

From the Triangle to the Pentagon: Open Universities in the 21st Century



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Introduction

It is a pleasure to be here. I have found that the Asian Association of Open Universities is the most effective and interesting of the international groupings of distance educators. The common threads of geography and mission that bind your institutions together, and the scale of some of your operations, gives intellectual acuity and a shared purpose to the discussions that take place here. I accepted your invitation when I was the Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO, but when I moved to the Commonwealth of Learning maintaining this engagement was not a difficult decision.

A number of Commonwealth countries are represented here and, in any case, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL for short) does not discriminate between countries when there is an opportunity to advance the thinking and practice of technology-mediated education in general and distance education in particular.

It is also a privilege to be back in China to this vibrant city of Shanghai. As Ian Brown wrote in *Shanghai Surprise*, 'I was amazed and alarmed by the sheer speed of Shanghai, and how hard people work'. One

group that has been working hard and successfully for many years is the staff of the Shanghai TV University and it is a pleasure to congratulate Dr Zhang and his colleagues on the opening of their new electronic campus.

I realise that I am beginning to acquire the status of an elder statesman in open and distance learning, because it is now 32 years since I first came into contact with ODL. As an assistant professor of metallurgical engineering at the University of Montreal I spent the summer of 1972 as a visiting intern at the UK Open University, then in the infancy of its second year of operation.

The experience changed my life. The scale and scope of the UKOU, the dedication of the students and the staff, and the use of technology and media were for me a revelation on the road to Milton Keynes. It was a revelation of a revolution in the making. I wanted to be part of it and I joined the team creating the Télé-université soon after I returned to Canada. I was lucky enough to be standing on the bottom step of the distance-education escalator when it started to move. Since then I have had a most fulfilling career watching open and distance learning develop and making my small contribution to that process.

My greatest satisfaction has been to observe the remarkable emergence of the open universities to their present prominence.

I think of the UKOU, which in the year that I left to go to UNESCO stood at number five in the rankings of teaching quality, just above my alma mater, Oxford. By then the UKOU had far more students than the combined enrolment of all British universities at the time that its creation was announced in the 1960s. I observe IGNOU, now topping a million students itself and providing the hub for an increasingly vibrant network of state open universities across India. IGNOU is now preparing for an even larger impact through its new access to India's new satellite channels.

I look at our host, the Shanghai TVU, and admire the way that it has made the difficult transition from the old Chinese Radio and TV University system, where students were told to enrol by the state factories that employed them, to today's market system. I also applaud the way that STVU has made the e-world its own - witness this new campus. I might add that the most useful piece of equipment that I now own was given me on my last visit here when the technician handed me my presentation on a data stick. I had never seen one of these wonderful gadgets before but now I never leave home without it. Thank you STVU! My wife has asked me to bring one back for her.

Finally, although I could name others, I consider Athabasca University. When I was vice-president there in the late 1970s I had to lay siege to that great academic citadel of western Canada, the University of British Columbia, in order to get it to recognise Athabasca University credits. Today Athabasca fully deserves its strap line Canada's Open University and regularly comes out top when the quality of its programmes and services are compared to those of other universities by students.

So the world's open universities can take pride in their magnificent achievements over the last forty years. But times change and, as the title of this conference implies, a new century calls us to face new challenges and to adopt new missions, always with the vision of providing quality education for all.

I have entitled this address From the Triangle to the Pentagon: Open Universities in the 21st Century. In the light of current events I hasten to add that I am not talking about the Sunni triangle and the building in Washington from which the war in Iraq is directed. Many of you know my fondness for explaining the success of educational technology in general, and open and distance learning in particular, in terms of an iron triangle made up of the vectors of access, cost and quality. Some colleagues in India even call this the Daniel Triangle, although I disclaim any ownership.

The importance of these three parameters in education is obvious. I first heard them used as a way of analysing developments in higher education when I was a new university president attending one of my first meetings of the Council of Ontario Universities in the mid-1980s. The then president of the University of Toronto, George Connell, used these three vectors to analyse Ontario government policy for higher education and the idea has stayed with me ever since. Today, however, I am going to add two more vectors and look at today's challenges to open universities as a pentagon.

A Changed World

First, however, let me risk some comments about the contemporary world in which the open universities face their new challenges. Logically, there is no reason why the turning of a century or a millennium should lead to a changed world, for it is only a number on a calendar. Yet major changes have taken place since the late 1990s.

