Introducing the concept of social justice into discussions of open, distance, and e-learning immediately creates tension. At its core is the question as to whether ODEL contributes to or detracts from social justice, given its facility for supporting the development of formal education on an international basis and the complexity of intentions, inputs, and outcomes in any educational provision.

Let us first consider what we mean by social justice. Clear, agreed-upon concepts of this term are essential underpinnings for robust support for strategies to remedy social injustice. Without this clarity, there is a risk that those who claim it as a goal but have no intention or capacity to deliver it will appropriate the term.

CONCEPTS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social Justice for Individuals

The central concept of social justice is a conviction that human beings have some core characteristics of equality. Philosophical and religious traditions
developed this concept long before English priest John Ball asked the following of rebel peasants in 1381:

When Adam delved and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman? From the beginning all men by nature were created alike, and our bondage or servitude came in by the unjust oppression of naughty men. For if God would have had any bondmen from the beginning, he would have appointed who should be bond, and who free. (Chisholm, 1911, p. 263)

The concept of equality was also developed in the secular tradition of Universal Human Rights, articulated in the *Egalité* of the French Revolution, then adopted in the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and subsequently embodied in UN institutions. Both religious and secular concepts of the value of each person underlie an ideological commitment to the fundamental equality of status of all human beings regardless of the lived reality of privilege and social hierarchy. Indeed, John Ball’s support for the Peasants’ Revolt might be seen as a very early attempt to bring these concepts together.

Rawls’ account (2001) of a social contract begins with a commitment to equality of worth of human beings and demands that entitlements be proposed by representatives of the population, especially those with responsibilities for government, on a “blind” basis, i.e., as if they had no knowledge of their own entitlement and acted for all rather than as advocates of their own interests. Rumble’s discussion of education and social justice elaborates Rawls’ contribution and, following Honderich, dismisses Rawls’ liberalism as too permissive of gross inequalities (Rumble, 2007, pp. 171–72).

The social justice concepts listed above tend to portray social justice as enabling individuals to access their fair share of social and economic benefits. In contrast, Sen and Nussbaum identify much broader and universal human rights as integral to social justice.

Sen’s human development theory (1999, 2009) contributes another dimension to the concept of social justice by focussing on what he terms the *Capability Approach*—the support of positive freedoms to be or do something “to choose a life one has reason to value” (Sen, 1999, p. 74). These freedoms depend on *functionings* or, “the various things a person may value being or doing” (Sen, 1999, p. 75). Sen’s perspective is significantly different from equality provisions because it regards material benefits or services not as social justice indicators in themselves, but as the basis for the freedom to
deploy capabilities that represent the real social justice outcomes. Sen does not propose a set of universal capabilities, suggesting instead that they must be elaborated in specific contexts.

Nussbaum (2003) builds on Sen’s work by stipulating a list of essential capabilities for social justice. This step is crucial, Nussbaum argues, because there is no benefit in having rights without the underlying capabilities that make it possible to exercise those rights: “Thinking in terms of capability gives us a benchmark as we think about what it is really to secure a right to someone. It makes clear that this involves affirmative material and institutional support, not simply a failure to impede” (Nussbaum, 2008, p. 38).

Of the ten capabilities that Nussbaum (2003) identifies, three have direct relevance to education and learning, and two others have significant supporting roles. Those directly related to education and learning are:

4. Senses, Imagination, and Thought. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a “truly human” way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one’s own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one’s mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. . . . 5. Emotions. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves . . . not having one’s emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development.) 6. Practical Reason. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance.) (p. 41)

Nussbaum (2003) describes capabilities that support education and learning as follows:

7. Affiliation. A. Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another.
(Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.) B. Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of non-discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, or national origin. (pp. 41–42)

Also relevant is Nussbaum’s capability 10:

Control Over One’s Environment. A. Political. Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one’s life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association. B. Material. Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers. (2003, p. 42)

This concept of social justice as capabilities to which every human is entitled is consistent with Article 26 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights (1948) on the right to education:

(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups.

(3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.
In summary, our concept of social justice for each individual encompasses both the notion of equality rights as a level playing field and the right to opportunities and support that enable each person to fully participate in all aspects of society—to get to the playing field in the first place. These include affordable education, housing, access to decent work with sufficient pay to sustain a family—rights that go far beyond access to participate in the economy.

**SOCIAL JUSTICE AMONG SOCIETIES AND WITHIN DEFINED SECTORS OF SOCIETY**

But there is more to social justice than the cumulative human rights of each individual. As Judt (2010, p. 131) points out, despite the current “cult of the private” that emphasizes enterprise over justice, an underlying concept of the common good is essential for democratic governance.

Both Judt (2010, p. 67) and Franklin (1990, p. 42) identify trust and reciprocity as essential components of social justice and as elements that convey social values. Franklin distinguishes divisible and indivisible benefits and the social and economic implications of both. Sharing a crop among all farm workers is an example of divisible benefits among a specified group. Indivisible benefits are inclusive and for everyone and include justice, peace, clean air, equal access to education, public institutions. Some significant indivisible benefits that, until recently, were supported by the public domain are being increasingly shifted into the private sector, for example, transportation, utilities, health care, and education (Judt, 2010; Franklin, 2006). Moreover, although the public purse has sustained the infrastructure that makes private divisible benefits possible, there is increasingly less political support and protection for the sources of indivisible benefits, such as the global environment (Franklin, 1999). Education provides both indivisible and divisible benefits, and it is difficult to isolate the benefits of education to the individual from the benefits to society.

