

Editorial

Peter Cookson, Editor
Athabasca University (temporarily in Colombo, Sri Lanka)

As part of the globalization process, pressures are being put to bear on higher education institutions worldwide to increase the relevance of their curricula for their respective societies. While it is difficult to find fault with the need for curricular reform, the rush to rationalization of higher education curricula to satisfy the demands of business and industry for more and better skilled employees may also lead to a paring down of higher education curricula. Within this new global agenda for higher education reform, all too often readiness of higher education graduates to contribute to the productivity and global competitiveness of their respective employing organizations is regarded as the sole litmus test of quality higher education.

In the process of updating and strengthening curricula in the fields related to commerce and science and technology, caution and vigilance are required to prevent inadvertent or intentional concomitant devaluation of studies in the arts, humanities, and social sciences – fields that enable students to gain not only knowledge and competence for work, but also to appreciate and adopt ideals and virtues that contribute to quality of life in general. Restriction of the focus of learning to solely the economic aspects of human existence may have the long-range effect of canceling out any benefits resulting from increasing the work relevance of their studies.

In some countries, open and distance learning institutions are perceived to be more responsive to these curricular reform efforts than conventional campus-based institutions. Additional financing can often be more readily obtained from national and international agencies and development organizations for studies in commerce and sciences and technology than for studies in such areas as humanities, arts, and social sciences. In many countries, both industrialized and developing, such infusions of much needed financial resources to support specific programs of study relating to the world of work undeniably constitute bright spots on an otherwise bleak landscapes of chronic underfunding. But, if open and distance education institutions are to fulfill their broader mandate for construction of humane, just, and free societies, there must be a strong sense of commitment to the broader conceptualization of higher education. Open and distance learning institutions must maintain their commitment to higher education comprehensiveness for both “youngsters,” those part-time or fulltime students between the ages of 18-25 and study, as well as mature adults who, with their multiple social roles, are unable to afford the luxury of fulltime studies. In the spirit of “Man does not live by bread alone,” efforts must proceed to upgrade and revitalize all areas of study. The focus of such efforts should be programs of study that relate not only directly to the labor market, but also those have less immediate relevance but no less long-term value in terms of

preparing students to a society in which there is civic participation, promotion of freedom and peace, concern for the equality of opportunity and general well being of all.

As long as open and distance learning institutions maintain their commitment to the broad goals of comprehensive higher education, higher distance *education* will not devolve into higher distance *training*. This objective can be achieved in several ways. In making undergraduate and graduate programs of study available to distance learners, sufficient program flexibility must be maintained to enable students to enroll in optional courses in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. In launching course and programs relating to commerce and science and technology, course design and development team members can be selected from arts and sciences to ensure integration in the content of pertinent philosophical, ethical, and social dimensions. Learning activities can be designed in such a way as to encourage exploration and cultivation of analytical thinking regarding the ethical and social implications of their current and future work. By incorporating elements of liberal education into the curricula, open and distance education institutions can respond to the need of business and industry for employees who think creatively and critically and have strong problem-solving skills. Such practices will enable students not only to function well in their work roles in their organizations of employment, but also in the many other roles that add quality and meaning to their lives as well as to the lives of those with whom they associate in their families, communities, and societies.

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