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From ‘Equal Access’ to ‘Widening Participation’: the Discourse of Equity in the Age of e-learning

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“The Open Learning System has the political mandate to espouse the educational cause of the marginalised sections of Society” (Roy 2002)

Higher Education as a Basic Human Right

Education is enshrined as a basic human right in the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (Article 26). This declaration specifies three levels of basic right to education, with a corresponding onus on nations to provide: i) free compulsory elementary education for all, ii) general availability of technical and professional education, and iii) equality of access to higher education ‘on the basis of merit’. The commitment to free compulsory elementary education gives governments clear targets to aim at, but the right to technical, professional and higher education leaves considerable room for political re-interpretation. Moreover, the construction of the right to higher education as being available on the basis of merit is ideologically equivocal. The idea of merit suggests intellectual fitness and a capacity to benefit, and whilst the underlying intent is that this should be the main factor determining access, rather than social status or ability to pay, many social egalitarians (including Michael Young, one of the founders of the British Open University) reject the notion that social advantage should accrue from attributes, intellectual or otherwise, which are inherent in some people but not in others.

In the half-century that has passed since these principles were declared, the world has made progress in terms of the numbers of children and young people attending schools and colleges (Perraton 2000:2-3). However, whereas the developed and industrialized countries (Western Europe, North America, Japan, Australasia, etc.), and some of the more advanced countries of the developing world (India, Thailand) have also seen a considerable increase in the proportions of their school populations which go on to benefit from higher education in some form, in the developing world in general and in Africa in particular, this proportion is still less than 10 percent (Perraton 2000:3; Gourley 2004).

What are the means by which these richer countries have created educational equity for significant proportions of their own populations? Has it been achieved in an egalitarian manner, or through the creation of meritocracies? And can these means be universally applied, in this more globalised age, to the extension of the same rights to all the world's people? To address these questions we need to look at the field of open and distance education (ODE), which bears much of the responsibility for the expansion of mass post-compulsory education over the post-war period, and we need to look at current developments in e-learning, in which much of the promise for the future resides. In particular we need to look at some of the ideological, political, economic, technical and entrepreneurial factors which have shaped distance teaching practices and the systems in which they are embedded.

In this chapter I will focus specifically on the British Open University (OU), not only because it has been my own employer since 1996 and is the context with which I am most familiar, but also because it was the first of the open universities and has been hugely influential in legitimizing, and serving as a model for, a number of similar initiatives in other countries (Perraton op.cit:84). Distance education was not, of course, invented by the OU; it grew out of the marriage in the 1920s of correspondence teaching, which had been around in Europe and the US since the late 1800s, and the new technologies of radio broadcasting

(McIsaac & Gunawardena 1996). However, the system of ODE which the OU has been practising since 1969 is generally regarded as the most successful model to date for distance education on a large scale (Keegan 1986). It has been influential in the development of mass distance education systems in several other countries, including in Asia and other developing areas (Perraton 2000:84-85). So a discussion of how the OU currently conceives its mission with regard to the fundamental questions of equity of opportunity at the higher education level could be considered relevant to most other open universities that have adopted this model.

The Age of E-Learning

When we talk about open universities and mass distance education we usually refer to systems that are publicly-owned and government-funded and thus politically accountable. Such systems have tended to actively embrace educational technologies, not only as a means to widen access, but also as a way of reducing the costs of teaching on a large scale. ODE in the current context also encompasses what is now called e-learning. This, at its most generic, is simply the use of digital technologies to connect learners with sources of teaching, but in the wider contexts of globalization and the economic development of countries, the practices of e-learning have acquired a much profounder significance. Indeed they are demonstrating an apparent potential to fragment those same systems of mass distance education, and to cause us to have to redefine the concept of access and indeed the very distinctions between technical, professional, and higher education on which the traditional commitment to the right to post-compulsory education is based. Many ODE providers employ e-learning technologies, but the arena has come to be dominated by organizations which are, to varying degrees, privately owned and engaged in the electronic delivery of distance education primarily and explicitly for profit. Such organizations have mushroomed in recent times, and are not confined to the advanced industrialized countries (King 2003 cites Malaysia and South Africa as sites of expansion of 'for-profit' e-learning). However, the most

commercially-successful are currently US publicly-listed companies, e.g., the Apollo group which includes the University of Phoenix Online, and the Sylvan group (King op.cit:5). The success of the Apollo group, which was ranked higher for market capitalization in Arizona in 2005 than all but one of the state's most successful companies (Wiles 2005), demonstrates that the for-profit e-learning industry is capable of outstripping traditional industries in some areas. These organizations have been highly influential in determining the nature of the market for private e-learning provision internationally, and have recently begun to influence the thinking of public and non-profit institutions, including the traditional ODE leaders such as the OU, with regard to their strategies for increasing and retaining student numbers in an international market.

