International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning

Special Issue: Open Universities: Past, Present and Future

Ross Paul et Alan Tait

Citer ce document

Editorial

Special Issue: Open Universities: Past, Present and Future

Ross Paul[1] and Alan Tait[2]
[1]*University of British Columbia, Canada,* [2]*The Open University, UK*

Fifty years since the establishment of the Open University in the United Kingdom (UKOU) seems an appropriate time to evaluate the current status of and outlook for the world's open universities. There is much to celebrate, not only in the UK, but also in the 60-80 (depending upon definitions) open universities around the world. The rapid development of communication technologies has both enhanced and challenged the particular role of the open university. This special issue of IRRODL offers a number of perspectives on its evolution in many different national settings – what it has achieved, the challenges it faces and its options for the future.

There are an estimated 8 million students in open universities around the world, with more such institutions still being created. This underlines the success of open universities since the inception of the UKOU in 1969, an achievement of extending educational boundaries that stands up well against the dramatic expansion of physical boundaries represented by the moon landing of the same year. The Open University model fundamentally changed notions as to who should and could benefit from a university education and the approaches to teaching and learning that would facilitate such access. For more depth on the UKOU, readers are referred to the perspectives of its founding Vice-Chancellor (Perry, 1976) and a much more recent history (Weinbren, 2015).

The origins of this special issue lie not only in celebrating the Open University model but also in looking beyond its success to the critical challenges that have arisen in the 50 years since its inception. In the last 10 years, the UKOU has lost about one-third of its students, primarily due to an enormous rise in fees in England accompanied by a student loan model that appears comprehensively unattractive to the adult part-time learner. This poses an urgent question as to whether the Open University model can move and flourish from a broadly social democratic political orientation to the more recently developed neo-liberal social model. While discretion precludes more detail, four of the eight open universities in Europe have had existential threats over the same period for a range of different reasons and, like many of its counterparts, Athabasca University in Canada has struggled in adjusting to increased competition from traditional institutions. In Asia, where there has been more investment in the Open University model than anywhere

else, open universities have struggled, at least in some countries, to gain a reputation for quality or to achieve acceptable levels of programme completion and graduation.
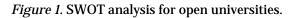
The early open universities pioneered a number of features that were truly radical. The invention of the Open University mission for mainstream rather than marginal inclusion of new audiences at such a large-scale changed the broad social understanding of who could go to university. Secondly, and concomitantly, there had to be a new focus on learning and teaching to support students who were first-time entrants from families without prior higher education and for whom the challenges of learning at a distance demanded study skills, self-confidence, and social capital which could not be assumed. Thirdly, open universities committed early and firmly to the deployment of new technologies to support learning and teaching, pioneering industrial methods of course production and design and student services. Fourthly, the very idea of such large-scale universities was significantly different, though not unique. Lastly, and more broadly, open universities thought of themselves as having embedded innovation. They existed in order to change how post-secondary education was conceived, and acted as a vanguard for the move from elite to mass higher education systems.

This special issue was born out of the concern that the first-mover advantage of the open universities has been substantially eroded by developments elsewhere in the university sector in many countries, and, further, that this has in many cases not been adequately noticed nor indeed addressed by the open universities themselves. Many of the features that were developed for the first time on any significant scale by open universities are now more widely shared as the move to mass higher education is near universal in developed countries and increasingly the case in middle income countries. These features include a much wider recognition that part-time routes to study have to accompany the traditional full-time campus-based modes, and that the much wider range of student backgrounds in mass higher education has to be accompanied by commitments to reform teaching and student support. New entrants, notably online universities and traditional institutions moving significantly to online and blended learning, provide significant competition for longer established open universities, some of which have struggled to move from earlier distance education methods into online modes. So, in most countries, open universities are increasingly struggling to maintain their primacy in a much more competitive and complex environment of blended learning and dual-mode campuses. While a few governments have kept the monopoly position of their open university to deliver part-time and distance education for the country, this is less and less sustainable in the face of burgeoning new technologies for teaching on so many campuses.

