, 1996: 43-44).

In this context, it becomes of vital importance for a distance education institution to learn and follow the practices and approaches of other institutions serving the same purpose in order to develop its own strategies and policies and to eliminate its deficiencies. This was the rationale of the present work. Within the scope of this study, 6 mega universities were investigated from administrative, educational and R&D viewpoints, especially upon emerging new global trends. We hope that this study could help for a better understanding of some new prominent features of the selected institutions and enable a comparison, which might be useful for institutions seeking interaction with new developments in open and distance education.

2. Methodology

The population of this study comprises 60 mega universities in the world. Considering the financial and human resources, in the first place, it is decided that it would be more appropriate to examine the countries, in which the open and distance education is perceived as a necessity. In this context, mega universities offering open and distance learning services in 6 countries were chosen as the research sample through consciousness sampling method. These countries and the institutions are listed below:

Australia: Open Universities Australia (<https://www.open.edu.au>)

Indonesia: Terbuka University (<http://www.ut.ac.id/>)

Malaysia: Open University Malaysia (<http://www.oum.edu.my/>)

Pakistan: Allama Iqbal Open University (<http://www.aiou.edu.pk/>)

South Korea: Korea National Open University (<http://www.knou.ac.kr/engknou2/>)

People's Republic of China: The Open University of China (<http://en.ouchn.edu.cn/>)

An institutional review framework was developed to ensure a common language and structure in order to review the related institutions. Similar studies in the literature and the needs of Anadolu University Open and Distance Education System are taken into account in this process. In addition, expert opinion was consulted from Prof. Dr. Colin Latchem, the project advisor who conducted similar studies about the Australian system. The institutions selected for this project were reviewed under categories of country profile, history, current status, structure, and design and quality assurance. A semi-structured questionnaire related to these categories was translated into English and uploaded to the project communication platform.

For the purpose of this project, each institution was examined by a project team consisting of 3 to 5 researchers. These teams were established in view of researchers' field of specialization and inclination to work together. Each team conducted a preliminary research by reviewing the literature related to the institution they were assigned to study. The project members got in touch with the institutions to obtain the required permissions and to schedule a visit. In scope of the project, the institutions in South Korea, Malaysia and Pakistan has been visited by the related project teams. The institutions that could not be visited during the project were examined by reviewing the information available in the literature and on their website according to the predetermined research framework.

The global tendencies in the related universities were generally examined under the categories of the countries' characteristics, policies, laws, regulations, administrative characteristics of institutions, their organizational structure, strategic plans and financial structure, student admission, support services, quality accreditation processes, instructional design, programs, media and technologies used, measurement and assessment and research and development.

3. Findings

The distance education institutions included in this study have administrative structure and approaches differing according to the political, socio-economic and cultural characteristics, educational needs and development level of the countries. In general, the reasons for preferring open and distance learning can be summarized as meeting the increasing need for higher education, offering equality of opportunity in education, offering low-cost education, increasing the rate of schooling in higher education, offering the opportunity of access to higher education for people that cannot get on-campus education, ensuring effectiveness and efficiency by using new information and communication technologies in distance education, increasing the opportunities of vocational education, training teachers and contributing to the level of development of a country.

According to ICDE's (International Council for Open and Distance Education) report, open and distance learning (ODL) has played a significant role in Asia, especially in providing access to higher education to people in remote areas and for up-grading teacher qualifications. The opportunity offered by the ODL system goes beyond conventional face-to-face education, reducing the obstacles posed by geographic and economic factors. In Indonesia, for example, Terbuka University has given over one million people the opportunity to access higher education and has contributed significantly to the country's efforts to upgrade teachers qualifications (ICDE, 2009).

In parallel with ICDE's report, we have found out that, as required by its large population, China attaches more importance to adult education than the other countries. On the other hand, in Australia, the learner profile changes and the high rate of literacy is remarkable. In Turkey, the organizational structure of open and distance education in three universities is not based on an independent model; in other words, these are not universities or faculties offering only open and distance education, but they have adopted a blended (dual) mode offering on-campus education together with open and distance education. The rules for university entrance also apply to admission to open and distance education in Turkey while admission and education processes are more flexible in other countries.

