

ODL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: INCREASING THE PROBABILITY OF THE POSSIBILITIES

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Abstract

Social justice in higher education would connote equal opportunity to access, participate and benefit from higher education which simply means removal of barriers thus inclusion of all those who have traditionally been excluded either by history, perceptions or structures. Because of its flexibility of programmes and forms of delivery open and distance learning (ODL) has been acknowledged to have greater potential for reducing these barriers. However, to date, especially in developing societies there are still a great number of people who are missing out on higher education.

This paper attempts to explore the strategies for increasing the probability of realization of the potentials of ODL hence expanding the possibility of social justice in higher education. Acknowledging that there are a number of strategies that can boost possibilities for social justice in higher education the paper focuses on only a few including the bridging courses and partnerships in the development, use and sustainability of open educational resources (OERs). Drawing examples from the foundation course that is offered by the Open University of Tanzania the paper explains how the bridging courses can uplift access to higher education for those who conventionally would otherwise be left out. Highlighting on experiences of the Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) Programme the paper examines partnerships in development as well as use and sustainability of OERs.

The purpose is to stimulate more understanding, thought, interest and discussion about the role of bridging courses/programmes and appropriate partnerships/networks in developing OERs in enhancing the capacity of ODL to contribute towards social justice in Higher Education.

INTRODUCTION

By removing barriers to education (Muganda 2002) ODL opens up the possibilities of social justice in higher education in terms of access, relevance, flexibility, lifelong learning opportunities and democratization of knowledge. However, maximizing the realization of these possibilities is still problematic as evidenced for example that to date in Africa (Maliyamkono and Mason 2006) there are still a great number of people who are missing out on higher education.

This paper analyzes the challenges to full realization of the possibilities that ODL presents and strategies for enhancing ODL's contribution towards social justice in higher education. The paper underscores the main attributes of social justice in higher education and analyses the role of open education resources (OERs) and bridging courses/programmes in enhancing the capacity of ODL to contribute towards social justice in Higher Education. The Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) Programme and the Foundation Course (OFC) offered by the Open University of Tanzania are introduced to exemplify OERs and bridging courses/programmes respectively. Some of the challenges for each are also discussed to stimulate more thinking and discussion so that improvements as well as more and better strategies can be identified.

ATTRIBUTES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Social justice in higher education needs to be understood within the wider conceptualization of provision of education. In this paper, higher education refers to post secondary education offered by tertiary institutions and universities; which include degrees, advanced diplomas or equivalent qualifications? Graduates of these programmes are normally professionals expected to use their professional competences for the sustainable development of self and their societies.

The concept of social justice is complex and dynamic because varied conceptualizations proffered by various scholars reflect ideological orientations and beliefs. Definitions and descriptions of social justice based on liberal and neo-liberal ideology for example indicate that social justice should focus on rights of the individual. John Rawls, for example, proposes that "Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others." (Rawls1971:3). Similar ideas are shared by other libertarians including the Neo Liberals who also recognize the rules of law, human rights and welfare safety nets in fostering social justice; however, they insist on free market ethos of equality of opportunity, and promotion of philanthropy and charity (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_justice). In that regard social justice is observed in just procedures that protect the individuals and individual property rights. In the context of market economy some Neo-liberals assert that what are important are the just processes of making choices in the market place. Social justice in education, therefore' should be based on fair procedures of competition for access and participation.

The socialists on the other hand, insist that social justice has to be observed in fair distribution of income and property as well as control of the production process. In this view some of individual rights may be sacrificed for the benefit of many. In that regard collective responsibility and fair and equitable outcomes are more important than equal procedures and processes that may result in unequitable outcomes (Muganda 1999). Social justice in education, therefore, should be based on equitable chances to participate and benefit from higher education. Religious beliefs also account for varied views of social justice. The catholic teachings for instance, insisting on the protection of civil rights to ensure harmonious existence in a society (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_justice).

