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Book Review: *Mega-Universities and Opening Education by Design*

Editor: Mark Nichols (ICDE, 2025, xxii + 217 pages). ISBNs: 978-82-93172-63-5 (PDF), 978-82-93172-60-4 (paperback), 978-82-93172-61-1 (hardback), 978-82-93172-62-8 (Kindle)

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Mega-Universities and Opening Education by Design, edited by Mark Nichols, focuses on what current open, flexible, and distance learning (OFDL) can learn from mega-universities' economies of scale. This 2025 publication revisits Sir John Daniel's influential 1996 book, *Mega-Universities and Knowledge Media: Technology Strategies for Higher Education* (Daniel, 1996). In the intervening three decades, the global landscape of OFDL has undergone tremendous changes, following its mainstreaming into the ecosystem of higher education. As a tie-in, Daniel writes the foreword to this 2025 sequel. The chapter authors are internationally renowned OFDL scholars who use plain language to share their praxis in democratizing higher education.

My overview of this book starts with the title using the word *opening* as a verb. Explicitly, this denotes the various strategically deliberate actions by institutions to become more open. Four facets of higher education are explored throughout this book, namely to be (a) available and (b) inclusive (from the students' perspective); and (c) scalable and (d) sustainable (from the institutional perspective). The chapters are presented in three sections. The first is grounded in the design of OFDL, technology, management of mega-universities, and institutional resilience in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. The second section focuses on what any university can learn about expanding their reach while also increasing their openness. The third section presents two case studies. One analyzes the evolution of Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) from a residential institution into a mega-university. The other illustrates how the Open University of China, the world's largest university, pursues innovation to maintain its relevance to learners in the trades, higher education, and lifelong learning. Building on the collection of insights from each chapter, the editor has summarized the book in the form of "five strategic considerations for mega-universities and those seeking mega-university status: advocacy, differentiation, adaptability, alignment, and courage" (Nichols, 2025, p. 198).

Several points in the book resonated with me. The first was the specific case study of SNHU. The next three points are relationally intertwined, including technology, capacity building, and cost-effectiveness, which I tie together in my discussion of cost-effectiveness. I conclude by discussing quality, the thread that runs through all chapters of the book.

The case of SNHU, evolving from a small residential institution into a mega-university, is fascinating. At one time, mega-universities were the prerogative of open universities, as only these institutions had the potential to develop into mega-universities. The success of SNHU challenges this assumption and has far-reaching implications for campus-based universities facing strong competition from a variety of sources. This case study shows how campus-based institutions can learn from OFDL institutions and vice versa.

Technology use is indispensable to OFDL and mega-universities. Overall, the book conveys an optimistic stance on leveraging digital technologies, including generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), to expand higher education at scale. The hope is that educational technologies can break the iron triangle of access, quality, and cost. A strength of this book is that it is a collection of competing views. For example, many chapters stress GenAI's future innovations and reimagining of teaching and learning, while others discuss current struggles to deal with GenAI in higher education. However, rather than critique the risks and controversies related to technology in education, the book favours using cutting-edge technologies to support mega-scale access to higher education.

Capacity building is raised only in a few chapters in terms of initiatives for students, staff, and faculty. Chapter 1.5, drawing from a case study of Allama Iqbal Open University that serves over 600,000 students per semester, considers comprehensive capacity building to be among the measures essential to the success of mega-universities. Capacity building figures prominently within a framework for managing technological implementation and change at scale. The importance of capacity building for an institution makes it a critical element in designing mega-universities.

Research into cost effectiveness in higher education has made use of different measures for comparison, making it difficult to synthesize knowledge in this area. The book considers several facets of cost effectiveness within higher education, including as (a) a process constraint, (b) a strategic-competitive differentiator, (c) a transformative priority, (d) an operational business measure, and/or (e) a government requirement. It also presents it in relation to other measures, such as tracking productivity, a measure that combines student success with cost effectiveness (Nichols, 2025, p. 125). Procuring and maintaining technology is a core responsibility of mega-universities and OFDL. The acute problem is that the best pedagogical choice of an educational technology may not be the best financial choice for a given institution. In other non-educational business models, an increased cost of doing business can be passed along to the consumer who is buying a premium option (i.e., an expensive choice) in the sector. Unfortunately, an increased cost of technologies competes with the affordability aims of OFDL and mega-universities. Furthermore, only Chapter 1.3 takes students' perspective into account by introducing specific measures to increase affordability for students at the University of South Africa. One assessment of cost effectiveness of the technological change is to measure the appropriateness of the technology to build capacity.

In the editor's preface, quality compliance is explicitly assumed to exist within the four facets of higher education to be available, inclusive, scalable, and sustainable. While each chapter (except the Introduction) mentions how quality issues affect that chapter's discussion, the question of "how do we both serve more learners, and improve our quality at the same time?" (Nichols, 2025, p. 159) permeates the book. Of the many points raised in Chapter 1.4, there is a substantial exploration of quality assurance. Currently, higher education has a multitude of complex definitions for quality assurance. This chapter discusses a variety of quality assurance statements, guidelines, and best practices applicable to OFDL and mega-universities. It

presents the interplay among the scaling of education in mega-universities, rapid technology changes, and educational quality assurance. This interplay within mega-universities brings a unique nuance to the discussion, as harm to students can be exacerbated by either scaling up education of poor quality or scaling up good quality education poorly. Quality assurance is both critical and significant for all sizes of higher educational institutions.

I am happy to recommend this book to OFDL and mega-university institution leaders and management, practitioners, and researchers, as well as government education policy-makers and campus-based university leaders. I believe all will find it a valuable source of reference and inspiration when making policies, formulating institutional development plans, or designing innovations in learning and teaching. The book is forward-thinking, scholarly, practical, and written in plain language. It inspires an array of processes to increase openness in a higher educational institution.

References

Daniel, J. S. (1996). *Mega-universities and knowledge media: Technology strategies for higher education*. Routledge.

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