As Franklin (2006) notes, the process of establishing social justice should be systemic rather than case-specific, so that the onus is on society rather than the individual to change structural, institutional, and cultural barriers that impede equal access to human rights, rather than on “putting the primary burden of change on the disadvantaged” (p. 345).
The ILO’s Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization summarizes the links between individual and social aspects of social justice in Article A1, which supports the following objectives:

promoting employment by creating a sustainable institutional and economic environment in which:

• individuals can develop and update the necessary capacities and skills they need to enable them to be productively occupied for their personal fulfilment and the common well-being

• all enterprises, public or private, are sustainable to enable growth and the generation of greater employment and income opportunities and prospects for all

• societies can achieve their goals of economic development, good living standards and social progress (ILO, 2008, p. 4)

WHY THERE ARE NO SIMPLE LINKS BETWEEN SOCIAL JUSTICE AND ONLINE DISTANCE EDUCATION AND LEARNING

On the face of it, it would seem that educational provision that is consciously intended to be more accessible to more people would make a contribution to social justice. But each of ODEL’s main attributes brings with it a caveat:

• ODEL’s capacity to disaggregate the constitutive elements of classroom learning offers freedom from place and time, providing the ability to offer flexibility and to support educational systems across national boundaries. However, flexibility brings with it the potential for disconnection from the learners’ contexts and from direct association with others engaged in learning. ODEL’s capacity to traverse national and regional boundaries also enables it to displace local or national provisions, and to disseminate ideologies that are incompatible with local beliefs or cultures.

• National governments, inter-governmental organizations, and NGOs have, as part of development of the Third World, or the Global South, promoted ODEL’s flexibility and scalability as an opportunity to fulfil the moral obligation to create urgently needed educational provision.

However, as McLuhan (1964) pointed out, no technology is neutral; all technologies affect both the creator and the user. Each technology includes
underlying concepts and assumptions that may not always be evident to planners or practitioners. As well, the capacities and limitations of hardware and software affect how pedagogies are applied. For example, broadcast radio assumes a functional network, access to electricity, learners who can listen attentively at the broadcast time, and learners who can learn effectively from a transitory auditory medium. Radio can convey a voice of authority that is not easy to challenge, or a conversational tone that invites participatory learning.

Transplanting any technology along with its ideological roots brings the risk of imposing an inappropriate set of assumptions and values on the users, thus detracting from, rather than supporting, intended goals.

ODEL’s history includes the commercial provision of accessible accreditation both locally and internationally (for example, for-profit correspondence schools, or University of London External Studies). Online learning has greatly expanded opportunities to offer education and accreditation across international boundaries, making it possible for learners around the world to access the specific programs they need.

However, even with ready availability of online communication in some locations, learners are not always in the best position to assess the quality and appropriateness of a specific program that is on offer, given the lack of clear international standards for ODEL provision and the limited access to the kind of collegial local knowledge that is available in face-to-face learning settings. As well, ODEL that relies on advanced technologies can (intentionally or not) reinforce inequality by providing access only to those on the “have” side of the digital divide.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE, PART 1: SHOULD ODEL EMBED SOCIAL JUSTICE PRINCIPLES?

Many ODEL providers began with a stated commitment to provide greater access to education for those who were previously excluded. However, there are questions about the effectiveness of access to education as a route to social justice and about the success rate of ODEL institutions in enabling disadvantaged people to attain their educational goals. (Prinsloo, 2011, summarizes these arguments.)

Moreover, times have changed since contemporary forms of ODEL emerged in the early 1980s with the promise of reaching underserved
learners at all levels of education throughout the globe. Short-term economic goals have displaced social justice from policy agendas, along with a shift in societal expectations that supported publicly-funded access to affordable education.

These factors prompt the question: Should all ODEL provisions be required to follow social justice principles, and if so, what would this look like? Can a society or government require an educational provider to adopt a social justice mandate? Oversight bodies that represent government and/or society can require educational providers to meet specific standards—why not include social justice? Exploring this question involves considering different concepts of social justice in education: access, curriculum, pedagogy, and management.

Social Justice as Improved Access

Many distance education providers include social justice in their mission or values statements. For example, the Open University of the United Kingdom (OUUK) current website states, “We promote educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential. . . . The OU was founded to open up higher education to all, regardless of their circumstances or where they live.” Athabasca University in Canada “dedicated to the removal of barriers that restrict access to and success in university-level study and to increasing equality of educational opportunity for adult learners worldwide” (AUP, 2009). These statements associate social justice with providing greater access to learning.

But Woodley (2011) points out the social justice disconnect in most distance learning models intended to improve access to learning: the provider benefits financially when learners do not continue in courses because the provider has received payment, but the learner does not use all the services paid for (such as counselling or tutoring). ODEL’s economics, like that of health care provision, rely on funding for a larger population than is directly served. Woodley also cites 2009 HEFCE data showing that the OUUK’s graduation rate is 20%, and that just 40% of first-year students proceed to take a second-year course. However, given OUUK’s student population of 250,000, one could also argue that the 50,000 students that graduate each year from OUUK, representing a significant number of graduates who might otherwise not achieve this goal. While there have been 382,000 graduates at
bachelor’s and master’s levels since start of teaching in 1971, at the time of writing, the graduation rate is difficult to assess and may in fact be less than the percentages identified by Woodley.

By comparison, the online for-profit University of Phoenix has a six-year graduation rate of 5.1%, but this “measures fewer than 1% of its more than 253,000 students” (Waddington, qtd. in Blumenstyk, 2012).

The flexibility of ODEL may be one factor in lower graduation rates, given the higher participation rate of working adults, the percentage of learners who study at several institutions to obtain transferable credits, and ODEL’s accessibility for personal interest studies. So a proportion of ODEL students may be accomplishing personal goals without completing full programs.

Given these considerations, it is possible to argue that ODEL can benefit society as a whole, even if not all learners are able to achieve their individual goals. However, this argument requires recognizing every individual’s right to learning which is appropriate to his or her needs, and acknowledging that strengthening society’s capacity requires responding to both individual and societal needs.