Projecting ahead 15 years or so, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals propose, as both necessary and desirable, a major increase in post-secondary education and lifelong learning, in effect moving to deliver mass higher education in upper, middle, and many lower middle income countries. This pertains to nations on the scale of China, India, Brazil, and South Africa, or, more widely, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Some 30-50 years ago, the natural solution to such large-scale provision of lifelong higher education was restricted to the Open University model. Today, the question is whether this model retains the dynamic energy and innovatory character to be entrusted with that task. Or will a wider range of models including blended delivery, dual mode campuses, and new online universities (notably private for-profit organisations) crowd out the place of open universities in the higher education landscape?

The prime characteristic of open universities in their foundation stages was their capacity to innovate, and to do so fearlessly. Their place as a key institutional model for the future in countries at all stages of development will be the sustainability of that capacity to offer innovation. How can open universities reinvent themselves as the most exciting organisational model to meet contemporary needs for new audiences in innovative ways? We have paid attention in the past to leadership in open and distance education (Paul 1990; Paul 2011; Tait 2008b), and it is in the development of high-quality distributed leadership in open universities that the capacity to innovate can be most effectivity sustained. We would summarise our evaluation of the present situation with the SWOT analysis in Figure 1.

Strengths	Opportunities
• Commitment to openness, flexibility, and access. • Capacity for large-scale provision. • Support for part-time students, working adults. • Commitment to technology-enhanced learning.	• World-wide access to the Internet. • UN's sustainable development goals for major expansion of higher education. • Use experience to develop quality assurance for mass higher education systems. • Trends to international collaboration, open educational resources. • International trends to lifelong learning and continuous professional upgrading.
Weaknesses	Threats
• Completion and graduation rates. • Reputation and brand. • Staff resistance to change. • OU model based on very large student-to-staff ratio.	• Burgeoning mainstream university involvement in online and blended learning. • Governmental disenchantment with OU model. • Supreme value of elite education. • MOOCs and other innovations from mainstream universities.

Figure 1. SWOT analysis for open universities.

There are two priorities for leadership at all levels that we propose for particular attention. Firstly, open universities have a tendency deriving from their uniqueness in their national contexts to become inward-looking and to fail to study the changing external environment with insight and to develop accordingly. Secondly the claim of quality has rarely been made effectively, leaving the public discourse identifying quality as the work done by highly selective rather than open institutions. In too many cases, the quality of curriculum as well as learning and teaching and student support have fallen short. It is with this range of concerns that this special issue has been drawn up.

The collection articles represent the work and perspectives of 13 authors from 11 different countries. As might be expected, the writers do a better job of presenting the achievements of open universities and their current challenges than they do in prescribing what is necessary to ensure their continuing success in higher education. Campus-based universities are changing swiftly with the rapid evolution of communications technologies, with much of this change informed by the success of the world's open universities. Somewhat ironically, these changes have blurred the distinctions between campus and distance institutions, in the process making it more difficult for open universities to maintain a clear and separate institutional identity. In this sense, they have been victims of their own success.

The co-editors of this special edition have been both colleagues and friends since initially meeting at the 1982 ICCE/ICDE conference in Vancouver. They have both been very engaged in the evolution of open universities from their earliest days in very different ways. Ross Paul spent 11 years at Athabasca University (10 as Vice-President Academic and one as Acting President) before taking up the presidencies at more traditional institutions in Ontario (Laurentian University, the University of Windsor). He is particularly interested in institutional management and leadership, having written respective books on open learning and open management (Paul, 1990) and the challenging role of the Canadian university president (Paul, 2015). Alan Tait is Emeritus Professor of Distance Education and Development at the Open University UK. From 2013-2015, he was Director of International Development and Teacher Education, and, before that, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic) and previously Dean of the Faculty of Education and Language Studies. He has had a particular interest in social justice and student support, and was for many years a co-host of the very successful series of Cambridge conferences with the late Roger Mills. Both editors have written recently about the contributions of and challenges facing the world's open universities (Paul, 2016; Tait, 2008a; Tait, 2018).

