**Joanne Deitsch  
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University of Maryland University College

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Introduction

This paper compares two distance education institutions one in a developing country and one in a developed country. The countries discussed are the developed country of Canada and the developing country of India. The two institutions, Athabasca University (AU) in Canada and Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in India, are compared and contrasted across six different dimensions. First is the mission of each institution as well as the population that they serve. Second is the institution’s history as well as the reason for their existence. Third are the values that are espoused and or inherent to the institution. Fourth is the organization as well as the systems of operation of each institution. Fifth is the institution’s model of teaching and learning. Sixth is the technologies used at each institution. Each dimension is fully explored in each section of this paper. The influence on the context of the institution’s distance education practice is also discussed. By exploring the six dimensions listed above we can see that both IGNOU and AU provide a valuable service to their students, and this is important because it lends valuable insight into the inner workings of distance education institutions.

**Mission and Population Served**

The mission and population served for both IGNOU and AU are closely linked. IGNOU’s mission is to “advance frontiers of knowledge and promote its dissemination through sustainable Open and Distance Learning systems, seamlessly accessible to all, including those hitherto unreached” (IGNOU, 2013f, para. 2). IGNOU’s “focus is on people who have missed their education early in life, economically, socially and physically disadvantaged groups, rural youth, women and those living in backward, hilly and remote areas” (Reddy & Srivastava, 2001, p. 5).

AU’s mission as well the populations both institutions serve appear to be similar. “As Canada’s Open University, AU is dedicated to removing the educational, geographical, financial, social, cultural and other barriers that often limit access to post-secondary achievement” (AU, 2012h, para. 2). “Athabasca University’s long-standing commitment to adult and lifelong learners, to aboriginal communities, to learners in remote, rural and northern areas, to under-served urban populations” are an important part of AU’s student populations (AU, 2012a, pp. 6-7). Sharpe & Arsenault (2009) see aboriginal education as a critical success factor in Canada’s economic future.

**History and/or Reason for Existence**

The history and the reason for the creation of both IGNOU and AU are discussed in this section. The underserved populations in India and the low income status of India appear to be drivers for IGNOU’s creation (Reddy & Srivastava, 2001; Sharma, 2005).IGNOU’s establishment is by an Act of Parliament in 1985 (IGNOU, 2013c). The mandate of IGNOU is to provide access to affordable higher education to all segments of society including the disadvantaged through the use of open and distance learning (IGNOU, 2013e). “In terms of economy, India still remains in the low-income group of developing nations” (Sharma, 2005, p. 229). Higher education is seen as a means to lift India from poverty (Sharma, 2005).

Student population growth and a change in governmental leadership are key factors in AU’s establishment as well as a change in educational direction during their formative years. The rising number of students in their region led the Alberta government to establish AU by Order of Council in 1970 (AU, 2012d; Daniel & Smith, 1979). AU at first is conceived as another bricks-and-mortar University (AU, 2012d; Daniel & Smith, 1979). The new governmental authority in 1972, establishes a new order which empowers a six member authority to undertake a pilot project to design and deliver multi-media university level courses to off-campus students (Daniel & Smith, 1979).

**Institutional Values**

The institutional values of IGNOU and AU are discussed in this section. IGNOU holds true to the mandate under which it was founded. Reddy & Srivastava (2001) talk of IGNOU’s values as working to “democratize higher education” (p. 5). On IGNOU’s home page (IGNOU, 2013b) and throughout their entire website, their value is shown as being “The People’s University.”

In contrast, AU appears to expand on their original mission. “The Athabasca University experience represents a rigorous, high quality university education accessible for adult learners worldwide” (AU, 2013, para. 5). While building communities is still part of AU’s strategic plan from 2011 through 2016, it is in the last position of their top five strategic goals (AU, 2012a).

**Organization and/or Systems of Operation**

The governance structure and the operational structures at IGNOU and AU are discussed in this section. The top two governance structures or authorities that control IGNOU are their Board of Management and their Academic Council (IGNOU, 2013c). There are 12 operational departments or divisions that comprise IGNOU including but not limited to their academic coordination, library and documentation, material production and distribution, computer, and student evaluation (INGOU, 2013a).

