

# Chapter 2

## Equity in Distance Education

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### ABSTRACT

*Within the context of distance education, an understanding of the impact of social justice issues is crucial for informing research, practice, funding, and policy. Equity and the related concerns of access, social inclusion, and ethics impact all levels of distance education, from the macro (research and development, including the globalisation of distance education), through the meso (community and open learning, including choices in educational technology), and down to the micro (teaching and learning, including choices in curriculum design). As a consequence, a modification to the macro-meso-micro framework of distance education is called for: one that situates equity at a meta level. This meta level encompasses all aspects in the field of distance education, and acts as a guide for policy-makers, academics, and administrators on planning, decision-making, and practice within the discipline.*

### INTRODUCTION

The principles of social justice are equity, equality, access, and participation. In the context of distance education, these form the basis of ethical considerations in educational access for all. In a broader context, such social justice principles have been the basis of governmental reports and reform agendas across many Australian state and federal departments for the past 30 years. For example, Hawke's *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1989) was an action plan which envisioned a multicultural nation that was based upon social justice principles to

reduce potential inequalities derived from cultural, racial, religious or linguistic differences.

Similarly, social justice principles have been applied to the reform policies within the Australian higher education sector. To guard against potential educational disadvantage, non-dominant groups in our society should be supported and also resourced so that social justice occurs (McIntyre, Volkoff, Egg, & Solomon, 2004). That is, educational disadvantage should be acknowledged, and students experiencing disadvantage need to be supported in order to achieve equitable educational outcomes. Distance education, argued by many to be the means to address equity, access and participation issues in the context of higher education, goes some way to enabling a number of sub-groups

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of the student population social justice, yet other groups continue to remain under-represented and marginalized despite such opportunities.

This chapter explores the issue of equity in distance education, using as an analytical framework the three levels of common themes in distance education research: the macro, meso, and micro (Zawacki-Richter, 2009). In so doing, it highlights equity as an issue that is pervasive, affecting in turn every aspect of consideration in distance education. The chapter calls for the inclusion of a fourth level in the framework: an overarching meta level which situates equity, and the related concerns of access, social inclusion and ethics, at a meta level encompassing all facets of distance education from guiding and planning, through to decision-making.

## **DISTANCE, TRANSNATIONAL, AND BORDERLESS EDUCATION**

Historically, distance education—or correspondence study as it was then known—grew out of the need to make education accessible to those who wanted a formal education, or to obtain key industry-related qualifications, but could not gain these through the traditional on-campus, post-secondary pathways. Before this time, as Gunawardena and McIsaac (2004, pp. 356–357) note that:

*[E]ducation had been available primarily to males in higher levels of society. The most effective form of instruction in those days was to bring students together in one place and one time to learn from one of the masters...Correspondence study, [alternatively] was designed to provide educational opportunities for those who were not among the elite and who could not afford full time residence at an educational institution...*

Early correspondence style modes evolved during the 1800s to answer this call for widening

participation beyond privileged males in society. While on one level, this appears to have made provision for early equity and access solutions, it masks the reality that it still did not provide educational access for all. For example, one of the earliest forms of distance education, Pitman's correspondence courses (Matthews, 1999) trained participants in the abbreviated sign system of shorthand. However, this was still only provided accessibility for a small percentage of the population training for professional careers. These students were already literate in terms of their reading and writing abilities, and hence in the position to take on the study of a second language via correspondence mode (in this case, the second language being Pitman's short-hand).

Continued growth in distance education was related not solely to an extension of pathways into education by those who might have been traditionally marginalized, but also due to changes in communications technologies, such as radio and television. This in turn has helped facilitate the gradual trend towards the “massification of education” (Ajadi, 2009, p. 577) over the past 120 years. Further, with the addition of flexible, online, mobile, and e-learning, the opportunities for on-campus learners growing, and with more students opting for mixed methods of participation, the blurring of boundaries between on-campus and off-campus (or distance) modes of study is taking place. Chatterjee and Moore (2009, p. 2) write that “[a]s universities expand their geographical reach, the distinction between the demographics of on-campus and online distance learners decreases”. The once ‘poor excuse’ for the ‘real thing’ (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004, p. 357), distance education is now for many successful participants, mainstream education.

Today, the terms distance education, transnational education, and borderless education are becoming blurred. Distance education is defined by DEHub (2010a) as “a system of education delivery in which the majority of learning takes place with the learner and the teacher separated by

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