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# THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF THE UNITED KINGDOM: THE FIRST 50 YEARS

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Reino Unido

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## INTRODUCTION

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The Open University U.K, founded in 1969 as the first university bearing this name, can be called the mother of all open universities, with now more than 80 independent open universities around the world. To be sure they do not all follow the same organizational structure, although many do. But the core institutional model of large-scale distance and *online* teaching with unusually flexible and open entry requirements and systems of student support, to allow a wider than usual range of students to participate, is a common feature.

## FOUNDATION

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There are several historical developments that help set out the context for the establishment of the Open University U.K. The first is that in 1960 the

continuation rate from school to university in the UK lay at approximately 5% only, ending that decade doubling to some 10% following major expansion with around 23 new universities during that decade (Robertson 2010). Almost all the places in the newly expanded Higher Education sector were however taken up by school leavers, with the adult part-time learner served almost entirely in evening classes by Birkbeck College in London, and the University of London itself with External degrees freely available more widely throughout the U.K. and indeed the world. Higher Education was an opportunity for the elite, dominated by children from middle class families, and more by men than women. Both the historical backlog and the continuing injustice in life opportunity constrained by social class and gender provided one stream in the Labour Party Prime Minister Harold Wilson's first proposal in 1963 that an additional new university but of a new kind should be established to address such inequities. The second stream of the Prime Minister's concern was that the possibilities of broadcasting has not been optimally deployed for formal educational purposes, and he thus placed the use of technology for education at the heart of what was to become the Open University institutional model, which he named 'The University of the Air' (Perry p 8). Alongside the commitments to social justice and educational technology was the recognition that the UK needed greater numbers of technologists and scientists to provide the skills and knowledge basis for a modernizing economy (Weinstein p8). Wilson entrusted the still embryonic idea to his Minister for the Arts Jenny Lee, who is widely given the credit for making a reality of it, and in doing so adapting the original vision in some very important ways.

Weinstein in his history of the Open University U.K. takes up Christenson's notion of disruptive innovation only to reject it somewhat dismissively (Weinstein 2015 p17-19). However, a few key characteristics of how universities were understood to function, and for whom, were disrupted, not to say upended by the Open University UK. They have had an impact world-wide. The first of these is that the Open University UK, as the latest of the 1960's new universities designed to move the UK from an elite to a mass Higher Education system, decided to have no entry qualifications for undergraduate admissions. This at a stroke changed something hitherto fundamental to the functioning and character of Higher Education, that the university chose its students, as happened through competitive entry and selective interview at all other universities. However, at the OU U.K. the students

chose the university. There were for the first 20 years or more applications to the Open University than there were places, as there were for the more selective universities, but the Open University used a first come first served queuing system to manage its admissions, not selection. While this has not been widely copied in open universities around the world, who usually, but not always, ask for High School Leaving Certificate, the Open University UK has stuck to this fundamental reversal of the power relationship between student and institution for more than 50 years. The numbers of students in the first year of undergraduate study has had a consistent division between approximately one third each of those with more than the minimum grades for university admission, those with the minimum, and those with less than the minimum who would normally not be able to apply for university entry.

This radical approach to student admission has changed the understanding of who could go to university, from the stereotypical but not misleading picture of 18 or 19 year old middle class young person, more often a boy than a girl, to a university of adults in all sorts of occupations, and from the beginning with a larger proportion of women to men than in the rest of the University sector, increasing to more or less equal proportions. The predominant characteristics of the OU student was not of someone who had had no post-school education, but of someone who had had some but wanted more. There were therefore large cohorts of non-graduate schoolteachers, engineers in technician roles, IT workers in the then embryonic telecommunications and computing industries, and later managers and would-be managers, nurses and allied health workers, legal workers, laboratory workers, and so on. The picture is one of individuals already in a process of social mobility not so much those for whom this was the first step (McKenzie, Calder and Swift). However, we should not overlook the large numbers of women home workers, for whom the Open University provided a route for study flexible enough to accommodate the demands of parenting and home management, and the small but until the recent period important number of people who had retired and were studying more or less exclusively for reasons of personal fulfilment rather than vocational advancement, career change or professional development. Finally, there were several student audiences who had never been served adequately. First and foremost were students with disability, and to this day the Open University UK supports more students with disability than all the other universities in the UK put together and can fairly be said to have pioneered the recognition that stu-

dents with a range of functional disabilities could and should be supported to study. Other smaller groups have had their study facilitated by the flexible and student-centered nature of Open University operations and systems, including students in prison and in the military.

## EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

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The second dimension of disruption that the Open University UK brought was in its deployment of a range of technologies, assembled as noted above in new ways. Prime Minister Harold Wilson's vision of the use of TV and radio was brought forward, though not as the primary means of teaching as he envisioned in his so-called 'University of the Air', but as supplementary enrichment in what was created as a multi-media teaching system. TV and radio had hitherto been seen primarily as media enjoyed at leisure, albeit including informal education as well as entertainment and news and current affairs. Produced in a core partnership with the BBC, those skeptical of the very concept of change from conventional approaches to teaching were able to refer sarcastically to the use of TV and radio as inappropriate for a university with any claim to seriousness. The ways in which BBC producers worked as partners with Open University academics moved swiftly away from televised lectures – this more than 50 years ago – to using TV to provide visual explanations more effectively than text, such as three-dimensional graphics for Mathematics, as well as enormously enriching site visits for subjects such as geology or art history. The broadcasts, which were available to the public at large not only Open University students acted as a compelling shop window for those with an informal interest in learning, not only for students gaining credit towards a qualification.

Other major innovations on the academic front lay in the development of methods for creating texts for active learning that initiated an internal conversation for the individual learner in his or her home and were not in any sense old-fashioned textbooks. In the light of the open entry admission policy, the Open University took very seriously the range of academic backgrounds especially in the first or so-called Foundation Year, when the student was supported in study skills, and supported in his or her progress by

an active tutor with a maximum of some 20-25 students per tutorial group. The development of the tutor role was not in itself an Open University innovation, but to make it central to the student academic and individual life on such as scale was an innovation, as well as the support and quality assurance systems that will be examined below. Of importance also was the development of so-called Home Experiment Kits, sets of equipment delivered to the student's home that allowed the student to conduct scientific and technological experiments, and learn the discipline of recording results.

It is worth saying at this point those professionals who were not academic staff but in in academic and operational management made up, and indeed today make up most of the professional level staff, due to the complexity of the industrialized nature of a university that grew at its largest in the years 2000-2010 to 250000 students. While this is dwarfed by the scale of the Open University of China and the Indira Gandhi National Open University of India, which work in millions, it nonetheless represents a mega-university in Daniel's definition (Daniel 1998).

## COURSES AND CURRICULUM

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There are several aspects of Open University innovation in the field of curriculum and programs of study which have not recently received attention in the same way as have the innovative features of student admissions and audience, and educational technology.

The Open University UK has attempted to make its study systems genuinely student centered, in recognition of the wide range of educational backgrounds and life contexts, in particular with undergraduate students, it seeks at all times pro-actively to reach out to help students succeed. The initial and very influential model of a multi- disciplinary Foundation Year was pioneered in the UK by the Open University, providing a broad and multi-disciplinary introduction to the Humanities, the Social Sciences, Mathematics, Science and Technology, broadly speaking the early Faculty structure, later complemented by Educational Studies, Health and Social Welfare and Business Studies and Law. The undergraduate degree structure

was for the first 20 or so restricted to BA only, whatever the subject areas, as was the case in the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge. However, pressure from students led to differentiating between BA and BSc before again primarily because of student pressure introduced so-called Named Degrees were introduced in order, so students argued, to have more market currency.

Most importantly the Open University UK pioneered the use of modular structures for its degrees, allowing students to construct credit accumulation pathways flexibly from whatever subject area they wanted as well as within more defined subject specific groupings. This also permitted breaks in study without the threat that credit would be lost, in recognition of the challenges of working and family life that adult students manage. Finally, and radically for its time the Open University permitted the count of credit from other institutions to be counted for an Open University qualification, again recognizing that what counted towards a qualification was what a student could demonstrate s/he had learned, not necessarily what the Open University alone had taught them. While the Open University is no longer alone in doing this, it is still by no means universal in U.K. Higher Education.

