

Chapter 21

Epilogue: Directions for Future Research

B. Tynan

University of Southern Queensland, Australia

J. Willems

Monash University, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter undertakes to provide directions for future research that has been highlighted by the authors and, consequently, the editors of this book. The suggestions made for future research indicate a need for further research that can build on issues and concerns investigated throughout the various chapters. New areas are also raised for investigation that link either indirectly or directly to the research themes.

INTRODUCTION

This volume has focussed on comparative global issues and perspectives in distance and flexible education, providing a set of emerging perspectives from diverse corners of the world. Section 1 discussed global issues from several important perspectives. Section 2 presented a set of institutional case studies that focussed on collaboration and capacity development.

Zawacki-Richter, Bächer, and Vogt (2009) found that the major research gaps in distance education are at the macro and meso level, with the most neglected areas of research being the

globalization of education and cross-cultural aspects; innovation and change; and costs and benefits of distance education. Even though some contributions within this volume attempted to address these neglected areas the gaps are still evident. With this in mind, the editors felt that each volume required some concluding thoughts that would focus on a set of emerging questions for future research and investigation. These suggestions fall out of the work in this volume. The field certainly requires more qualitative studies to capture a deeper and richer range of data across many areas. We would also suggest that there is scope for numerous meta-analyses of various field areas and particularly of the case study research or ‘war’ stories from practice that could capture generalisable findings.

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MACRO AND MESO LEVEL RESEARCH IN DISTANCE AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

This section contained numerous insights into a range of global issues. Olaf Zawacki-Richter explored the field of distance education research and developed a theory to assist researchers in classifying the depth and breadth of research. Using the Delphi approach, his work highlighted areas where research is urgently needed—not least around management, leadership and meta-analysis across case studies of practice. From here, Cherry Stewart, Stefan Horarik and Keith Wolodko demonstrated an effective approach to mining and synthesising the research literature on the topic of technology within the higher education professional development. They established a starting point for future researchers attempting such a synthesis, especially if moving towards a meta-synthesis of the topic of professional development. Julie Willems provided her experience of equity in distance education and called for sustained further research that recognizes the depth of different and multiple disadvantage. Cultural issues informed the chapter of Don Olcott who explored internationalization and globalization. He noted the need to understand more deeply the interconnected dynamics of culture, language, and social norms. The chapter also seeks more research around the impact of languages, pedagogies and scholarship, organizational systems and cultures, particularly in relation to strategic and operational challenges. Quality is a further theme related to transnational education and Colin Latchem and Yoni Ryan as well as Godwin Utuka call for more investigation of the relationship between cultural appropriateness and quality. The overview of directions in Australia by Bruce King seeks that we carefully consider how the future of higher education is going to affect Australia's distinctive brand of distance education.

CASE STUDIES OF GLOBAL RESPONSES TO DISTANCE AND FLEXIBLE EDUCATION

The case studies in Section 2 of this volume have each provided insights into specific examples of collaboration, partnership and program development to meet needs within specific contexts. While each has lessons for us, they demonstrated a need for clear objectives and outcomes, careful management of the stakeholders and time for relationships to develop. Transnational development is viewed by Thomas Hülsmann and Stella Porto who each describe from their own side a collaborative program between Germany and the USA. While pointing to a success of this program they both highlighted the need for more strategic decision making. Similarly the model described by Michael Crock, Janet Baker and Skye Turner-Walker of the Open Universities Australia demonstrated a commercial enterprise that seeks to transform itself as market pressures and higher education policy alters. They call for increased flexibility because these enterprises operate in the environment which is continually changing. This model highlights some interesting opportunities and raised numerous questions about how universities and the emerging 'e' private businesses for profit sector can work constructively to attract students for mutual benefit. There is further research to be done on whether for profit private providers might 'do distance learning better' than universities.

The issue of quality and standards also affects private providers who tend to see accountability (as expressed in achieved outcomes) as essential business practice rather than response to regulatory demand. Jo Osborne, Carina Bossu, Louise Bertrand, Tricia Donovan, and Janet Paterson-Weir, Ken Stevens, Luke Strongman, and Polly Kobeleva all detail partnerships within a range of settings and provide recommendations for careful strategic thinking, interventions for solving contextual challenges, collaboration and partnership

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