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Open Universities: Old Concepts and Contemporary Challenges

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Abstract

We begin by summarising Prasad's (2018) work on the disconnect between the social purposes of open universities and their achievement. Next, we will revisit the concept of the iron triangle from the 1990s, which explores the three topics access, cost, and quality. How does it apply to distance education conducted with today's technologies? A distinction made in the 1970s between independent and interactive learning activities helps us pursue this question further. A discussion among open university executive heads from around the world in 2017 sets the stage for the final section, which reflects on the current challenges facing open universities. How should they address the competition from the rapidly expanding online offerings of campus institutions? We review economic models, the use of technology, governance and management arrangements, and teaching. The successful systems conceived by the UK Open University in the late 1960s stimulated the creation of many other open universities. How should they be updated today?

Keywords: open universities, distance education, open learning, higher education, access, quality, cost, governance, management, social purpose, independent study, interactive learning

Introduction

Open universities were the most significant innovation in higher education of the late 20th century. The first chancellor of the UK Open University (UKOU), Lord Geoffrey Crowther, captured the public imagination at the UKOU's inaugural ceremony when he proclaimed its purpose of being "open as to people, open as to places, open as to methods and open as to ideas" (Crowther, 1969, pp. 1-2).

By operating at scale with low costs, raising the standard of learning materials, and introducing newer communications technologies, open and distance learning promised to transform higher education generally. But this wider mutation occurred only slowly. Most campus universities did not take distance learning seriously until the second decade of the 21st century, when the Internet became pervasive and some Canadian and US universities offered massive open online courses (MOOCs).

By then there were some 50 open universities (OUs). The 50+ Commonwealth countries alone count 27 of them (Mishra, 2017). The success of each OU naturally reflects the economy and politics of its home jurisdiction, as well as the general evolution of higher education. Some OUs have forged ahead, others have struggled to get going, while yet others now face difficulties after decades of achievement (see e.g., The Guardian, 2018).

This analysis of the future prospects of OUs is couched in general terms since, with few exceptions, citing individual institutions is not appropriate. Institutional status can change quickly.

The article draws on two concepts found useful during the author's many years as a scholar-practitioner in open and distance learning (ODL) from 1971 onwards. It also recalls with admiration the teaching and learning system developed for the UKOU by Walter Perry and colleagues in the 1960s. These caught the imagination of policy-makers worldwide and inspired many countries to adopt and adapt them.

Before applying older concepts to today's OUs, we summarise Prasad's distinction between the dharma (social purposes) and the karma (actual practice) of distance learning in the case of India (Prasad, 2018, p. 6). A later section of the paper recalls the conclusions of a roundtable of OU vice-chancellors held in the margins of the ICDE World Conference on Online Learning in October 2017 (Daniel & Tait, 2017). Our concluding remarks reflect on the challenges facing OUs today. How should they evolve now that online learning offerings from campus universities are exploding?

Dharma and Karma of Distance Learning

In his recent book on open and distance learning (ODL) in higher education in India, Prasad (2018, p. 6) used the Sanskrit words dharma and karma to distinguish between the "principles that guide us to do the right things" (dharma) and present practices (karma). He used the words in the secular sense of right conduct and actual practice. An important theme is the disconnect between dharma and karma in ODL in India and how to repair it.

The elements of the dharma of ODL include:

- *An instrument to democratise education.* This means opening access widely and letting learners manage their learning. Open admission policies assume that it is exit standards, not entry standards, that matter.

- *A means for social justice.* ODL can offer opportunities to people in resource-poor areas, covering a wide geography. Being more inclusive, it is especially helpful for women who lack the independence of movement to attend campus classes.

- *A means for development.* The Commonwealth of Learning's (COL) mission is learning for sustainable development (Commonwealth of Learning, 2018). COL helps governments expand the scale, efficiency, and quality of learning with appropriate technologies, particularly ODL. This is used extensively for capacity building as well as developing skills and professional competence in the working population.

