

## BOOK REVIEW

### ***Handbook of Open Universities Around the World***

EDITED BY Sanjaya Mishra and Santosh Panda

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#### Introduction

The past fifty years of open and distance learning (ODL) have transformed higher education by establishing it as a fundamental mode of learning, which has raised ongoing debates about university definitions of “open” status. *The Handbook of Open Universities Around the World*, edited by Sanjaya Mishra and Santosh Panda (2025), is a landmark volume that seeks to document, probe, and contextualise the global field of open universities. The *Handbook*, which contains nearly 700 pages and features ODL experts as authors, presents historical insights, alongside institutional research, to create the first global overview of open universities. The editors position the volume as a reference work that contains essential information regarding how openness develops in higher education, as institutions adopt new operational practices. This review views the *Handbook* through one central question: “*How open are many institutions that state they are an ODL (open and distance learning) institution?*” In other words, does the *Handbook* supply an evidence-based answer about the degree of openness practised by self-described open universities, or does it leave the reader with more questions than certainties?

As an academic scholar who has facilitated many training programmes for emerging ODL researchers, this is a question that I often pose to the participants in these training sessions. My perception is that we often use the term ODL, which starts with the word "open", interchangeably with "distance education" as the equivalent term. My training sessions usually include an exercise in which participants evaluate institutional openness using a Likert scale system. They all agree that the maximum level of openness they perceive for our institution (University of South Africa), which presents itself as an ODL institution, stands at 5 out of 10. UNISA's admission requirements create less strict barriers than traditional universities in South Africa, yet these requirements do not reach the level of true open access.

The *Handbook* is ambitious in scope, combining theoretical discussions with institutional narratives and regional overviews. Daniel (1996) introduced conventional definitions of openness which cover accessibility, teaching methods, educational content, and materials to be examined in current terms. Tait (2018) argued that openness embraces characteristics that exist on a scale dependent on funding, regulations, technological tools, and teaching methods. The *Handbook* shows this by demonstrating how institutions implement their open policies in distinct ways. The institutions which support fully open entrance procedures, together with adaptable learning speeds and comprehensive student support, face obstacles from institutions which demand entrance tests and charge high tuition fees or provide restricted learning opportunities. This handbook challenges the view that any institution which uses the term "open university" automatically practises openness in its fundamental operations.



## Strengths

The strength of the book lies in its presentation of institutional case studies, which demonstrate how global practices create an empirical foundation for research. The United Kingdom Open University (UKOU), for example, continues to maintain its open entry standard while it operates as a model educational institution that provides learner support services. The rising tuition fees create new financial barriers that reduce accessibility, showing readers that open admission does not guarantee affordable access (Tait, 2018). In Asia, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and Universitas Terbuka in Indonesia demonstrate the potential of open universities to achieve mass enrolment on an extraordinary scale, enrolling millions of students between them. However, these institutions face persistent challenges with student retention and completion rates, raising questions about the quality and sustainability of such models (Zuhairi et al., 2020). The *Handbook* demonstrates that institutions implement openness in varying degrees, as they apply open practices to certain areas while maintaining closed systems in others. In Africa, UNISA represents both the promise and the difficulty of openness: as the largest distance education provider on the continent, it provides access to hundreds of thousands of students, yet struggles with ensuring inclusivity and meaningful support for its dispersed and often under-resourced learners (Zongozzi, 2020). These cases illustrate the *Handbook's* central insight: openness is enacted unevenly and is often partial, with institutions being open in some respects but closed in others.

## Themes and Key Arguments

Three critical dimensions which define institutional openness are addressed by the authors. The first dimension refers to the process of entering an institution through its access and admission procedures and policies. The traditional practice of open universities, which accepted students without prior qualifications, has now changed as some universities have introduced new entry standards, which restrict the initial model's universal access. Financial expenses, such as increasing tuition charges in both wealthy and poorer nations, create additional barriers that limit access to education. The second dimension addresses pedagogical flexibility and learner support, which vary between different institutions. This includes diverse levels of personal tutoring, academic support services, counselling and flexible learning schedules. The third dimension concerns recognition and credentialing. According to Daniel (2019) open universities experience a "credential paradox" because they may lower entry barriers but their qualifications do not receive equal recognition from employers across different professional settings, which limits the value of openness for learners. The combination of these three dimensions demonstrates that openness exists in multiple dimensions while its nature remains contested between competing definitions.