Inherent in the varied approaches to social justice, is an indication that efforts have to be made to promote human rights. This paper contends that social justice signifies equitable distribution of human rights despite differences in socio-economic status, gender, race or ethnicity. This entails equitable procedures, processes and outcomes hence equitable ownership and control of the processes pertaining to the individuals' and society's livelihood and potential for sustainable development. Promotion of social justice in higher education therefore would connote equal opportunity to access, participate and benefit from education.

Thus attributes of social justice in higher education include:

- Recognition and acknowledgement of education as a basic human right;
- Equitable opportunities for access and participation in higher education;
- Equity in the ownership and control of the learning process;
- Equitable outcomes from participation in higher education programmes and activities;
- Equitable opportunities for different categories of learners, faculty and institutions to participate in acquisition, creation, development; application of knowledge and benefiting from that knowledge.

Recognition and acknowledgement of education as a basic human right is significant because education is a foundation for promoting livelihood of individuals and sustainable development of the society. As Nyerere (1968) observes, the purpose of education should be the liberation of the people from ignorance and dependency thus increasing their physical and mental freedom to increase control over themselves, their lives and the environment in which they live.

Equitable opportunities for access and participation in higher education suggest existence of a wide range of programmes to enable varied people to enroll in the programmes that are relevant to their context and situations. Equity in the ownership and control of the learning process, on the other hand, indicate that higher education programmes should be flexible enough to accommodate a wide range of learners regardless of who they are, where, when and what they want to study. While equitable participation in higher education involve ability to participate in activities of higher education as a creator/constructor, distributor or consumer of knowledge; equitable outcomes entails ability to benefit from the efforts put in during the participation in the knowledge development cycle including recognition for participation and contribution in knowledge creation, development and use.

OERs AND CHALLENGES TO SOCIAL JUSTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

ODL has potentials to contribute to social justice in higher education including the capacity to widen provision; to provide equitable education opportunities; increases opportunities of provision and recognition of lifelong learning; and the capacity to contribute significantly towards poverty alleviation and sustainable development (Muganda 2002, 2005). ODL can enhance provision of education in a range of fields at different levels to cater for various needs. The fact that social justice is still a challenge however; indicates a need to set strategies for increasing the chances of realizing these possibilities.

While acknowledging that there are many and varied strategies that can boost possibilities for social justice in higher education, the focus in this presentation is only on open educational resources (OERs) and bridging courses. It is argued that OERs have great potential to contribute towards meeting challenges to social justice in higher education by combating some of the barriers to higher education and creating opportunities for participation in the knowledge development cycle.

What are OERs?

Open educational resources (OERs) are a recent development in the open content movement which is inspired by the Open source software movement and the belief that knowledge and education are common goods (Casserly 2008, Hylén 2006). Open educational resources can be described as mostly digitized high quality educational materials and resources that are offered freely and openly for anyone to use and under some creative common licenses to re-mix, improve, re-use and redistribute. The special features of OERs are that they are usually a product of many authors collaboratively with the possibility of users adding; editing, updating the contents or adapting them to their own context (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_educational_resources: Feb 2008).

The OER movement has developed hand in hand with the Free / Libre Open Source Software (FLOSS) a software movement which works within similar principles based on open and inclusive ethos (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_educational_resources, 2008). The collaboration is an added advantage because institutions of higher learning can use the combination of the two to provide higher education through e-learning, covering a wide range of learners without displacing them from where they are.

OER and Barriers to Higher Education in Developing Societies

This section discusses the challenges to social Justice in Higher Education in developing societies including historical, socio-economic, socio-cultural and technological barriers, for which OERs could assist to alleviate.