- *Mediating education with technology*. Although at varying speeds, ODL systems are being revolutionised by interactive technologies and open educational resources.

- *Quality as an imperative.* Quality is essential for achieving dharma in distance education. The quality of learning materials, student support services, student evaluation, and administrative services are critical to system effectiveness and ODL's legitimacy and credibility. The public visibility of ODL systems makes them more open to general scrutiny.

- *The teacher as a facilitator*. Teaching in ODL is facilitative rather than expositional. The identity of academics in these systems is complex and inclusive because of the division of labour between the teaching functions of materials preparation and student support.

- *The institution teaches.* In conventional education the teacher teaches, but in ODL the institution teaches (Keegan, 1996). Good logistics, quality materials, and effective student support are important requirements for successful ODL.

Prasad (2018) addressed the karma of ODL in ODL's Indian context, described as "one system, many models" (p. 103). This description also applies to the global network of open universities, giving the trends observed in India wider relevance, including the following:

- *Large student numbers.* The capacity to expand enrolments at low marginal cost is a vital feature of ODL. China and India have ODL institutions with over a million students. They number in the hundreds of thousands in some other OUs. But how large can such systems grow before they become so hard to manage that their effectiveness suffers?

- *Diversity of programmes*. Almost any subject taught in campus universities is available in an OU somewhere. Subjects with significant practical components may require special arrangements, but these can be delivered to high standards. Professional associations, once sceptical about ODL, now appreciate that its flexibility lets institutions offer skills and professional development programmes needed by employers. Short-duration, specialised ODL programmes targeting particular workplace needs are increasingly popular.

- *Involvement of the private sector.* Major industries use ODL for developing human resources in professional and vocational fields, while numerous private providers also offer education and training programmes through ODL.

- *The profit motive.* Because they can add enrolments at low marginal cost, ODL systems that charge tuition fees can generate surpluses once a break-even threshold is reached. ODL in both

private and public sectors can be tempted to skimp on learning materials, support services, evaluation systems, and administrative effectiveness in order to maximise profits.

- *Use of technology*. The use of technology in ODL systems varies greatly. OUs in developing countries often apply technology effectively to their admissions and administrative systems before attempting to use it in the teaching function. One temptation is to enhance profits—but lose quality—by using technology to replace all human interventions in the teaching/learning process.

- *Quality and regulation*. Prasad (2018) focused on quality assurance and regulation in India. Practice varies greatly around the world, but most OUs face quality assurance regimes similar to those for conventional universities. The regulation of ODL varies widely by jurisdiction, from highly restrictive to lax.

How to Address the Disconnect Between Dharma and Karma

The disconnect between dharma (principle) and karma (practice) in India—and ways to mitigate it—have broader relevance to OUs elsewhere.

We note the following:

- Distortion of the goals of open and distance learning. Chasing the surpluses that ODL at scale can easily generate may compromise the social goals being pursued in both public and private sectors. Although dual-mode universities (i.e., on-campus and ODL) are the most prone to subsidise campus operations from the surpluses of their ODL programmes, OUs may also be tempted to use these so-called profits for activities of little benefit to their students.

  Prasad (2018) commented:

  > This amounts to gross violation of academic norms. The money-making orientations in most of the cases result in compromise with quality. It is distressing to observe the attitude of some dual-mode universities which accept ODL students, but exhibit no sense of ownership or pride in them. Their usefulness is measured in terms of surplus generation. It is sickening to listen to some vice-chancellors boasting of their achievements in terms of surpluses generated through distance mode. (p. 65)

  He added: “publicly stated for-profit institutions are preferable to the hypocrisy of publicly-funded institutions making money through ODL and using it for other purposes” (Prasad, 2018, p.65).

