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Socio-Economics of Virtual Universities: Experiences from open and distance higher education in Europe

Editors: Nickolmann, Friedhelm and Ortner, Gerhard E., (1999). *Socio-Economics of Virtual Universities: Experiences from open and distance higher education in Europe*. Beltz Deutscher Studien Verlag: Weinheim. ISBN 3 89271 895 4

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While vacationing in Spain in the summer of 2002, the reading of a book about virtual universities that has a publishing date of 1999 and whose literature almost completely predates 1996 gnaws on my sanity. What am I to write? How am I to judge this book's content?

If I begin on the "topicality" of the content, I can stop immediately. But that will not yield the promised review, so let's do it a different way. I'll begin with the content and with the title itself: Virtual Universities. How do they think up such titles? Isn't virtual reality, a reality that does not exist? Instead, isn't it a combination of interaction between the digital zeroes and ones of my computer (often networked with other computers) and the perceptions of my sensory organs and how they are processed by my brain. The feelings, people, and things that inhabit such virtual worlds don't really exist, except in my own mind. But now a "virtual university?" As I understand from this book, virtual universities really do exist, real people work there (and are paid real money), real students study there, and real diplomas are awarded. Nothing virtual about this! Or is "virtual universities" just a sexy new buzzword to set apart what used to be called correspondence or distance universities from traditional, contiguous universities? If this is the case and the "campus of a VU is globally open, electronically accessible . . . free of real time constrictions . . ." (p. 10) then I am again back to my first problem, namely that topicality renders the term "virtual" virtually useless? Most universities are already partially virtual or are rapidly becoming so. So what's a poor vacationer to do?

Room and the demands of the editors of this journal do not permit an in-depth discussion of each of the contributions to this book. Because there are 11 contributions, even a summary review of each would yield too long a review, so I will suffice with a general discussion. Reader, decide for yourself.

The major strength of this book is that each of the individual contributions is generally of outstanding quality in itself. Each chapter warrants – and merits – close reading. At the same time, I do have a major problem with this thorough and well-documented work, namely that each chapter is an essay in itself, and each are not well related to the other chapters. The book is a collection of gems, but together they do not form a piece of jewellery. Two examples can demonstrate this.

Curran and Föllmer, for example, both present excellent essays on the economic underpinnings of distance education, handling costs, benefits, supply, demand, et cetera. The problem is that while they both profess to be based upon data from 1997, the reader is presented with data that differ sometimes as much as 50-100 percent between the two chapters. And in two other chapters, Medina and Ortner both refer to cost effectiveness and efficiency issues, yet the reader is hard pressed after reading the essays to “find the similarities” in terminology and viewpoint. This disconnect between similarities is compounded by the fact that although Medina begins with a macro and micro-economic discussion of open distance learning, he turns it into an encyclopaedic discussion of costs at all levels and ends with a discussion of quality control.

A second major problem is a grave lack of consistency in terminology among the chapters. I have already discussed a few of these inconsistencies, but the major inconsistency is that open higher education, open distance learning, distance education, virtual higher education, and virtual university are used intermittently and interchangeably as if they are one and the same. A virtual university – if I understand it correctly – is an information and communication technology-mediated university. But the fact that a university is ICT-mediated does not necessarily make it “open.” And this openness may vary with respect to time and place of study, those who may study there (e.g., students with no prior credentials versus those who have met all specified entrance requirements), and the goals and means of achieving academic program credentials. Which type of “open” these “virtual” institutes of higher education are, is not made clear in this book (and let’s not forget that not all higher education is university education!)

One contribution can be singled out, namely Elen, Lowyck and Van den Berg’s chapter titled “Virtual University: Will Learning Benefit?” By avoiding the pitfall of defining causal relations between the two, the authors offer a rare and clear discussion of technology and learning. They are rightfully critical and their chapter should be seen as required reading for the current crop of educational managers and their educational snake oil selling guru counterparts in industry and consulting.

Now that my vacation is over and I have finished reading the book and writing this review, I must unfortunately conclude that I still don’t know what “virtual universities” are and I still have no clear view of their socio-economics.

