Openness and Flexibility in New Zealand
Victories and Challenges

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Openness in higher education relates to institutional practices; it describes a continuum along which institutions, to varying degrees, adopt practices that encourage access to and participation in education. In his address at the charter ceremony of the UK Open University, Lord Crowther (1969) defined an open institution as one that is open in regard to people, place, methods, and ideas. This characterization of openness as an institutional phenomenon should be complemented by a consideration of the processes of teaching and learning. To do this, we turn to the concept of flexibility. Tight (1996, 97) discusses flexibility in terms of learning opportunities that optimize learner autonomy and the process of learning. To us, as experienced distance educators, flexibility exists, for instance, when learners can control the order in which topics are studied, make decisions about the learning goals that are important to them, and have input into assessment tasks they undertake.

Our ideas about the practices of openness and flexibility in higher education have been shaped, buoyed up, and at times almost destroyed by our experiences in two settings. We have worked in universities on developing programs to make teacher education available to anyone, anywhere in New Zealand. We have also worked in professional communities to help create institutional and national contexts that support the notion that education should be offered to people anywhere at any time.

The New Zealand context has many features conducive to the development of openness and flexibility. It provides an accessible government; a relatively small number of major tertiary institutions, all largely publicly funded, with educational policies that reflect the international trend toward the promotion of lifelong learning; and a history that recognizes the value of and need for the flexible provision of education.
Some factors, however, have served to limit engagement with openness and flexibility: the higher-education system is strongly shaped by government policy and funding frameworks; research is, through funding mechanisms, seemingly prioritized over teaching; institutions create unhelpful systemic rigidities as they mature; and although the national postal infrastructure is superb, the digital infrastructure is wanting. This is the context in which we have carved out our ideas about openness and flexibility in higher education and that, along with immersion in related literature, continues to shape those ideas and how we put them into practice. We now consider the four features mentioned above—government frameworks, teaching and research activities, institutional policies, and the digital environment—that have an impact on flexibility and openness and that support or impede the movement toward enhanced access and participation in higher education.

THE ROAD TO OPENNESS AND FLEXIBILITY IN EDUCATION

Government Frameworks
Institutions operate within a national policy and funding framework that shapes, enables, and constrains. Government funding of public institutions provides a mechanism for some control, especially when that funding is tied to specific initiatives. Government policy sets broad national-interest goals for the higher-education sector.

The New Zealand context comes with a historical attachment to openness, evidenced by the emphasis on provision of access to education. In 1939, Peter Fraser, then the minister of education, announced the government’s vision: “The government’s objective, broadly expressed, is that every person, whatever his level of academic ability, whether he be rich or poor, whether he live in town or country, has a right, as a citizen, to a free education of the kind for which he is best fitted, and to the fullest extent of his powers” (Fraser 1939, 2). Despite the gender-specific language typical of the time, this commitment extended across the reach of the education system.

The commitment seems to continue in New Zealand and is still quoted by ministers of education. The most recent government strategy for higher
(tertiary) education discusses educational opportunity in terms of access and achievement, and calls for success for all New Zealanders through lifelong learning (Office of the Minister for Tertiary Education 2007). Higher education of any form is open (but not free) to all New Zealanders over the age of twenty. Support at a national level of strategy is a necessary part of a climate of openness in higher education.

Even where policy supports openness, however, implementation may create barriers. We recall an early battle over public funding of a distance teacher-education program. At that time, funding for all university distance courses in any subject was set at a single rate. Funding for the equivalent on-campus program had an additional component for costs related to field experience. That extra field-experience component was not added to the funding for distance students. Distance students, we were told, would be supported but were not consumers of the same level of resources as on-campus students and would be funded accordingly. As Butterfield (1999, 5) noted, “There is also little, if any, understanding amongst policy makers about the different cost structures underpinning quality open learning. Too many seem to think that simply broadcasting or putting courses on the Internet will suddenly enable thousands of students to access . . . education.”

Teaching and/or Research
Teaching’s role within the core activities of a higher institution has been diminished in the past decade in comparison with research. In a number of countries, research-assessment exercises are regularly undertaken, and resources are allocated according to the results of those assessments. Such exercises, with their attached funding and “bragging rights,” play a significant part in shaping institutional policies and structures, as well as influencing how academic staff understand the relative importance of their roles.

