

Online, distance education and globalisation: Its impact on educational access, inequality and exclusion

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Abstracts

English

Online and Distance Education can be seen as a product and a producer of globalisation. Educational access, inequality and exclusion from education are topics of major importance in developing and developed countries' efforts to use Online and Distance Education as a means to respond to the forces of globalisation. Socio-cultural, economic, political and technological factors and their complex combinations in the wider context of globalisation show that globalising forces affect deeply and in various ways the educational systems of any country and are expected to do so more drastically in the future. This is mirrored at the universities' mission statements that were examined. While educational access has traditionally been given high priority, inequity and exclusion issues – along with globalisation pressures – undermined societies' and universities' efforts to fully achieve their aims. These society used Online and Distance Education (especially by establishing Open Universities) but responded to each country's specific needs and priorities. It is suggested that a good response to these issues might be context-specific Online and Distance Education and Flexible Learning solutions, new pedagogy that is more aware of students' needs and, alternatively, tailor-made modes of Open and Distance Learning and Flexible Learning that suit particular contexts and circumstances.

Greek

Η Online και Εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευση μπορεί να ιδωθεί ως προϊόν και ως παραγωγός παγκοσμιοποίησης. Η πρόσβαση στην εκπαίδευση, η ανισότητα και ο αποκλεισμός από την εκπαίδευση είναι θέματα μείζονος σημασίας στην προσπάθεια αναπτυσσόμενων και ανεπτυγμένων χωρών να χρησιμοποιήσουν την Online και Εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευση ως μέσο ανταπόκρισης στις δυνάμεις της παγκοσμιοποίησης. Κοινωνικο-πολιτιστικοί, οικονομικοί, πολιτικοί και τεχνολογικοί παράγοντες και οι περίπλοκοι συνδυασμοί τους, δείχνουν ότι οι δυνάμεις της παγκοσμιοποίησης επιδρούν πολύ και με διαφορετικούς τρόπους στα εκπαιδευτικά συστήματα οποιασδήποτε χώρας και αναμένεται να κάνουν το ίδιο με δραστικότερο τρόπο στο μέλλον. Αυτό αντανακλάται και στις δηλώσεις αποστολής των πανεπιστημίων που εξετάστηκαν. Ενώ στην πρόσβαση στην εκπαίδευση έχει, παραδοσιακά, δοθεί υψηλή προτεραιότητα, τα ζητήματα της ανισότητας και του αποκλεισμού – παράλληλα με τις πιέσεις της παγκοσμιοποίησης – υπονόμισαν τις προσπάθειες των κοινωνιών και των πανεπιστημίων να επιτύχουν πλήρως τους σκοπούς τους. Χρησιμοποίησαν την Online και Εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευση (ιδρύοντας Ανοικτά Πανεπιστήμια) αλλά ανταποκρίθηκαν στις ειδικές ανάγκες και προτεραιότητες της κάθε χώρας. Μια ορθή ανταπόκριση σε αυτά τα προβλήματα θα μπορούσε να συνιστάται σε εξειδικευμένες λύσεις Online και Εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευσης και Ευέλικτης Μάθησης, νέα παιδαγωγική που να αντανακλά περισσότερο τις ανάγκες των εκπαιδευομένων και, εναλλακτικώς, προσαρμοσμένοι, κατά περίπτωση, τρόποι προσφοράς Ανοικτής, Εξ Αποστάσεως και Ευέλικτης Μάθησης.

Keywords

Globalisation, Online, Distance Education, Access, Exclusion.

Topics

- Introduction
- Defining terms and concepts
- The debate on globalisation of educational access, inequality and exclusion – Present and future
- The varied nature of educational access, inequality and exclusion
- Challenges and opportunities offered by globalised online and distance education
- Conclusion
- References

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss Online and Distance Education as a product and a producer of globalisation. It analyses the varied nature of educational access, inequality and exclusion all over the world and describes how does globalisation affect them now and how might it in the future. It also examines the challenges and opportunities offered by globalised Online and Distance Learning to institutions and societies.

