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What are you capable of? A comparison of the open university system in the United Kingdom
and South Africa

The first thing a visitor to the Open University (OU) of the UK web page sees is the question “What are you capable of?” (The Open University, 2015, para. 2). Scores and scores of learners have taken advantage of an education from the Open University, which enjoys a rich heritage. Have scores and scores of learners on a different, developing continent similarly enjoyed this outcome? Yes, as shown by the success of the University of South Africa (Unisa). Both OU and Unisa are considered to be mega-universities; institutions that provide distance education with over 100,000 active students enrolled in degree-seeking programs (Daniel, 1998, pp. 29-30). The purpose of this essay is to compare and contrast the characteristics of an open university in a developed country (the United Kingdom) and a developing country (South Africa).

Mission and population served

As stated above, the mission statement of the Open University is “to be open to people, places, methods and ideas” (The Open University Mission, 2015). Unisa has a lengthy mission statement but their vision statement is quite clear: “Towards the African university in the service

of humanity” (Unisa About our strategy, 2012, para. 1). Both universities offer undergraduate and graduate degrees, certificate programs and a variety of diploma programs.

The OU has enjoyed substantial penetration into the four primary countries of the UK (England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales) but also offers 20 curriculum partnerships in 23 countries, and has graduates from their MBA program in 128 countries (Facts & Figures, The Open University, 2014). Students enrolled at Unisa are overwhelmingly from South Africa (91.3%), with an additional 7% from the South African Development Community (SADC; 15 southern African states). Only 1.2% of students are from other African countries and 0.5% from other parts of the world (Unisa About student enrolments, 2014; Southern African Development Community, 2015).

Both OU and Unisa charge their students tuition; OU charges the equivalent of about \$8,500 US dollars/year and UNISA charges about \$1,000 US dollars/year (Unisa Student fees 2015; OU Fees and funding, 2015). It is clear why most citizens of sub-Saharan Africa are unable to attend Unisa as the annual tuition represents three times the median per capita income (Phelps, G., & Crabtree, S., 2013).

History/Reason for Existence

The University of South Africa (Unisa) was the first distance education institution in the world (Peters, 1998, pp. 183-184). Originally founded as the University of the Cape of Good Hope, the university was primarily “examinations only” (Peters, p. 184). Students were expected to acquire learning on their own; consequently very few students graduated. In 1946 Unisa began offering education, embracing the correspondence method to reach disadvantaged citizens.

The Open University of the United Kingdom was formed by Royal Charter in 1969 (Peters, 2010, p. 58). OU was the first single-mode institution, meaning it was taught entirely by distance to accommodate learners who could not participate in campus-based education (Peters, 2010, p. 58). OU was founded on the idea of “open” – admitting learners with little or no prior qualifications, and catering to the learners’ need to study on their own time and in their own space.

Value System

While Unisa was developed as an open university, the implications of this decision are somewhat different from the OU. Unisa was founded on the principles of high academic quality, and importantly, principles of equality (Peters, 1998, p. 184). Whereas the OU was developed more to give learners a “second chance,” Unisa was developed on the notion that potential students never really had a “first chance.” Part of this was due to racial segregation due to the apartheid regime. Black students were not allowed to attend “white” universities, therefore equality for all was a founding value for Unisa (Peters, 1998, p. 185). It can be said therefore, that Unisa embraced humanitarianism and egalitarianism as core values.

As mentioned above, the OU was developed to meet the educational needs of adult learners “who were educationally disadvantaged and underrepresented at traditional universities” (Peters, 1998, p. 194). Woodley examined the impact of the “open” admissions policy on actual admissions of student populations at OU who might not otherwise have pursued higher education (2010). Results showed higher enrollment of women (surpassing men), older students (over the age of 30), “under-qualified” students, students with multiple disabilities, and students who self-categorize as “working class.”

Peters explained how the philosophy of “open enrollment” was not only a by-line, but was evident in the development of foundational courses that compensated for the varied educational background and preparedness of admitted learners (1998, p. 194). According to Dr. Tony Bates, a professor who joined the UK OU in 1969, driving principles in the development of the university were the emphasis on high-quality distance education, and that faculty be “full academics,” expecting participation in research (Bates, 2011).

