



Editorial

Reforming the Open University through Local Evidence-Based Research

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University reform is a current issue being tackled through various methods. These include the traditional method of Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis on how other universities in other regions are managing their reform processes, and also include a fairly strong bias towards home-grown research based on surveys of the university's own students. Whether or not local evidence-based research can illuminate a new direction is however not at all clear. A university is often keen to keep any reform quiet and manage it in-house : its own researchers are tasked with undertaking surveys, and apart from poor questionnaire design, generally seek out results to confirm the status quo or to confirm earlier studies. Even important issues such as a high student drop out rate are simply revisited and confirmed as issues. A better approach would be to see what other universities have done to treat the issue with what results. This would uncover a range of strategies that have been tried and tested. Some may have lead to adverse effects or a deterioration, and others might have improved the situation. Then some select strategies will need to be contextualised and adapted to best suit the university's own context, and then piloted. The research outcomes then would provide ideal evidence on which to build wider reform measures. There are many examples of self-fulfilling prophesy research, such as researching into face-to-face interaction as a

component of an otherwise online course. The programme operators survey the students and 'discover' the students are satisfied and enjoy the face-to-face element - and this counts as evidence to continue the face-to-face interactivity. If the students had to pay extra for the face-to-face class perhaps they would be less satisfied and want more for their money. Indeed when the dean discovers that no increase in learning is achieved by the experience then the university also might want to re-think including it. This is not to say that all social interactivity should be dropped, but rather that evidence for and against should be gathered objectively, and reform then based on this. Too often case study research undertaken locally does not lead to any significant reform. Universities could do well to read what other universities are doing to see what works in other places and why. They could then import and adapt reform measures that work best. In this issue of the Journal we look at ways some universities are reforming themselves to improve learning and improve the student learning experience.

In this issue the first Paper is by Bansal, Chandra & Joshii who review how OER are being used in the many colleges and universities across India. They report that OER can help solve the current challenges notably the need for more teachers, the inadequate library resources, and the poor infrastructure. We need more local evidence

to determine how well OER are useful in practice - as OER need expert facilitators, are intended perhaps to augment print rather than replace or act instead of books, and OER also require good technological infrastructure.

The second Paper is by Garg, Ghosh & Khare. They focus on the key issue of improving learning support. They correctly identify the crucial aspect of learner support if distance education is to thrive. IGNOU is not alone in trying to improve support services. While at first many universities opted for e-learning at a distance to reach the unreached at low cost, most find that the marginal faraway rural students are more expensive to reach than the local urban students, and that the increasing new diversity brings a need for more support services. It is even the case that remote students need more support than urban students - since urban students often support each other, whereas the remote student has only the textbook or computer text. One solution being tried in other countries is to build in more interactive support into the learning materials - including the written materials. Garg, Ghosh & Khare emphasize the clear need for a printed study guide as support, and simpler use of language. Garg et al (1992 : 1998) have previously examined the readability of course materials and reports on the quality of language as an important area for improvement to support learning. Other reports for example by Kawachi (2002 : 2004) also stress the issue of language and readability.

The third Paper looks at the students' performance in one course at the Open University of Malaysia. The authors Saminathan & Goolamally set out to see what factors most influenced their students achieving good quality learning. They find that time management was the key issue (the statistical factors are 'able to complete assignment in time', 'time allowed to complete exam' and 'hours of study allocated per week'). Time management skills are in the management domain of learning, and Yuguang Zhang & Kawachi (2011) recently published research on these management skills for student support.

Next, we have a Paper reporting on what

the students think about the university management in the Philippines, by Castolo & Chan. They report on the successful operation of student -faculty interaction and academic advisers.

The fifth Paper reports on the basic conditions in Bangladesh and how the students' performance could be improved through using e-learning. Iftekhar Khalid reports on the availability of e-learning infrastructure at the student level - whether they have access to smart phones for mobile e-learning, or to laptops or computers at home with internet access. These data are foundational data for any university to develop its e-learning materials. With poor infrastructure, open education in Bangladesh relies on conventional face-to-face classes. To move towards e-learning, Iftekhar Khalid surveys those students studying at a distance to better understand the actual conditions of the students.

Next Sabio & Sabio give the challenges facing distance education in the Philippines and highlight the benefits that could be achieved through small reforms in student support and better materials. Certainly importation of OER here could dramatically reform the landscape, and could lead local developers to adapt and create their own OER. In this report, Sabio & Sabio say that particularly in rural Philippines that distance education is an effective alternative to traditional face-to-face education. They suggest that open and distance education can help achieve universal primary and secondary education in the Philippines.

In the seventh Paper, Farisi takes on a major topic of reforming the academic culture throughout the university by better nurturing the character strengths of those teachers who lead study groups. The key personal characteristics in this research were responsibility, subject knowledge and overall intelligence, integrity and honesty, helpful and cooperative spirit, care to the students, and authority. The students surveyed indicated they wanted the teachers to show more personal care to them. A university naturally promotes the need for a teacher to have expert knowledge, and this study finds that there is also a need for better quality pastoral care and attention in

the form of more individualised tutoring. Increasing tutor support to the student can reduce the drop-out rate - so the findings here are relevant and important.

Lastly we include a Paper by Mahapatra who reminds us that we have a much wider diversity in students than ever before - and that we need to adapt our teaching to reach those with learning difficulties. Special education is generally very labour intensive involving too expert specialist teachers in face-to-face interactions. The open school system may also involve a higher proportion of students with special learning needs. The differently-challenged students here do manage to complete their studies alongside regular students where learning materials are specially prepared and teachers are highly trained. In this study, Mahapatra reports that specially-prepared ICT has supported disabled students and achieved increased enrolment. No doubt these measures are actively helping to achieve universal education goals.

We have included eight Papers in this issue in response to growing interest from researchers, readers and prospective authors. While we have previously had a policy for presenting seven Papers in each issue, we have felt the need to reform ourselves and adapt to evolving and changing times. In most previous issues we have dealt with open learning and distance education in universities, and we need now to include some Papers on open schools at pre-tertiary level and on those people not registered in universities yet use online education to learn. The new OER movement is offering opportunities for studying independently from traditional ODE universities. People of all ages can now study at home almost anything that takes their interest. The OER available now are mostly designed to augment and support for-credit courses, but being free -of -cost

and obtainable online means that people at large are now taking up this new mode of distance education without enrolling at any accrediting institution.

We are now pleased to have Nabi Bux Jumani on board as an Editor. His previous support on the Editorial Advisory Board was considerable, and he has worked as a tireless volunteer over the years for us. We look forward to his continuing contributions at the highest level.

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