Defining terms and concepts

A lot had been written about "distance learning" and "distance education" but not "distance teaching". However, all definitions have some elements in common. Here, we adopt and use Keegan's equation (1996): "distance teaching" + "distance learning" = "distance education". The term "distance education" is more comprehensive and precise (UNESCO, 2002) despite the every-day usage of the term "distance learning". Juler (1990) puts it in the right context: 'Distance education means creating educational communities which teachers, students and others are linked in discourse wherever they may be through networks appropriate to their circumstances'.

These educational communities and networks can be created, facilitated or augmented by the use of the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). This gave birth to "online education" which, according to Paulsen (2003), is characterised by the use of a computer network to present or distribute

some educational content and the provision of two-way communication via a computer network so that students may benefit from communication with fellow students, teachers and other staff. Therefore, online education is a way distance education is provided. So, for the purposes of this paper, the terms Online and Distance Education (ODE) and Open and Distance Learning (ODL) will be used interchangeably.

We now come to define the terms "access", "inequality" and "exclusion" with education in mind. "Access" means finding ways of 'bypassing' barriers to learning (DfES, 2002). There are many characteristics that can be considered as barriers (or structural features) to learning or education: income, gender, race, ethnicity, power, status, age, religion, physical or mental disability or any other characteristic.

Levitas et al (2007) define *social exclusion* as "a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole."

By adapting Preston's definitions (1996) accordingly, *inequality* refers to:

- "inequality of opportunity" which is the lack or limited access to important social institutions (with education among the most important ones),
- "inequality of condition" which means that some people are disadvantaged from the outset because of one or more of the above mentioned structural features / circumstances into which they are born, and
- "inequality of outcome" which means that whatever the circumstances contributing to inequality, people end up unequal because there is insufficient compensation to remove the effects causing inequality in society. On the reverse, equality of outcome means that everyone should end up equal regardless of his or her particular circumstances.

Therefore, access to education may be restricted by exclusion and inequality – it is very difficult to distinguish "what causes what" as these notions are intertwined. This is particularly true in today's economies and societies that are under the pressures of globalisation (Kavoura, 2007). The next section examines the concept of globalisation and how it affects educational access, inequality and exclusion.

The debate on globalisation of educational access, inequality and exclusion – Present and future

The present ...

Kellner states that (1999) "Globalisation is a distinguished trend of the present moment and it involves flows of commodities, capital, technology, ideas, forms of culture and people across national boundaries via a global networked society". It is a definition that brings together the various constituents / elements described by other authors.

An effort will be made so that these constituents be put under the major factors that form the world and even every single country or region. These factors are socio-cultural, economic, political and technological ones. This effort is attempted just for reasons of better understanding. However, what must always be borne in mind is that every constituent / element of a given factor may be closely connected to other elements belonging to other factors – they are intertwined and the resulting situation is a complex one (Edwards and Usher, 2000).

Socio-cultural factors

There is evidence that socio-cultural conditions are under a process of change and have an impact on educational access, inequity and exclusion. The main reason for this, is that social processes are transforming space and time (Castells quoted in Lea and Blake, 2004b) in a way that space is not a barrier because time for communication and distribution is minimised thanks to the new Information and Communication Technologies – ICTs). This has been described as the "compression of the world" and "global consciousness" (Robertson quoted in Hoogvelt, 2001) and the "annihilation of space through time" (Hoogvelt, 2001).

All these sound very optimistic as such developments are expected to remove barriers to education (thus providing more access) and prevent exclusion and erase or smooth inequalities. But this is not the case as nothing can be taken for granted. It is assumed that all people in every region of the globe are aware of these developments, do have the education and training that enable them to exploit the new advantages and there is the relevant infrastructure in place. A view like this cannot be supported at a time when 80% of the earth's population has never heard a dial tone (Reddy and Manjulika, 2002). Moreover, inequality is a structural feature of society – it is something that actually exists (Preston's "inequality of condition") and it can be said that new developments create a much broader gap between the members of a given society. For example, this results to the exclusion of the poor, as they do not have the means to pursue more education and / or buy equipment needed to gain the benefits of the new ICTs.