Social Justice as Curriculum and Pedagogy

As Freire (1983) and many others have pointed out, curriculum and pedagogy are not value-neutral: content and methods that enable learners to think for themselves and engage in dialogue with resources, instructors, and other learners are more likely to support social justice goals. Prinsloo (2011a, para. 10) argues that learning must “empower graduates to critique, to formulate their own opinions, to question accepted ways of seeing the world (ontologies) and accepted canons of market-dominated knowledge (epistemologies).” He also cites Giroux’s critical commentary about higher education becoming the “handmaiden” of corporations in an age of money and profit, [where] academic disciplines gain stature almost exclusively through their exchange value on the market, and students now rush to take courses and receive professional credentials that provide them with the cache they need to sell themselves to the higher bidder. (2003, p. 182)

Freire’s concept of social justice in learning proposes that discussion, interaction, and problem solving can enable learners to develop a critical consciousness that is “integrated with reality” and prepares learners to
act in response to challenges (Freire, 1983, p. 44). But distance education practice can itself limit this kind of engagement. Previous generations of distance educators were concerned about the tendency of then-current technologies, such as print, radio, and television, to emphasize the authority of the message, rather than enabling learners to engage with the content and discuss concepts. Although multiple technologies can now accommodate discussion and collaboration among ODEL learners and instructors, there are questions about whether these strategies support genuine engagement for all learners, rather than a pro forma interaction that meets assessment requirements (Harris, 2011). Writing about South Africa, Daweti and Mitchell (2011) observe that “third-generation ODL usually suggests a greater reliance on electronic media, but in our context, it suggests once again the need for more student support, more contact, and more flexibility of access to technology than ever before” (p. 63). Moreover, without ready and affordable access to the Internet or required bandwidth, the promise of active engagement is empty.

Without denying the realities of dominant ideologies influencing both curriculum and pedagogy, it is also important to recognize the capacity of committed educators to enable learners to think outside these dominant forces, whether it is a professor teaching “a hidden curriculum” that challenges the prevailing totalitarian mantra in pre-1989 Poland (Potulicka, 1991), or a facilitator enabling Kenyan women with limited literacy to develop skills in managing businesses in a male-dominated occupation (Kere, 2006). Moreover, as Derounian (2012) explains, distance-learning assessment that enables learners to deal with genuine workplace issues can actually support rather than undermine personal integrity.

Social Justice in ODEL Management and Operations

Curriculum and pedagogy are both particular and situational, linked to an academic and cultural context and governed by academic freedom. Given these considerations, society can, at best, strongly encourage the inclusion of social justice principles in these aspects of ODEL provision.

However, social justice is also relevant to many of the most common operational elements of ODEL provision, notably access and support, as well as management, financing, and staffing. Despite cultural, social, and economic differences, there is evidence of widespread acceptance of social justice principles, especially those related to work and education. For example,
182 countries signed the 2008 ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization, which provides a broad framework for applying social justice principles in specific sectors and affirms that “the fundamental values of freedom, human dignity, social justice, security and non-discrimination are essential for sustainable economic and social development and efficiency.”

The issue is how to reconcile a social justice mandate with all the other pressures that affect policy and practice. How can an ODEL provider make social justice an integral part of all levels of its operations and provision?

WHAT IS TO BE DONE, PART 2: IMPLICATIONS FOR EMBEDDING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN ODEL

In accepting the case for social justice, there is the embedded *a priori* assumption that the world is not structured fairly enough, and that something should be done about it. This assumption does not gain universal assent, especially from those who regard the market as the most simple and effective mechanism for distributing goods. Even where the abstract principle is supported, it is likely to strike the rock of self-interest as soon as it demands the shifting of resources from some of the haves to some of the have-less or have not groups.

Implementing Social Justice

There are relatively passive approaches to social justice, for example, those that restrict themselves to making opportunity more equally available, alongside the much harder task whose objective is to make achievement more equally accessible. Attempting to implement the latter concept into practice soon begins to affect the distribution of resources and meets resistance fairly early in its development. In the creation of institutions and organizations for ODEL, this interpretation would lead to policies and practices of equal opportunity, with remedial support given to those who needed it.

Consideration of the extent to which ODEL contributes to or detracts from social justice when working on an international basis requires a deep understanding of how an institution or a program contributes to the freedoms that its learners might deploy in their lives (Sen, 2009). In more concrete terms this might include:
• ensuring, or seeking to ensure, the admission of students to programs according to their need and not to their capacity to pay
• ensuring the alignment of curricula with the skills and knowledge that students need to function in their individual, family, and economic lives
• ensuring the commitment to student success, and thus to a range of support services on a differentiated basis
• ensuring the validity and credibility of qualifications in terms of societal acceptance and value.

This approach moves away from abstract commitment to equality but demands practical outcomes, within which we can place commitments to ethics and to equal opportunity practices. Following this approach, ODEL can contribute to social justice, whether nationally or internationally, in its ability to support development of the activities needed to live a free, fully human, life.

Let us return therefore to the question as to whether ODEL on an international basis contributes to or detracts from social justice. Are we restricted to asserting that all for-profit educational initiatives are educationally suspect? It is certainly the case that for-profit educational organizations would need, logically speaking, to serve the market, which in a fundamental way suggests accepting the world as it is rather than identifying its structural inequalities. Both publicly funded and private for-profit educational institutions are designed to serve market needs, and both include learners and their employers as their markets. Public institutions are more likely to include their primary funder, that is, the government and the people it represents, as one of the markets they serve, and to take these broader needs into consideration in planning, policy, and operations.