The 1990s ended with a dotcom boom, especially in the USA. Other countries feared they would fall further and further behind the powerful American economy. Optimists in the USA argued that the laws of economics had been repealed and that the boom would never end. In the event, of course, the words had hardly left their mouths before the bubble burst and the laws of economics reasserted themselves rather brutally. Then came Osama bin Laden. The actions of his people on 11 September 2001 were not responsible for most of the significant developments of recent years, but somehow his looming presence has thrown these global changes into sharper relief.

We now live in world where the USA has diminished itself. As a former Bush official, Richard Haass, wrote last week, America 'is stretched militarily, in debt financially, divided domestically and unpopular internationally'. The recent actions of the USA have cost it some respect in the world, as evidenced, for example, by a sharp drop in the number of foreign students, except from India, who want to study there. Whether this is because America is less welcoming or because many students have lost the taste for going there is not the point. Attitudes have changed on both sides.

When I joined COL, which is based in Vancouver, I was startled to find that when they have to travel from Vancouver to Australia or New Zealand some of my colleagues take the much longer route via Hong Kong simply to avoid the officious hassles of transit through Honolulu or Los Angeles. It's a straw in the wind, but travelling from Canada to Australasia via China, instead of America, is a metaphor for the changes that are occurring.

Europe is grappling with the expansion of its own ambitious union of states and Japan is only beginning to emerge from the economic doldrums that have diminished its stature too.

The early years of this century look like being a tale of two countries, China and India. Charles Dickens' opening words to his book, *A Tale of Two Cities*, ring true: 'it was the best of times, it was the worst of times'. We live in a dangerous and uncertain world, yet the peoples of China and India, who make up a large proportion of humankind, are rapidly increasing their standard of living and their status in the world.

That respected bellwether of international trends, Lee Kwan Yew, now known as the Minister Mentor in Singapore, recently told his compatriots that they should henceforth spend less time emulating North America and Europe and pay more attention to India and China. Today I shall take his advice and use India as an example of the world into which the open universities of Asia are evolving.

Converging universities

If I have to identify a single trend to encapsulate the new environment into which open universities must evolve, it is the convergence of different traditions of higher education, partly as a result of the convergence of their teaching methods with the arrival of eLearning. This coming together means that governments increasingly view their universities and colleges as single higher education systems. While recognising the diversity of those systems, they now expect all institutions to espouse some common aims and values.

Open universities and conventional universities have converged in the minds of governments and, increasingly, in the minds of our students. Our own work must reflect that reality. I sometimes use the iron triangle of access, cost and quality to explain the success of the mega-universities. The triangle assumes that societies and governments want greater access, lower costs and higher quality. It is a way of recalling graphically how conventional classroom education has difficulty in responding those three demands simultaneously. Those basic demands are still there, but governments today have added two others.

I am indebted to the visionary chairman of India's University Grants Committee, Professor Arun Nigavekar, for the idea of expressing the expanded requirements as a pentagon. My three vectors of access, cost and quality still appear, but there are two new sides in the Nigavekar Pentagon, relevance and governance. I shall ask how they might apply to open universities and then return to the other three sides and try to give some further insights into that more familiar territory.

One of India's great strengths is the attention that it gives to planning and to policy frameworks. In our own field of open and distance learning I know of no other government, except possibly and more recently South Africa, that has incorporated the development and expansion of ODL into a national policy framework with the same thoroughness as India. That policy framework, with its goal of having 40% of Indian higher education students in ODL, explains why the development of IGNOU and the state open universities has been so impressive, even if not all the elements of the policy have yet been implemented.

Here I shall highlight some of the key principles of the policy vision of India's University Grants

Committee and look at their implications for open universities. I apologise to Professor Nigavekar and to our Indian colleagues if I fail to do proper justice to the vision.

Knowledge: the driving force

The first core principle is the role of knowledge as the driving force for the development of the economy and society. We hear this so often these days that we tend to treat it as a platitude. However, this principle is now the practical foundation for policy in China, as it develops an economy focused particularly on manufacturing, and also in India, with its greater focus on software and services.

A first implication of this principle is that the world of education, with its emphasis on academic ideals, cultural values and ideas, has to converge with the world of trade, with its focus on borderless education and the conversion of knowledge into wealth. In linking teaching to national development open universities have a good record.

