Research and Policy nexus in Open and Distance Learning

NOTES FOR ONLINE DISCUSSION

Introduction
There are two meanings associated with the connection between the words 'research' and 'policy' in ODL. The first is - ODL research policy - that is policy for promoting, funding and directing research in ODL. Secondly there is - ODL policy research - that is research into ODL policy, for example, the effects of open entry, what is taught, which target groups, media used, and assessment procedures.

ODL researchers will look to ODL research policy and bodies responsible for policy for ways of getting support for their research. ODL policy researchers will look at policies and bodies responsible for formulating and implementing ODL policies to examine, analyse and assess the impact and success of policies.

We shall review both these aspects of the research and policy nexus in ODL and the relationship between these two aspects. The connection between research and policy is not symmetrical, we shall distinguish between research policy and policy research as well as look at the relationship between these two combinations.

We shall consider the following connections in the context of ODL:

- Research → policy
- Policy → research
- Research policy → policy research
- Policy research → research policy

Research
There are many different kinds of research - pure and applied, theoretical, institutional, comparative, case study, experimental, survey, and policy research. It is policy research we are particularly concerned with here.

Policy
Policy generally it involves some authority (government, agency, institution or individual) which defines goals or intentions; provides, permits or constrains certain activities in pursuit of these goals; assigns responsibilities to agencies or individuals; and provides resources (equipment, facilities, money) to enable activities to be carried out. Policy and especially economic and social policy covers a range of sectors including education and research.

Research policy
There may be policy about much larger areas of research than ODL, for example, policy for science research may or may not have much influence on the more specialised field of ODL. Whereas policies on research into education, higher education and information and communication technologies are likely to have relevance for research on ODL.
**ODL policy**
ODL policy might be part of or affected by a wider range of policies, particularly those dealing with higher education, for example entry requirements, standards and quality and especially funding. Within ODL there will be a range of policies dealing with the complexity of ODL systems, including admission, curriculum, media, support, assessment, accreditation, evaluation, research and so on.

**ODL research**
ODL research includes a range of research areas, for example Holmberg's 1996 list includes the following areas - theory, target groups and student bodies, the environmental context, courses development, interaction, students' learning, organisation and administration, history and evaluation (see also Jegede, 1993). Attention has also been given to how the areas of research or the research agenda has shifted over time (Holmberg, 1996; Moore, 1995).

**ODL policy research**
We can identify different kinds of policy research:
- Research for policy formulation - eg. market research (inputs)
- Research into the policy process - eg. identifying stakeholders, the role of ideology, stages in policy formulation, comparisons between policies in different institutions or countries (process).
- Research on policy effects, outcomes, impact and evaluation (outputs).

Research into ODL policy processes, ie. pure policy research, is only one topic of research in a field that includes many other areas. However, many of these areas will have policy implications. For example research into - reasons for student dropout, the effectiveness of computer conferencing, quality of teaching materials etc, may have policy implications. This is policy oriented research, not primarily policy research. The definition of a research area is determined by the focus of the research. In the example of student dropout, the primary focus of the investigator is to understand the reasons for dropout, although a secondary objective may be to make policy recommendations.

**ODL research policy**
Like policy generally, ODL research policy will be defined by relevant authorities, who will identify areas or topics for research, determine priorities, allocate responsibility for research, provide facilities and resources. Only certain areas of research might be approved, commissioned or competed for; it might be carried out by full-time specialists or those who teach as well, administrators or part-time staff might not be eligible; part or full funding and computing, survey and support facilities might be provided.

**ODL policy and research**
Logically ODL research policy is at the intersection of research policy and of ODL policy generally. Similarly ODL policy research is a subset of the wider range of ODL research.
In summary, ODL research policy, does not exist in isolation, but is part of a wider range of ODL policies, and may be part of more general policy regarding research. Also ODL policy research is a specialised subset of ODL research. Furthermore broader policies for research may have implications for ODL research (link 1 in Figure 1); specific ODL research policy will be directly relevant to ODL research (link 2); and ODL policy research may examine the full range of ODL policies (link 3).

**Levels**

Policies may emanate from various levels: global and international, regional, national, local, institutional, faculty, departmental, team and personal. Policies regarding ODL can operate at the same range of levels and have direct or indirect, intentional or unintentional affects, and the research might be directed at different policy levels and on direct and indirect consequences.

Figure 1 could be replicated for each level, for example within an institution such as an open university there will be policies for research generally and including the discipline areas in which the institution has courses. ODL research may be included as part of the university's research policy or be subject to a specific policy with separate resources.

Within the institution there might be a range of ODL research projects being carried out, some focussing on policy and others with policy implications. Also at national level, there may be government departments, research councils and other bodies which have policies affecting research generally and ODL in particular. These policies might be aimed at promoting particular areas and kinds of research and provide funding and other resources. ODL policy research could examine national
policies, not necessarily research policies, but policies about ODL generally, for example a review of the demand for ODL could be oriented towards informing policies for expansion of ODL at national level.

Table 1 A summary of the various levels and ODL research policy and ODL policy research.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>ODL research policy</th>
<th>ODL policy research</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Global</em> - World Bank, UNESCO</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>International</em> - Commonwealth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Regional</em> - European Union, Asian Development Bank</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>National</em> - UK, China, Sri Lanka</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Local</em> - University of Highlands and Islands, Hong Kong</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Institutional</em> - UKOU, OUHK, OUSL</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Faculty</em> - Institute of Educational Technology, Education Studies, Division of Educational Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Department</em> - Student Research Centre, Centre for Research in Distance &amp; Adult Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Team</em> - Programme for Learner Use of Media, ICDL</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Personal</em> - N Farnes, ODL researcher, other academic</td>
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At the global level for example, the first column refers to the World Bank's policy on ODL research (if it has one); whereas the second column refers to research on the World Bank's policy about ODL (which it does have). Also in the second column levels of ODL policy research refer to the level (and area of responsibility of a particular body, eg. global in the case of the World Bank) at which the research is directed, thus a faculty, team or individual might carry out research on the World Bank's global ODL policy.