- External constraints on the dharma of distance education. Such unethical practices partly explain why regulators sometimes take restrictive approaches to ODL programmes. In some places, ODL offerings are restricted to subjects already in the curricula of campus universities. This is misguided because it ignores the different target groups for ODL and the social needs to which it can respond. Constraining ODL by the rigidities of the conventional system defeats its purpose. Prasad (2018) called ODL in India “an ineffectively over-regulated system” (p. 66).

- Slow adoption of interactive technologies. Although interaction is essential to education, Prasad (2018) argued that expanding its use in India is constrained more by the attitudes of the ODL institutions than by the slow roll-out of the technologies needed to support interaction.

- Lack of professionalism in management and leadership. Large OUs resemble industrial enterprises as much as they do campus universities, but this distinction is not usually reflected in their leadership and management. The result is that they fail to meet students' simple expectations: receiving their learning materials on time, having professional student support, and seeing examination schedules respected.

- The role of teachers in ODL. Ambiguity in defining teacher roles is a challenge for most OUs. Their roles are equally important in ODL and conventional systems. Indeed, they may be more complex in ODL because it uses multiple technologies. A final comment from Prasad (2018) is apposite:

> There is a constant debate in ODL circles about the roles, responsibilities, and relationships [of teachers] with others in the system. Teacher identity is not satisfactorily addressed in ODL systems. ...there is a feeling that teachers in ODL are engaged more in management activities than in academic activities. This may not be a satisfying situation for serious academics. The strengthening of ODL system management may relieve teachers from some of the administrative responsibilities and enable them to make meaningful academic contributions (p. 67).

Prasad's (2018) analysis of the disconnect between dharma (principle) and karma (practice) in ODL leaves us with two observations. First, this disconnect is not unique to India, although the size of its ODL sector gives more examples of it. Second, it is ironic that some OUs are struggling just as the wider higher education system begins to adopt their missions (dharma). This is new. Campus universities did not previously espouse the democratisation of higher education and social justice as goals—save in the occasional rhetorical flourishes of their presidents!

While it is good to see the wider higher-education sector promoting inclusiveness, most of it is far less prepared for this than the OUs, in both attitudes and practice. What must OUs do to recover their pre-eminence in implementing the contemporary agenda expressed in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2018)?

ODL can achieve the ambitious goals that Prasad (2018) set out because it applies technology to the educational process. We now draw on concepts developed in the late 20th century to explore this further.

Revisiting Older Concepts

A first concept is the iron triangle (Daniel, 2010). This shows that distance education—and technology-based learning generally—can break away from the constraints that classroom education faces when trying to balance access, quality, and cost. How an OU exploits this possibility determines whether it can expand student numbers, cut costs, and offer quality teaching—and do it all simultaneously.

A second 20th century concept presents the challenge of ODL as achieving a cost-effective balance between learners' independent study and their interaction with others (Daniel & Marquis, 1979). This

is an important practical implication of the iron triangle. If an OU operates at scale, it costs less to provide materials for independent study than to arrange personal support and tutoring. But, to succeed, most students need some direct human interaction.

Open Universities and the Iron Triangle

Technology's revolutionary contribution to education is to make it possible to increase student numbers, cut costs, and improve quality—all at the same time. OUs are its most powerful expression.

Daniel (2010, p. 51) expressed this graphically as the "iron triangle." It highlights the fundamental constraints inherent in classroom teaching. Putting more students in each class may increase access, but with perceived loss of quality. Enhancing quality by adding more teachers, reducing student numbers, or providing better learning materials increases costs, while direct cost-cutting means either lower student numbers or poorer quality (or both). These constraints have dogged attempts to expand education throughout history, explaining why educational quality is so often equated with exclusivity of access.

Technology allows education to break out of these constraints. Here we understand technology broadly, meaning not only machines and electronics but also, importantly, the basic organisational approaches of specialisation and division of labour described by Adam Smith in the 18th century (Smith, 1776). Wedemeyer (1974) summarised the essential contribution of technology to distance education half a century ago:

> As an operating principle the system is capable, after reaching a critical minimum of aggregation, of accommodating increased numbers of learners without a *commensurate* increase in the cost of the basic learning experiences: i.e. costs must not be directly and rigidly volume sensitive. After reaching the necessary level of aggregation, unit costs should show a diminishing relationship to total system costs (p. 4).

