Open University UK vs. University of South Africa

Essay Assignment 2

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The establishment of the British Open University (OU) in 1969 was the first step towards the third wave of extramural studies. The unique innovative and mixed-media approach to teaching was incomparable to any other university, although the oldest distance education university, University of South Africa was considered a forerunner of some learning at a distance facilities (Tutt, 2013). In this assignment we will compare the mission, population served, history, organization, and system of both universities to establish significant differences in teaching and learning of distance education.

University of South Africa, UNISA, is the largest University in South Africa, and it is one of the eleven mega-distance teaching Universities in the world. It was established in 1873 as the University of the Cape of Good Hope and changed its name to the University of South Africa in 1916. Since then, several colleges within the UNISA became autonomous, and by 1946 the University pioneered tertiary distance education, which was the very beginning of it as it is known today. Due to political history and the legacy of the apartheid years, the foundation of UNISA as a distance education university has played an essential role in giving access to higher quality education to previously disadvantaged groups. Later, the UNISA offered Masters level education utilizing a combination of distance and part-time forms, what is often called hybrid classes nowadays ("Graduate School of Business Leadership: History").

While the UNISA was spreading its wings and becoming more well-known, the British Open University was created by an act of Parliament in 1969 in U.K. At the beginning, it consisted of only 20 people worth of stuff. It had the Vice-Chancellor, the Chief Administrator, a

couple of Deans, some secretaries, and a couple of research people. They had no idea about distance learning. The University was set up when only 8 percent of the cohort were engaged in any education. Therefore, the Prime minister of that time, Harold Wilson, initiated Open University UK, the benefit of which would be the access to higher education at a distance (Bates, 2011). High-quality academics were involved in research of integrated pedagogy which allowed the university to upbeat their research and teaching goals. In 1983, the Open University Business school was formed as well. Now it is the most significant business school in Europe. It also continued to expand during the 1990s including more areas of study – law, modern languages, etc. Although distance learning was a new phenomenon, it was a giant revolutionary leap because Open University UK was meant to be open for all (Bates, 2011).

The first generation of distance educators felt that it was important to offer educational opportunities to those without access to education institutions to reach out to people from all backgrounds. Although technology enabled flexibility in how fast knowledge is delivered, it could not be a separate entity from 'teachers' because making those technologies invisible and selecting the best pedagogical techniques to deliver the knowledge employing the technologies was the main goal. (Anderson & Simpson, 2015). The Open University's UK mission was to provide educational opportunities to all that strived to be educated. In the beginning, there were mostly adult students over the age of 30. It offered classes through correspondence via the postal system. The main difference was that The Open University's distance education was not wholly distant; many of the classes at the beginning still contained a portion that was face-to-face (Kirkup & Whitelegg, 2013). Today there is no typical Open University student. People of all ages and backgrounds study there for all sorts of reasons – to update their skills, get a

qualification, boost their career, change direction, prove themselves, keep mentally active

(Kirkup & Whitelegg, 2013). The Open University is open to them all. On the other hand, at

UNISA the mission is to provide quality tuition and foster active community engagement. The

diversity allows more ground for lifelong learning, innovation, and creativity. Besides, a wide

range of world-class academic offerings, UNISA places great importance on the celebration and

promotion of African arts and culture.

Both UNISA and OU seem to have the same mission and the same objectives, however,

one should keep in mind that Africa had to go through many historical waves that kept it a third

world country for quite some time. Although South Africa was able to prosper and hold its

economy on higher levels, the primary goal of UNISA is still to provide education for all, poor

and rich. It makes it challenging to provide a proper assessment of students' progress, that is why

UNISA offers a course – Theoretical Frameworks in Education – that allows the students to

consolidate their grasp of philosophical frameworks and how they shape educational practice

(Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013). The students learn at their own pace and in their own time; they learn

from a variety of learning materials, including the use of audio-visual media (Letseka & Pitsoe,

2013). They usually need less help from their teachers and do a lot of self-assessment. UNISA

commits to adhering to responsible, open admission policy. Its commitment resonates with

access requirements of the Open University which are based on the principle of "no entry

requirements" (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013).

While UNISA is open for all, young and old, OU used to be mainly targeted at adults that

are responsible enough to work and study on their own. The number of students in need of

distance education appeared to be larger than expected therefore the OU has developed a third-

generation distance education model that was based on an interdisciplinary approach to teaching - a supported open learning model specifically for teacher education that has a rich range of multi-media resources and, importantly, is both school-based and school-focused (Mayes & Young, 2000). OU class modules are developed by multi-disciplinary course teams comprising academics, educational technologists, and media specialists contributing pedagogic and technical expertise (Bates, 2011). This model has been adopted by distance teaching institutions worldwide. At UNISA teaching takes place by providing a study guide, formal and informal printed courses and study packages, support by answering questions online, and advice by regional administrative offices. The most impressive fact about UNISA is the number of graduates. It is a mega-university that contains a considerable number of Africans, Indians, and colored, from "the previously disadvantaged majority and the equally disadvantaged minorities." During the period of racial segregation, this university was the only institution of higher education that enrolled white and colored students alike (Peters, 2010).

Although UNISA fulfills a remarkable humanitarian mission by providing distance education and a new cultural perspective to people of different background all over the world, the OU was not just another distance teaching university but an entirely new type of interdisciplinary tuition, not comparable to its forerunners, which Otto Peters calls "nothing less than a pedagogical" marvel (Peters, 2010). Both Universities manage to fulfill their objectives in distance education although one uses a more traditional way of providing knowledge than another.

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