This "global village" (McLuhan quoted in Lea and Blake, 2004b) is not homogenous. Hoogvelt (2001) claims that the 20% of the earth's population must be regarded as privileged, the 40% as a mass of workers that live under unstable employment conditions and the remaining 40% as the totally excluded from the new developments. Castells (quoted in Lea and Blake, 2004a) supports that education is the solution to the inequalities of globalisation. The same could have been argued for Online and Distance Education as well, but the latter (i.e. Online and Distance Education) is just a product and a producer of globalisation. This means that it obeys to the same prerequisites described above.

Moreover, we must be aware that globalisation has many influences that are more directly experienced by modern (Western in their majority) societies. According to Jakupec and Garrick (2000) the distinctions between life and work, learning and production, community and enterprise are becoming less firm. At the same time, there is a growing need for well-educated and skilled human resources, able to deal with the increased requirements of a globalised society. This challenges "knowledge production" as the main aim of the university and threatens "academic autonomy" as the universities become economically driven organisations.

Edwards and Usher (2000) summarised the works of other authors on how globalisation affects education policy and how the respective issues are addressed (Table 1).

Table 1. Globalisation, education policy and issues addressed

| Issues ... | ... addressed by ... |
|--|--|
| The need to change education is largely cast in economic terms. | Improving national economic performance by tightening the connection between education, employment, productivity and trade. |
| There is increasing criticism of education and its failure to deliver what is needed. | Enhancing student outcomes in employment-related skills and competencies. |
| Changes in education are being required without a significant increase in resourcing from governments. | Attaining more direct control over education curriculum content and assessment. |
| Education is being required to work in more commercial and market-like ways. | Reducing the costs of education to government. |
| There is an emphasis on standards, accountability and testing in education. | Increasing community input to education by more direct involvement in education decision making and pressure of market choice. |

Source: Edwards, R. & Usher, R. (2000). *Globalisation and Pedagogy - Space, Place and Identity*. Routledge Falmer, London.

These issues must be combined with the fact of the growing need for well-educated and skilled human resources, which drove to mass education (especially higher education). This may well be considered as a proof for widening access and overcoming inequality and exclusion problems. But, again, this is not the case – what happened was the emergence of multiple niche markets instead of a mass market for a limited number of courses (Bottomley, 2000). This is accompanied by the demands that new forms of structure (i.e. modular structure) impose on students. They are expected to demonstrate a potentially bewildering range of academic literacies (Thorpe, 2000) that many of them did not have. As a consequence, Online and Distance Education tends to be restricted to learners that have certain characteristics and are a very thin slice of the world's population (Spronk, 2002) (Table 2).

Table 2. Required learners' characteristics in Online and Distance Education

| |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "These learners must be already well-educated. In order to take these 'excellent' courses from leading universities, one typically needs prerequisite credentials, usually of a fairly high order. • They must be proficient in reading and writing English, at a high academic level. • They must have ready access to powerful computing hardware and software, and a high speed and reliable Internet connection. • They must be computer literate. The more the ease they are with a wide variety of sophisticated computer applications, the more benefit they will derive from Web-based courses. • Last but certainly not least, they must have money, and not just any money, but hard currency. Investors and providers have billions of dollars to recoup, and it is the end users who will have to pay the freight." |
|---|

Source: Spronk, B. (2002) *Globalisation, ODL and Gender: Not Everyone's World is Getting Smaller*, working draft, International Extension College, Cambridge, August, pp. 4.

Even in countries that are considered as developed ones, few people do have the access to an education like this. Many are victims of inequality (such as the poor people dependent on social welfare) or are excluded (such as people that have basic education only).

Economic

Many authors have written about the economic dimension of globalisation. They consider it as the most important among the others. Hoogvelt (2001) attributes to global economy a highly dynamic, exclusionary and unstable character. She claims that social exclusion is a result of a new mode of development of the capitalist mode of production – only the most profitable will survive. She declares this, as a result of the annihilation of space through time which drives the economics of globalisation in three principal ways:

1. Global market discipline as transnational companies get what they want by threatening to move their facilities in low-cost places.
2. New global division of labour that creates a new social core-periphery hierarchy. High value activities go for the rich consumer and the low value ones to the underdeveloped. This is uneven as capital mobility equalises wage rates.
3. Financialization - financial capital in pure money form facilitated by deregulation which "steals" the surplus of workers' labour. As a result, globalisation makes national solidarity dysfunctional.