Historical Barriers

The historical barriers to higher education in developing societies include the fact that higher education was not a priority in the colonial policy. Thus, at independence most of the post colonial nations had to play catch-up in the education arena especially in the sector of higher education. In Tanzania, for example, the first university college was opened in 1961. Following independence, most of the nations adopted the manpower requirement approach (MRA) to planning of education. Higher education was provided in accordance to the human resource required to support the government sectors of the time, hence open only to a privileged few (Nyerere 1968). To date, only a small percentage of the population of the developing world has had the opportunity to participate in higher education (Maliyamkono and Mason 2006, Mkude and Cooksey 2003). Low levels of participation in higher education are an impediment to social justice since higher education creates greater earning potential for the individual and governments; contributes to improved health and wealth creation hence poverty alleviation and better opportunities for the next generation. Widening higher education opportunities is a significant remedy to this historical barrier.

ODL can cater for a large number of learners thus widening educational opportunities (ADEA 2000, Muganda 2002, OUT 2006, Mushi 2006). In Tanzania, ODL has been promoted to widen participation in higher education by providing opportunities to those who could not be absorbed by the conventional higher education systems (OUT 2006). Data on students' enrolment at the OUT indicate that by 2006 it "had risen to over 25,000 thus surpassing student enrolment of any other existing university in the country" (OUT 2006: ii).

As a form of ODL, OERs can widen the opportunity even further by providing quality resources that can be adopted or adapted by higher education institutions to develop and provide a wide range of programmes in a relatively short time and even to expand access by widening avenues for cross border provision.

Socio- cultural barriers

Founded on the male culture, the conventional mode of delivery of higher education have underprivileged women whose participation are sometimes delimited by their biological and designated social roles. ODL increases the opportunity for those who would have found it difficult to fit in the conventionally structured education system. OERs increase this possibility by availing resources to the learners wherever they are.

Structural and perceptual barriers

In most developing societies, such as Tanzania, educational structure is pyramidal, with the majority who miss out at the lower levels of the ladder finding it overly difficult to get admission in higher education programmes for lack of entry prerequisites. ODL can remove this major barrier to education especially to those who had missed the formal schooling process by providing bridging courses/ programmes outside the traditional system (Muganda 2002). Accessing OERs can assist not only in expanding avenues for getting requisite educational qualifications for the formalized system but also breaking the myth that education can be obtained only through schooling.

Economic barriers

Economic factors make expansion of education in general and higher education in particular, difficult. As observed elsewhere (Muganda 2002), poor societies not only exhibit lack of formal education to majority of the people but also lack of resources and infrastructure to support learning. The challenge is to ensure that those who are admitted in higher education programmes have equitable chances of participating fully and benefiting from the respective programmes. Being freely available and accessible to more institutions and learners at minimal cost, OERs provide more equitable chances of participating fully and benefiting from the respective programmes regardless of social economic background and status.

