

Comparing two distant education institutions from two different countries

1) Introduction

The purpose of this assignment is to compare and contrast two distant education institutions from two different countries – a developing and developed country respectively. I decided to focus on the Asian continent and will discuss the Bangladesh Open University (BOU) and The Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK) according to the following dimensions –mission and population served, history and reason for existence, inherent values, organizational structure, teaching and learning models and technologies.

Before proceeding with the comparison of the two universities it's important to provide necessary contextual information about Hong Kong and Bangladesh in terms of population size, urbanization and economic status. These factors have a direct influence on the provision of distance education in any country.

Hong Kong has a population size of 7,153,519 (July 2011 est.) of which 100% is urbanized (CIA, The World Factbook, 2012). It has no rural areas and it one of the most densely populated areas in the world. It is considered to be a developed country with a GDP (per capita) of \$49,300 (2011 est.) (CIA, The World Factbook, 2012).

Bangladesh has a population size of 161,083,804 (July 2011 est.) of which 28% is urbanized (CIA, The World Factbook, 2012). This means that a large part of the population lives in rural areas, which make the provision of distance education more challenging. Bangladesh is considered to be a developing country with a GDP (per capita) of \$1700 (2011 est.) (CIA, The World Factbook, 2012).

2) Mission and population served

The mission of The Open University of Hong Kong “is to make higher education available to all, principally through open and flexible learning” (www.ouhk.edu.hk, 2012). It is a dual-mode university offering distance learning and face-to-face programs. This type of university can be defined in the following way:

Dual-mode universities teach simultaneously on-campus and off-campus students, and the same admission requirements apply to both categories of students. The underlying idea behind the dual-mode model is that the same curricula can be offered to both on-and off-campus students through appropriate channels of communication. (Guri-Rosenblit, 2009, p.2)

In 2011/2012 it had 11856 students enrolled for distance learning programs and 6,628 students registered for face-to-face programs (www.ouhk.edu.hk, 2012). According to www.ouhk.edu.hk (2012) the majority of its students are younger adults aged between 22 and 35. It mainly serves students from the three districts of Hong Kong – Kowloon, Hong Kong Island and the New Territories (www.ouhk.edu.hk, 2012). Furthermore, the majority of its student population is currently working in managerial and professional contexts (36,2%) (www.ouhk.edu.hk, 2012).

The mission of the Bangladesh Open University is predominantly focused on fulfilling larger needs prevalent in Bangladeshi society – addressing the problem of illiteracy and to provide a second chance to students “who for various drop out of the conventional system of education” (www.bou.edu.bd, 2004).

According to www.bou.edu.bd (2004) it is currently the only distance education institution in the country offering programs in sciences, agriculture, humanities and social sciences. It is a single-mode institution exclusively offering distance learning by means of technological devices. Its student population largely consists of Bangladeshi students. In 2008 it admitted 2, 71630 students (www.bou.edu.bd, 2004). This large number of students is typical of the industrialized notion of distance education and more specifically mass production which makes it possible for universities to register a large number of students (Peters, 2010, p. 18).

The main difference between the two universities according to this dimension is that The Open University of Hong Kong has a more geographically concentrated and smaller student population than the Bangladesh Open University. However, both maintain an open access policy.

3) History and reason for existence

According to www.ouhk.edu.hk (2012) The Open University of Hong Kong was formerly known as the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong (OLI) with the latter being established in 1989 with 4,237 students enrolling. In 1997 it was established as a university reflecting the success open learning enjoyed during the preceding eight years (www.ouhk.edu.hk, 2012). Since 1997, The Open University of Hong Kong received continued financial support from the government, continuously increased its student numbers and received wide recognition for excellence in open and distant education. The main reason for its existence is to provide education for all students as reflected in the tag line of the university – “Education for all”. (www.ouhk.edu.hk, 2012).

According to www.bou.edu.bd (2004) the Bangladesh Open University had its origins in using audio-visual technology (especially radio receivers) in the Bangladeshi educational system since 1956. During the 1970s the provision of distance education further evolved

with the establishment of the School Broadcasting Pilot Project (SBP) which later became the National Institute of Educational Media and Technology (NIEMT) (www.bou.edu.bd, 2004). The latter developed into the Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education (BIDE) which later became the Bangladesh Open University in 1992 (www.bou.edu.bd, 2004).

The Bangladesh Open University is a good example of how technology led to the development of open universities. According to Shale (2010) radio and television offered a solution to problems associated with postal services. Furthermore, “radio and television were often touted as cheap transmission vehicles for educational purposes.” (Shale, 2010, p.97).

The main reason for the existence of the university is “to provide opportunities of education to all classes of people and create efficient and skilled manpower by improving the quality of education” (www.bou.edu.bd, 2004).

Although the two universities have different histories (in Bangladesh distance education has a longer history), both have essentially the same reason for existence – to provide education to all students.