Access. Therefore, OUs are uniquely placed to expand access by increasing student numbers. They should be well-positioned to pursue the goal of serving much wider populations that the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030 have legitimised. The Millennium Development Goals of 2000 limited their scope to basic education, but the SDGs also target higher education: "by 2030, ensure equal access for all to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education including university education" (UNESCO, 2018)

Whether an OU can respond to these UN goals depends on the size of their pools of potential learners and the obstacles people might face in enrolling. On these criteria, OUs present a picture of feast and famine. Although overall enrolments in higher education are forecast to increase by tens of millions in the coming decades (UNESCO, 2015) many of these millions are in Africa and Asia, where OUs are already under great pressure.

Meanwhile, OUs in richer countries face shrinking pools of potential learners as well as obstacles to their enrolment. Most (the UKOU is a good example) began operations when access to higher education was severely restricted and part-time study was virtually unavailable. When it opened in 1969 the UKOU had a large pool of applicants—including many school teachers—who were eager to obtain degrees. Although the applicant profile subsequently evolved, the UKOU attracted high enrolments for several decades, reaching over 200,000 in the early 21st century.

Whilst the absolute size of the potential applicant pool may have become smaller, the recent decline in enrolments at the UKOU owed more to the obstacles people faced to enrolling. The massive expansion of UK campus institutions, including more extensive part-time and ODL study opportunities, can hardly be called an obstacle to enrolling at the UKOU, but the UKOU has certainly lost the quasi monopoly on part-time study and distance learning that it once had.

Much more significant, however, was UKOU's loss of state funding, both generally and for particular programmes. Most rich-country governments are cutting financial support to higher education. In the UK, where the recent governing elites have little personal experience of either part-time study or ODL, state funding for these learning modes has been essentially wiped out. The UKOU is in a quandary. Its social mission (dharma) means that the students it attracts are less able to meet steep increases in tuition fees than those in campus universities. Moreover, these older UKOU students, who may already have mortgages and other debts, are often reluctant to take state-supported loans for higher education, even when these are available to part-time students.

For OUs in other rich countries the squeeze on government funding has been less severe than at the UKOU, but their government support has diminished in various ways. The smaller ones have more difficulty attracting political attention than do campus universities, because most legislatures are territorially based, giving campuses strong local support. The Toronto roundtable of open university heads concluded that "most OUs have been the darling of their government at some stage in their development, but it is impossible to retain this status for decades as governments and their political ideologies change" (Daniel & Tait, 2017, p. 4).

Costs. OUs around the world face very different challenges regarding costs. The large OUs in Africa and Asia, which generate surpluses from relatively low tuition fees, have the challenges of adapting the economics of their institutions to changing technology, and of avoiding the temptation, highlighted by Prasad (2018), to spend their surpluses in ways that fail to advance their teaching and student support functions.

OUs in richer countries may, on the other hand, face the necessity of slashing costs generally to compensate for a loss of state funding that cannot be made up by raising tuition fees.

The costing of ODL is well-tilled territory. For example, Snowden and Daniel (1980) argued that with careful design, management, and cost control, distance teaching institutions could be economically viable with fairly low student numbers. Rumble (1992) warned of the competitive vulnerability of distance teaching universities, and Bates (see, e.g., Bates, 2015) has revisited the costing of ODL regularly as teaching and student support technologies have evolved.

Because of their scale, the challenge for OUs in cutting costs lies less in conceiving strategies than in implementing them. OUs cannot change direction quickly without disrupting students' experience. New approaches to teaching and tutorial support need thorough pilot testing before being rolled out at scale.