How do these public and for-profit ODE and e-learning organizations conceive their missions, in terms of equity? Are they able to serve, simultaneously, a commitment to education as a basic human right, the requirements of individual and national economic development, and the desire for corporate profit? What impact has the rise of for-profit e-learning organizations, such as the University of Phoenix Online, had on the way that non-profit providers, such as the British OU, represent their purposes, to themselves, and to the world? To address this question we need to look at the way that terms such as 'access' and 'participation' are used in institutional and pedagogical discourses as proxies for the right to equity in the opportunity for higher education.

Discourses of Equity in Distance Education

Institutions belonging to both non-profit and for-profit sectors publicly espouse social goals such as the expansion of opportunity, widening of participation, enriching of lives, etc. In this they are honoring traditions of discourse about education as a social good that today are universal. However, there are different ways of conceptualizing these goals and different motives underlying the commitment to them.

Roy, in the quote which prefaces this chapter (Singha Roy 2002), argues that ODE has a political mandate to serve the cause of marginalized sections of society. There have been, broadly, two different viewpoints underlying the political commitment to access to higher education on the part of national governments of OECD countries in the 1960s-70s and the 1980s-90s (Jakupec 2000:68-70). The early period is associated with Keynesian 'welfare state' ideologies, and the later with neoliberal 'economic rationalist' ideologies. These viewpoints construct access to tertiary education respectively as: a political catalyst for social equality and mobility; and necessarily aligned with national economic priorities (Jackupec op.cit:68). Roy, and other voices within the Asian Association of Open Universities, argue that economic rationalism and globalization currently threaten the historic commitment of ODE to social justice and transformative education (Roy op.cit:274).

Lockwood (2002, citing Hawkridge's 1995 address to the International Council for Distance Education World Conference) implicates technology in this threat to social justice, identifying a number of ways in which global e-learning developments may impact negatively on populations in the developing world. The chief way is by accelerating the penetration of (largely) Western technologically-advanced and commercially-oriented provision (which may involve both private companies and collaborations of universities with each other or with private companies) into the learner constituencies of other nation states. The growth of an international market for teaching and training materials, at decreasing cost and on an increasing scale of production, it is argued, leads to the imposition of the cultural values of rich and powerful communities onto the lives of the less advantaged, and the deskilling of these developing societies in respect of their ability to reproduce their own values through the development of their own educational resources.

For-profit education does not have an explicit political mandate, but a financial one imposed by customers and shareholders. This does not mean that it is free

from any requirement to respond to pressures for social transformation, any more than publicly-funded systems are able to ignore economic and market pressures, because it is still working largely within a regulatory system which is owned and managed by the public sector (King 2003). Like the public ODE institutions, for-profits are deploying increasingly sophisticated technologies to reach their target audiences and to enhance their reputations, and in doing so, they are implicated in the creation of conditions in which the less acceptable kinds of social consequences outlined by Lockwood and Hawkrige (above) may emerge.

Other principles, as well as equity, are thus active in the ways that access to higher education is being extended through the technologies of distance education, and however they may be represented in the discourse of involved organizations, these are not necessarily based in the social and political priorities of the communities which distance learners themselves inhabit. It would be tempting to see the obstacles to the extension of human rights through e-learning in the developing world as rooted in a fundamental contradiction between the philanthropic principle of equity and the economic principle of profit. However, closer examination of the roots of technology-based ODE as practiced by the open universities suggests that there has always been a more complex relation between ideological and technical/ entrepreneurial aspects of the missions of these public distance education providers. For example, the missions of the Asian open universities have always been closely associated with national economic needs. Whilst the public agendas of the founders of national open universities in India, Pakistan, China, Malaysia, Indonesia and the other members of the Asian group aspired to extend access to groups who are marginalized by existing systems of formal education,¹ they also reflect an overt and pragmatic commitment to national economic and social development. The mission statement of Indira Ghandi National Open University (IGNOU), for example, cites the objective of providing for disadvantaged segments of society

¹ For example, marginalised groups in the Indian context identified by Sharma Sen (2002) include: the differently abled; women; minorities; scheduled castes and tribes; prison inmates; senior citizens; nomads and migrants; the geographically remote.

and strengthening the 'natural and human resources of the country through the medium of education' (IGNOU Handbook 1985).²

The open universities of Asia and elsewhere contributed considerably to the numbers of their citizens entering higher education during the last two decades of the 20th century. India, for example, saw an annual increase of 13.1 percent in students enrolling in distance education courses, compared to 5.3 percent for those entering higher education in general (Perraton 2000: 89). But there are at least two caveats to the conclusion that the ODE movement has been the means to expand access to higher education in a universally equitable manner. The first is that, although the commitment of the open universities continues to be nominally to higher education, the majority of the courses they have provided are more properly to be described as technical and professional education, specifically in subjects such as teaching, nursing, and commerce (Perraton 2000: 92-93³). The second, and more important, caveat is that, whilst numbers of participants in post-compulsory education globally have increased overall, the proportions from low-income and marginalized groups have not (Power 2002:54-55, Sawyerr 2004). It seems that the goals of national economic development and an increasingly egalitarian social order are not necessarily both served by the access-expanding policies of governments which have created mass ODE systems to date.