However, private sector institutions can do two things that could be regarded as valuable contributions to a society committed to social justice. Firstly, the private sector can serve established audiences that do not need the support of the state or other not-for-profit sources; and secondly, the private sector can invent markets and through innovation provide products and services that users have not asked for but take up, sometimes with great enthusiasm, when first offered. This can apply in educational contexts as well as in more familiar product-led sectors. An issue for both public and private sector ODEL is whether financial considerations outweigh social justice principles. We will expand on this question in the next section.
Therefore, rather than starting from one of the ideological positions that are frequently proposed (for example, that all institutions working internationally in ODEL are involved in cultural imperialism, or that all private sector institutions are more interested in shareholder returns than educational missions, or that public sector institutions are likely to serve staff interests rather than client interests), we can assess the contribution to social justice for our own or other organizations through the construction of characteristics that support or detract from social justice, developing these principles within our own contexts, and sharing these in order to construct larger order understandings.

To that end, the following is a proposed framework for a social justice audit of ODEL.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE, PART 3: FRAMEWORK FOR AN ODEL SOCIAL JUSTICE AUDIT

We propose a social justice audit as a method for assessing how well an ODEL organization’s policies and practices support its identified social justice goals. Both the process and outcomes of a social justice audit can guide a reorientation of policies and practices, or potentially, a rethinking of social justice goals. A social justice audit can emerge from the overarching question: What characteristics should ODEL have in order to achieve social justice, or to have an impact towards social justice? In other words, what should social justice look like, in terms of goals, policies, and practices? An audit also needs to consider a practical question: What dimensions of social justice are actually identifiable and measurable through the appropriate and available research methods? At an organizational level, a social justice audit can examine the clarity of its social justice goals and the extent to which the organization is meeting its stated social justice goals at each level of its operation.

Using a participatory process is consistent with social justice principles because it engages those who are directly involved and affected by the organization’s management and services, providing multiple perspectives and greater depth of information than selective research. Moreover, a participatory process among those directly involved in ODEL, as learners, staff, funders, government, and representatives of society, can strengthen both the organization and its links with stakeholders.
A Participatory Approach to Examining Social Justice in Practice

A participatory approach to a social justice audit builds on the concept of participatory evaluation, a method that engages those directly affected by a process or project. Participatory evaluation originally developed in the 1970s as a response to concerns about externally managed project evaluation that did not involve project participants, beneficiaries, or their communities, and has since evolved into a widely used practice.

Participatory evaluation is a process of self-assessment, collective knowledge production, and cooperative action in which stakeholders in a development intervention participate substantively in the identification of the evaluation issues, the design of the evaluation, the collection and analysis of data, and the action taken as a result of the evaluation findings. By participating in the process, the stakeholders also build their own capacity and skills to undertake research and evaluation in other areas (Jackson & Hassam, 1998).

There are now many variations of participatory evaluation, such as participatory action research, cooperative inquiry, and others however, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to consider each of these threads. Variations of participatory evaluation meet different needs, and organizations are in the best position to identify a variation or combination of approaches that is most appropriate for their situation. Considerations include the goals of the inquiry, who is included, and their level of decision making in planning, gathering, and interpreting information; timing and extent of participation; choices of inquiry processes; methods for sharing outcomes, and developing action plans based on the outcomes and the extent to which each part of the process can contribute to organizational learning.

A literature review indicates that the term social justice audit is not used extensively in educational contexts. However, the application of the concept in enterprise monitoring and in development initiatives indicates its potential for education, especially ODEL, because it examines the extent to which organizational practice at each level is consistent with agreed principles. Examples of social audits in enterprise monitoring and in development programs provide useful lessons for a social justice audit in ODEL.

A participatory approach can strengthen the reliability and impact of social audits that monitor compliance with international labour standards, compared to a “snapshot” audit by an external evaluator who relies solely on
management input and pro forma checklists (Auret & Barrientos, 2004). A genuinely participatory approach to a social audit of an enterprise involves:

- companies, trade unions, NGOs and government in local initiatives that provide independent forms of monitoring and verification of (labour) codes. Local multi-stakeholder initiatives require active engagement by all relevant actors that have knowledge of employment issues on the ground. This helps to provide space for the interests of more vulnerable unorganized groups, such as women, to be articulated. The process of (labour) code implementation by multi-stakeholder initiatives, rather than external governance, is sustainable locally as an ongoing process of improvement—it encourages active involvement of workers and managers, enables discussion, creates awareness, and enables people to identify problems and priorities. (Auret & Barrientos, 2004, p. 1)

This participatory approach contrasts with some corporations’ self-monitoring reports on their corporate social responsibility (CSR) commitments, which may provide extensive quantitative information but without contextual or other information that would enable society as a whole to assess the corporation’s compliance with CSR goals (Owen, 2003).

Participatory approaches to assessing effectiveness of development projects can redress imbalances of power among funders, implementing agencies, and beneficiaries and strengthen accountability and results. As Jackson and Kassam (1998) note, “no one has a greater stake in optimizing results than project beneficiaries on the ground” (p. 13).

In summary, a social justice audit engages those who are directly and indirectly affected by the organization by looking within the organization, outwards to its immediate clientele, and beyond to society as a whole. However, as with other methods of assessing progress towards goals, the process must be much more meaningful and engaging than a pro forma exercise of ticking boxes and filling in forms. Several proponents of participatory process describe it as a conversation (Williamson et al., 2000).

With the appropriate intentions, engagement, support, and resources, a participatory social justice audit of ODEL can enable all those involved in provision to:

- identify social justice as it applies to ODEL, by contributing their perspective based on their role or involvement with an ODEL provider
- focus on social justice dimensions that are most relevant for the
specific ODEL context, in terms of policy, strategies, operations, and impact on society

- create and implement appropriate strategies for clarifying how well the ODEL organization is supporting its own social justice goals
- develop action plans to strengthen practical support for agreed social justice goals for the ODEL organization.