Quality. The UKOU demonstrated from the start that distance education could achieve quality of scale as well as economies of scale. Given their large student numbers, OUs can, in principle, afford considerable investments in learning materials, student support, and administrative systems to ensure very high quality. Although today's learning media and support systems are different, better integrated, and more diverse than the printed materials, broadcasts and face-to-face tutorials that the UKOU

pioneered in the 1970s, OUs can still enjoy economies and quality of scale. Contemporary technologies let students get more rapid feedback on their work, while teachers can update and revise learning materials more frequently.

In sum, OUs continue to be less constrained by the iron triangle of access, cost, and quality than are campus institutions. It is still possible, with judicious design and management, to increase numbers, improve quality, and cut costs all at the same time.

Independence and Interaction: Getting the Mixture Right

Prasad (2018) flagged a vital question facing all OUs. He wrote:

> It is time to rethink the current model of support services provided to distance learners by using available ICTs effectively. Many specialised agencies are providing tutorial services and conducting free tutorial services under the open tutorial system. The social media are also extensively used by some OUs for support services. The OUs should revisit their systems of support services to make them more flexible and reflective of needs through technology enabled direct-to-home services. The learner support in OUs should be based on the principles of engagement, two-way interaction and building the sense of community and belongingness amongst the learners. (Prasad, 2018, pp.78–79)

Whilst each OU faces its own challenges in providing student support, it does appear that the original UKOU tutoring model requires rethinking in some institutions. This model had teams of full-time academics concentrating on course development, which meant designing materials for independent study, while a much larger group of part-time tutors mediated, either locally or electronically, the interactions between course materials and students.

Although this model served the UKOU well for many years, some weaknesses were always apparent. A writer in the 1970s talked of “a large teaching proletariat and a small academic ruling class” while another lamented that “part-time tutors and the students face similar problems on the outside rim of the Open University wheel” (Daniel & Marquis, 1979, p. 42). Decades of development have exacerbated these issues.

First, the UKOU’s early part-time tutors embarked enthusiastically on a radically novel project. Most were academics with full-time posts in other universities. Some, finding that they enjoyed teaching the older UKOU students more than their own younger students on campus, elected to continue as UKOU tutors for many years. Today, the casualisation of the academic profession has largely swept away such idealism among new recruits. In 2018, Québec’s TÉLUQ found that more than a third of its part-time tutors were also teaching for other institutions (Umbriaco, 2018).

Second, in some OUs full-time academics are becoming somewhat disconnected from the reality of students’ learning in their courses. With earlier technologies, courses might run for several years without significant revisions by the original development team. Today, as courses are presented more interactively through electronic platforms, revisions are more frequent, which requires course team members to stay closely in touch with how students interact with the learning material.

Some OUs are therefore insisting that all full-time professors be substantively involved in tutoring the courses they have developed. Accordingly, the management of full-time and part-time academic staff is

becoming more integrated. In the UKOU, the terms and conditions under which part-time tutors are hired have improved substantially over the years, thus enhancing their status and self-esteem.

In changing arrangements for interaction, OU leaders must consider their impact on institutional economics. The industrial principles of specialisation and division of labour are still key to operating at scale, so OUs must avoid returning to the so-called cottage industry approach to teaching still prevalent on most campuses.

What do Open University Executive Heads Think?

In October 2017, the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) and Ontario's Contact North | Contact Nord (CN) organised a world conference on online learning in Toronto. The president of CN, Maxim Jean-Louis, convened a closed roundtable of the world's OU executive heads (vice-chancellors or presidents) alongside the ICDE conference so that they could share views on the opportunities and challenges they faced. Professor Alan Tait and the author facilitated the event, where the executive heads shared views on these questions (Daniel & Tait, 2017).

- Open Universities have made openness and access a mainstream concern across higher education (HE) generally. How should they now innovate in their own missions to strengthen their reputations and social relevance? Participants agreed that the UN's Sustainable Development Goals had legitimised this goal of serving wider populations. The challenge is that the big numbers of new students will be in Asia and Africa, where the OUs are already under great enrolment pressure. Two of the OUs represented had face-to-face teaching streams on campus, accounting in one case for half their student body.