Discourses of participation and the 'marginalized'

Over the last few years, the concept of 'participation' has begun to replace that of 'access', as a key descriptor of the effort to extend the opportunity of higher education to a wider population. In the UK, successive Labour governments since 1997 set targets for the percentage of the population aged between 18 and 30 to be engaged in higher education in some form. By 2004 the figure of 44

² Compare this with the British OU's commitment to 'promote the educational well-being of the community generally' (Open University Charter 1969).

³ More recent figures from Murphy et al. (2003), however, suggest that in the provision of online courses, Asian universities now provide more in Humanities subjects than in Education.

percent had been achieved, and the target of 50 percent set for 2010. However, the UK government has recently acknowledged in its white paper 'The Future of Higher Education' that the proportion of these who were from low-income families has not increased (Department for Education and Skills 2003:8) and there is evidence now that the 50 percent figure is unlikely to be achieved (Bekhradnia 2005). Expanded opportunity is now being constructed in terms of fairer access, which focuses on the identities, rather than the numbers, of those who engage in higher education (Scott 2003).

A concern with the disadvantaged has long underpinned the concept of social justice that the OU has espoused (see the next section). But, as is the case with the field of ODE in general, it is arguable whether it has contributed much to the extension of higher education to the economically marginalised. The social mandate is now being expressed through a change in the discourse of equality of opportunity, from emphasising access for classes of people, to the participation of individuals. The OU, for example, which used to have a strategic priority to support the participation of people who had been previously disadvantaged in their pursuit of education, now represents its mission as 'providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realize their ambitions and fulfill their potential' (Open University 2005). It is arguable whether this shift of emphasis is still in line with the traditional commitment to social justice based on a political egalitarianism, or whether it represents another facet of contemporary economic rationalism.

Other elements of the discourse of participation which have been inherited from UK government policy address ideas of lifelong learning enabled by ubiquitous technologies, particularly the technologies of e-learning. The discourses of e-learning and lifelong learning promoted by the UK and other Western governments still refer to equality of opportunity, just as did the original mission of the British OU, but these technologies are also implicated in the wider discourses of globalization and entrepreneurship (Edwards & Usher 2000:52),

and e-learning has come to be associated with business in a way that earlier generations of distance learning have not been. Not that the field of ODE was free of commercial associations – even in the earliest days of the OU's founding there was an opportunist strand of argument running parallel to the social agenda, as Harris has pointed out (Harris 1987). Private commercial publishing interests, such as Pitmans, Pearson, and private colleges and universities such as the Open Learning Centre International in the UK, and DeVry University in the US, have always sought to profit from demand for distance teaching. However, the association in the case of e-learning is both more extensive, in that there has been an explosion of initiatives aimed at establishing for-profit electronic teaching operations during the last 10 years, and also more fundamental, as Business Studies, along with related areas such as administration and accounting, has itself become one of the subjects most taught in e-learning contexts (Farrell 2001). The University of Phoenix Online's own subject curriculum is evidence of this, with 11 of its 15 undergraduate programs related to business and/or management areas (Phoenix program list 2004). According to Garrett (2004 *op. cit*) Phoenix Online is a model for a form of distance education which directly addresses a demand which is not being catered for by public education providers in the US. This is for mass-market taught programs with workplace relevance, targeting 'non-traditional' learners who are defined as aged 25 and over and seeking short-term career advancement through study.

The issue for the OU today, is therefore whether a mission to promote participation in what Bonk (2004) calls the coming 'e-storms' in higher education being generated principally in the US (by which he means the increased demand for convenient and career-focused post-compulsory education, and the expansion of technological 'solutions' to pedagogical problems), can still be represented as a strategy to create a more just society through the extension of opportunity for higher education. Or does it signal instead a reconceptualization of the idea of social justice, in which human rights are contingent on the ability to

find a place in a new kind of social and economic order, predicated on technical and occupational competencies?

Access, Social Class, and the British Open University

One of the original founders of the OU, Michael Young, coined the term 'meritocracy' to describe a society which 'sieved' people according to values laid down by an intellectual elite (Young 1958). In his view such a society would be as divisive as one based on social class. Young, and the British Labour Party of the post-war period to which he belonged, were the inheritors of a movement towards educational reform begun in 1945 and given momentum by the creation of the national welfare state in 1948. They were motivated by the inequalities of a system which selected 80 percent of British schoolchildren for secondary education (vocational or non-university focused) at age 11. Both the comprehensive school system which they were responsible for launching in 1964, and the Open University which was founded in 1969 were, at the ideological level, expressions of their belief in the human right not to be 'streamed' or treated as inferior on the grounds of either social class or intellectual merit.