With regard to higher education policies and approaches to administration, it is found that central administration and audit are preferred in countries other than Malaysia and Australia (namely, in Indonesia, South Korea, China and Pakistan). In Malaysia, the state has assumed a regulatory role in recent years; the establishment of universities as an incorporation is possible and universities are responsible for raising their own funds. Religious elements play a role in education in Indonesia. In Australia, there is a tendency to integrate all stakeholders into higher education and the society into administrative processes. The financing of education is mostly provided by the state in Korea (In Turkey, educational costs are covered by fees collected from students in addition to state financing, and a great income is generated due to the scale of economy). In Korea case, especially Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) policies are accepted as "best practices". Korea's e-Learning and ICT policies are supported by premises as systematic application mechanisms, guaranteed budget and support, enhancing available capacity, successful cooperation between government and private sector and effective evaluation as a consequence of a concrete legal framework. Hence, Korea particularly attaches importance to increasing the capacity of course managers, creating a staff capable of adapting to new technology and integrating ICT to the curriculum (Hwang, et.al., 2010).

According to Daniel (1996: 36), "The mega universities are increasingly embedded in the institutional networks of their countries. As governments seek to increase the availability of distance education by exploiting their existing investments in campus universities they may be tempted to set up new institutions whose purpose is mainly to coordinate distance teaching activities across universities". With regard to administrative characteristics of institutions, it is found that the administrative approaches have an impact on structure and processes. Particularly in Malaysia and Australia, there are structures/consortiums where the authorities are distributed, and the admission of international students is more common. For instance, in Australia, 7 universities have come together under a single roof (<https://www.open.edu.au/about-us/universities/shareholder-universities/>). In Malaysia, 11 state universities offer services through a distance learning consortium named METEOR (Multimedia Technology Enhancement Operations), and mostly employ part-time university staff (<http://www.meteor.com.my/>). All the six institutions are organized across the country due to high number of students, and many regional student centers offer services to open and distance education students. Anadolu University also has an international organizational structure with its centers in Europe and Azerbaijan.

These institutions which adopt life-long learning as their basic strategic goal aim to prepare and offer programs at global standards particularly for disadvantaged individuals that do not have access to formal education. When compared to other institutions, Open Universities Australia has focused on the purpose of "being a brand" in its strategic plan while Anadolu University has adopted the objective of "being a world university" with focus on lifelong learning in its strategic plan.

With the increasing recognition of ODL (open distance learning) as a tool of widening access to higher education globally, it has become increasingly necessary that quality assurance processes are developed and maintained if the ODL provision is to be relevant and recognized as complimentary to conventional higher education (Pitsoe & Maila, 2014: 252). In this context, when the institutions are examined with regard to quality and accreditation process which is an important aspect of administrative procedures, it is seen that national accreditation institutions and/or quality insurance bodies play an important role. Particularly related ministries and higher education councils are the authorities in this respect. Terbuka University in Indonesia is the only institution with an international quality certificate. In March 2006, UT was awarded certification for ISO 9001:2000 for the quality management process of course materials distribution from the Headquarters to Regional Offices (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007). Anadolu University was granted the Ed excel accreditation for its associate degree programs, and quality procedures have been initiated for undergraduate programs.

Daniel (1996: 38) stated that "within the academic community, the performance of the mega universities in research is an important yardstick for judging their credibility". In this context, it is founded that each institution under investigation has special units in order to support R&D (Research and Development) activities, as well. Those units are responsible for organizing activities in order to increase the quality of educational processes and have stakeholders for research cooperation. Especially in Malaysia and Australia, quality efforts are also covered by R & D activities.

As Daniel stated (1996: 40), a focus on making learning productive is particularly important for the mega universities and generally materials design and production is centralized and carried out by multi skilled teams. With regard to education and research activities, it is found that The Open University of Malaysia has adopted the ADDIE (Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement, Evaluate) model in activities related to education and research while the other universities have developed specific course planning and development procedures. The ADDIE model comprises six basic steps consisting of planning, analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation. This model is a kind of practice-oriented way to produce effective educational programs. At Allama Iqbal Open University, the course materials are produced under the responsibility of Presidency of Academic Planning and Course Production and with the participation of Course planning and Development Committee, Faculty Board and Research and Technology Committee within the framework of instructional design principles. Also, the material production process is subject to the audit of the quality assurance and the multimedia content managers (Ajmalet.al. 2011).

