

## CHAPTER 12

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### CONCLUSION

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Looking back over the contents of this volume, we find, on the one hand, a large measure of consensus over key issues, trends and challenges in the field covered and, on the other hand, a diversity of approaches and perspectives. Clearly all the contributors are agreed on the following facts:

1. Higher education institutions throughout the world are coming under increasing pressure for reasons already described.
2. With the advance of globalisation, higher education is increasingly crossing national, sectoral, institutional and disciplinary borders, bringing many new challenges.
3. Lifelong learning is becoming increasingly essential in a world of rapid social, economic and technical change.
4. The explosion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) offers a way of meeting these challenges and holds vast possibilities for the future of distance higher education.

However, in specific contexts – national, institutional or sectoral – these facts can lead to different scenarios. And herein lies the first salient point to emerge from the book: that those engaged in making policies relating to distance higher education and the use of ICTs are constantly having to strike a balance between universalising tendencies (globalisation, student mobility, the need for international standards and norms etc.) and the demands of different nations, cultures, population groups and constituencies.

Taking the national level, it is clear from several of the contributions how much countries vary in their educational needs, their technological capacity, the attitudes of students and teachers towards modern learning technologies, and the scale on which it is practical to apply ICT-based learning. The much discussed digital divide is of course one of the major factors here. As long as this divide persists it will be necessary for policy-makers to adapt their plans to what is technically possible in a particular national context. The Finnish Virtual University, described by Marja Kylämä, is made possible by, among other things, Finland's high rate of Internet access and its computer-literate learners. A very different situation prevails, as Olivier Sagna tells us, in Africa where “the number of people possessing a home connection to the Internet is insignificant”. Nevertheless, as Mr. Sagna's example from Senegal shows, some African higher education institutions are finding inventive ways of carrying out ICT-based learning despite the digital divide

by, for example, entering into partnerships with private companies to make computers available part-time to students doing courses online. The situation is again different in China, where there is both an external and internal digital divide, but where e-learning provision is developing at high speed within a well planned and co-ordinated strategy, in which the government is playing a key role. Each of these countries offers useful examples to planners elsewhere in the world, depending on the level of digital technology and provision in the country concerned.

Countries also evince wide differences in the attitudes of learners towards distance learning in general and ICT-based learning in particular. In countries such as the UK, as is shown by the case of the Open University, described in Mary Thorpe's chapter, distance higher education and ICT-based courses enjoy a high acceptance in the learning community. By contrast, in China this form of learning is at present regarded as a lower option for those studying towards a degree. As Ding Xingfu, Gu Xiaoqing, and Zhu Zhiting report, most of these have only taken the e-learning route because it is the last chance for them to receive higher education. The authors also report widespread lack of understanding, among both learners and teachers, as to the nature of e-learning and what it requires. Students often lack the necessary motivation and self-discipline, and many teachers think that they can simply put educational materials online and then wait for the students to use them.

Providers of e-learning also face a cultural diversity that can sometimes create difficulties or barriers when programmes cross frontiers. As Mary Thorpe writes:

“When the [UK] Open University sought to open its courses to US students, it had to break down long courses into shorter modules, fitting with the US semester system, and also with the concept of regular instructional activity led by a tutor, on a weekly basis. Course materials may also include content that is too culturally specific, or even offensive in some contexts.”

Linguistic diversity is a further challenge at a time when English is becoming more and more dominant as the language of cyber-space.

While countries differ widely in the ways already mentioned, they also have many common problems. One of these, albeit varying greatly in degree, is that of funding, dealt with in the chapter by Greville Rumble and Frederic Litto, which helps us to understand how cost patterns are changing with the growth of distance and ICT-based learning. Another common problem is that of standardisation. The Chinese authors, describing this challenge, write:

“Hundreds of ICT companies are competing in the Chinese e-learning market. Consequently, many e-learning systems developed by various educational companies are experiencing difficulties in resource sharing and harmonising their systems owing to the different technology standards used. In 2001 the Chinese e-Learning Technology Standardisation Committee (CELTSC) was established, which is responsible for developing a standardised framework for e-learning technology systems.”

The importance of standardisation is also highlighted by Marja Kylämä when describing the work of the Finnish Virtual University's Service Unit: “The foremost task for the Service Unit is to support university ICT co-operation. This includes defining joint university standards, harmonising practices in electronic service access and ICT, and drafting standardisation agreements together with the parties to the FVU agreement.” Clearly standardisation is likely to become an increasingly complex issue,

and policy-makers will continue to be faced with the challenge of harmonising national and global standards.