In New Zealand, the net effect of research-assessment exercises has been to alter academic staff’s perceptions of the relationship between teaching and research. Morris-Matthews and Hall (2006) surveyed staff at one New Zealand university and reported that since the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) exercise was implemented in 2003, 27.8 percent of academic staff reported a decreased emphasis on teaching. None reported
an increase. In Australia, similar research (Teaching-Research Nexus 2008) shows that university academic staff see learning and teaching as undervalued as a result of more funding and prestige attached to research than teaching, and of promotion in universities primarily based on the amount and quality of research rather than excellence in teaching.

Valuing teaching as an activity must be foundational in the development of flexible approaches to learning. Institutions cannot afford to allow the development of polarization around teaching and research as separate activities. Devaluing teaching devalues students and the importance of adults’ participation in education. Institutional and national policies that promote the integration of teaching and research must be pursued as a basis for revaluing teaching and learning, and providing a foundation for flexibility in education.

_Institutional Policies and Frameworks_

Institutions have always recognized that they have a role to play in encouraging students to engage in study. There is, however, a distinction between institutions acting to help students assimilate current institutional values and practices, and institutions acting to change themselves to accommodate the increasing diversity of students and the changed circumstances under which student learning now occurs. Thomas (2002, 431) argues that “institutional habitus” is a useful concept in understanding this difference, explaining it as “more than the culture of the educational institution; it refers to relational issues and priorities, which are deeply embedded, and sub-consciously informing practice.”

This relational viewpoint aligns closely with a more nuanced understanding of the concept of flexibility. Zepke and Leach (2005, 47) speak of the conceptual change as a turn to the discourse of adaptation, “where institutions change to accommodate diverse students” rather than where students are integrated within institutional norms. They suggest that “central to the emerging discourse is the idea that students should maintain their identity in their culture of origin, retain their social networks outside the institution, have their cultural capital valued by the institution and experience learning that fits with their preferences” (54). Nowhere is the importance of this more evident than when institutions are faced with students from varied cultural backgrounds.
In New Zealand, Maori participation in higher education serves to exemplify the importance of this relational viewpoint. Noting that governments and institutions might value different outcomes from students, a report from Te Tari Matauranga Maori (2007, 374) argues that especially for Maori, the concept of “success” or “achievement” should not be presumed to equate with indicators the education system uses, such as attendance, passing courses or gaining high marks. Students may not define their goals in terms of attending throughout a programme of study (viewed as retention) or the receipt of a qualification (seen as achievement) because they may have alternative objectives.

Flexibility may be easily limited. The institutional suppleness that is required for flexibility to be the norm may be missing in “middle-aged” universities, where practices have often become rigid. Failure to recognize and account for the diversity that today’s students bring to institutions may arise in those institutions that have been more familiar with a homogeneous student body.

**Digital Technologies**

The advent of the online world seemed to hold great promise for enhancing flexibility and openness. This promise arose from early arguments for the democratic nature of the online world, the power of the natives-immigrants metaphor (Prensky 2001), and the rapid growth in online courses through the past decade. For some, it has been realized. Students taking online classes in the United States report valuing the flexibility that such classes afford (Salaway and Caruso 2008). However, the digital world affords just as many difficulties as it does solutions to questions of openness and flexibility.

Three major factors continue to differentiate students and serve as barriers to openness and flexibility through use of digital technologies: access to technology, capability of the technology being used, and individual competence with technology. Distributions around “norms” of access, capability, and competence are to be expected. Some students are bound to have poorer access, or equipment with more limited capabilities, or less competence with technology, or any combination of those
three factors. For example, in New Zealand in 2007, 31 percent of Internet users still accessed the Internet by dial-up (Bell et al 2008). These factors inevitably impact on both the openness and flexibility possible in education based on online delivery.