The number and diversity of programs are considerably high in all six distance education institutions. Educational services are offered in certificate, associate degree and undergraduate degree programs. Among these are programs in sciences, engineering and even medicine in China. At Allama Iqbal Open University, there are 12 doctoral programs. Disability support services in Open Universities Australia, the concept of cyber education in Korea National Open University, and digital library and Professional Development Institution in Open University Malaysia are remarkable aspects of open and distance education. The media and technologies used in the Asian open and distance education institutions are varied, including mainly the internet-based learning environments, radio and TV/satellite and online counseling services, all of which support face-to-face education.

Student admission criteria as well as financial issues including student fees differ from one university to another. Student grants and state support are more frequent in China. The fees are higher in Australia and South Korea. However, at this point, the diversity and quality of materials offered to students vary by the fee they pay. With respect to support services and learning environments, it may be said that the institutions in Australia use technology more intensively. The common point related to the use of support materials in other five institutions is that printed materials constitute the main learning resources. Nevertheless, each institution also offers face-to-face academic support services. As Anadolu University, Open University Malaysia has reduced registration fees for elder and disadvantaged students, as well. When student admission criteria are concerned, it is found that there are different models applied in related institutions. While a more flexible student placement system is applied in Malaysia and Australia, a student selection exam is applied in South Korea, Indonesia and China. On the other hand, in Pakistan, according to the related programs' qualifications, student admission is based on their diplomas.

With regard to support services and units, it may be said that – in addition to face-to-face counseling and e-learning environments – support services provided by using radio and television in The Open University of China and support services provided by radio in Open University Malaysia come to forefront. Open University Malaysia is outstandingly known for its internet radio. In China, tens of thousands of part-time academicians and specialists support the system. Also, 44 regional TV universities (PRTVU) reach their students under the auspices of China Central Radio and Television University (The CRTVUs) with their 1600 offices (<http://en.crtvu.edu.cn/about/structure>). Open Universities Australia has adopted the policy of offering counseling services for 24 hours (via the internet/telephone).

The measurement methods in mega universities are varied and include, in the order of frequency, multiple-choice tests, assignments and final/exit tests. The measurement and assessment policies indicate that the institutions mostly prefer multiple-choice tests. The most significant factor that affects the preference for these tools is student number. Anadolu University is one of the institutions that uses multiple-choice tests most commonly. In other mega universities, assignments that replace exams encourage students to use course materials and enable them to be aware of the curriculum at the beginning of a semester. The assignments submitted by students to advisors before a deadline are revised and returned to students with feedback. It is considered that such practices strengthen students' commitment and sense of belonging to the institution. Another useful practice is that students make obligatory presentations in regional centers with the participation of their peers, and the presentations are evaluated by their advisors.

Online assessment practices are not very common in mega universities. This indicates that online technologies have not been used frequently for student evaluation in the mentioned universities. With respect to the method of assessment, it appears that some mega universities use only absolute evaluation, i.e. the method where student success is evaluated independent of the success of other students, while others use both absolute and relative evaluation, i.e. the method where a student's success is dependent on the success of other students in the class. Distinguishing from other institutions, Anadolu University depends merely on relative evaluation.

In this context, when the measurement and assessment methods are taken into consideration, it can be said that the institutions mostly prefer the exams, but the applications may vary from institution to institution. For instance, Terbuka University (Indonesia) may let the students plan their exam schedule. As in Turkey, in Australia students can take exams in exam centers close to their residence, as well. In Pakistan, classical exams (i.e. open-ended questions) are used for student evaluation, and assignments and oral exams are also included in evaluation (Aisha, 2007).