- How are open university student demographics shifting? What innovations are needed now? The demographics of OU students are changing in different ways—getting older in some OUs and younger in others. Although some OUs are having to adapt to the habits and attitudes of older learners as students' median and average ages increase, the general trend is in the opposite direction. Most OUs are seeing increasing numbers of younger students, though not usually school leavers. These younger students are not always more technologically savvy than older students and they usually have less money to spend.

- Technologies are expanding the options for ODL—which ones hold most promise? Some of the OUs were teaching entirely online, whereas others used printed materials. All OUs have plans to increase their online teaching, but an important conclusion was that IT can prove most useful in the administrative and student support functions. Speeding up these processes has positive impacts on student progression and retention. In most countries, governments now authorise all HE institutions to offer online and distance learning, putting considerable competitive pressure on the OUs. It is now rare for an OU to have a national monopoly of ODL.

- OUs should operate at scale—what are the implications? The OUs present at the roundtable operated at very different scales, not always proportional to the size of the country's population. Some of the smaller OUs may have made things more difficult by adopting too fully the division of labour and specialisation inherent in the industrial model used by the larger OUs. With the notable exception of the UKOU and its creation of FutureLearn, the OUs present generally were not engaged intensely with MOOCs (massive open online courses).

- Are there opportunities for collaboration among OUs? Most of the OUs represented already had the partnerships they needed. There was, for example, extensive course sharing among the state OUs in India. Partnerships need close attention and management, even when the original agreements are clear, and the challenges of offshore partnerships are several times greater.

- The fundamental challenge for OUs is blending flexibility, quality and scale. How do they achieve it? Flexibility is good, but so is structure. One OU had improved its completion and retention rates dramatically simply by tightening up the regulations about start dates and completion deadlines.

- How do OUs sustain good government relations? This vital aspect of OU management came up repeatedly. Most OUs have been favourites of their government at some stage, but this status can prove fragile as governments and their political complexions change. Success in government relations came from using the considerable scale, power, and reach of an OU to help the government achieve its own education and training goals. The smaller OUs have special challenges, and the near-death experiences of both the Canadian OUs emphasised the absolute importance of nurturing the links between an OU and its government's priorities.

- What terms to use? A refrain throughout the roundtable was that although most OUs felt that the quality of their teaching and support was at least as good as that of the campus universities in their jurisdictions, they—and ODL generally—still had a poor reputation with the public. Some heads felt that using the term 'distance education' or even the term 'open' was not helpful.

Rising to Current Challenges

Most campus universities are now offering or planning courses online. How can OUs retain their competitiveness? Can they also position themselves to respond to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, namely, "by 2030, to ensure equal access for all to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education including university education" (UNESCO, 2018, p. 1))? Addressing both challenges is a tall order. At a minimum, it requires that OU programmes must be:

- affordable to all students (open as to people);

- offered ubiquitously at scale (open as to places);

- well-governed and managed (open as to methods); and

- effective at teaching (open as to ideas).

These criteria recall the four elements of the founding slogan of the UKOU. How should OUs adapt themselves to meet these requirements today?

Open as to People: Affordability and Economics

A harsh lesson of recent decades is that OUs need economic models that rely on student fees for most of the resources needed to operate. OUs relying on state funding for their regular programmes will become increasingly fragile as governments continue to reduce financial support for higher education.

This also affects campus universities, where state funding is eroding too. Campus universities, however, unlike OUs, do not seek to be affordable to all and can usually set their fees as high as their chosen markets will bear.

This warning against reliance on public funds applies to the general operations of OUs. However, they are well-placed to bid for state support for specific time-limited programmes that governments themselves wish to implement in order to retrain large numbers of people across their jurisdictions. The author's first work in ODL, in the 1970s, was on such a programme. The Quebec Government wanted to retrain all its secondary school mathematics teachers in the space of a few years and gave the task to the TÉLUQ, Quebec's open university (TÉLUQ, 2009).