Overcoming the access, capability, and competence barriers may be an important goal, but it will not necessarily ensure openness for all. In 1985, David Perkins argued that technology places opportunities at our fingertips but asked whether people actually take advantage of these opportunities. The answer is “sometimes,” although for some groups in society, the answer is “no.” Clearly, as regards the online delivery of education, “those who are less privileged will not find advantage here. . . . The issues facing online education are those that have faced all forms of education—power, privilege and interest” (Anderson 2005, 175–76). And it is power, privilege, and interest that work against flexibility and openness.

Higher-education institutions are recognizing that they no longer control access to knowledge. The advent of Internet-based open educational resources and open courseware initiatives ensure that course material is freely available online. What institutions do control is access to accredited qualifications and the experiences that surround formal learning. As long as such things are desirable, institutional policies and frameworks will continue to impact on student perceptions and experiences of openness and flexibility.

INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

Why does high-quality open and flexible higher education remain so elusive and seemingly so hard to achieve? The success of the single-mode Open University (UK) has been emulated around the world by other national open universities, but achieving that success across the range of conventional, dual-mode higher-education institutions has been more problematic. Many have followed the route of e-learning, pointing to online distance education as a key means to attaining open, flexible delivery. We believe that three factors—knowledge of history, a focus on programs, and an understanding of adult learners—should ensure that the potential of openness and flexibility through online distance education will be realized.
**Leveraging Knowledge of History**

History is important. Knowledge of the field of open and flexible higher education and of developments that have brought us to the present must guide us toward quality provision. Although it is not the only contributor, we see distance education as having played a major role in developing openness and flexibility of higher education in New Zealand. Distance education is not a recent development, nor is it a static field. It has evolved from correspondence methods in the nineteenth century through to the development of the World Wide Web and on to intelligent flexible learning (Taylor 2001). Each generation of distance educators has, or should have, taken from the previous one and built on it, developing the concept of openness as it relates to people, places, methods, and ideas, and taking into account principles of learning and teaching.

Engaging in distance education is an especially difficult challenge since its use crosses all academic disciplines. The physical separation of teacher and learner and the unfamiliarity of distance education to on-campus, classroom-bound educators impede progress toward recognizing the potential for more flexible ways to help adults learn. It is understandable that academics may not see themselves as distance educators or even be aware of the field, yet many of them often enthusiastically embrace the use of the latest fashionable modes of delivery to reach students. Enthusiasm is desirable and may lead to innovation, but an informed response built on past lessons is a necessity (Burge 2008).

The development of networked technologies as a tool for learning illustrates the importance of understanding history. While networked learning is undoubtedly a most exciting and potentially transformative development for higher education, its use is not often founded on understanding incremental growth based on past lessons. This failure is one reason why higher educators in dual-mode institutions fail to realize the potential for creating flexibility alongside interactive, media-rich, collaborative, and personalized learning experiences for all learners.

In addition to not using the lessons of history, we propose two key reasons why realizing the potential of distance-mode flexible education is difficult in conventional dual-mode institutions. First, administrators and teachers often do not understand the lengthy course-development time needed, and they tend to focus on individual courses rather than on
the conversions of full programs to flexible formats. The second difficulty is the minimal understanding of the teaching and learning needs of busy adults who study while working and raising families. Both difficulties must be addressed at the institutional level, not at the individual faculty member level, if our own experience is any guide.

A Program-Based Focus
Having a program-based focus and supporting teachers in working together doesn’t fit comfortably into the organizational structures that we see in most institutions of higher education. Such institutions often channel resources into discipline-based units where the focus is on individuals, their research, and the courses they teach, not on the programs they teach in. Teachers and course developers (where they exist) may get many forms of technical and pedagogical support individually, but planned institution wide systemic support is often lacking.

New patterns of curriculum planning and development are needed if conventional institutions are to move toward openness and flexibility. More of us teachers have to commit to and fight for program-focused developments and the understanding that program development is complex and multi-layered. Change is threatening. Program-based change threatens the individual-faculty-member basis of course ownership that is well established in higher education. Developing flexible course materials collaboratively and on a program basis means that work that has been personal is suddenly public and open to peer scrutiny. All participants in change have to understand their contribution to and locations within the change process. Strategically, units within dual-mode institutions would have to interact and work toward a shared outcome. That is not always common practice. Program-focused development and teaching-model changes across institutional units are significant challenges.