The *Handbook* provides a partial answer to the central question about how open universities that identify as ODL institutions actually are. The evidence presented by these case studies shows that many universities adopting the ODL identity are only partially open, with degrees of openness shaped by national policy frameworks, funding models, and institutional missions. The book indicates that institutional openness cannot be assumed based solely on institutional labels. However, the *Handbook* stops short of offering a universal evaluative framework or an openness index. It provides empirical evidence, conceptual reflections, and illustrative practices but does not synthesise them into a single comparative measure. As a result, it provides insights and evidence but leaves readers to draw their own evaluative conclusions. For policymakers seeking straightforward instruments to assess openness, this may appear as a

limitation. The editors acknowledge that openness is too context-dependent to be reduced to a singular metric. As Bates (2024) observes in his review, the *Handbook* is a “rich compendium” whose strength lies in its comprehensiveness and nuance rather than in prescriptive clarity.

The volume has significant strengths, which establish it as an essential academic resource. The book maintains global coverage, which eliminates the common Eurocentric bias found in many higher education studies, by balancing research equally among Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe and North America. The chapters use a balanced approach, which allows the authors to recognise successes and address ongoing issues, including high dropout rates, digital technology gaps and regulatory pressures. The inclusion of chapters on emerging issues—such as employability, micro-credentials, and technological innovation—ensures the volume looks forward as well as backward, providing readers with insights into the evolving challenges open universities will face. In a time when higher education around the world is grappling with increasing digitalisation, the rise of lifelong learning, and changing labour market requirements, these chapters that look to the future are especially important.

### Areas for Further Consideration

Although the book has considerable strengths, there are certain limitations that prevent it from achieving complete effectiveness. The quality of the chapters is uneven: some case studies offer rigorous critical analysis, while others read more like descriptive institutional profiles. In addition, the student community remains absent from the discussions. Because the chapters were authored by academic scholars, the experience of the learners, who are the main participants in openness, receives minimal mention. Finally, while the book identifies dimensions of openness, it does not convert them into a comparative evaluative framework that could be used by policymakers or institutions to assess, measure, and benchmark their operations. These are gaps that future research should address, building on the foundations provided here.

### Conclusion

If you want a single-volume compendium that maps the field, identifies the big debates, and points to areas for future study and leadership attention, this handbook provides just that. If you want a prescriptive playbook that ranks institutions on a single “openness meter,” you will need to look elsewhere—or encourage the authors to write a sequel that translates the *Handbook*’s rich descriptive material into operational metrics. However, Mishra and Panda have given the ODL community an influential resource: one that answers major empirical questions and — by raising harder ones — helps set the agenda for the next decade of research and practice in open higher education.

*The Handbook of Open Universities Around the World* makes an essential contribution to the field of ODL research and its practical application. In response to the central question of this review—how open are institutions that describe themselves as ODL universities—the book provides the answer that openness is neither uniform nor absolute but partial, contextual, and contested. Many institutions maintain their commitment to openness, though their actual implementation of this principle has proven challenging, while attempting to maintain a proper balance between competing access requirements and quality needs, which leads to compromises. The *Handbook* both answers and complicates the central question: it answers by demonstrating that openness is uneven, and it complicates by refusing to impose a singular evaluative metric. The volume serves as an important reference, which all professionals in the field should treat as mandatory reading. The study provides extensive research information and critical reflections,

which should lead to further investigation into the evolving meaning of openness in higher education. Openness necessitates ongoing effort and safeguarding, especially as education becomes more complex.

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### Reviewer Notes:

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