Grouping of Articles

The papers in this special edition are organized into four general themes:

History/Evolution

Two of the articles pay particular attention to the evolution of the open university in their respective contexts. **Weiyuan** and **Li** look at the transformation of the Radio and Television universities (RTVUs) in China and the recent promotion of five institutions to Open University status. Four issues of university reform are highlighted in their analysis of these institutions and the challenges they face, specifically, key performance indicators (KPIs), cohesion and resource sharing between National OUs and their provincial counterparts, quality assurance for award bearing programs, and their implications for the transformation of the remaining provincial RTVUs to OUs.

Using auto-ethnographic interviews, **Lee** explores the perceptions and feelings of eight faculty members in two institutions (in Canada and South Korea) about the changes in their teaching practice brought about by their experience in open universities. Three interrelated themes emerge in the resulting narratives – stories about openness, excessive openness and a lost sense of mission; stories about technological innovation in the face of long-lasting resistance; and stories about teaching (transactional interactions and feelings of loneliness). The paper then presents a discussion of useful implications for open universities as a starting point for more meaningful discussions among distance educators in a time of change.

Case Studies

Five of the papers look at specific issues through the example of experiences at open universities in different national contexts – Turkey, Mexico, South Africa, Mauritius, and Brazil.

Bozkurt considers the contributions of Anadolu University in Turkey, notably in narrowing the information gap and digital divide by enhancing equality of educational opportunity and extending lifelong learning opportunities to many. As such, he suggests Anadolu as a role model for other higher educational institutions in his country.

Cervantes, Bucio, Vadilo, and **Herrera** analyse the evolution of openness at Mexico's national university (UNAM). Using the *Open Online Flexible Provision of Technology-Enhanced Higher Education* (OOFAT) model, the authors assess the evolution of various components of openness over three time periods). Readers may find the OOFAT model useful for pursuing similar analyses in their own national contexts.

The University of South Africa (UNISA), a pioneer institution in open and distance learning (ODL), is one of the first institutions to shift from ODL to open and distance e-learning (ODel). **Nsamba** assesses and determines the maturity levels of UNISA's lecturers' and tutors' explorations of various forms of e-learning technologies to support students in an ODel environment. The Online Course Design Maturity Model (OCDMM) was modified and adapted in order to guide data collection and analysis and the interpretation of results. It is hoped that this assessment will serve as a starting point for UNISA to constantly measure improvements in advancing e-learning activities.

Quality assurance is the focus of **Carr's** case study of the Open University of Mauritius (OUM). While there is a growing body of literature in QA best practices, there has been little investigation into the factors that influence such institutions to improve or adopt QA. The author advances a framework for understanding drivers of institutional QA at UOM. A better understanding of the drivers for change in QA can help open universities plan the implementation of QA mechanisms in a more comprehensive and systematic way in developing a culture of quality that responds to the unique ideological and practical context of open and distance learning.

The last of the case studies concerns the Open University of Brazil (OUB), which is neither a university nor open. It is, rather, a consortium of public federal, state and municipal face-to-face institutions which nevertheless has made contributions to distance education in Brazil. **Baxto, Amaro,** and **Mattar** look in particular at the challenges it faces in improving the quality of learning support centres, labour relations and other issues related to the hiring of face-to-face and online tutors, and the structure of course content production. The case study will be of particular interest to those trying to initiate open and online learning changes in traditional institutions.

Overarching Theme

Four other papers use very different ways of looking at open universities to explore some very specific issues:

Lucena, Diaz, Reche, and **Rodriguez** provide a tour of open university research output through the literature of the past 40 years. Examining over 800 papers published in prestigious journals from 1969-2018, the authors analyze the resulting output scattering and impact bibliometric indicators. They suggest that the scientific output of open universities is in a phase of exponential growth.