A further area of innovation much discussed in the early period was the concept of the course team that is a collective of academic and other professionals who together put together modules, through discussion, sometimes very lively, of curriculum content and pedagogy. This was an innovation in the sense that it removed the privacy of individual teaching which was the dominant model of lectures and seminars in universities, a one man or woman responsibility that was not open to wider institutional transparency and has subsequently widely influenced learning and teaching in Higher Education. It was argued that this enormous collective and indeed costly commitment to the production of courses and modules led to the widely agreed high quality of learning materials, widely agreed that is in much of the Higher Education sector where they found their way formally or often informally as support to teaching in other universities.

## STUDENT SUPPORT

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A significant marker of difference with preceding correspondence teaching schools lay in the Open University's early and continuing commitment to substantial and individualized student support. The core idea was that in a mass university the student should still feel that she or he was known, supported, and valued as an individual learner.

Core to this is the role of the tutor, a part-time staff member often teaching in another university or an academically qualified person with part time or home management responsibilities who wanted to work in this way. The tutor had a group of no more than 25 students and had the responsibility for grading the continuous assessment which provided about half of overall assessment when combined with an examination or end of model project. The tutor role contained a few then innovative features, not least the focus in correspondence teaching on developmental feedback, not just grading. In fact, the developmental feedback on a student's assignment was core to the teaching as a whole. Further the tutor role was constructed to be pro-active in reaching out to each student, not only to support those in difficulty but to support the good student to become excellent. Thus, while the tutor was a part-time and in formal terms a marginal member of staff, their role in student-facing activity was central, and represented to a significant extent what the Open University experience was to the student. Tutors and advisors in the first 30 years of the University's life were supported in some 12 or 13 Regional Centers, or National Centers in the case of Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, with tutors offering face to face tutorials across some 260 study centers in the UK. In this period before the advent of digital technology, the only way it was understood one could be near students was to have an infrastructure that diminished geographical distance, as well of course as telephone contact. All this was to change from 1995 or so onwards as the digital revolution set challenges for the analogue solutions that the Open University had created, and place as a core organizing principle for student support began to give way to the new desirables of immediacy and national level expertise which *online* solutions began, with greater and lesser success, to offer. In other words, advice and support to students began to be provided more through *online* tutorials, email and Call Centers for telephone support, adopting approaches developed in commercial *online*



customer practice (Tait 2014). The majority of Regional Centers in England were abolished. The new practices of Learning Analytics were pioneered in the Open University U.K. building with digital solutions out of the many years of practice in intervening actively to support student progress and using survey data to feedback to course teams for purposes of quality enhancement. This was a difficult revolution for the Open University, as for many open universities around the world, with the affordances of digital technologies gradually revealing themselves, and much difficulty in taking some students and some staff on the journey that the digital revolution demanded.

## QUALITY

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It is important to discuss the notion of Quality and Quality Assurance in any account of innovation in the Open University UK, not least as it was the first Open University and thus pioneered this complex area. The area was complex because we must distinguish between perceived quality, as well as actual quality, and this latter is complex because we must unpack what the legitimate and most important measurements of quality are.

The issue of perceived quality relates to what our societies in all their variety, but especially the media and its influence on popular opinion, say about an open university, and this is open to much subjective misunderstanding as well as fair and responsible critique. If in the U.K., and I suggest in many countries, there is discussion about 'the best universities', it will in everyday conversation refer as a matter of course to the highly selective, research focused and older universities in the country. However, while these universities do without doubt represent excellence in their own terms, for example having the school leavers with the highest school leaving qualifications and the most impressive research outcomes from their academics, any account of 'the best universities' should also include those who face the most demanding challenges in terms of teaching and student support for a much wider range of student educational backgrounds. This is not to dismiss the discourse of the excellence of the elite universities, but to insist on a place in the discussion of excellence for those universities, and an open university is

preeminent in this category, who seek to undertake a much more ambitious task in the building a mass Higher Education system with a wide variety of students. Thus, part of the task in the Quality arena for an open university is one of advocacy for this wider and more nuanced understanding of what Quality is.