4) Inherent values

The Open University of Hong Kong aspires to a generic set of core values. In summary, these values are focused to open education regardless of demographic factors, high-quality and affordable programs across various disciplines, excellence, commitment to lifelong learning, learner support via technology flexibility to adapt to changing needs of learners (www.ouhk.edu.hk, 2012).

The most important value the Bangladesh Open University try to uphold is to provide open access to education to all Bangladeshi citizens in order to improve the educational system, increase literacy levels and to contribute to human development in the country. (www.bou.edu.bd, 2004).

This example links well with broader factors associated with open learning which Peters (1998, p. 101) also highlights: “There are also deeper causes, namely motives and influences that have a societal background. The term ‘open university’ can be interpreted multidimensionally.”

The most important difference between the two universities regarding this dimension is that the Bangladesh Open University has a more determined social mandate than The Open University of Hong Kong. The focus is not exclusively of preparing students professionally but also to enhance fundamental skills on a more elementary level. This is

demonstrated by the offering of non-formal programs in areas like Health, Nutrition and Agriculture via its Open School.

5) Organizational structure/Systems of operation

The Open University of Hong Kong has four schools – the School of Arts and Sciences, the Lee Shau Kee School of Business and Administration, the School of Education and Languages and the School of Science and Technology. Additionally, the Li Ka Shing Institute of Professional and Continuing Education is responsible for overseas degree programs, work related training and short courses (www.ouhk.edu.hk, 2012).

The university also has a clear research mandate across disciplines to deliver high quality research outputs and the RIDAL-centre conducts research in distance learning.

According to www.bou.edu.bd (2004) the Bangladesh Open University comprises of six schools – Education, Social Science Humanities and Language, Business, Agriculture and Rural Development, Science and Technology and the Open School. Each school is managed by a dean and consist of faculty members.

The university is further managed by the Pro-Vice Chancellors Secretariat, the Treasures Secretariat, the Registrar's Office and the SSS Division that is responsible for student registration and the distribution of study materials (www.bou.edu.bd, 2004).

Both universities are divided into schools, have administrative support divisions (distribution of study material for example) and academic support divisions (libraries for example). Therefore, they both follow a conventional systems model found in many distance education institutions.

A clear difference between the two universities is that their academic offering differs. For instance, the Bangladesh Open University comprises of schools such as Agriculture and Rural Development which links with its societal mandate and demonstrates that distance education institutions normally reflects prevalent needs in a particular country. No distance education institution can function in isolation from broader societal contexts.

6) Teaching and learning model

The Open University of Hong Kong makes use of self-study packages and supplementary audio-visual study materials. As part of student support the university uses a tutor system to provide comments on assignments and to answer student enquiries telephonically (www.ouhk.edu.hk, 2012). Tutors also arrange tutorial classes on weekends or weekday evenings although these tutorials are voluntary (www.ouhk.edu.hk, 2012).

Teaching and learning at the Bangladesh Open University mainly relies on the print-based study package. Students do have access to tutors and library services at regional centres whilst continuous assessment through assignments and end-of-semester examinations (done at more than 1000 centres) are used to evaluate students (www.bou.edu.bd, 2004).

Both universities strongly rely on print-based course packages supplemented by audio-visual material. Both universities offer student support in the form of a tutor system. The Bangladesh Open University is more decentralized in its teaching by means of 12 regional resource centres, 80 coordinating offices and 1106 study centres throughout the country (www.bou.edu.bd, 2004).

7) Technologies

Advanced technology to provide learner support and to facilitate the learning process plays an important role at The Open University of Hong Kong. The university is equipped with tutorial rooms, a multimedia laboratory, language and computer laboratories, an audio-visual centre, classrooms and lecture theatres across its two campuses and two learning centres (www.ouhk.edu.hk, 2012). According to www.ouhk.edu.hk (2012) the university is also equipped with an Electronic Library with over 500,000 volumes of publications. Students can access these resources from anywhere and at any time they wish.

The Bangladesh Open University makes use of more conventional print media which form the largest part of study packages although radio and television programs are also used as supplementary material. Further technological support exists in the form of the Internet and teleconferencing and videoconferencing (www.bou.edu.bd, 2004). The university is further equipped with a modernized Media Centre offering technological advances like “silicon graphics, digital editing suites, electronic preview theatres, microwave communication link and full-fledged audio-video suites” (www.bou.edu.bd, 2004).

It is clear that the two universities differ in terms of technological advancement. The Open University of Hong Kong offers more advanced technological support to students and has a better and more integrated technological infrastructure.

8) Conclusion

There are clear differences between The Open University of Hong Kong and the Bangladesh Open University especially in term of student population, history, societal mandates and technological advancement. The two universities are more similar with regard to organizational structure, systems of operation and teaching and learning

models. Both universities clearly aspire to provide unhindered access to education. Both institutions cannot be viewed in isolation from broader societal contexts.

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