Student persistence in open universities is the central concern of **Li** and **Wong**. Reviewing 108 empirical studies from the 1970's to the present, they identify 284 factors influencing student persistence which they then categorize into student factors, institutional factors and environmental factors, and their changes and trends over the years. Based on the results, the implications for developing intervention and retention strategies in open universities are discussed.

A thoughtful perspective on what makes open universities unique is offered by **Jeong.** Her focus is on the elusive challenges of establishing a clear identity for a given institution, especially in an age when more and more traditional universities are adopting distance education and online learning courses and programs. Their quest to be recognized as "genuine universities" through their particular quality assurance systems has led open universities to develop regional networks and a greater emphasis on research. Considering open admissions and the industrialization of teaching and learning, Jeong offers the term "network university" to differentiate open universities from their traditional counterparts.

Devries looks to the websites of open universities to understand better their unique contributions to higher education, exploring key themes of distance education and open educational practices. The study concludes that, with the growth of open distance education, online learning, and other emerging open educational practice, open universities can remain uniquely positioned in their ability to meet the growing need for higher education globally by increasing the scope of their open educational practices and clearing reflecting these on institutional websites.

Current Challenges

The special issue concludes with a focus from two of the best-known practitioners on the current challenges facing open universities and what they need to do to ensure their future success. While recognizing the huge impact of open universities over the past half century, **Guri Rozenblit** focuses on their current challenges, including the blurring of boundaries between distance teaching and campus-based universities. This leads her to suggest the need for better collaboration among the different types of higher educational institution and the work and corporate worlds in the contexts of lifelong learning, professional upgrading and managing huge numbers of students.

Following Prasad's 2018 identification of the disconnect between the social purposes that open universities proclaim and how well they fulfill them, **Daniel** revisits his concept of the "iron triangle" of access, cost, and quality, and asks how it applies to distance education with today's technologies. He goes on to explore the contemporary implications of a 1970's distinction between independent and interactive learning activities. Informed by a 2017 meeting of Open University executive heads, he looks at economic models, technology, governance, and teaching issues as open universities endeavour to thrive in an era when online offerings from campus institutions are expanding rapidly.

Conclusion

None of the concerns and challenges posed above takes anything away from the very significant achievement of many open universities over the last half-century. It is true to say that they have changed the understanding of who can go to university from the perspectives of gender, geography, ethnicity, disability, and social class. Open universities have won many battles of ideas about accessibility and how technologies can be used to create systems of learning, teaching, and student support at large scale.

It should be noted that many countries with large populations distributed over large distances have not followed the open university model. Examples include Russia, Brazil, Australia, the USA, and France. While the profiles of post-secondary provision in these countries is very different, it can be concluded that there is no absolute necessity to establish an open university in either rich or middle-income countries. In other words, having an open university is a choice. We hope the following rich accounts of open universities from all around the world will strengthen the analysis of what they have achieved, and how they might continue to occupy leadership positions in the provision of higher education for many more countries. It is our conviction that sober reflection is necessary to strengthen the case that open universities, as an educational model, will be as influential in the future as they have been in the past.

References

Paul, R. (1990). *Open learning and open management, leadership and integrity in distance education.* London: Kogan Page.

Paul, R. (2015). *Leadership under fire: The challenging role of the Canadian university president* (2nd ed.). Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press.

Paul, R. (2016). Open universities: A storied past but an uncertain future? (J. Xiao, Trans.). *Distance Education in China, 11*, 5-16. DOI:10.13541/j.cnki.chinade.2016.11.001. (In Chinese)

Perry, W. (1976). *Open university, a personal account.* Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Tait, A. (2008a). What are open universities for? *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning, 23*(2), 85–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680510802051871

Tait, A. (2008b). Leadership development for distance and e-learning. In T. Evans, M. Haughey, & D. Murphy (Eds.), *International handbook of distance education* (pp. 499-511). Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing.

Tait, A. (2018). Open universities: The next phase. *Asian Association of Open Universities Journal, 13*(1), 13–23. https://doi.org/10.1108/AAOUJ-12-2017-0040

Weinbren, D. (2015). *The open university, a history.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.