

# Chapter XII

## Open to People, Open with People: Ethical Issues in Open Learning

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The increasing multiculturalism in its society has recently encouraged the study of ethical dimensions in higher education in the UK. Distance and open learning has long had such a dimension, but this chapter will argue that ethical issues need to be reviewed in the light of recent developments. Three examples in distance education are taken: the increasing use of e-learning, dropout rates, and the development of methods of predicting student success. Some evidence suggests that e-learning may harm the openness of open learning given the numbers of educationally disadvantaged potential students which it will exclude. Dropout rates in distance education appear to be markedly higher than in conventional learning, which raises ethical issues of honesty and openness, and finally the use of methods in which a student's success can be predicted raises ethical issues about if and how that information should be communicated to that student. Considerable work has gone into the development of a discourse of medical ethics in response to modern developments in medicine. But this chapter suggests that medical models are inadequate to judge ethical issues in distance and open learning and it calls for the development of a similar discourse in the ethics of distance and open learning.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

There are signs of a renewed interest in ethics in UK higher education following concerns that various changes in society mean that judgements

about issues in higher education are becoming more difficult in various ways. For example, the increasing diversity of higher education in terms of ethnicity and status may mean that universities are no longer able to assume that staff and students

share similar value systems. One possible sign of this increasing concern is the recent attempt at Leeds University to build the discussion of ethics into 13 disciplines in the University through its Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (Lipset, A. 2005). The aim is to use a model of medical ethics and adapt it to other disciplines.

Another sign may be the recent publication of a booklet *Ethics Matters*, a joint project between the Council for Industry and Higher Education and the Institute of Business Ethics, which examines issues such as the extent to which universities can encourage free speech amid fears of extremism on campus (Shepherd, J. 2005).

Yet another sign, and one that is significant for distance learning, is the proposed appointment of a chair for a new ethics centre in the UK Open University. And perhaps this is all as it should be: if education is not itself ethically-based, then societies and institutions which depend on that education may themselves become unethically-based, with potentially disastrous consequences.

## **ETHICS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING**

It has indeed long been clear that open and distance learning attracts its fair share of ethical issues for practitioners. Gearhart (2001) suggests that the increasing use of information technology in distance education may actually enhance unethical behaviours because of the effects of “psychological distance”; when acts are carried out at a distance they feel less personal because the person acted on cannot be heard or seen in the exchange. Yet Visser (2001) noted that “a search of the literature including documentation on the World Wide Web reveals little explicit concern with ethical questions among the community of professionals in the area of distance education and open learning” (slide 5).

Despite Visser’s comment, there have been some examinations of ethics in distance learning.

Some early work by Reed and Sork (1990) suggests that ethical dilemmas in distance learning can arise in each of six areas:

1. Admission intake and retention of students: for example, dealing with issues around how fair an admissions process might be;
2. Programme and course marketing: for example, the temptation to put the “best face” on programmes when describing them in a course catalogue, or what Simpson (2004a) calls the “recruitment vs. retention” tension;
3. Programme and course administration: for example, how far the institution’s various regulations are fair to both students and society as a whole as the ultimate customers of qualifications awarded by the institution;
4. Learner/facilitator interaction: for example, given that learning can expose the learner to difficult emotional situations, how far does the institution and its tutor have a duty to take some responsibility for the learner’s emotional state and offer support?;
5. Course development and presentation: for example, how far should course writers develop materials that reflect diversity rather than “pre-digested material that students are in danger of soaking up uncritically” (Cole, Coats, & Lentell, 1986). This is a concern shared by Tait (1989), who is concerned about the potential of distance learning to be undemocratic; and
6. Programme, course and learner evaluation: for example, what are the ethical issues in ensuring that assessment is fair to all interested parties (learners, employers, and society) as a whole?

Crosling and Webb (2002) suggest that ethical issues to be addressed may also include confidentiality, care when intervening between student and tutor, and in drawing the line between work with student learning and therapeutic counseling.

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