We propose a social justice audit that can serve as an instrument for assessing whether ODEL is meeting identified social justice goals, the following section outlines steps in the process.

Explicit Social Justice Goals

Clearly identified social justice goals set the tone and framework for an organization’s mandate. Without an explicit statement of goals for social justice, it is difficult to establish policies that will support achievement of social justice goals, or to identify practices that are consistent with social justice policies. To have a real impact, social justice needs to be adopted and applied at every level of the organization.

Examining an organization’s social justice goals can explore the clarity, depth, and scope of these goals in relation to its mission, those it serves, and members of the organization.

Policies That Support Social Justice Goals

Policies articulate principles that demonstrate commitment to specific areas of social justice and provide a framework for developing the organization’s strategies for meeting its responsibilities to learners. Without policies that are clearly based on social justice goals, it is difficult to ensure that social justice principles are the formulation of procedures and day-to-day practice. Policy areas most relevant to social justice govern access, quality, consistency, and sustainability, and the social contract implications of providing learning opportunities that benefit both the individual and society.

Policies Related to Access

Access, the *sine qua non* of ODEL, may be defined as the removal of barriers (geographic, social, economic, gender) and/or as the enabling of learners to
overcome potential barriers (disability, incomplete prior education, social exclusion, and so on). Access may be defined differently in different contexts, depending on the barriers to learning. For example, providing genuine access to basic literacy programs requires resources that non-readers can use. Clear access policies put the onus on the provider rather than on the learner to ensure accessibility.

A review of policies related to access could consider the organization’s definition of barriers to access, and assess how effectively its policies address these barriers, such as support, flexibility, and responsiveness.

**Policies Related to Quality**

ODEL literature frequently refers to learners’ reluctance to question poor quality learning materials, resources, or services. Providing genuine access to learning opportunities entails a commitment to quality provision that is fair to all learners and accompanied by appropriate instructional and administrative support. Policies related to quality should guide appropriate strategies that consistently enable learning materials, resources, services, and administrative systems to meet acceptable standards.

A review of policies related to quality can consider the extent to which policies define standards, quality assessment, and quality improvement guidelines for each aspect of provision.

**Policies Related to Consistency and Sustainability**

Many ODEL initiatives begin on a trial basis, often with dedicated funding for a limited duration. However, many ODEL learners, who typically study part-time, require a fairly long time frame to complete their qualifications. Courses or programs that are a limited time offer are unlikely to meet most learners’ needs. Learners who are working towards a specific qualification, such as a university degree, rely on all the required courses in a program to be available when they need to take them. ODEL providers that cancel required courses due to lack of funding or other resources (such as instructional staff or technical support) are not meeting learners’ needs for continued access.

A review of policies related to consistency and sustainability can consider the extent to which policies specify standards for ensuring continuity of funding and support for programs and for communicating time limits on availability of specific programs.
Policies Related to Social Contract Aspects of ODEL Provision

Both publicly and privately funded education fulfill an implied social contract based on the benefits of education and training for both the individual and society. Society provides funding for public education and oversight and accreditation for both public and private education. In turn, education and training enable an individual to have a livelihood and contribute to society, to the benefit of both the individual and society. Several African countries make this social contract explicit in practical terms by providing free university education to qualified students, and in turn, requiring graduates to complete a year of free national service in their field (Idogho, 2011, personal communication). The global reach of ODEL offers learners the opportunity to acquire internationally recognized qualifications: This is potentially a mixed benefit for society, if it accelerates the loss of its well-educated citizens to other countries where their skills command a higher income. (For example, about one third of African-trained health professionals relocate to Europe or North America, representing a net loss to their countries of origin, even when considering remittances from expatriates.) Moreover, initiatives to use open educational resources (OER) in ODEL increase the possibility that ODEL learning materials will include resources developed in contexts and cultures that are different from those of the learners.

A review of an organization’s social contract policies could consider the extent to which policies identify social contract commitments to society, to learners, and to specific stakeholders.

Operational Strategies that Support Social Justice Policies

Policies provide the rationale and conceptual framework for supporting social justice; strategies identify practical ways of realizing these goals in each area of ODEL practice. While policies are relatively stable, strategies require regular review and recalibration to ensure they are appropriate for the organizational and learners’ contexts and consistent with policy objectives.

A broad consideration of strategies that support social justice could examine the consistency between stated policies on each aspect of social justice and the operational strategies that implement these policies, the effectiveness of the strategies for implementing these policies, and the organization’s capacity to improve or revise strategies to respond to social
justice needs. More specific strategies address the issues of access, quality, consistency, and sustainability, and the social contract for learning.

**Strategies that Address Accessibility**

*Strategies that Address Accessibility of Entry to Learning*

In situations where social justice is a guiding principle for ODEL provision, accessibility involves more than putting access strategies in place. Ensuring accessibility requires viewing the organization through the eyes of prospective learners, identifying barriers as they perceive them, developing strategies to minimize or eliminate barriers, and anticipating learners’ needs at each stage: enrolment, participation, and completion. Accessibility can be described as passive, simply allowing learners who are familiar with the organization to enrol in programs, or active, proactively reaching out to communities and providing prospective learners with enough information to enable them to make an informed choice and to guide them through the enrolment process.

A review of access strategies can consider whether there are effective strategies to minimize or remove barriers to access and to support at-risk learners, and adequate resources to implement these strategies.

*Strategies that Address Continuity of Access to Learning*

After making the first step to enter a learning program, learners are still vulnerable to individual and social factors that can impede or stop their progress. As well, organizational decisions (such as course availability, technologies, and support systems) can make it difficult or impossible for learners to continue to their goal. Genuine access includes the opportunity to continue learning towards a specific goal.