Harvey (quoted in Hoogvelt, 2001) agrees: space, time and money are sources of value and power and the mass of workers does not have them. So, the workers that do not have them cannot have access to Online and Distance Education even they could be benefited by it. There is no equity with the power companies have. Worker's employment instability makes them vulnerable and the danger of exclusion is evident.

Political

Jakupec and Garrick (2000) stress that globalisation makes it difficult for governments to define, maintain and control borders of economy, polity, policy and politics. This is true because globalisation implies greater connectedness and de-territorialisation (Waters quoted in Edwards and Usher, 2000). Edwards and Usher (2000) support that the state is subject to the paradoxical pulls of globalisation as other institutions - globalisation may strengthen or weaken it. Kellner (1999) agrees as he claims that globalisation is a "contradictory amalgam" of capitalism and democracy - sometimes globalising forces democracy and sometimes inhibit it.

This "contradictory amalgam" implies the problems of limited access, inequality and exclusion modern democracies face. These are embodied in capitalism. Democracy may attempt to remedy some of them. For example to provide extra scholarships for students coming from disadvantaged groups to study via Online and Distance Education methods or to provide adult basic education via online means. But economic reasons or different priorities may prevent it from doing so.

Technological

Technology and, in particular, new ICTs are the second dimension that has attracted the attention of authors on globalisation. Lea and Blake (2004a) believe that ICTs have taken the centre stage today (compared to "old" technologies). They probably provide access and equity as the proponents of globalisation claim. Castells (quoted in Hoogvelt, 2001) gives this phenomenon a new name: "Informationalism" and considers it as a new technological paradigm that comprises networks, space of flows (nodes and hubs) and "timeless" time. He sees Computer Mediated Communications (CMCs) as a driver of socially stratified differentiation which leads to two distinct populations: the interacting (those that have access to new technology and are able to use it for multiple purposes) and the interacted (the victims of inequity, the excluded that are merely receivers of the actions of the first group).

He continues (as quoted in Lea and Blake, 2004a) by claiming that technology (or the lack of it) embodies the capacities of societies to transform themselves. Kellner (1999) refers to "technocapitalism" – the synthesis of capital and technology in the present organisation of society – which generates new modes of societal organisation, forms of culture and everyday life, conflicts and modes of struggle.

Nevertheless, all these authors do not explain how all people can be benefited from the new ICTs and how Online and Distance Education can be accessible by disadvantaged groups. Probably, this is not their aim but we must know that technological innovations offer new possibilities but can become limitations too (Lea and Blake, 2004a) in analogous ways (see other factors above). We must also remember that McLuhan was not optimistic of universities to use new media and Castells expressed his doubt (quoted in Lea and Blake, 2004b).

Evans (2000) epitomises: "The changing, economic, social and technological conditions have created a demand for education which is less about providing people who are socially and economically disadvantaged with educational opportunities but rather providing those who may well be well placed socially and economically with the educational opportunities to develop their professional and technical knowledge and skills". This contrasts the first paragraph of the Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948).

Thus, globalised education (and Open and Distance Learning as a part of it) is deeply affected by three elements: the ways universities and other educational institutions are going to be transformed, the nature of the emerging socio-cultural, economic and political conditions and the educational exploitation of ICTs (Mason, 1998).

... and the future ...

