

Book Review – Distance and Campus Universities: Tensions and Interactions

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Book Review - Distance and Campus Universities: Tensions and Interactions

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Author: Sara Guri-Rosenblit
Oxford, Tokyo and New York: Pergamon for the IAU Press (1999)
290 pp. (Hardcover) ISBN: 0-08-043066-X

Reviewed by: **Ian Mugridge**, Athabasca University

I once read a book review in which the author recommended to the distinguished university press that had published the work that, since it was irredeemably bad and for the benefit of all concerned, it should be withdrawn and everyone connected with it dismissed. I do not intend to make such a suggestion in this case. But I would be tempted to do so in the case of those who designed and approved the cover: The design and, more particularly, the colour are simply awful, so much so that I was tempted to put the book aside without going further. However, where I grew up, everybody – at least, everybody I knew – had mothers who reminded them never to judge a book by its cover. In this case, our mothers would have been right.

Initially, I feared this book might attempt to revive the discussion that flickered into brief and inconclusive life in the mid 1980s, about the relative merits of single and dual mode institutions. It does not. What this book provides is a serious, sustained and cogent attempt to discuss “the subtle and intricate relations between the distance teaching universities and conventional universities, and to analyze the influence they have had on each other” (p. xix). In addition, the author seeks “to identify significant divergences between distance teaching universities operating in various national contexts” (p.xx) by, as its subtitle notes, providing a comparative study of five countries. This is done by attempting to answer in eight separate chapters and in relation to five distance teaching universities, a number of questions related to several aspects of university teaching and practice. The universities discussed are the United Kingdom Open University, the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Spain, the FernUniversität, Germany, Athabasca University, Canada, and the author’s home institution Everyman’s University, Israel. The chapters review questions related to the emergence of the open universities, each of the five in its national setting, students and academic faculty, academic curricula, technologies and distance teaching universities, governance, funding and organisation, scepticism, collaboration and competition among distance and campus universities, and finally, lessons from the past and trends for the future. Further, two annexes seek to devise, on the basis of the preceding discussion, guidelines for the establishment of new distance teaching universities and a checklist for those attempting to do so.

While I have my doubts about the value of the two annexes at this stage in the development of open and distance education, the remainder of the book contains an impressive and valuable discussion, the first I am aware of in such comprehensive form of the issues it takes up. To say that those of us who are familiar with Dr. Guri-Rosenblit's work, much of it related to the development of her own institution, would have expected no less is beside the point: she has undertaken successfully and with illuminating results, a complicated and difficult task and is to be congratulated on the outcome.

Much of what Dr. Guri-Rosenblit discusses here has been dealt with piecemeal in other contexts. Much of it has become enshrined in the mythology that has emerged in the distance teaching universities over the last thirty years. Nowhere, however, have the significant issues in the development of these institutions and their relationship to the campus based institutions alongside which they have worked been analyzed. One of the features of these developments is that in the five widely differing contexts in which the selected institutions are working, their experiences are often similar. The importance, for example, of political support comes through very clearly. The author cites Walter Perry's comment that the founding of the UK Open University was a political act and many of us who have been present at the establishment of distance teaching institutions would endorse this from our own experience. The establishment of the Open Learning Institute in British Columbia, which I helped to establish, was certainly a political rather than an educational action; and the comments of all the founding heads of open universities in *Founding the Open Universities* reinforces this point. In this sense, the argument that open and distance education as it has emerged in the 1980s and 1990s was a natural, even an inevitable outgrowth of universities as they were developing then may lose some its appeal: The establishment of the distance teaching universities was probably nowhere regarded as a useful development by the established institutions and it is likely that development would have been quite different – and, I would guess, much slower – if the campus institutions had been left to themselves.

It is perhaps in her discussion of the lessons to be drawn for both the past and the future that Dr. Guri-Rosenblit's discussion is at its most interesting and potentially useful. She begins by pointing out that the distance teaching universities have demonstrated that “massification and flexible access do not necessarily imply the lowering of academic standards” (p. 240). This was a charge leveled at most or all of the new distance teaching institutions when their establishment was announced and while they were in their planning stages: many of us were obliged to spend a great deal of time defending the view that distance teaching did not mean sub-standard teaching. Time has shown that this was correct as students from distance teaching universities have demonstrated that the quality of their academic preparation is equal to that provided by campus universities. She is equally convincing in discussing other conclusions derived from her earlier discussion. This is particularly so in areas like the need for a redefinition of drop-out and attrition, the importance of student support

systems, the care needed to develop high quality study materials, potential for changes in the teaching roles of academic faculty, and use of adjunct faculty and student support staff. These lessons from the past are finally moved forward into what I would expect to be a prescient look at future developments in the field. Taken together, both the body of this book and its concluding chapter constitute an impressive and important addition to the series of which it forms part.

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