A review of strategies that support sustained learning can consider the scope and effectiveness of its support services, of strategies for ensuring adequate communication with learners and for monitoring accessibility of its technologies for learners.

**Strategies for Maintaining Quality**

Every element of ODEL provision has quality requirements and implications: management, administration, learning resources, services that support students directly and indirectly.
Quality in Management Strategies
The quality of management strategies of ODEL impacts all levels of society and provision of services:

- decision makers who rely on ODEL to broaden access to education and to prepare people for a livelihood that contributes to society
- professions and occupations that depend on ODEL programs to help meet the demand for well-trained staff
- learners for whom ODEL is the only chance for access to education or training
- staff who rely on good management to enable them to meet their commitments to learners

Quality in management strategies implies supporting continuity and consistency in all aspects of provision that affect the learning experience. The longer time frame for many ODEL learning experiences has an impact on decisions that could change priorities, funding, or instruction, which can affect learners’ ability to achieve goals successfully. Moreover, ODEL learners often have difficulty overcoming physical and social distance so they can communicate their views to management.

A review of quality in management strategies could examine the extent to which decisions about management strategies consider consistency with policy and with learner and societal needs, and could help determine whether adequate resources are in place to support agreed-upon strategies.

Quality in Administrative Services
Quality in administrative services is an essential link between policy and provision. Unfortunately, it can be the weak link in ODEL, especially in situations where administrative systems are modelled on those used for face-to-face provision. ODEL learners can be discouraged or defeated by administrative delays that prevent them from meeting administrative or academic deadlines. Quality in administrative services includes responsiveness, timeliness, and accuracy, and it requires adequate staff resources that have appropriate guidance, training, and support.

A review of quality in administrative services can consider the responsiveness and timeliness of administrative systems and services and the adequacy of resources to ensure effective administrative services.
Quality in Instructional Support and Services

In social justice terms, fairness is an important attribute of instruction and entails providing the type of instructional support that is appropriate to the content, to learners’ needs, and to the expected learning outcomes. Short-changing instructional services is unfair to learners and to supporters and funders of the learning program because it reduces the likelihood that it will achieve its goals. Moreover, a lack of quality instruction can impede learners’ capacity to apply their learning in work or life situations.

A review of quality in instructional services could examine the suitability of instructional services for the specific characteristics of a program and the needs of learners and the adequacy of resources to support appropriate instruction.

Quality in Instructional Resources

In social justice terms, quality instructional resources are appropriate for the intended learning outcomes, content, context, learners, and instructional strategies. Instructional resources that are incomplete, or designed for a different context, or are not consistent with the level or focus of the program or course, present a disadvantage to learners. Moreover, because learning materials seem authoritative, learners can assume that their difficulties in using the materials are their fault, rather than that of the materials, and can lose confidence as a result.

A review of quality in instructional resources can examine the strategies that ensure instructional resources are appropriate for the instructional content, learners, and context.

Strategies for Maintaining Consistency and Sustainability

ODEL learners are particularly vulnerable to changes in provision because ODEL is often the only option that will enable them to meet their learning goals. However, there are many examples of short-term ODEL initiatives that showed promise but ended due to lack of funding, leaving many learners without alternatives for completing their program. While pilot projects can provide an opportunity to demonstrate the viability of an ODEL program, pilot learners need realistic information about the likelihood of longer-term provision. As well, initiating pilot projects that are not representative of the core mandate of the ODEL provider can be unfair to funders,
staff, and learners, because of the reduced possibility of continued support and possible diversion of resources from core programs.

A review of strategies to ensure consistency and sustainability can examine provisions that govern planning and implementing new programs, especially those dependent on short-term or contingent funding.

**Strategies for Sustaining the Social Contract Aspects of ODEL Provision**

Clearly defined strategies can govern some, but not all, social contract aspects of ODEL provision. By *social contract*, we mean a society’s agreed mutual obligations that support equity. The factors that can balance or outweigh social contract elements include learners’ freedom of choice, academic freedom as related to instructors’ choices of curriculum content and pedagogy, and prevailing values and expectations in the social and political context. However, clearly articulated strategies can help to ensure consistency between stated policy on social contract elements and day-to-day provision.

A review of the ODEL’s strategies that support social contract policies can examine the degree of meaningful consultation with communities it serves, about aspects of provision and the impact of its programs, and the extent of its engagement in community service initiatives.

**What About Measuring Outcomes?**

One reviewer of this chapter recommended that a social justice audit should also consider outcomes. However, we argue that paying attention to social justice in all ODEL processes serves as a counterweight to the current focus (obsession) on outcomes as the primary strategy for external assessments of the effectiveness of learning provision. Moreover, a social justice audit initiated from within an organization can provide insights into the underlying reasons for the organization’s effectiveness, and identify areas it can improve in order to strengthen effectiveness. External assessment that focuses only on outcomes provides information without a great deal of context. For example, readers will not know whether a high program completion rate is due to selective intake of high achievers, effective teaching, or less stringent standards. A study of processes provides contextual information that
enables an organization to focus on strengthening areas that can improve outcomes.

For example, in the UK, league tables rank universities according to a set of measures that include student satisfaction, student outcomes, and job placements after graduation. However, one commentator notes that it’s quite possible to focus on strategies that improve league table outcomes, and quotes a marketing director at one university that improved its league table standing significantly.

It’s not rocket science, according to Stuart Franklin, director of marketing and communications at Exeter: “We took the trouble to understand how the league tables worked and then implemented a deliberate policy of using the metrics to drive institutional performance.” In effect, Exeter designed its policy around the demands of the league tables, but Stuart Franklin rejects the charge that this was a subversion of institutional strategy “student outcomes, research, student satisfaction—league tables measure the sorts of things that any well run organisation should be focussing on” (Catcheside, 2012).