As Kellner says (1999) our era is an era of a "transition period" between modernism and postmodernism. Development will continue to be uneven and globalisation and local dichotomies will express contradictions and tensions. Globalisation will continue to be seen as sameness and homogeneity but, at the same time, hybridity, difference and heterogeneity. Globalisation is not in opposition with localisation – the latter is a part of the former (Edwards and Usher, 2000). "Globalisation from below" will probably continue to resist globalisation (the imposed "Globalisation from above") by using its institutions and instruments (mainly the ICTs). Individuals can produce and spread their own information, cultural forms, and engage in dialogue and mobilisation. This may lead to increased access to education and especially Online and Distance Education with new ICTs. Kellner (1999) foresees possibilities of greater democratisation, increased education and healthcare, open entry to previously excluded members of races, regions, and classes. But it lays his hopes up to the individual – how can we be sure individuals have access to more educational opportunities and are not prevented from doing so due to inequality and exclusion?

The varied nature of educational access, inequality and exclusion

We now come to examine the varied nature of educational access, inequality and exclusion. In their mission statements, many universities provide for the disadvantaged, the excluded and those who lack access to education. They also describe other priorities that refer to each country's particular needs. Lea and Blake (2004a; 2004b) and Perraton (2000) state that both industrialised and developing countries invested in Online and Distance Education for the following reasons (similarities):

1. Ideological – the aim was to widen access and equity and provide empowerment so as to narrow the distance between privilege and poverty. Examples include Western Europe (Baumeister, 1999), Australia (King, 1999), Africa (Mmari, 1999; Dodds, Nonyongoo and Glennie, 1999) and Latin America (Chacón, 1999).
2. Economic – expansion at a low cost, skilling the workforce in response to labour market needs. Examples include Central and Eastern Europe (Szczygalski and Jenkins, 1999), African countries – Botswana (Kamau, 2002), Swaziland (Magagula, 2002) and Latin American countries – Colombia (Serrano, 2002). In higher education, students pay fees, often higher than those charged by conventional universities. Students are expected to pay more and governments are willing to pay less (Perraton, 2000).
3. Technological – in few cases the technological ability dictated the need for pursuing Online and Distance Education via specific means e.g. in China (Perraton, 2000; Ding, 1999) and the Universities of the Pacific and that of the West Indies (Perraton, 2000; Matthewson and Va'a, 1999; Brandon, 1999).
4. Political – the establishment of Open Universities as a means to meet demand (mainly for higher education). Almost all the above universities include it in their missions.

Perraton (2000) and other authors stress the following as major differences (reflected in the policy statements) in what actually happened in developing and industrialised countries:

1. In many cases (mostly in developing countries) educational expansion through Open and Distance Learning turned to be a "safety valve" which satisfied demand for (higher) education or contained

- it.
2. In some cases the use of Online and Distance Education resulted in allocation of inadequate resources and little concern for effectiveness (e.g. India which tried to address demand without a commensurate increase in the budget).
 3. In South Africa Online and Distance Education did not seem so important for educational expansion purposes.
 4. The groups served by higher education expansion through Open and Distance Learning turned out to be young men (and fewer women) who missed to earn a degree and older students returning to education (Korea and South Africa).
 5. In Western Europe (Baumeister, 1999), Australia (King, 1999) and Central and Eastern Europe (Szocs and Jenkins, 1999) the priorities are more focused on access to Online and Distance Education and the use of new ICTs with the support of European Commission (in the case of European institutions) (Hermant-de-Callata, 1999).
 6. In other countries such as Canada (Shale, 1999), Australia (King, 1999) and Spain (Aretio, 2002), Online and Distance Education activities are part of a faculty or school of continuing education / extension. This means that Online and Distance Education practices are embodied in the respective institutions and are an indication of flexible learning practices.

Let us take as an example the Hellenic Open University (HOU) and the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). Hellenic Open University's mandate is the provision of undergraduate and postgraduate education and training at a distance through the development and use of appropriate educational material and teaching methods as well as the advancement of scientific research in the field of transmission of knowledge at a distance (Zondiros, 2002). At first sight, technology and its use may be considered as the primary goal – but it is not (as the main medium is print). Both the ideological and political reasons mentioned above are true while the economic one can only be inferred, as it not present in any official document. An example of the ideological reasons, had been the priority given for enrolment to people living in remote areas of Greece and are over the age of 23 (now abolished for other reasons). Numbers speak for themselves regarding political reasons: HOU's current annual intake is about 7.400 students and there are plans to reach a total of 30.000 in 2008-2010. And all these in a country of 10 million people only – an exception to Daniel's (1996) opinion for the relationship between country population and the need for an open university.