AU appears to have a simpler governance structure but a more complex organizational structure. There are only two governance structures at AU, the Board of Governors which is the senior governing body and the General Faculties Council which provides academic governance in conjunction with the Board of Governors (AU, 2012c). The operational structure of AU includes over 24 departments some of which are similar to those provided by IGNOU but also includes AU Press, Communication & Creative Services, and Ombuds office (AU, 2012g).

**Teaching and Learning Models**

This section describes the teaching and learning models used at IGNOU and AU as well as their student support systems. At IGNOU, teachers provide materials as well as specify what is to be completed for the week (Reddy & Srivastava, 2001). During the week, students review these materials and check their understanding through completing exercises (Reddy & Srivastava, 2001). IGNOU also provides student support through face-to-face or teleconference counseling sessions and, for select programs, practical training is also provided at study centers. (IGNOU, 2013d).

AU is not as prescriptive in their model as IGNOU and provides more student support options (AU, 2012e). AU students have six months to complete a three credit course and a year to complete six credits (AU, 2012e). Students receive “a learning resource package in the mail or online and work independently, with support and instruction from your tutor” (AU, 2012e, para. 1). AU students have a full array of support options including but not limited to individual assistance from faculty members, their individual tutor, as well as IT helpdesk support (AU, 2012e).

**Technology Use**

While IGNOU uses the internet as part of their delivery methods, AU demonstrates a heavier dependence on this type of technology (IGNOU, 2013d; AU, 2012b). Reddy & Srivastava (2001) discuss how IGNOU uses a multimedia approach using print, audio, and video to provide instructional materials to their students. In addition, there is an online portal for IGNOU (IGNOU, 2010) that allows students to access via computer a real time feed of IGNOU’s TV and radio educational channels, access to IGNOU’s YouTube channel as well as eLearning courses.

AU’s use of computers and the internet is at the heart of their delivery approach. AU applies “technology to make learning accessible” (AU, 2012f, para. 7). Athabasca University uses “multi-media, online activities, print materials, web, e-mail, Internet, CD-Rom, computer software, audio/video conferencing, audio/video tapes and TV or radio” (AU, 2012b, para. 1).

**Influence of Context on Distance Education Practice**

In this section we discusses each institution’s context influences their distance education practice.Distance education is seen India as a means of overcoming geographical barriers as well as language barriers (Sharma, 2005). While internet based delivery is one of the delivery methods, IGNOU relies more heavily on print, TV and radio broadcasts, as well as audio and video cassettes to deliver their content (IGNOU, 2013d). Regional centers provide practical training (IGNOU, 2013d).

From a technology standpoint, it appears that AU relies heavily on computer technologies. While AU does rely on printed materials, computer delivery is their second favored delivery method (AU, 2012b). Individual contact between students and their tutors or professors is also available (AU, 2012i). The AU Mobile Learning project has launched language training to student’s mobile devices (AU, 2012a).

**Conclusion**

It appears the AU is more dependent on computer and mobile technologies than is IGNOU (AU, 2012b; AU, 2012a; IGNOU, 2013d). AU and IGNOU use print, audio, video, TV and radio broadcasts to deliver training to their students (AU, 2012b; IGNOU, 2013d). AU appears to give their students more options than IGNOU in terms of course completion timing as well as in student support (AU, 2012e; IGNOU, 2013d; Reddy & Srivastava, 2001). AU appears to place more importance on operational structure while IGNOU appears to place more importance on governance structure (AU, 2012g; IGNOU, 2013c). AU appears to have expanded their mission to include students worldwide while IGNOU appears to be more focused on student populations in India (AU, 2013; IGNOU, 2013b; Reddy & Srivastava, 2001). AU’s original conception did not include open and distance education while IGNOU’s original mandate to provide affordable higher education to all segments of society did use open and distance learning (Daniel & Smith, 1979; IGNOU, 2013e). Both AU and IGNOU share a common mission to serve underserved populations in their countries (AU, 2012a; Reddy & Srivastava, 2001).

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