In Canada, a national magazine’s annual ranking of universities measures student success in obtaining national academic awards; student access to instructors; the proportion of faculty who win major awards and research grants; resources allocated to research, teaching, student support, library holdings; and the institutions’ reputation. The outcomes are focussed on exceptional achievement rather than on the general student and faculty population; the inputs are identified in physical terms, investments, numbers of books, journals, and so on, rather than in terms of the nature of the interaction and engagement of instructors and learners.

Typically, outcomes are based on program completion rates and, in some cases, on post-graduation employment (Dwyer, 2011). However, outcomes on graduation or shortly thereafter may not be a predictor of the long-term viability of students’ education. Some surveys follow up students five years after graduation, but with diminishing data returns from students and less relevant input for current programs.

One potential rationale for capturing outcomes is to assess if an educational provider is meeting an objective of enabling learners to achieve their goals despite a disadvantage—social, economic, and others. However, numbers alone are not enough to answer this question, because they do not answer the qualitative questions: Typical data collected indicates whether
learners are employed, but not the kind of work they are doing. However, an educational provider that actively engages with its alumni would be able to include former students in participatory social justice audits, thereby putting in practice the concept of a community of learners—past, current, and future.

CONCLUSION

This chapter presents more questions than answers, for several reasons. The topic of social justice is not easily confined within one category of experience or study: It imbues everyday life decision-making at all levels of work, society, and governance. It engages many disciplines, ranging from philosophy and theology to environmental studies, medicine, political science, and management. By its nature, social justice does not lend itself to prescriptions or road maps that “experts” recommend to others. Moreover, raising questions is in keeping with the book’s theme of building towards a research agenda.

For many philosophical, social, and practical reasons, a commitment to social justice can be considered an essential element rather than an optional extra for ODEL provision. A social justice audit should protect against the easy use of rhetoric about social justice that does not and, in worst cases is never intended, to drive practice. The proposed framework for a social justice audit is intended to serve as an initial step in the process of demonstrating the viability of a social justice orientation and its effectiveness in meeting both a social and economic mandate, in the face of increasing pressures to operate in a competitive business model rather than a public service model.

In contrast to the prevailing competitive model of education, Finnish educator Pasi Sahlberg (Sahlberg & Hargreaves, 2011) provides strong evidence of the strength of an educational system based on equity rather than competition, focussed more on process than on measuring outcomes, and on social justice rather than market values. Sahlberg’s work documents the transformation of the Finnish public education system, which has achieved “academic excellence through its particular policy focus on equity” (Partanen, 2012 p. 31).

Further work is needed to map the application of this social justice audit approach to particular institutions, organizations, and systems that deploy...
ODEL. A range of valuable studies could be constructed that compare, for example, learner support strategies of private for-profit providers with those of public sector institutions, or of dual-mode organizations with the major open universities. These studies could inform the development of benchmarks that could guide more effective practice.

We hope that readers will adapt the proposed social justice audit framework to meet the specific needs of their organizations and share their reflections and comments on the concept of a social justice audit for ODEL. We hope to provide an impetus for practical explorations of the implications of social justice in specific ODEL contexts and for continued conversations about how commitments to social justice can be embodied in ODEL practice. Ideally, the result will be the embedding of social justice in practical outcomes and its removal from the anodyne or rhetorical.
APPENDIX 1.1
A SAMPLE OF GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR A SOCIAL JUSTICE AUDIT IN ODEL

Social Justice Goals

• To what extent does the organization identify social justice goals within its mandate that will support success (for example, access to learning and resources)?

• How does the organization define individual and societal social justice goals? How are goals defined in terms of specific stakeholders, for example?

• What are individuals entitled to as learners? How does the organization define equity in access, provision, support?

• What is society entitled to as part of the social contract; given that society’s collective investment in education is for the benefit of both the individual and society?

• What is the role of staff members in supporting social justice goals, in their interactions with learners and with other staff?

Policies Related to Access

• To what extent does the organization have policies that demonstrate a genuine commitment to identify and remove barriers that impede entry to learning (financial, geographic, social—lack of equity for specific groups, lack of gender equity)?

• To what extent does the organization have policies that demonstrate a commitment to identify and remove barriers to learners’ continuing participation in learning and proceeding towards a successful outcome? Indicators can include policies that identify learners’ entitlement to accessible, appropriate support and policies that enable staff to identify and recommend removal of institutional barriers that can curtail learners’ continuing participation.

• To what extent are there policies that identify accessible, appropriate institutional support and that define how to remedy institutional barriers that are inconsistent with accessible, supportive learning (e.g.,
specific academic regulations imposing time limits on completing a program, use of technologies that are not widely available or affordable)?

• To what extent are there policies that indicate commitment to organizational flexibility and adaptability when required to ensure accessibility to entry and continuing learning? An example would be administrative policies that accommodate learners who may not be able to participate continually in learning (i.e., policies about completing programs within a specified time frame, or policies that enable learners to obtain accreditation based on requirements when learner began a program, rather than having to meet changed requirements).

**General Policies Related to Quality**

• To what extent are there organizational policies that identify acceptable standards in key aspects of management, administration, and provision of all components of the ODEL experience for learners?

• To what extent are there organizational policies that govern quality assessment and remedies for inadequate quality?

**Policies Related to Consistency/Sustainability**

• To what extent are there policies that govern the proportion of programs that must be fully supported by base funding, and the proportion that can be supported by contingent funding?

• To what extent are there policies that govern the proportion of the learner population that must be in fully funded programs and the proportion that can be in programs supported by contingent funding?

• To what extent are there policies that govern the lifespan of courses and programs and require strategies for maintaining uninterrupted provision of courses and programs?