The above similarities and differences do exist in the case of the University of Southern Queensland. It has almost the same requirements as the UK Open University. A potential student must have the capacities described by Spronk (2002) and the major difference is that everything (except of a stress ball and the transcript) is in electronic form. This means that access to it is impossible for disadvantaged or excluded people. But they are not dealing with these matters when promoting their services overseas!

Challenges and opportunities offered by globalised online and distance education

All descriptions of challenges and opportunities offered by globalised Open and Distance Learning take account Kellner's (1999:8) statement on the importance of the context and the aims to be achieved: "... whether global or local solutions are most fitting depends on the conditions in the distinctive context that one is addressing and the specific solutions and policies being proposed".

Jakupec and Garrick (2000) argue that globalisation demands mobility and thus flexibility and has made it imperative to develop more flexible approaches to learning. They suggest that Flexible Learning (FL) can be considered as Open Learning under certain kinds of limitation (accreditation requirements etc.). Thus, future expansion of Open and Distance Learning into a Flexible Learning context is both a challenge and an opportunity. At the same time, they warn that Open and Distance Learning and Flexible Learning must not be seen and used as another form of delivery but as an agent for changing the context in which higher education institutions operate and how knowledge is "constructed".

The latter implies that there is a challenge to improve equity via flexible and distributed learning through wider access to education (Nunan, 2000). But doing so presupposes that learners' needs, priorities, objectives and circumstances are acknowledged, understood and addressed by a suitable Open and Distance Learning and Flexible Learning system (Thorpe, 2000; Lea and Blake, 2004a). That is, pedagogy has to be seen in a context wider than the classroom – in relation to curriculum, the identity of learners and the emerging socio-economic and cultural contexts (Edwards and Usher, 2000). A context that is able to accommodate different people with different needs and "is directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms" (United Nations, 1948).

On the other hand, underdeveloped and developing countries have the Hoogvelt's (2001) option of a positive concept of exclusion and the parallel establishment of intervention tailor-made Open and Distance Learning and Flexible Learning strategies that meet the special needs of these countries. An addition to this (as well as for the developed countries also), is the initiation and use of Degree Granting Bodies (DGBs) (Brown and Duguid, 2000) that will provide education and training to people in these areas. This is one way the provision of the first paragraph of the Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ("Technical and professional education shall be made generally available...") (United Nations, 1948) can be implemented.

All the above challenges and opportunities are quite difficult to be exploited in practice. For example, an institution offering Open and Distance Learning such as the UK Open University can hardly implement the notion of Flexible Learning. The control required (as a result of distance, specific academic year etc.) set a limit to flexibility. On the other hand, only "advantaged" people can attend it. The same happens with the University of Southern Queensland courses and programmes at a greater extent. In the Hellenic Open University barriers to access are much more limited but issues of inequity and exclusion is not possible to be addressed.

So, Preston's (1996) important remark has to be taken very seriously: "While equality of outcome has not been pursued by governments in capitalist countries, attempts have been made to achieve equality of opportunity and to a lesser extent equality of condition. Governments do not seek to achieve a result where there are inequalities of wealth, income, power or status but only to try and ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to achieve success through equal access to resources such as health care, housing, education and employment". This seems to happen with the provision of the first paragraph of the Article

26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ("... higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit") (United Nations, 1948). But "merit" and the ways it is assessed, are a result of "inequality of outcome".

Conclusion

Access, inequality and exclusion are topics of major importance in developing and developed countries' efforts to use Online and Distance Education as a means to respond to the forces of globalisation. Access is given higher priority – inequality and exclusion are more deeply rooted in any society and economy. The influence of globalisation on socio-cultural, economic, political and technological factors had been reflected on universities' mission statements and also influenced what happened in practice. Response to these issues might be context-specific Online and Distance Education and Flexible Learning solutions, new pedagogy that is more aware of students' needs and alternative, tailor-made modes of Open and Distance Learning and Flexible Learning.

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