Learning from the past: Development of open and distance education research over time

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Abstract

Much recent research in open and distance education references literature that was produced primarily over the past decade. While the field of open education continues to evolve and branch out, many of its themes bear similarities to earlier research from the late 1960s and developing through to the '80s and beyond. As indicated by a lack of earlier references in current literature, there appears to be a low level of awareness of this earlier body of research, let alone how it may connect to recent scholarship.

There is potentially much to be gained from a deeper understanding of how open and distance education research developed over this time period. In addition to studies into practice, an extensive body of theory in open and distance education emerged over this time (Zawacki and Anderson, 2014), which can add valuable insights for current researchers and practitioners. In addition, researchers and graduate students will be able to enrich their studies by tracing ideas, connections, biases, discontinuities and patterns gleaned from the analysis of earlier studies. Further, current discourses about the meaning of openness in education may benefit from an understanding of historical patterns of, and problems in, open and distance education research.

The purpose of this study is to enrich current scholarship by exploring frequently cited publications, authors and themes found in open and distance education research published from the 1960s onward. Using a network citation analysis methodology, this work builds on a systematic approach that identified a corpus of historical open education articles from the 1970s which are almost entirely overlooked in the literature today (Rolfe, 2016). It is intended that this study will provide an accessible starting point for researchers to deepen their understanding and further explore and incorporate earlier open and distance education research into their work.