The Fourteenth Cambridge International Conference
on Open, Distance and e-Learning 2011

**Presented by The Von Hügel Institute, St Edmund's College,
Cambridge, in association with The Open University
and The Commonwealth of Learning**

# Internationalisation and Social Justice: the role of Open, Distance and e-Learning

**Sunday 25 to Wednesday 28 September 2011**



*Madingley Hall, Cambridge*

Collected Conference Papers and Abstracts
September 2011

# Edited and with an introduction by Anne Gaskell, Roger Mills and Alan Tait

Cambridge International Conference on Open, Distance
and e-Learning

# Internationalisation and Social Justice: the role of Open, Distance and e-Learning

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## Internationalisation, social justice and open, distance and e-learning: working with the grain?

**Introduction**

**Alan Tait and Anne Gaskell**

This 14th Cambridge Conference on Open, Distance and E-learning offers its contributors the challenge of aligning a trio of concepts and practices. There is no doubt that open, distance and e-learning (ODEL) facilitates the development of education internationally, in particular Higher Education. The reasons for this can be easily and quickly stated:

- ODEL in its capacity to disaggregate the constitutive elements of a learning system offers freedom from place and time, constituent elements of its key offer of flexibility that allow it to support educational systems across national boundaries;
- The extraordinary commitment since World War 2 at national and international levels, in particular driven through national governments, International Governmental Organisations and NGOs, in the 'development' of the 'third world' or 'the South' has seen in ODEL through its flexibility combined with scalability the opportunity to fulfil the moral obligation to build urgently-needed educational institutions and systems;
- The commercial opportunity available in the mismatch of demand and supply in Higher Education in particular, that has seen the entry of private sector for-profit and not-for-profit organisations in particular into on-line learning as a subset of ODEL, supported by the extension of free trade agreements such as GATS to services in which education is, albeit contestedly, included.

Once we bring the third concept in, that of social justice, there is immediately a tension created. At the core of the tension, for tension there assuredly is as this collection of papers fully demonstrates, is the question as to whether (ODEL) contributes to or detracts from social justice in its facility for supporting the development of education on an international basis.

But let us first of all consider what we mean by social justice. This is, as some contributors point out, too infrequently examined, and failure to pay attention to what is intended by the term risks first of all that we have an inadequately robust concept if it is to take on the mantle of remedying social injustice or, secondly, that the term can be suborned by those who claim it but have no capacity or even intention to deliver.

Central to the term is the conviction that human beings have some core characteristics of equality. This derives firstly from Christian tradition, and in both catholic and reformed churches (long before the often cited Catholic origins of the term in the 19th century, John Ball, the 14th century priest in England of anti-hierarchical and reformist character in a speech to rebel peasants in 1381 caustically put the metaphorical question 'when Adam delved

and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?'). Secondly the term can be seen to have arisen from the secular tradition of Universal Human Rights with its origin in the 'Egalité' of the French Revolution, and has been subsequently embodied in the UN institutions, following its adoption in the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. While both streams might characterise the other as being right for the wrong reasons, they share an ideological commitment to a fundamental equality of status of all human beings despite the lived reality of privilege and social hierarchy. Indeed, John Ball in his support for the Peasants Rebellion might be seen as a very early figure attempting to bring these streams together (for those who wish to take up the cause of social justice, it is worth noting that he suffered an unspeakable execution in the personal presence of the king. So there are risks!).

In accepting the case for social justice, there is the embedded a priori assumption that the world is not structured fairly enough, and that something should be done about it. That assumption does not gain universal assent, especially from those who regard the market as the most simple and effective mechanism for goods to be distributed. Even where the abstract principle can be supported, as soon as it demands the shifting of resources from some of the 'haves' to some of the 'have-less' or 'have not' groups it is likely to strike the rock of self-interest.

There are relatively passive approaches to social justice, e.g. those that restrict themselves to making opportunity more equally available, alongside the much harder task, which takes as an objective making achievement more equally achieved. This latter begins in particular to impact on the distribution of resources, and meets resistance fairly early in its development.

More recently, Rawls has made the term social justice his own, and his relevance to understanding of distance education and social justice has been elaborated by Rumble (2007). In summary, Rawls' account of a social contract starts from the commitment to equality of worth of human beings, and demands that entitlements are proposed by representatives of the population, especially those with responsibilities for government, on a 'blind' basis, that is to say as if they had no knowledge of their own entitlement and acted as if for all rather than as advocates of their own interests. Thus in creating institutions and organisations for ODEL this would lead to policies and practices of Equal Opportunities, with remedial support given to those who needed it by administrators or managers working to provide systems as if they themselves needed that support. The critique of Rawls has been twofold, that his work is based on abstract principles re egalitarianism, and also that the principles of the social contract might function nationally but are difficult to make work on an international basis.