Technological Barriers

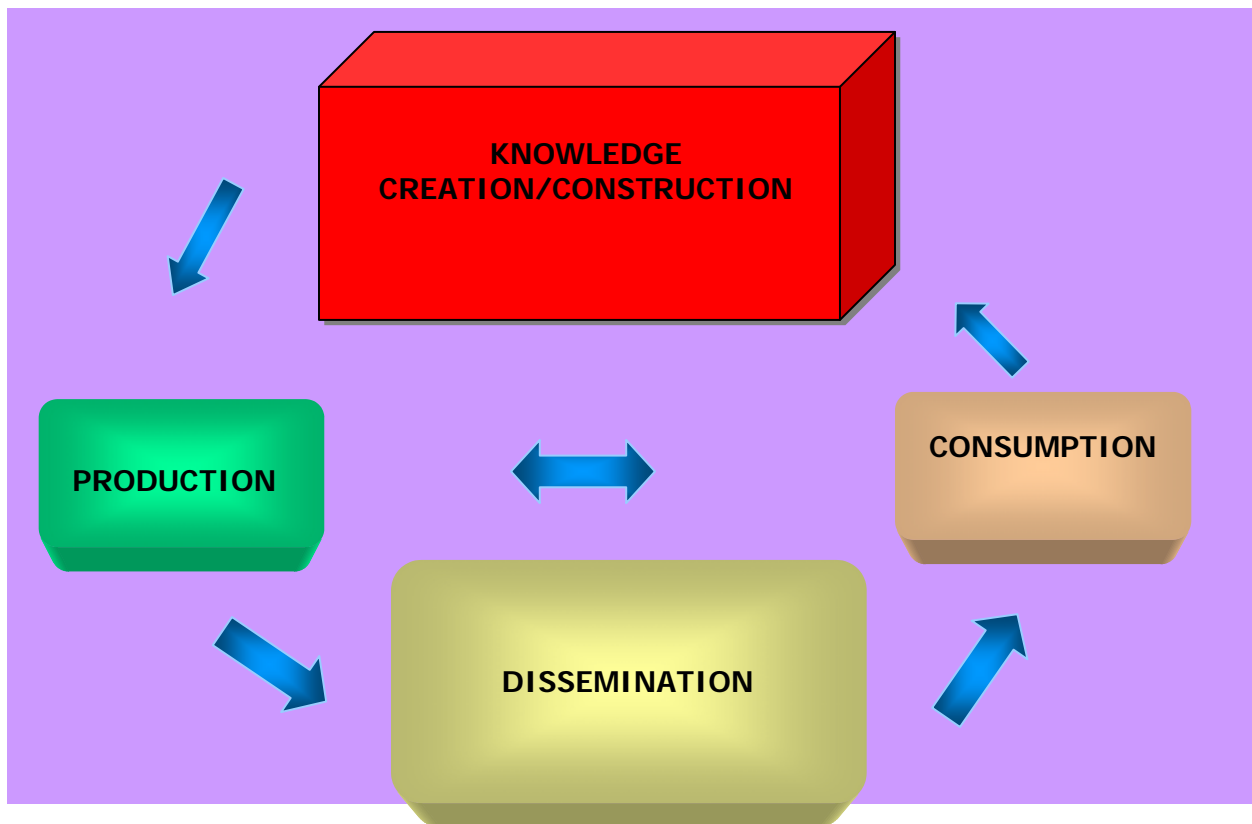
The technological barriers include the digital divide whereby access to technology in developing countries especially Africa is low. It has been noted by UNESCO (Mushi 2006) for example that access to internet connection in Africa is a privilege of big cities, towns and few affluent rural areas. By observing respective creative common licenses however, some OERs can be downloaded and presented in print form, CD-ROM and even audio taped for those who cannot access them in their original form.

OERS and Democratization of Higher Education

For the learners, democratization of education entails control of the learning process, getting relevant education and benefiting from participation in the learning process. Flexibility of OERs enhance their potential to provide education that is relevant, timely and with relatively less opportunity cost.

OERs promote interactivity in learning which in turn contribute significantly towards democratization of education, through empowering the learner to participate in the arrangement of their learning process, identifying what is relevant and sharing their learning experiences and reflections with others. OERs can also expand opportunities of lifelong learning thus increasing the potential to create knowledgeable societies. OERs can expand the possibility of equitable participation in the knowledge cycle which includes creation/construction, production, dissemination and consumption of knowledge (Muganda 2006).

Figure 1: Knowledge Production Cycle



Source: Authors conceptualization

In order for the cycle to continue knowledge consumption process should result into knowledge creation. **Complete participation in the cycle is important because stopping at any point not only breaks the cycle but also impinges on the rights of the participants. If a participant stops at knowledge creation for example, he/she is only a data collector and will not only miss recognition for his or her intellectual product but also sometimes be forced to buy the same knowledge in a repackaged form.** Through appropriate partnership and collaboration OERs create space for more equitable participation in the knowledge cycle.