A similar challenge in reconciling the global and national dimensions is manifest in the area of quality assurance (QA). Here Insung Jung's chapter on the Quality Assurance Survey of Mega Universities is illuminating. The survey reveals varying notions about the criteria for judging quality and about the methods for assuring it. "The survey results," she reports "show that the mega universities have often focused exclusively on assuring the quality of their own programmes and services delivered in their country. Increased cross-border distance education and e-learning activities present challenges for the existing QA policies." Prof. Jung, like a number of other contributors, also expresses concern about the quality implications arising from the growing number of private, for-profit e-learning providers. The emergence of these, she writes, "is pressing on the existing QA structure of distance education institutions". Speaking of the need for an international dimension to QA, Prof. Jung says: "QA in distance education is not an institutional or a national issue anymore because distance education reaches beyond local and regional boundaries and new forms of DE provision are increasing. Distance education in a globalised context requires new QA mechanisms."

Clearly, therefore, international mechanisms and instruments are of great importance for the future of quality assurance in distance higher education. One such instrument is the UNESCO Higher Education Open and Distance Learning Knowledge Base (HEODLKB), a decision-support tool for policy-makers, which is described in the chapter by Zeynep Varoglu. This project again provides an illustration of the challenge of striking a balance between universality and diversity. Through careful testing, the tool was developed so as not to be a "one size fits all" model, but rather one that takes account of the heterogeneity of specific national and institutional situations.

A related area where the international dimension is becoming increasingly important is that of the recognition of qualifications. At the global level there are initiatives such as UNESCO's Global Forum for Quality Assurance, Accreditation and Recognition of Qualifications. At the regional level initiatives include the Bologna process to establish an integrated European system of qualifications. At the bilateral level, many valuable policy lessons can be gained from the work of the Netherlands Organization for International Cooperation in Higher Education (Nuffic), described in the chapter by Jindra Divis, Astrid Scholten and Anne Marie Mak. While urging the full use of existing instruments and mechanisms to achieve transparency in the field of quality assurance and recognition of qualifications, they recommend that "quality assurance and accreditation systems ... should open themselves to all providers and all forms of educational provision including e-learning studies and cross-border provision" and that prior learning should be given due recognition. As a way of helping people to present their qualifications for a job or a university programme, the portfolio system used by Nuffic is proving to be a valuable tool and a good way of striking a balance between the standardised approach and the need to capture each individual's own special qualification profile.

A further message that stands out from the contributions to this volume is that the field in question has reached a critical stage, as one can see when looking back at the earlier phases. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries we saw the development of adult education, evening classes and correspondence courses. From the 1970s onwards came the great development of open universities and distance higher education, making use of radio and television. Then came the digital revolution, multimedia technology, the Internet and the virtual classroom, while at the same time globalisation took on a new momentum. We now stand at the confluence of these developments, poised to take further

and even greater steps, and the decisions we make will have profound consequences for the educational world of the future.

In such a situation, it is essential for decision makers to have maps and compasses to help them chart the course forward. Here the article by Tony Bates on research provides many useful insights. Educational research, as Dr. Bates shows, is not an abstract, ivory tower pursuit, but something that provides essential knowledge for policy making. One of the things that emerges from his article (and is confirmed by other contributors) is that online education is not a miraculous panacea and that it is not enough simply to create an online learning environment. Rather, “research has indicated that that very careful course design and moderation are needed”. Another important research finding is that “distance education is not a good substitute for conventional higher education for students straight from school” since these students usually lack sufficient independent learning skills. On the other hand “it is a powerful mechanism for supporting lifelong learning”. Dr. Bates also points out that “there is an undue emphasis on funding research into distance education technologies; more funding needs to be devoted to the ‘softer’ areas of research in distance education, such as policy research, cost-benefit analysis, instructional design, and learner support”. Thus, in addition to highlighting some significant research findings, his chapter also contains important pointers for the researchers themselves.

A further general point that can be drawn from the contributions as a whole is that e-learning technology is not an end in itself, but a tool for conveying educational content. The tool is more appropriate in some situations than others, and often works better when combined with other, more traditional tools. Furthermore, we should never become so mesmerised by the tool that we forget the content. Nevertheless, ICT-based learning has opened up enormous new vistas for distance higher education and has brought special benefits for the lifelong learner. The experience, insights and guidance gathered together in this volume will hopefully assist its readers in using the tool to the maximum benefit of learners.