As a basic strategic goal, it can be said that all the universities aim to make use of technology to offer open and flexible learning opportunities, adopt the principle of lifelong learning, offer blended learning services by getting support from part-time academic staff (whose number reaches tens of thousands), ensure active and participatory learning, program diversity and ease of access for all individuals, establish a powerful financial structure, prepare high-quality course materials, ensure international cooperation and prepare and offer at global standards programs particularly for disadvantaged individuals that do not have access to formal education.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

The institutions examined for the purpose of this study reflect current tendencies in open and distance education, which are governed by the socioeconomic and socio cultural characteristics of their countries, and also offer some practices that set examples. One of these is iRadio used in Open University Malaysia (OUM). In addition to being used for distance education, the internet radio also serves as a bridge of communication between students and the institutions. Furthermore, the magazine published periodically by the institution contributes to communication and strengthening of the sense of belonging. Another remarkable point is the "Flexible Admission" policy of the institution. Strict admission rules have been eliminated, and prior learning and work experience are taken into consideration in admission.

In offering open and distance education services, mega universities are likely to fulfill their social responsibilities with higher quality and wider effect when "openness" is achieved in student admission. In Turkey, it becomes more difficult to meet the expectations of flexibility and openness since distance education is legally distinguished from open education (although these are two modes of education complementing each other), there are gaps between open and on-campus education and transfer between on-campus and open education is not easy.

Another important characteristic of the distance education institutions in Asia is program diversity. Flexibilities such as elective courses and course exemptions are likely to increase the interest in open and distance education programs. Cooperation with other institutions and collaboration with faculty members from other universities for the purpose of developing course materials are frequently used methods. Under the examined institutions, mainly The Open University of China adopted this method. The implementation of ADDIE model in the production of all programs and courses of all universities is expected to contribute to have more qualified and effective production processes. In Turkey, the major problem in higher education is opening new programs and faculties of open education in an unplanned way without making needs analysis, so that it would be advisable to make use of the ADDIE model.

Universities also evince the need for receiving continuous feedback about current programs, developing human resources and providing support and conditions for research. Another common characteristic of the institutions examined in this study is the establishment of commissions and units related to R & D and quality. It is observed that R & D plays an important role in the administration of open and distance education institutions. In addition to R & D, the use of technology in learning environments and the integration of information and communication technologies are significant aspects of distance education. There are units launched to support R & D activities in each institution. These units carry out activities to improve the quality of educational processes and invite stakeholders to cooperation in research. Especially in Malaysia and Australia, quality efforts are also covered by R & D activities.

On the other hand, the weaknesses of the institutions may be summarized as technological infrastructure problems of universities and students, need for developing media literacy of learners and failure in bridging the digital divide. Besides, all institutions agree that increasing the cooperation with all other universities would be highly beneficial.

Consequently, after making an evaluation of open and distance education institutions within the scope of this study with regard to administration, education and R&D processes, some suggestions can be done to improve the quality of open and distance education and to offer more effective and efficient services:

- Offering open and distance education services under the roof of a university rather than specific faculties
- Not presenting open and distance education as two distinct modes of education, but offering them under a single roof in Turkey
- Ensuring openness and flexibility, and not depending only on exams in student admission
- Producing content and developing design models in view of program and course objectives, and developing blended learning and personalized learning designs
- Not opening programs arbitrarily, but in view of national employment policies and needs
- Opening new programs not only in social sciences but also in health, engineering and fine arts, and introducing graduate programs for research
- Increasing interaction among students
- Ensuring transfer between open and on-campus education, putting more weight on elective courses, and opening courses in universities without sufficient faculty members
- Ensuring that faculty members have the identity of instructional designers
- Diversifying measurement and assessment processes
- Improving international cooperation
- Being subject to an accreditation process to ensure that degrees awarded are recognized
- Establishing open and distance education research centers
- Ensuring the integration of information and communication technologies and solving problems related to technological infrastructure of students
- Making research on the profile of students and graduates and the satisfaction of graduates
- Analyzing the data related to student numbers, registration and dropout rates
- Establishing quality assurance systems
- Observing the principles of equality and ethics in student access to the system
- Ensuring information security in almost all universities
- Establishing stronger cooperation with labor force and sectors
- Increasing the opportunity for education in foreign languages

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