Core to discussion of Quality in the Open University U.K., as for all open universities, is the issue of student completion, progression and drop-out. We must avoid facile comparison of student success with highly selective universities as against those like open universities which deliberately take risk in admitting non-standard students to Higher Education. The Open University U.K. with an admission policy of having no entry qualifications has had for more than 50 years something like 50% success rate in the first year of undergraduate study. While the institution should always seek to improve, and it is fair to say it does, the success rates for highly selective universities recruiting full time-students amongst High School leavers are always going to be much higher than part-time adult learners managing work and family, and having for the most part less privileged social and educational backgrounds

Quality assurance in Higher Education in the UK as a field of practice it can legitimately be said was substantially invented by the Open University UK. While Quality assurance is now universal in Higher Education, and not just as an internal process but also with Government directed external Quality Assurance processes, the setting of university mission, targets and monitoring of operational achievements in Higher Education in the U.K. were pioneered by the Open University and are core to its innovative character.

## THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION

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The digital revolution of the last 30 years or so has set substantial challenges to the Open University, as indeed to many universities. For some staff the foundational assemblage of technologies made up the defining character of the university, and to move away from them was to betray the vision of access and inclusion that were seen as central to the Open University's charac-

ter. Most important was managing the pace of change, as students and staff became increasingly open to digital basics, such as having an email address and using the web for daily business. When could the Open University say the tipping point came, and when if digital innovation was not adopted the interests of a minority were holding up the interests of the majority?

Today the Open University makes it essential for all students to use the web, makes it compulsory for assignments to be written or produced on a computer and uploaded to the tutor and the university *online*, and offers tuition *online* as well as in some cases maintaining some face-to-face tutorial meetings. Course materials are all online, but several courses continue to send them out in print also. Many modules have moved away from end of course examinations over the last 20 years, as continuous assessment supported by the tutor role provided a robust and reliable judgement of individual student performance as well as support to learning. Where end of course assessment was still wanted projects in many cases have taken the place of examinations. So, in 2020, the year of the COVID pandemic, the Open University UK was not seriously challenged as were many campus and distance universities by the inability to hold classic end of course examinations in an examination hall. The Open University U.K. graduate can claim justifiably that she or he has sophisticated digital learning skills, both individually and on a networked basis with peers and tutors, all valuable for career development or career change.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

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I have made this analysis of the Open University UK with the concept of innovation at its institutional core and have argued elsewhere that to maintain its place in an ecosystem of Higher Education that is itself always in a process of change, innovation for an Open University needs to be maintained and not abandoned (Tait 2008; Tait 2018). The question should be considered then as to how innovation in the Open University UK is to be maintained today.

The new landscapes for technology supported practice in education con-

texts still present many opportunities, and it is here that innovation may identify new audiences, and that the Open University U.K. may find the best opportunities to lead Higher Education.

The most exciting range of possibilities come with the open education resources movement and the combination of the near total penetration of the UK population by the internet. The landscape of informal digital learning is based on the very widespread social practice of regular internet use for day-to-day purposes, with some 95% of the population having accessed it in the last 3 months (Baker *et al.* 2020). While access continues to be an issue which the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown into sharp relief for children in poorer families and less advantaged areas, the extraordinary phenomenon of OER's over the last 10 years or more have seen informal learning opportunities fuse with the advent of portable devices such as smart phones and tablet computers, with broadband available in many public spaces and travel hubs as well as at home.

The Open University U.K. has been at the heart of this nexus of innovation from the start, with the creation of Open Learn, an OER site freely open to all, with decommissioned courses and a proportion of all current courses, which has been used by many millions of informal learners. The creation of the Open Learn site has been complemented at the same time by the leading role taken by the Open University U.K. in the MOOC movement, not only creating its own MOOCs but even more significantly building a MOOC platform, FutureLearn, which is used by many of the top universities in the English-speaking world as the platform for their MOOCs. FutureLearn has invented a number of sector-leading characteristics in the MOOC field, such as being designed from the start for mobile devices and using a multi-media pedagogy that supports student engagement and interaction. The Open University U.K continues to innovate in finding sustainable financial solutions, for FutureLearn and MOOCs, with a range of income-generating opportunities, including end of course certificates, aiming to invent new and appropriate micro-credentials that will support adults in their personal and employment related development. In conclusion it is fair to say that the Open University UK has maintained its place as an innovative Higher Education institution after 50 years.

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