Tessa Programme Example

Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) Programme is an initiative emanating from the need in Africa for more well trained teachers. In the overarching need to develop under-qualified and unqualified teachers in Africa, especially in the wake of education for all (EFA), TESSA initiated a collaborative and participatory programme for developing teacher education OERs. So far, 18 institutions extending across 9 countries in Africa in partnership with OU (UK), BBC world Service, Commonwealth of learning and Africa Virtue University (AVU) have been part of the TESSA materials development consortium (www.tessafrica.net). By 2007 over 100 academics and 1,000 teachers had been involved in the design of the programme either as authors, researchers, versioning teams, participants in developmental testing or critical readers

Available in four languages used in Africa including Arabic, Kiswahili, English, French, TESSA resources can be accessed in the web and print form, supported by radio broadcast as well as by audio and video materials. While the TESSA OERs target a specific audience of teachers in Africa, they are openly available with possibilities of adaptation to fit specific contexts in Africa and internationally. Users can also encouraged to share their experiences and update the materials.

BRIDGING COURSES AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Along with OERs, bridging courses/ programmes are yet another strategy for increasing possibilities of realizing potentials of ODL, as they provide opportunity to those excluded because of inadequacies in their schooling experiences.

What they are

Bridging courses/programmes which tend to fill the qualification gap to ensure entry and success in higher education programmes are more common in developed world than in developing countries. Advertisements for such programmes suggest inter-alia their role in the areas of access, participation and benefiting from

higher education (<http://search.live.com/results.aspx?q=Bridging+courses&go=&form=QBRE>). Some of the identified roles of bridging courses in higher education include:

- Bridging the gap for those who could not qualify directly;
- Balancing gender by supporting women to pursue careers in non-traditional disciplines;
- Contributing towards equity in the ownership and control of the learning process
- Widening chances of successful participation.

The Foundation Course at the Open University of Tanzania

The Foundation Course of the Open University of Tanzania, is an example of bridging programmes. It is a non-degree programme hosted by the Institute of Continuing Education (ICE) which has the mandate to provide opportunities for continuing education. Through certificates and diploma programmes the institute has provided bridges that have opened the chances for many of those who would not have had the opportunity to participate in higher education.

Contributions of Foundation Course

With a cumulative enrolment of 4678 by 2006 the foundation course accounts for 67% of the ICE and 20% of OUT enrolment (OUT 2006). The foundation course also prepares students for better participation in undergraduate programmes. Some graduands (OUT 2007) explained that the foundation course provided them with useful experiences in undertaking studies through the distance education mode, thus increasing their chances to participate in undergraduate programmes while, at the same time assisting them to have a sense of control of their learning process. The course also significantly contributes towards gender balance, with female enrolment in the course increasing from 25.3% in 2001 to 42.7% in 2006. Further, 52% of students who successfully completed the course in 2006 were female (OUT 2006).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The foregoing discussion indicates that OERs and bridging courses can increase the realization of the potential of open and distance learning in fostering social justice in higher education, however, a few grey areas are worthy of noting.

Major issues for OERs include copyright; resources; sustainability; the digital culture quality assurance as well as capacity for developing, adopting and adapting the OERs.

Concern on OERs, for issues of copyright have been raised (Hylén 2008), pointing to contradictions between the collective ownership advocated by OERs and the market economy ethos of individualism. Based on individual achievement recognized publications for academic staff are those that bear their names. Thus recognition of individual contribution to the construction and development of OERs remains a grey area.

Funding and sustainability is another area of concern in reference to OERs in developing societies. For example, the TESSA initiative has been supported by donors indicating that without developing mechanisms to reduce dependency sustainability of project may not be guaranteed. Connected to this is availability of supportive infrastructure for developing viable and sustainable OERs including capacity for developing, adopting and adapting the OERs. The underdeveloped digital culture in developing countries also delimits their level and extent of participation in and benefit from OER and ODL in general. Further, quality assurance and quality control of OERs is another area of concern, which may need to be addressed to ensure that the flexibility criteria are maintained without compromising the quality of learning taking place.

Regarding bridging courses the main issues is for higher education institutions to establish modalities of collaboration with other education institutions to assist in identifying what each institution can do in order to achieve recognized, desired and adequate bridging programmes for different higher education settings.

Finally, it is hoped that the deliberations in this presentation will stimulate more thinking on how OERs and bridging courses/programmes can be sustainably developed and used to enhance ODLs capacity to foster social justice in higher education.

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