In their quest for affordability OUs have two advantages. By operating at scale and using technology intelligently they can, after reaching a critical mass of enrolments, see their "unit costs show a diminishing relationship to total system costs" (Wedemeyer, 1974, p. 4). The larger OUs, mostly in Asia and Africa, have already reached the point where student fees support their operations. Their challenge now is to govern and manage these huge organisations effectively. The smaller OUs need to become more skilled at using technology efficiently to cut costs, thereby attracting more students through lower fees.

Correspondence education, in its heyday from the mid-19th until the late-20th century, was mostly offered by the private for-profit sector and entirely supported by student fees. Modern communications technology should enable OUs to re-create aspects of that economy, whilst teaching more effectively than correspondence education was able to do a century ago.

Some private-sector ODL operations are showing the way. A contemporary example is the French company Open Classrooms (2018), created by its 12- and 13-year old founders in 1999. It now reaches over 2 million learners per month with a range of job-related courses and several degree programmes recognised by the French government. Open Classrooms' so-called freemium economic model means that viewing the content is free, but payment is required for mentoring and assessment (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/OpenClassrooms).

Some institutions are developing MOOCs (massive open online courses) in a similar way. Much of the content is freely available, but students pay for assessment leading to degrees and diplomas (see e.g., Deakin University, 2018).

OUs should be leaders, not laggards, in such developments.

Open as to Places: Ubiquity

The founding slogan of the UKOU implied that it would make its courses available everywhere through ODL. Today, most universities that offer online courses boast about the diversity of countries from which they attract learners, even though those learner numbers are dwarfed by those from the home jurisdiction.

There were three good reasons why the UKOU and other OUs were slow to recruit learners globally. First, they had a sophisticated awareness of copyright legislation across the world, which limited their right to distribute learning materials in certain places (see e.g., Open University (2018a)). Second, they aimed to offer all learners a similar experience which, if their teaching and learning systems involved

mentoring or tutorials, was difficult in some places. Third, the setting and collection of fees were not straightforward.

The expansion of the Internet has changed these constraints, but it should also make all universities, particularly OUs, more sensitive to the possible perception that they are engaged in a neo-colonialist project. Such perceptions could be a serious barrier for OUs seeking to contribute to the attainment of the UN Sustainable Development Goals outside their home jurisdictions. For this reason, as well as for greater reach and sustainability, OUs do better to operate overseas through partnerships or consortia. Examples are the UKOU's joint programmes in Africa in teacher education, TESSA (Open University, 2018b) and health education, HEAT (Open University, 2018c); and the University of South Africa's work in Ethiopia (UNISA, 2016).

Such programmes may also provide opportunities for OUs to secure some time-limited funding from the international development arms of their home governments.

Open as to Methods: Governance and Management

Ritzen (2016) summarised contemporary research on the links between governance and effectiveness in higher education by stating that "university autonomy, specifically in reference to academic approach, staffing, internal decision-making, and financial practices, in combination with proper funding, is likely to enable universities to produce graduates with better competencies" (p. 1).

Securing sufficient autonomy to ensure effectiveness is key to the success of an OU. Fortunately, prime minister Harold Wilson's original proposal that the UK Open University be established as a consortium of Oxbridge colleges was abandoned during the planning and implementation process in favour of a royal charter that gave it similar autonomy to the UK's older universities (Perry, 1977). Some other OUs, however, have governance structures that give campus universities—often rivals—considerable control over their programming and operations.

OU Malaysia, for example, is owned by a consortium of 11 Malaysian public universities (Open University Malaysia, n.d.). Fortunately, as a private university it pays dividends to these owners, so oversight by the public universities has been relatively benign. In Canada, the TÉLUQ was not so lucky. It was set up as the distance teaching component of the Université du Québec network of regional campus institutions, which were strongly represented on its governing board. Subsequent inter-institutional rivalries within the network led to no less than seven attempts to close the TÉLUQ (Umbriaco, 2018). Its survival and present success is a tribute to ODL's attractiveness to students.