• To what extent are there policies governing short-term initiatives, such as specially funded pilot programs, in terms of commitments to learners as well as to funders?
Policies Related to Social Contract

- To what extent are there policies that support engagement with society by senior management, instructional and administrative staff, and learners, about such topics as community learning needs, curriculum, applied learning opportunities?
- To what extent are there policies that require curriculum and pedagogy to be appropriate and relevant for the learners that the organization serves?
- To what extent are there policies that support arrangements that enable linkages between learning and practice, e.g., through workplace learning, internships, work terms, etc.?

Strategies that Support Social Justice Goals and Policies

- To what extent do the general operational strategies support the organization’s stated goals and policies for social justice?
- What are the indicators of the effectiveness of these strategies?
- What are the provisions for assessing the effectiveness of these strategies using appropriate, consistent measures and tools?
- What is the outcome of these assessments? Does assessment guide changes that improve practice?

Strategies that Support Access to Entry to Learning

- To what extent are there effective strategies to reach out to specific groups that are now or were previously restricted from access to learning, for example, due to economic circumstances, gender, social class, or ethnicity?
- To what extent are there clear strategies to inform prospective learners about study opportunities, explain how they can access these opportunities, and provide guidance at each stage of the process (enquiry, program choices, registration, and starting the course or program)?
- To what extent are there clear strategies to actively inform prospective learners about accessibility policies and practices that are relevant to the learners’ situation?
• To what extent are there adequate financial and staff resources in place to support these strategies?

• What are the indicators that the organization’s access strategies are effective and are applied effectively?

**Strategies that Support Access to Sustained Learning**

• To what extent does the organization provide support services, such as academic and individual counselling, that can help learners deal with personal or social factors that affect their learning?

• To what extent does the organization assess its provision to ensure that administration, instruction, and technologies are accessible to all its current and prospective learners?

• To what extent are there effective strategies to inform learners of any changes in administration, instruction, or technologies that could affect accessibility to learning?

• If changes have an impact on learners, to what extent does the organization take steps to remedy the situation? (Changes could include a change to a courier that does not serve some learners’ communities, a change that makes phone calls to the institution more costly for learners, and so on.)

• To what extent are there academic provisions to accommodate learners who may not be able to participate consistently in a learning program over a period of time and may need to take time out from learning (for example, catch-up materials, extra tutoring support, assurances that academic credits will not expire after a specific time)?

• What are the indicators that these strategies help learners to continue learning and achieve their expected outcome (for example, programs for housebound learners or for learners dealing with health problems)?

**Technology Access**

While new technologies can bring additional dimensions to the learning process, introducing a technology that is not readily available or affordable is unfair to learners and defeats goals of inclusiveness and access.
• To what extent does the organization assess availability of a technology to learners before incorporating that technology into programs?

• What are the organization’s requirements for the percentage of learners who have assured access to a technology before that technology is included as an essential element of a program?

• To what extent does the organization make provisions for learners who do not have reliable, affordable access to the technology?

**Quality in Management Strategies**

• To what extent are management strategies consistent with agreed social justice goals and policies?

• To what extent do proposed changes in management strategies consider agreed policies and input from all relevant stakeholders and take into account the impact on learners and the learning experience over the long term?

• To what extent do proposed changes in management strategies provide appropriate resources for implementation, including finances and staffing?

• To what extent do management strategies ensure that staff have adequate job security training, support, and financial compensation to enable them to use their skills effectively and dedicate the required time for responding appropriately to learners, whether for administrative or academic needs?

**Quality in Administrative Services**

• To what extent are there clear guidelines about the expected response time to routine administrative enquiries from learners?

• What are the indicators that these guidelines are met for a specific proportion of enquiries?

• What are the indicators that the first administrative response met the enquirer’s need, or that there were follow-up enquiries?

**Resources**

• To what extent are there adequate staffing and other resources (e.g., financial, communications systems) to support responsive
administrative services? What are the indicators of the adequacy of these resources?

Quality in Instructional Services

- To what extent is there consistency between the types of instructional services provided for a specific program or course (e.g., tutoring, help line, assessment) and the requirements of that program or course?
- To what extent is there consistency between the instructional strategies for a course or program and agreed learning outcomes?
- To what extent is there adequate staffing, financial and technical resources to support quality in instructional services (e.g., enabling appropriate response times for learner questions and assessment so that learners can proceed according to the program or course schedule)?

Quality in Instructional Resources

- To what extent are the instructional resources designed, chosen, or modified specifically for the program or course on offer, by staff knowledgeable about ODEL, learners’ needs, and the subject matter?
- To what extent have the instructional resources been pilot-tested with typical learners before using them for full-scale provision?
- To what extent are the instructional resources complete, including assessment, guidance for learners, and guidance for instructors?
- How frequently are the instructional resources updated, and how does this time frame correspond to expected changes in the subject matter?
- To what extent are staff that develop or modify instructional resources provided adequate time and compensation for their work?

Strategies that maintain consistency and sustainability

- To what extent are there strategies for assessing the viability of proposed pilot initiatives for a new ODEL course or program?
- What are the common characteristics of pilot initiatives that have received long-term funding, and what proportion of pilot initiatives are eventually sustainable?
• To what extent are staff and learners provided adequate information about proposed pilot initiatives to enable them to make an informed decision about committing time to studying or instructing the course or program?

**Strategies that Support a Social Contract**

• To what extent does the organization actively engage in meaningful consultation with representatives of the communities it serves (students, society, employers) when identifying needs and planning programs, delivery methods, curriculum?

• To what extent does the organization research the impact of its activities on the communities it serves, for example, the proportion of graduates who obtain employment in a field related to their studies, or the longer-term roles of graduates in social, environmental, and economic initiatives?

• To what extent does the organization actively identify sectors of society that could benefit from the organization’s expertise, and provide that expertise as a community service?
REFERENCES