We can build up the contents of Table 1 by starting with institutional, faculty and personal levels, before widening our consideration to national, regional and international levels.
### Institutional, faculty and personal levels

For the online discussion participants could helpfully give examples to fill the boxes for each column, particularly for areas of the world and institutions you are familiar with.

1. **What is your institution’s policy for ODL research**
   - Who decides what research is done?
   - Who does research?
   - What funding is there?

2. **What research is being done in your institution on ODL policy?**

3. **What research has policy implications?**

As an example we can draw on a case study on the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) (Calder 1997). A summary outline of the situation in distance education research at OUSL at the beginning of 1966 is described below:

**What is OUSL policy for ODL research?**
- **Institutional level** - there was no explicit policy on the purpose, role and functioning of research and evaluation activity in the field of distance learning at OUSL. A laissez faire approach had been in operation with some ad hoc and irregular studies carried out by individuals and groups.
- **Faculty (divisional) level** - the Educational Technology and Regional Educational Services Divisions are actively developing their research strategies.
- **Individual level** - staff undertake a range of ODL research for the purposes of achieving a higher degree, for publication and conference attendance.

**What research is being done in OUSL on ODL policy?**
- **Research for institutional purposes** to inform management and course team decision making, includes student feedback studies (refs, see ICDL, search under Sri Lanka).
- **National and international level** - a range of studies on national policy and comparative studies (refs, see ICDL).
National, regional and international levels

The online discussion can move onto to consider national and international policies affecting ODL research:

4 What national sources of funding for ODL research are there in your country, what are their ODL research policies?

5 What international funding sources are available for ODL research and what are their policies?

The case study for the Open University of Sri Lanka gives some information on these questions:

- National level - OUSL receives 66% of its funding from government, and research and development grants bring in additional funds. In general academic staff in Sri Lanka are expected to undertake research in their own discipline area

- International level - bilateral, a major three year grant from the UK Overseas Development Agency provided consultancy help and support to develop ODL research and evaluation capacity in OUSL.

- International level - multilateral, Sri Lanka is a member of the Commonwealth as such benefits from its policy towards ODL through the Commonwealth of Learning, which has policies for supporting research in ODL.

- Regional level - OUSL is a member of AAOU's, which has policies to promote research and research collaboration, and OUSL staff members attend regional conferences and present research.

Interaction between levels

There are interactions between ODL research policy levels. National policies on research generally and ODL related research in particular will have an influence on institutions and the ODL research they undertake. This is especially the case for ICT, where many countries are taking active steps to promote research into the application of new technology to education, often as part of broader economic and social development policies. Also in the case of the European Union, massive funding for research into new technologies for education and training is having a major affect on institutions research priorities in ODL. At global level, UNESCO's policy of funding chairs (professorships) in institutions is being extended to give priority to ICTs in distance education.
Within ODL policy research the interaction between levels involves ensuring that the analysis of policy at one level is contextualised by other levels. For example, the reasons why an institution operates a particular admission policy is likely to be influenced by national policies regarding admission. Many so-called open universities adopt the same admission procedures and criteria as conventional higher education. Research into the impact of an institution's credit recognition and transfer policies will need to take into account policies in other institutions, national bodies and of international schemes. Analysis of how choices about what to teach are made, may show that professional bodies operating national or international standards are the dominant influence.

Research policy and policy research
We have clarified the nature of ODL research policy and ODL policy research at different levels, and considered interactions between levels. Now we can look at the complex issue of the interaction between ODL research policy and policy research. Figure 1 does not show any direct link between these two. Indirectly ODL research policy may set priorities for research which favour policy research, and are aimed at particular policy issues. Also ODL policy research is more likely to focus on ODL policies other than research policy.

However, for the CRIDALA conference we are sharing knowledge of different ODL research policy environments. Also ODL research professionals are likely to be much concerned with their institutions research policy as well as other funding opportunities. Professional knowledge and reflection about the conditions (ie. policies, priorities, resources, funds, constraints) under which ODL research (policy as well as general) is carried out will be a continuing process. Furthermore the need for informed policy making, and the recent emphasis for ‘evidence-based policy’ places heavy requirements on policy research. Policy research is crucial for quality and continuous improvement, as well as the development of knowledge about ODL and related innovations. As organisations adopt more integrated approaches to
knowledge management, the role of research and knowledge creation becomes central.

This paper provides a framework for examining the research and policy nexus in ODL and raises questions about the connections within a wider context and of the relationships between different levels. The framework helps us compare experience across institutions, countries and regions. Careful documentation, analysis and evaluation, creates a basis for making generalisations and discovering what works under what conditions, and for improving the advice for policy makers and practitioners.

Online discussion points:
10 What are your recommendation for your institution for ODL research policy?
11 What are your priority areas for ODL policy research?
12 How can ODL policy and research be integrated into a knowledge management strategy for continuous improvement and learning within our institutions?
13 What policies would you like to see at national and international levels to promote ODL research?
14 What role is there for comparative research on ODL policy and research and how can this be carried out?

References
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Jegede O (1993) A Distance Education Research Agenda: a survey of expert opinions from developed and developing countries, in Scriven B et al (eds) Distance Education for the Twenty-First Century, International Council for Distance Education, Oslo, pp 324-30.