Of equal interest in terms of considering social justice, and substantially as yet unexplored in the ODEL context, is the contribution that Sen has made with his so-called Human Development theory (Sen 1999; 2009). This has been explored in an educational context, in particular in schools, by Walker and Unterhalter (2007). Sen focuses development on what he terms a capability approach, that is to say the support of positive freedoms to be or do something,

'to chose a life one has reason to value' (Sen 1999 p74). These freedoms are dependent on what he calls functionings, 'the various things a person may value being or doing' (Sen 1999 p 75).  This is a significantly different position from those who see the outcomes of development as primarily material benefits or services, which from Sen's perspective make up the basis for the freedom to deploy the capabilities that he sees as the real outcome. Sen does not propose a set of universal capabilities but proposes that they be elaborated in specific contexts.  Nussbaum however has proposed a set of universal capabilities such as being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; being able to have good health; being able to move freely from place to place; being able to use the senses, to imagine, think and reason (there are 10 in total) (Nussbaum p 33-34).

Thus, following Sen,  in considering the extent to which ODEL contributes to or detracts from social justice when working on an international basis, we would look to develop understanding as to how an institution or a programme contributed to the freedoms that its learners might deploy in their lives.  In more concrete terms this might include:

- Ensuring, or seeking to ensure, the admission of students to programmes according  to their need and not to their capacity to pay;
- ensuring the alignment of curricula with the skills and knowledge that students need to function in their individual, family and economic lives;
- ensuring the commitment to student success, and thus to a range of support services on a differentiated basis;
- ensuring the validity and credibility of qualifications in terms of societal acceptance.

This approach moves away from abstract commitment to equality but demands practical outcomes, within which we can place commitments to ethics and to equal opportunity practices.   Following this approach, ODEL can contribute to social justice, whether nationally or internationally, in its ability to demonstrate its development of the functionings needed to live a free, that is to say a fully human, life

Let us return therefore to the question as to whether ODEL on an international basis in fact contributes to or detracts from social justice.  Are we restricted to asserting that all for-profit educational initiatives are educationally suspect?  It is certainly the case that for-profit educational organisations would need, logically speaking, to serve the market, which in a fundamental way suggests accepting the world as it is rather than identifying its structural inequalities.  Public-sector or third sector institutions usually have the privilege to spend money made available through government or other foundations for purposes that the market is less likely to see as an avenue to provide the profit to allow it to continue.

However, it is also the case that private sector institutions can do two things that could be regarded as valuable contributions to a society that is committed to social justice. Firstly, the private sector can serve established audiences which do not need the support of the state or other not-for-profit source; and secondly the private sector can invent markets, by which is meant through innovation

provide products and services which users have not asked for but take up, sometimes with great enthusiasm, when offered for the first time. This can apply in educational contexts as well as in more familiar product-led sectors.

Rather, therefore, than starting from one of the ideological positions that are frequently proposed, e.g. that all institutions working internationally in ODEL are involved in cultural imperialism, or that all private sector institutions are interested in shareholder return rather than educational mission, or that public sector institutions are likely to serve staff interest rather than client interest, we can assess the contribution to social justice for our own or other organisations through the construction of characteristics that support or detract from social justice, developing these principles for our own contexts, and sharing these in order to construct larger order understandings.

The outcome of any of these approaches should be the embedding of social justice in practical outcomes and its removal from the anodyne or rhetorical. This conference represents an important opportunity to try and do this.

**Introduction to the conference papers**

The conference papers provide a comprehensive illustration of these themes and will provide a very fruitful basis for discussion about wider concepts, practical experience and outcomes[1].

As discussed, for-profit institutions can make useful contributions to social justice, but some of their international activities have raised concerns over issues of quality, which have a major impact on the validity and credibility of qualifications, one of the concrete ways in which institutions can contribute to social justice. How can quality be assured with "imported" and "exported" programmes (Youssef)? Cross-border education can raise issues of programme relevance and cultural dilution (Braimoh) and commodification (Ipaye), while the use of VLEs to provide educational services can lead to quality assurance challenges (Idogho). Assuring quality transnationally would require more effective control over programmes and institutions; but as King discusses, there is a tension here between greater control and the technological developments which are leading to greater flexibility and less constraint (King).

Several authors interrogate the concept of social justice and discuss the contested nature of ODEL's role (Prinsloo); whether, for example, ODEL spearheads an agenda of accumulation (Hülsmann), neo-imperialism (Ninalowo) or Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence" (Ntshoe and Bohloko).