The principle of 'open-ness' in its original formulation by the founders of the OU therefore meant that the opportunity to study at tertiary levels should be available to everyone who wanted it, not just those who could claim to merit it. At the time of the OU's founding, less than 16 percent of British school-leavers went to university, and of these only a very small proportion came from working class backgrounds. (Social class in the UK used to be determined according to categories of employment: managerial and professional, manual & casual, etc. More recently, it has come to be seen as a function of the places where people live, with neighborhoods categorized on the basis of average income, value of property, consumption patterns, etc. See Chapman 2001-4). Furthermore, there were very few routes to a university degree open to mature students of any class. Open-ness was therefore construed in constructive terms, not only through the

lowering of symbolic barriers, such as entrance qualifications or age restrictions, but also through practical intervention to make it possible for the educationally marginalized to engage in study activities which had been denied to them for pragmatic reasons. This particularly applied to working class students, the disabled, the imprisoned or those in care, and to members of the police and armed forces. Open-ness was seen as the route to an increasing and increasingly diverse student population, which would bring both social and economic benefits to British society as a whole.

The overtly ideological character of the discourses of social equality that accompanied the establishment of the OU inevitably generated political resistance, as much from Labour's own supporters as from the Conservative opposition. The decision by the Education Minister, Jennie Lee, to constitute the fledgling institution as a fully-chartered university, rather than as a consortium of public education providers outside the 'elite' university system (National Extension College, Workers Educational Association, Local Authority Adult Education, Trade Unions, etc.), attracted opposition from those on the left who felt that this sold out the cause of adult education to the middle class values of the academy. It was seen by many as a betrayal of Labour's egalitarian principles. As Walter Perry, the OU's first Vice-Chancellor, put it:

"In her effort to navigate the political minefield, Jennie Lee had sought advice from the University world, ignoring the world of adult education, including extramural departments, the Workers' Educational Association and local education authorities that Harold Wilson had included in his original consortium concept. It took the Open University a very long time to overcome this resentment." (Perry 1976 quoted in Schugurensky 2001)

And of course, there was strenuous opposition from the Right too, objecting both to the principle of qualification-less entry to the British university system, and to the cost of setting it up, which was to be borne entirely by the public purse. Nevertheless, there was much in the idea of access to higher education for people who did not conform to the traditional profile of the university student, in

order to help them make good their potential, that appealed to progressive conservatives. It enshrined the notion of the university education, and the degree-level qualification, as the benchmark of educational success, and it promised a whole generation of middle class people whose education had been interrupted by the war a 'second chance'. Jennie Lee did her best to remove any lingering connotation of class bias: 'It is not a working class university. It was never intended to be a working class university. It was planned as a university. It is the Open University' (Harris 1987).

The OU was successful from the start, with 19,500 people registering for its first courses in 1971 (Schugurensky op.cit), and 600 of them graduating at the first degree ceremony two years later (BBC News 2003). Ten years later the numbers had more than doubled and the university had proved that it was able to retain students in the notoriously precarious domain of distance learning.⁴ It also established itself as a cultural influence on the British public's attitudes to higher education in a way that few other universities outside Oxbridge have. A combination of the political controversy surrounding its foundation, the enduring resonance of the images created by the film 'Educating Rita',⁵ the consistent public exposure to its teaching via broadcast TV, and its success in drawing attention to its celebrity alumni guaranteed it a recognition factor that other institutions could only envy. This public image was, and is, of great business value to the university (a recent survey carried out by the Institute of Education Technology, for example, found that only 28 percent of OU new students in 2003 had even considered studying with another college or university). The flexibility of part-time learning at a distance for older students with families, and for professional people who cannot take time off from work, is clearly a factor in the decision of many of these students to take an OU course, but whereas in the

⁴ Drop-out rates in Distance Education have long been thought to be considerably higher than for face-to-face equivalents (see, for example, Kember 1995)

⁵ This film played on the relationship between an aspiring working class OU student and her disillusioned middle class tutor.

1970s the OU was effectively the only provider of good quality higher education of this kind, this is no longer the case.

