

February – 2026

Book Review: *Handbook of Open Universities Around the World*

Editors: Sanjaya Mishra and Santosh Panda (Routledge, 2025, 740 pages). ISBN: 978-1-032-76361-3 (hardback, \$225.00); ISBN: 978-1-032-75405-5 (paperback, \$46.49); ISBN: 978-1-003-47819-5 (ebook, \$46.49), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003478195>

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Overview

The Handbook of Open Universities Around the World, edited by Sanjaya Mishra and Santosh Panda, offers both a panoramic survey and a reflective critique of what *openness* truly means in higher education today. Drawing together insights from more than 100 scholars and practitioners, the editors have curated an extraordinary compilation that maps the histories, organizational structures, and innovations of 47 open universities across Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania. The result is not only a celebration of institutional achievement but also an invitation to confront difficult questions about equity, sustainability, and the future of open learning.

Open universities were originally conceived as democratic institutions designed to remove barriers of geography, class, gender, and prior schooling. They opened doors to learners traditionally excluded from mainstream education systems. In the current era of rapid digital transformation, when artificial intelligence (AI) and data-driven technologies are reshaping how education is delivered and experienced, the notion of openness demands fresh examination. The *Handbook* situates itself precisely at this critical juncture, bridging historical foundations with emerging digital realities.

Conceptual Anchors of Openness

The editors anchor the *Handbook* in two complementary conceptual frameworks. The first is Lord Geoffrey Crowther’s classic articulation of the “four opens”—open to people, to places, to methods, and to ideas—cited by Sir John Daniel in his opening chapter. Daniel reminds readers that open universities were designed with the core goal of reaching the unreached and promoting social justice and accessibility, using modular, self-instructional courses and flexible delivery systems. Measured by this compass, many institutions in the *Handbook* have remained loyal to the founding vision. For instance, the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) continues to uphold a policy of nonselective entry and massive reach, while the UK Open University welcomes learners regardless of prior qualifications and supports them through a sophisticated blend of digital and human tutoring.

A more contemporary framework comes from Sanjaya Mishra, whose 10-dimension model of openness, developed in earlier studies of technology-enhanced learning, offers a detailed lens through which to assess institutional practice. His model examines 10 key areas: entry requirements, location, time flexibility, curricular choice, pedagogy, technology use, resource licensing, assessment, credential recognition, and cost transparency. Viewed through this multifaceted lens, the degree of openness across institutions appears uneven. While access and geographic reach remain broadly inclusive, other dimensions—particularly curricular flexibility, the adoption of open educational resources (OER), and innovative assessment methods—show significant variability. For example, Open University Malaysia has integrated recognition of prior learning and modular credentials, but many other institutions still adhere to rigid curricula and conventional high-stakes examinations.

Empirical Breadth and Depth

One of the *Handbook's* greatest strengths lies in its empirical depth and comparative breadth. Each institutional chapter is grounded in robust data, lending credibility and concreteness to the analyses. Enrollment figures, for example, vividly illustrate the scale and diversity of open universities. IGNOU, serving more than 4 million learners, stands as the largest university in the world, while the Open University of China follows closely with over 3.5 million students. Universitas Terbuka in Indonesia, though smaller in relative terms, now serves more than 700,000 learners dispersed across a vast archipelago, a testament to the logistical and pedagogical challenges of reaching geographically scattered populations. At the other end of the spectrum, smaller institutions such as the Open University of Cyprus enroll tens of thousands, not millions, demonstrating that the open university model can function effectively at different scales.

Financial and operational information further enriches the discussion by exposing how institutions sustain themselves. The UK Open University illustrates how economies of scale and distance-delivery models contribute to reduced unit costs per student, while Universitas Terbuka's experience shows that a careful mix of government subsidies and affordable tuition can ensure both accessibility and sustainability. These examples suggest that cost-effectiveness is not simply a by-product of scale but a result of strategic financial design and prudent governance.

Technological practices vary just as widely. In low-resource contexts such as the Zimbabwe Open University or the National Open University of Nigeria, print-based materials and radio broadcasts still play a dominant role, complemented by modest digital initiatives. Conversely, universities such as Athabasca University in Canada and Korea National Open University have invested heavily in digital ecosystems, including mobile integration and AI-supported analytics. These diverse cases give readers a nuanced appreciation of how open universities operate at the intersection of aspiration, constraint, and innovation.

Comparative Themes

Despite the enormous diversity among the 47 institutions, the *Handbook* highlights strikingly consistent themes. Every open university is guided by the mission to democratize higher education and to serve learners who are marginalized or excluded from conventional systems. The University of South Africa, for

instance, supports multilingual learning and Indigenous outreach; Allama Iqbal Open University in Pakistan advances gender equity through large-scale female enrollment initiatives; and Universitas Terbuka in Indonesia focuses deliberately on remote and island communities.