Social justice can, however, be served by ensuring access for diverse groups of students and putting in place support services to promote their success. This aspect of ODEL forms the subject of a number of papers. Studies relate to gender (Anene; Ogunsanmi), disability (Mozelius & Megammaana), school-age learners (Jakobsdóttir & Johannsdóttir; Mustafa Munawar; Ombajo Misava), and location - ODEL being particularly important for those living in rural and less

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[1] Many papers address more than one theme but this introduction highlights only one of these.

developed areas (Li; Mozelius, Hewagamage & Hansson; Zhang) or areas subject to flooding (Rezwan).

However, simply providing access is not sufficient in terms of promoting social justice: the open door should not be a revolving door and lead to student attrition (McIntosh, 1975). Papers discuss the range of skills that need to be developed to ensure student success:  these should be needs-driven (Aremu), involve critical thinking (Ramadan) and can involve a framework to support students' learning capabilities (Guo). The development of inter- or cross-cultural understanding is important to enable learners to situate themselves within transnational course materials (Al-Khatib) and is also one of the areas promoted in a sandwich programme in Nigeria (Osakinle & Omoniyi). Intercultural issues were also relevant to cross-border collaborative learning in pharmacy (Bruhn-Suhr).

Collaborative learning and learning in communities emphasise the role of learning as a social process, "of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities" (Wenger 1998, p.4). Active engagement with others can promote student success and is fostered in a number of ways illustrated through case studies presented here. Servant-leadership can provide one way of promoting community-building (van de Bunt-Kokhuis) while Bolt & Mortimer emphasise the role e-Learning can play in this process (Bolt & Mortimer).

While e-Learning has the potential to support the development of communities and promote social justice (Gezani), the inappropriate introduction of ICT may actually inhibit this (Hendrikz & Aluko), lead to plagiarism (Ryan), or indeed widen the "digital divide" (Fadlallah).  Provision of hardware and software is not always the answer: the focus should be on its use for social inclusion and so "reorient discussion of the digital divide from one that focuses on gaps to be overcome by provision of equipment to one that focuses on social development issues to be addressed through the effective integration of ICT into communities, institutions and societies" (Warschauer 2004, p. 9). Even when there is relatively good connectivity, students may face challenges with access for various reasons and prefer blended forms of learning materials (Simon, Taylor, Nelson & Lithgow). It is necessary to understand student diversity and their needs to support success (Botha) and so the use of familiar technologies such as mobile phones may be more inclusive (de Lemos).

One aspect of e-Learning with considerable possibilities for cross-border education is the development of Open Educational Resources (OER) which can be adapted to suit particular contexts. Their potential and the challenges facing their use are discussed by Kaushik and Lentell and O'Rourke and form the subject of a workshop by the latter two.  Other  aspects of e-Learning across borders are discussed by Mariam Munawar in her consideration of the critical success factors involved, while the use of social media and Web2.0 technologies and their role in supporting the communicative and ethical needs of a global citizen (Sorensen) and learning, knowing and working practices (Thompson) are also explored. Second Life has also proved valuable in

improving the reading habits of low-income Mexican children (Gayol, Rosas & Uribe).

Access and support for student success (including appropriate and relevant skills for study) are critical for developing the ways in which institutions and programmes can contribute to the freedoms that learners can deploy in their lives. ODEL institutions also have responsibilities for ensuring that curricula and teaching provision is aligned with student needs.

Curriculum and course design are discussed in a number of papers: about business education (Slade, Galpin & Prinsloo) and law (Bolt & Mortimer); while learning foreign languages can provide particular opportunities for the promotion of internationalisation (Tcherepashenets; Thorsteinsdóttir, Ragnarsdóttir & Jakobsdóttir). Course evaluation can provide important information to improve the planning and delivery of programmes (Adelowotan & Lawal) while the creation of quality resources through collaboration between institutions is explored by Swithenby and Macdonald.

The design of appropriate e-Learning events and online activities requires relevant support and development for teachers. A workshop led by Moseley, Hayes and Fyle will demonstrate the use of games to introduce faculty to the concepts needed for international course design, while Clayton discusses the use of self-reflective frameworks to encourage educators to meet the needs of diverse groups of students. Other papers focus on the use of online activities for teacher training (Soliman) and as a route for initial teacher education for Māori students (Yates). Academics also need to publish their research findings and this is not easy internationally, particularly when publication in major international journals is dominated by authors from a very few countries – an issue which needs to be addressed (Mitchell).

Finally, we are very proud that previous Cambridge Conferences have led to the kind of international discussion and collaboration which is the subject of a workshop by Douglas, Kelly, Moseley & Stevens. Their example of continuing dialogue must be an essential way forward in addressing themes of internationalisation and social justice for the future.

We wish you very fruitful and enjoyable discussions around this rich collection of papers and workshops at the conference!

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