Once an OU has the autonomy to set its own priorities and strategies, the challenge is managing their effective implementation. OUs are large and complex operations that require competent academic and administrative leadership. In jurisdictions where external political input into the appointment of university executive heads is the norm, nepotism in these nominations makes effective management unlikely. We must hope that, as OUs play an increasing role in achieving governments' own objectives, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, officials and politicians will realise that appointing cronies to lead these institutions is a short-sighted policy.

Open as to Ideas: Teaching Effectively

One reason why the infant UK Open University caught the imagination of the public and captured the allegiance of its students so quickly was the originality of its major courses. They not only brought

together different disciplines, but also created new paradigms for teaching some subjects. These academic breakthroughs were largely driven by the development of courses in teams, which Perry (1977) considered to be the UKOU's most important innovation. As well as producing some very exciting courses, these teams also made the UKOU an attractive working environment for academics who enjoyed the robust intellectual arguments that were a staple of their work.

But course teams are expensive. Today, some OUs save money by going to the other extreme: commissioning course materials from outside content experts and having them worked over by internal editors and instructional designers before being released to students. This process is much cheaper than constituting a course team to rethink the teaching of a subject *ab initio,* but does risk presenting current academic orthodoxy in a dull manner. A compromise is for OUs to operate a mixed economy in course development, using cheaper methods for more advanced subjects, but setting resources aside to excite new students with some blockbuster courses.

Some campus universities already do this by allocating resources to celebrated faculty members for them to create exciting MOOCs that may attract learners to their regular programmes. But this may not always work. An Australian academic who took a MOOC on *Xi Jinping Thought* from the elite Tsinghua University wrote that it gave "an unprecedented opportunity to observe the poverty of Chinese state-enforced ideology" (Carrico, 2018, p. 5)!

For OUs, however, teaching means not only developing courses, but also supporting the students who take them. No single approach to the functions of tutoring and mentoring can fit all situations. An OU's size and its communications infrastructure are just two of the factors that will determine how it provides student support. Earlier we quoted Prasad's (2018) conclusion that this is a special challenge for OUs because it is easy to create the "feeling that teachers in ODL are engaged more in management activities than in academic activities" (p. 67).

This is currently a vibrant area of research and development in ODL. OUs can take advantage of the large volume of action research on online teaching generated by campus institutions that are entering the field. The Contact North newsletter Online Learning News is a rich resource for this topic (Contact North, 2018).

Conclusions

Prasad's (2018) analysis of the disconnect between the purposes (dharma) that OUs claim to espouse and their actual practices (karma) set the stage for this paper. Whereas higher education was absent from the Millennium Development Goals, its inclusion in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 shows that the purposes of OUs are as relevant as ever. Yet, although OUs have attracted tens of millions of new students in recent decades, some have found it difficult to adapt to changing environments, particularly decreasing financial support from governments and evolving communications technologies.

Revisiting the iron triangle of access, cost, and quality we conclude that ODL can still enjoy advantages over classroom teaching in all three areas, although these advantages may be more challenging to achieve with contemporary interactive systems. These systems also require a rebalancing of the role of part-time and full-time staff in providing independent and interactive learning opportunities for students.

A roundtable discussion among the executive heads of OUs concluded that despite decades of success, the advantages of open and distance education still need to be promoted assertively. OUs need to make the provision of advanced education to resource-poor communities more newsworthy than yet another rearrangement of the world rankings of research-focused universities in rich countries.

The slogan of the UKOU, “open as to people, open as to places, open to methods and open as to ideas” (Crowther, 1969, pp. 1-2) still provides an inspiring vision for all OUs. The challenge is how to implement each of its four elements in a new era.

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