However, institutional differences also reflect national priorities and local contexts. The curriculum at Open University Malaysia emphasizes vocational and workforce-oriented programs, while Athabasca University in Canada champions liberal arts and flexible postgraduate studies. Accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms also diverge. Bangladesh Open University aligns closely with national regulatory frameworks, whereas Korea National Open University enjoys greater academic autonomy. These variations reveal that openness is not a monolithic concept but a flexible, adaptive philosophy responsive to sociopolitical and cultural environments.

Digital Transformation and Artificial Intelligence

A recurring theme throughout the *Handbook* is the transformative power of technology. The evolution from correspondence-based instruction to complex online ecosystems is carefully chronicled, illustrating how technological progress has expanded educational opportunities while simultaneously exposing new inequities.

Artificial intelligence receives special attention as both a promise and a challenge. At Universitas Terbuka, for example, AI tools are being introduced to enhance learning systems and streamline assessment processes. Across the global landscape, contributors acknowledge AI's potential to personalize learning, predict student performance, and provide timely academic support. Yet they also sound a note of caution. Ethical concerns, which range from algorithmic bias and data privacy to the depersonalization of learning, underscore the need for deliberate, human-centered AI design. The editors advocate an approach that is both optimistic and critical: AI should augment, not replace, the relational and ethical dimensions of education. This balanced stance provides valuable guidance for open universities as they navigate the digital frontier.

Strengths, Limitations, and Gaps

The most conspicuous strength of the *Handbook* is its sheer comprehensiveness. No other volume in the field of open and distance learning has attempted to document so many institutions across such a wide geographical and cultural span. By blending quantitative indicators such as enrollment, budgetary allocations, and staffing with qualitative narratives that trace institutional histories and policy reforms, the editors have created a work that is both detailed and panoramic.

Equally impressive is the conceptual coherence that underpins the collection. By framing institutional case studies within Daniel's and Mishra's frameworks, the *Handbook* demonstrates intellectual continuity with the foundational philosophies of openness while also situating them within present-day technological and policy realities.

Nevertheless, the book is not without its shortcomings. Some chapters are uneven in depth, largely due to disparities in available data or contributor access. More substantively, several thematic gaps remain.

First, the learner's perspective, particularly regarding hidden costs, opportunity costs, and time burdens, is underexplored. For many students, the cost of mobile data and the necessity of traveling to centralized examination sites represent substantial barriers. Second, the discussion of open educational resources and open educational practices is inconsistent. While a few universities, such as the UK Open University, have institutionalized open licensing, many others remain hesitant or silent. Third, innovation in assessment receives limited attention; traditional proctored examinations continue to dominate even though they may not adequately measure adult learners' competencies. Fourth, the ethical, social, and environmental dimensions of open learning—issues like data privacy, vendor dependency, and the ecological implications of mass printing—are touched on only peripherally. Finally, the absence of learner voice and agency stands out as a missed opportunity, given that responsiveness to learners is at the very heart of the open education ethos.

Significance and Contribution

Despite these limitations, the *Handbook of Open Universities Around the World* represents a monumental scholarly and practical achievement. It reaffirms the enduring relevance of open universities as institutions that combine scale, equity, and flexibility in unique and powerful ways. Beyond serving as an encyclopedic reference, the volume offers comparative insights that allow policymakers and researchers to benchmark institutional performance and share best practices across regions.

Perhaps the *Handbook's* most significant contribution lies in its portrayal of openness as an evolving philosophy rather than a static condition. Openness, the editors suggest, must be continually reinterpreted in response to technological change, shifting policy environments, and learners' changing expectations. By embedding rich empirical data within coherent conceptual frameworks, the *Handbook* succeeds both in documenting the current state of the field and in imagining its future trajectories.

Looking ahead, future editions could build upon this foundation by incorporating learner-centered narratives, especially from marginalized or underserved groups, to capture the lived experience of open learning. They might also provide more systematic analyses of open education policies and OER adoption; develop clearer benchmarks for institutional openness; and showcase innovative models of assessment and credentialing, including digital badges, e-portfolios, and competency-based recognition systems. Furthermore, addressing ethical and ecological concerns such as AI governance, data protection, and environmental sustainability would enhance the comprehensiveness of future research. Finally, longitudinal studies on graduate employability, social mobility, and community impact would offer valuable evidence of the real-world outcomes of openness.

Conclusion

In summary, the *Handbook of Open Universities Around the World* is an indispensable resource for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in open and distance learning. Its combination of global scope, empirical rigor, and conceptual sophistication makes it a landmark contribution to literature. While not exhaustive in its treatment of openness, it convincingly demonstrates that open universities remain central to the future of higher education—that they are institutions uniquely capable of balancing access, quality, and innovation in an era of massification and digital disruption.

By situating open universities within both Daniel's foundational ideals and Mishra's multidimensional model, the *Handbook* reminds readers that openness is not merely the removal of barriers but an ongoing process of reimagining what higher education can and should be in a rapidly changing world.

Disclaimer

The writing of this review was done with the help of ChatGPT for outlining.