Access, Diversity, and the OU

In 2005, the OU has grown to around 180,000 students, including 25,000 studying overseas, 10,000 registered disabled people, and 1,000 in prison, and its claim to have helped to expand the UK university population over its 35-year history is undeniable. But John Daniels, vice-chancellor of the OU from 1996 to 2001, has also claimed that the OU has increased the social diversity of university students:

“On almost any measure of the profile of the student body: gender, disability, ethnic origin, or socio-economic background, the Open University has greatly expanded the diversity of students entering higher education.” (Daniels 1998)

The OU's impact on diversity has been disputed from the beginning. Harris (1987 *op. cit*), for example, argued that it was because of the inequalities of the British education system that there was a pool of able, motivated, but insufficiently qualified students ready to seize the opportunity offered by new means of access. These students included a large number of women, which represented an increase in diversity over conventional university populations, but considerable proportions of these were from semi-professional occupations, especially teaching, which is a traditional occupation of the British middle class. These people were the disenfranchised, rather than the marginalized, in the sense that their exclusion was a function of the elitism of the British university system itself, not of fundamental inequalities in economic or social status. In the US, for example, where college education had never been a preserve of the elite, there was arguably no equivalent constituency for part-time higher education at a distance, at that time.

Furthermore, the last 10 years have seen a general widening of access to higher education in the UK, through reorganization of the full-time university sector (e.g., the granting of university status to Polytechnics in 1993). The OU's role in this

expansion has been significant, but its retention rate for students from lower-income and 'non-traditional' backgrounds has been considerably worse than that of non-distance universities attempting to expand participation by the same groups (Aston & Bekhradnia 2005 compare first-year withdrawal rates of 13 and 18 percent at two London Universities with high populations of lower-income students, with the UK average for all students of 8 percent. By contrast, OU internal figures for students receiving financial assistance in 2002 show that over 65% did not complete the first year). But as Aston & Behradinia (*op.cit*) have pointed out, higher non-completion rates are the price that universities have to pay for operating open access policies.

A major part of the UK government's discourse on diversity in higher education is nowadays about increasing participation in the national economy of people from diverse backgrounds. The 'salary premium' that graduates are able to command when they are employed has been an important part of this rhetoric. But the idea that adult part-timers entering higher education are more likely to be motivated by instrumental and occupation-related considerations, rather than by cultural ones, is not born out in the case of OU students. Motivation for studying with the OU varies considerably between individuals, and studying purely for interest or as a hobby has equal priority with looking to enhance employability either in a current or a prospective career. As OU internal surveys have repeatedly shown, new students on undergraduate courses are more likely to cite 'personal development' or 'interest in the subject' as their reason for doing the course, rather than 'to help me progress in my employment'. This is certainly the case with some of the more high-profile students taking OU courses, such as well-known actors and other personalities who clearly have little need to improve their academic profiles or their job prospects.

There are notable differences, however, for those following postgraduate programs, who are more oriented towards employment and professional goals. The majority of these students seek to use a course as a means of progressing

in their employment. Furthermore, once people get beyond their first course, whatever level they are at, they are more likely to cite qualifications or credit points, rather than intrinsic interest, as a reason for studying. The OU is, of course, very keen for students to go on and seek accreditation, not only for their development, but for its own business reasons too, as competition for part-time students has increased. The emphasis which was once put onto student recruitment is now moving to retention, and this may be one of the reasons why the number of postgraduate places have steadily increased (in 1996 the OU was offering 135 postgraduate courses, by 2000 this had risen to 220). This is an indication of the way that the concept of access, with its original justification in the idea of removing barriers to entry, is increasingly acquiring a more instrumental meaning as education is converted into social capital for the student, and into economic capital for the university.

The OU and e-learning

Most major organizations involved today in mass distance education via e-learning emphasize their commitment to innovation, and to being leaders in the field, as is demonstrated by these extracts from the statements of mission and/or objectives of three of the main 'players':

...to be a world leader in the design, content and delivery of supported open and distance learning (British OU)

...to be a recognized player in (commercial) distance and e-learning training programmes and consultancy. (Open University of the Netherlands)

...to foster a spirit of innovation that focuses on providing academic quality, service excellence, and convenience to the working adult. (University of Phoenix Online)

The original Charter of the OU established the objectives of the institution as disseminating learning and knowledge by a diversity of means including broadcasting and 'technological devices appropriate to Higher Education' (OU Charter 1969). As Shugurensky (*op. cit*) points out the then Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson had a fascination with technologies, particularly the

broadcast methods which were being used to train engineers in the Soviet Union, and the use of teaching films by Encyclopedia Britannica in the US. His election manifesto for 1964 argued that there was an 'imperative need for a revolution in our education system which will ensure the education of all our citizens in the responsibilities of this scientific age' (Labour Party Manifesto 1964). TV broadcasting figured largely in the constructing of the public image of the university, but the real motive for using technology at that time was making teaching cheaper, and the real technologizing of teaching was in the development of systems for production and distribution of printed materials on a very large scale, as well as the administration of the registration, teaching and assessment of hundreds of thousands of distant students annually. As Schugurensky observes:

"Staff at the Open University have titles unheard-of in other British academic institutions, for example: photographic manager, copyrights manager, director of marketing, manager of correspondence services, chief systems analyst, and project control officer." (Schugurensky op.cit)

But with the development of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) from the mid-80s onwards, the economic argument for technology-based teaching began to be supplemented by claims for additional pedagogical benefits to be gained. The OU's approach to distance teaching had always claimed enhanced learner-centeredness and pedagogical effectiveness from the use of technologies, including print. Some very distinct print-based pedagogies were developed to support a very diverse range of student types, including the socially and educationally marginalized. Rowntree (1999), for example, describes the attention paid to active understanding and to the 'voices', of students as well as of teachers, in what he calls '2nd and 3rd generation' distance learning texts and practices (broadly the pre- and post-computer phases of distance teaching).

The major investment in new technologies going on across the higher education sectors, both public and private, was therefore seen as educationally, as well as

economically, justified, and the OU set out to embed ICT into all its courses and dealings with students and part-time tutors, and to propel itself into the forefront of the development of new technology-based teaching methods. John Daniels, then Vice-Chancellor, wrote and spoke extensively of his vision of a future in which 'mega-universities' would provide mass education globally, delivered electronically, across social and geographical boundaries (Daniels 1996).

Participation as a Metaphor for Learning

But e-learning also has another discursual relation to the notion of participation, in this pedagogical domain. Participation as a metaphor for learning, in contrast to the more conventional acquisition model (Sfard 1998), has long been a central feature in the discourse of computer-mediated communication in education (see Bullen 1998). The online learner is usually idealized as independent and autonomous, participating fully in, and benefiting from, online discussion with peers in an unthreatening collaborative environment, where the tutor acts more as a friendly facilitator rather than as the traditional authoritative didactic figure. Learning in these contexts is seen as a function of participation in the social construction of knowledge (see, for example, Garrison & Anderson 2003, or Jonassen *et al.* 1993).

As a corollary of this pedagogical emphasis on active participation, assessment in online courses has a strongly regulative function. In Garrison & Anderson's words: 'it is clear that students must perceive participation in eLearning discussions as a major component of the programme of studies. Thus, assessment activities must be integrated within the eLearning activities' (Garrison & Anderson *op. cit.* 95). The simplest way to do this is to specify minimum levels of contribution (for example: the University of Phoenix Online specifies a minimum number of logins per week). In addition, guidelines can be provided as to what constitutes a 'good' message, and how to interact and build on others' contributions. Because of the practical difficulties of monitoring every student's contribution in an on-going discussion, the onus for demonstrating the

value of his/her contributions is often put back onto the student, sometimes through requiring him/her to 'reflect' on discussion at a later point, in order to provide evidence of his/her learning, or to demonstrate outcomes from problem-based learning or group collaboration. The use of assessment as a means of rewarding, and thus promoting, participation in online discussion is now very common in the world of online learning. Garrison and Anderson observe that many online courses now offer 40-50 percent of overall course grade for this kind of participation (*op. cit*:96).

But there is evidence from elsewhere that cultural, linguistic, and other factors of student difference do not disappear in e-learning environments, and may in some cases exacerbate effects of exclusion and marginalization (Goodfellow *et al.* 2001; Mavor & Traynor 2003; Reeder *et al.* 2004). Furthermore, as Ess (2002) has argued, the dominance of Western, English-speaking institutions in the design and development of these systems of remote communication ensures that it is a culturally-specific notion of participation that is being imposed on the otherwise heterogeneous population of e-learners. Examples of this can be seen in studies of the type which investigate participation in computer-mediated tutorials by students from different national backgrounds (e.g., Kim & Bonk 2002). The findings of these studies often reinforce the idea that characteristics of student engagement such as individualism and autonomy, valued by pedagogical thinking in the West and embedded into the design of both technical and social structures of communication in many e-learning contexts, are more often present among the participants who are schooled in Anglo/US academic environments.

Participation for Employability

Developments in the technologies of e-learning are not tied to the proliferation of interaction-based models of participation. The relation between the technologies the social goal of widened participation has also been constructed by associating the ability to use 'knowledge tools' with individual or organizational survival, in a

society where competitiveness and success depend on the creation of knowledge. Romiszowski (1996) provides a good illustration of this. In his view, societies in the 21st century will be characterized by networks of 'knowledge workers' whose primary function is to continually renew the process of knowledge creation in order to keep themselves, or their employers, ahead of the competition (*op. cit.*:25). The process of knowledge creation is dependent on personal skills of information access, location, analysis and evaluation, which involve the manipulation of sophisticated and ever-developing software applications, and also on the performance of human 'conversational networks' in which knowledge workers 'collaborative participatively toward the same set of global objectives' (*op. cit.*:26). The emphasis on collaboration, on new technologies, and on competition as the key driver is highly typical of the discourse of what Gee and others have called 'fast capitalism' (Gee *et al.* 1996) and is paradigmatic of an approach to educational opportunity which is oriented simultaneously to participation in a social order and to individual competitive advantage.