Organization/Systems of Operation

The OU employs over 1,100 full time faculty members, nearly 6,000 tutors, and over 3,500 support staff (Facts & Figures, The Open University, 2014). They offer approximately 400 undergraduate modules, 160 postgraduate modules, 50 international versions, and over 20 curriculum partnerships covering a wide range of topics (Facts & Figures, The Open University, 2014). Programs and modules are designed and produced by teams of up to 20 professionals at the university’s main location (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 244).

Students receive a packet by post containing books, specially created texts, CDs, DVDs and other core study materials, which are also available for download from the internet (The Open University, What it’s like to study, 2015). Students also have access to resources via the internet such as podcasts, broadcasts and other teaching materials. OU has a very large online library available to all learners. Tutors work with students both face-to-face (at a regional center), by telephone, via the internet, and correspondence. The tutor is the student’s first-line “to go” person for course assistance. Assessments are either graded online, or graded by the tutor (The Open University, What it’s like to study, 2015).

Unisa made its mark early on by becoming an outstanding “correspondence university” (Peters, 1998, p. 184). However, education through Unisa has changed in recent years, becoming very similar to OU. After being accepted as a student and registering for one or more classes, the student receives a study pack by post, as well as online access to the same materials (Unisa Online – Undergraduate and Honours Studies, 2015). Students are asked to purchase required textbooks and read their study guide. Students have access to tutors either face-to-face at regional offices, or an e-tutor (online). Unisa also has an extensive library available to learners (Suttie, M., 2005).

Model of teaching and learning

Peters has provided a comparison of teaching and learning behavior at both OU and Unisa (1998, p. 186, p. 196). Teaching behaviors at Unisa begin with the development of course materials; faculty in Unisa work in much smaller groups to develop course materials than do faculty at OU. Additional teaching behaviors at Unisa include developing, administering and correcting assignments and assessments, and advising and supporting students assisted by tutors. At OU, faculty serve more in a development role, and tutors provide student support and correct assignments and assessments.

Learning behaviors of students at Unisa include purchasing textbooks, reading and studying course materials, completing all assignments and assessments, using literature retrieval skills and fostering relationships with faculty and/or tutors. Learning behaviors for OU students are very similar except the student would have more of a relationship with the tutor than the faculty member (Peters, 1998, p. 186, p. 196)

Technologies Used

As discussed above, students at both Unisa and OU receive study packets by postal service, as well as online availability. Therefore correspondence materials remain an important part of course materials at both universities. Both OU and Unisa require students to have computer and internet access. Unisa states in their admission criteria that students must have at least one hour a week access to the internet, and Unisa works to get lower prices for 3G connectivity and purchase of computers and devices for their students. Computer and internet access is available at one of the learning centers throughout South Africa, although students are generally limited to one hour per week to allow more students access. Both Unisa and OU use on-line wikis, blogs, discussion groups, tutor-groups and internet-based study schedules (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 245). OU also offers podcasts and broadcasts (through BBC).

Access to information and communication technology is critically important in a distance education program that relies heavily on this technology. Research published in 2012 by Liebenberg, Chetty & Prinsloo demonstrated that not all enrollees at Unisa had computer access. Those that did have computer access more commonly did so from home (61%), however 53% of students use online capabilities at work, 9% used an internet café and 7% used an Unisa computer laboratory (p. 257). Surprisingly, only 90% of those with computer access also had internet access; none of the students who lacked computer access had internet access (p. 257). The most common reasons for inability to access the internet were lack of computer access (28%), affordability (25%), and no internet access at work (11%) (p. 258). Only a bit more than half of respondents owned a mobile device with internet connectivity (p. 258). It will be interesting to see how the changes Unisa has made in recent years, mandating internet access, will affect enrollment.

Conclusion

Both OU and Unisa have enjoyed tremendous success in distance education. OU has clearly demonstrated its commitment to research in distance education, and has proven greater learner access to higher education than that seen in traditional universities. Unisa has made great progress in its humanitarian and egalitarian efforts, although assessing tuition and the lack of computer and internet access still hinders citizens of sub-Saharan African from participating in distance education, thus impeding Unisa's mission.

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