Adult Learners
Understanding adult learners is essential. It is not always the case, however, that such understanding shapes teaching and material-development approaches. The student body in higher education is fragmented. In New Zealand, for example, we are seeing increased numbers of first-generation higher-education students, more part-time students, and greater numbers
of mature students engaged in higher education. Adult learners bring wide and disparate knowledge and experience to their learning. Their backgrounds need to be valued and used to shape teaching approaches and teaching materials. Accepting that adults bring idiosyncratic and hard-won knowledge and experience also means accepting that a teacher is not the sole source of knowledge in the class and is not necessarily the only one in a class capable of teaching. Adult students also bring experience of formal learning, and it is not always positive. They may have developed strong, but not always helpful, preferred styles of learning and preferences about types of material.

Adult students are often highly motivated and may have clear learning goals, but they also bring constraints that present serious challenges for their teachers. They are likely to be time-poor, multitasking in the realms of work, family, and study, and expecting high returns on their investment in learning. Kramarae (2001, 29) notes that many women undertaking distance study “serve a first shift at work outside the home and a second shift as primary caretakers of family members. The only way they can accomplish a third shift—their education—is to fit it in when and where they can.” In a recent study, Creanor et al. (2006) explored how learner control is exerted within learning environments. They found learners controlling specific aspects of their e-learning experience, such as where they studied, which technologies they used, how they personalized their learning environments, and how they approached learning activities. This behaviour was reported as being mostly invisible to tutors. Students are leading a move from a teaching-centred to a learning-centred approach.

CONCLUSION

What lessons have we both learned about promoting more flexible approaches in higher education? Two things need to happen. First, we must be mindful of the value and role of research in innovative practice. Innovations that aim to break the traditional transmission model moulds must be rooted in a solid understanding of past research; they must be evaluated rigorously and systematically, and the results disseminated. Second, teamwork is all. It gives us a fighting chance to anticipate and
creatively overcome the obstacles to progress. The kind of discussion that Evans and Nation wanted in 1996 is still needed today: “dialogue between researchers, policy makers and practitioners and across the various sectors, traditional disciplines and national contexts of education” (Evans and Nation 1996, 176).

The third lesson is that our progress toward consistently flexible higher education is slow and challenging. Like many other writers in higher and distance education, Garrison and Kanuka (2004, 102) argue that higher-education institutions are “notorious resisters to change.” It can feel that way to us, but on good days we prefer Evans and Nation’s (1996, 176) comment that reluctance to change reflects “the tensions that exist between education’s purposes to preserve and sustain important traditions as well as to prepare people to construct their futures.” We must all weave through those tensions, avoiding as many potholes as we can on the journey.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHORS

More than thirty years ago, taking a distance-education course opened Mary Simpson's eyes to an exciting new range of possibilities. Qualifying in several fields through distance study gave her a real feel for students’ experiences—good and bad. Completing her studies opened up opportunities that allowed her to develop and teach in distance-delivered teacher-education programs. It has given her much joy that these programs have provided wonderful career opportunities to people who had been denied that chance because they were unable to move to a location that offered campus-based education. Distance education’s ability to provide equity of access is what really appeals to Mary. New technologies have made the experience even richer for all. She is Associate Professor and Associate Dean (Teacher Education) in the University of Otago College of Education—Te Kura Akau Taitoka in New Zealand. www.otago.ac.nz/education/staff/profiles/mary_simpson.html

Early in his career as a teacher, Bill Anderson realized that he didn’t know enough “stuff” and the only way he could learn more was by engaging in distance education. From that point on, he recognized the value of a flexible and open education system as a means to extend the opportunities available for all people to involve themselves in lifelong learning. That
has driven his ongoing involvement in distance education and a career-long emphasis on enabling the social nature of education to be part of the distance-learning experience. He still enjoys meeting students he “knows” but has never met, and reflecting with them on the opportunities they have had thanks to distance education. Bill is currently Director of Distance Learning at the University of Otago in New Zealand. www.otago.ac.nz/distancelearning/otago015445.html