There is also an influential strand of development located predominantly in the US and Western Europe, concerned with the design, operationalization, and ultimately marketing of technical platforms and systems which support the mass-delivery of materials which are independent of any communication between or among teachers and students. Wiley (2002) calls this 'automated instruction', and predicts a future collision between this model and the social-constructivist version of participation in e-learning. The assumption is that the effort of providers of teaching materials will shift away from content and the delivery of teaching, to the creation of repositories of learning objects. These are essentially software objects designed for learning purposes that can be picked up and re-used by different learners in different learning contexts. Such a development, it is proposed, will free educational institutions from the need to create learning materials for themselves. They will then be able to concentrate on assessment and accreditation, and on developing systems which focus on validating a

learner's success at self-initiated learning. This conceptualization is closely associated with ideas of a developing global market in learning 'objects', and with the participation of the (lifelong) learner as a customer in that market.

The Limitations of e-learning

The valorization of information technology in relation to learning in general and lifelong learning in particular, as exemplified in the British Government's 'Learning Age' papers (DfES 1998) led to the founding in the UK of the 'university for industry' (later renamed 'Learn Direct') which was to use 'leading edge technology to make learning available at work, in learning centers, in the community, and at home' (David Blunkett, UK Education secretary 1997-2001). Gorard *et al.* suggest that:

"ICT-based initiatives have formed the bulk of interventions aimed at achieving lifelong learning for all in the UK with the government keen to adhere to the notion that technology is a means through which to free learning from those characteristics that have made it traditionally unattractive or inaccessible to large sections of the population."
(Gorard *et al.* 2002)

Inaccessibility is seen as connected with the location and convenience of learning opportunities, rather than with longer-term social, economic and educational factors. In fact, the study by Gorard *et al.* reports that having access to computers and the internet is not a significant factor determining whether people have undertaken any post-compulsory education. Thus, access to IT is not a proxy for wider participation in education, which remains largely determined by other factors. For example, those in social class AB (professional and managerial) are three times as likely to participate as class DE (manual and casual). This contradicts the assumed link between participation and electronic access which continues to characterize much of the public discourse of lifelong learning in the UK.

In fact, whilst the use of online communication in distance education is widespread, especially in the US, it is not yet all-pervasive. In the case of the OU, for example, whilst much is made publicly of the 160,000 students and tutors who are registered users of the university's email and online discussion facilities, only half of its (over 360) courses make use of the internet for the delivery of materials or for study support (OU Factsheets 2004). The university acknowledges that it has no ambition to become an 'online university', unlike, for example, the Open University of the Netherlands, which is explicitly engaged in transforming itself into a 'digital university' (Curran 2001). This is partly out of a commitment to flexibility in the means of studying offered to its students, but also a product of a policy on equal opportunities that requires that technical systems are embedded in the curriculum in ways that do not undermine the ability of any students to access material or benefit from teaching. One of the roles of the Institute of Educational Technology (at the OU) has always been to monitor and report on levels of student access to the various media considered to have an educational application.⁶ Over the years this data has played an important role in the development of the university's policies on courses which required students to use, progressively, audio tapes, video tapes and off-air recordings, stand-alone computers, email and computer conferencing, CD-ROM multimedia packages, and most recently the internet.

E-Business and the Digital Divide

It might appear, as Boshier and Onn argue (2003, quoted in Roy *op. cit*), that the rhetoric of e-learning as e-business is a construct of a neoliberal social agenda focused on the internationalization of education as instrument of economic globalization, rather than the democratization of educational opportunity. Certainly the apparent impact of new technologies on social structures in the developed world leaves little room for optimism as to any leveling effects they might achieve elsewhere. The tendency identified by van Dijk (2000) for technological divides to deepen, so that the gap separating the haves from the

⁶ For example: in 1996 a Student Access survey showed that 25 percent of OU students had no access at all to a computer. By 2001 this was down to 8 percent.

have-nots gets progressively more unbridgeable, does not augur well for the prospects of increased technical access to post-compulsory education for traditionally disadvantaged sectors, even if it does widen participation by previously uninvolved groups on the 'have' side of the divide. Nevertheless, even institutions such as the OU, which are still publicly committed to a social transformative role in the wider international context are finding themselves constrained to consider the way their social missions articulate with the conditions that commercial self-interest is creating in the global education market. Not least because of the rapidly increasing complexity of types of institutional partnership and forms of public-private financing that have emerged in the wake of several spectacular and costly failures to turn considerable levels of investment into acceptable numbers of students (e.g., Columbia University's Fathom company, Cornell University's eCornell venture, the UK e-University etc.).

The Reshaping of the OU's Social Mission

The OU's current priorities link its core UK objective of widening participation, to the revitalization of its international focus and 'global reach', and to becoming a leader in design, content and delivery. This strategy explicitly constructs the international arena as a key area of pedagogical and institutional innovation, and stresses the pedagogic resource that the OU and other developed economies represent to the international market. The impact of OU audiovisual techniques on the world in the early 1970s is presented as evidence for its capacity to exploit the global implications of newer e-learning technologies. It thus aims to use the university's advantage in its pedagogy and technical resources to compete in major new areas of distance education expansion, e.g., India and China, focusing on reproducing itself as a large-scale provider on a global basis. It also draws on the OU's traditional social agenda, emphasising its support for the principles agreed by UNESCO in the Dakar framework of 2000 (see 'Education for All'⁷). These two aspects of the organization's enterprise are not seen as

⁷ http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/ed_for_all/dakfram_eng.shtml

polarized but as complementary. Business advantage can be found in meeting what is seen as a desire on the part of the stronger developing countries to deliver low cost mass education. The OU's resources are in both expertise and 'goods' (i.e., hardware, materials and accreditation), but the unstable economic climate for e-learning suggests that it will not be advising international clients on major investments in e-learning infrastructure of their own.

Higher Education for Economic Advantage

The two discourses of 'equal access' and 'widening participation' are essentially two faces of the single coin of expanded educational opportunity. Nevertheless, they involve differences in emphasis on human rights, economic priorities, and individual development. They also have different implications for the way that higher education is constructed in opposition to professional and/or occupational education, and suggest different trajectories of development for the technologies of e-learning. Finally, they also lead to different positionings of the socially disadvantaged and/or marginalized.

Historically, equity in the context of access to higher education has been presented as the equalizing across all sectors of society of the availability and the quality of teaching at this level so as to remove any physical and financial barriers to its take-up. It has been viewed as the responsibility of national governments and identified with publicly-funded systems of open and distance education, such as the British Open University, which utilizes a variety of technologies to achieve flexible, large-scale, low-cost teaching of a comparable quality with the conventional elite systems it supplements. The maintenance of intellectual and cultural parity with the curriculum and learning outcomes of these elites has been of key importance in upholding equality of access through ODE, and the representation of e-learning technologies in this perspective has emphasized their ability to reproduce teaching and learning processes characteristic of quality in conventional universities. The success of the discourse of equality of access through open and distance education in highlighting its

contribution to an overall increase in numbers of people entering higher education has been mitigated by a perceived failure of national education systems as a whole to alter the proportion of those from low-income and socially marginalized groups who do so. At the same time, the increased educational levels of populations in parts of the developing world where access has expanded have created conditions of increased global competition, for both commercial and educational opportunity. There has therefore been a shift in the ideological underpinnings of social commitment to equity in higher education in the developed countries, from the individual's right to a university education, whatever his/her circumstances or social background, to his/her opportunity to participate in post-compulsory education at some level, as part of commercial and governmental agendas for social and economic transformation.

Equity in the context of participation in this social and economic transformation has been presented within two additional frames of reference, one focusing on the theme of diversity in the social backgrounds of those who do take up enhanced opportunities, and the other emphasizing a convergence of higher education with professional, technical and lifelong learning, and the dissemination of the opportunity for personal economic advantage. These discourses have valorized the development of educational technologies which are oriented to the customization of the teaching and learning process to local contexts of work and social life, and which are also capable of reaching educationally marginalized, but economically viable, sectors of relatively developed societies on a global level. In general, widening participation through e-learning, whilst inheriting the democratic connotations of personalization and choice, adds a strong implication of social responsibility – to participate 'in' a social process which has to a large extent been determined by larger political and corporate interests (e.g., the so-called 'knowledge society' in conditions of globalization). Access is, by contrast, a more passive concept, removing restrictions without necessarily imposing duties. The OU's social mission, like that of other public education systems in the West, is changing through its

representation as part of the discourse of equity in participation, rather than of access, and through the expression of this in the development of more complex technological systems. In attempting to retain its principles of social justice and diversity, whilst at the same time responding to the UK government's invoking of the national economic interest, and meeting the challenge of corporate survival in the highly commercialized conditions of global teaching with technology, the institution is trying to reconcile ideologies which many would see as incompatible. If it is the case that the notion of equity is coming to mean equal opportunity to participate in a competition for economic advantage, and if it is also the case that the cost of achieving equity is shifting from society to the individual, then it could be argued that this is a departure from the basic human right to be educated at university level. Whatever the discourse, however, if the growing investment of non-profit institutions such as the OU in the technologies of e-learning is not able to extend significant benefits of higher education to globally marginalized populations, then they will have failed in their mission of over half a century.

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