However, the other implication of treating knowledge as the driving force for development is to attach greater importance research, which is more challenging. A prime reason why the academic quality of the UK Open University was acknowledged so quickly after its creation was that its founding vice-chancellor, Walter Perry, made research crucial to its mission from day one. Other open universities, which began without the very strong political support and autonomy that the UKOU enjoyed, have found it more difficult to develop research activity. But I urge you to do so in spite of the difficulties.

Your technological base gives open universities a comparative advantage in research on applications of technology, which are very important to modern societies. Furthermore, Professor Nigavekar argues that the 21st century will be the century of the human and social sciences because only they can address the complexities of modern societies. If that proves to be true, open universities could have an advantage there as well.

Connectivity

A second principle in Indian higher education policy is the importance of connectivity. Two reasons for the importance of connectivity are that it enhances quality, because it gives students and staff easy access to the world's knowledge, and that it promotes equity by levelling the playing field between rural colleges and urban universities. Connectivity enriches the academic and professional environment everywhere. Professor Nigavekar is passionate about connectivity. 'We want them to get addicted', he says.

Your open universities are in a position of strength when it comes to connectivity. Just look around you here at the Shanghai TVU. Furthermore, open universities were the first institutions in higher education take the connectivity off campus and into the homes of our students on a large scale. You must maintain this leadership.

Relevance

The third principle, captured directly in one of the new vectors in the pentagon, is relevance. In India 83% of students are taking Arts, Social Science, Law and Commerce, partly because the fees for these subjects are lower. The problem is not with the subjects themselves. I just quoted the Chairman of India's University Grants Commission to the effect that the 21st century will see a resurgence of the human and social sciences. The problem is that too often these subjects are taught cheaply, without sound fundamentals, and without good materials. The result is that they do not give students the intellectual and practical skills, not least of entrepreneurship, that lead to employment or self-employment.

To address this problem the Indian vision calls for combined studies, where students do a regular degree and an employment-related diploma simultaneously, and also for multi-institution study.

I observe that some open universities are well equipped to go further in this direction. IGNOU long ago swung its curriculum away from traditional degrees and towards practical diplomas and certificates. Some open universities already have a large proportion of students who are simultaneously enrolled at another institution. Open universities are also ideally placed to develop the materials, including the eLearning materials, that can strengthen teaching programmes at all institutions.

Governance

Continuing around the Nigavekar pentagon we come to governance. Most governments are now trying to achieve a difficult balance. On the one hand they accept the evidence that when institutions are given greater autonomy, within an agreed financial and governance framework, they do a better job for society. On the other hand the public good requires governments to continue to make big investments in higher education.

India did not progress from a hundred thousand students in 1950 to nine million today by sitting back and letting the market take care of expanding the system. Furthermore making the system more equitable, which in India has meant that 23% of today's students are the first in the family to have access to higher education, compared to a figure of only 0.5% in 1950, also requires government involvement.

The challenge for governments today, which must seek contributions from private sources to sustain vastly expanded HE systems, is to balance the private good and the public good. The dilemma for governments is to create regulatory frameworks that protect the consumer without stifling innovation and creativity. The challenge for open universities is to achieve their own balance of the public and private good. In this respect you are in an enviable situation. On the one hand, creating a national or state open university is a public intervention par excellence, reflecting the determination of a government to expand educational opportunities for its people. On the other hand, private sector provision of ODL is older than public provision.

Open universities are intrinsically more commercial in spirit than campus universities. I found that being vice-chancellor of the UK Open University was a much more satisfying job than being vice-chancellor of

Oxford University because the UKOU could set its own fees and thus exercise more control over its operations than Oxford could.

A great strength of some of your open universities is that you operate largely or completely on fee income. This makes your discussions with your ministers of education much more friendly than if you come to them with a begging bowl for public funds. If the UKOU had been even more commercial it might have been able to bring to maturity the US Open University that it created in the late 1990s. However, we found that the investment of funds needed to take the USOU to financial independence was too large for a publicly funded institution to put at risk.

All open universities are complex organisations and some are very large. This means that governance and management are usually good. An open university either functions very well or doesn't function at all. Some of the state open universities in India vegetated and went nowhere for some years after their creation until a competent and dynamic vice-chancellor came along and managed the institution to growth and success. Some of those committed leaders of Indian state open universities are here with us today and I salute them.

Access

Let me end with a few observations about the three other sides of the pentagon, which made up my own iron triangle. Governments continue to look to you to widen access. They also look to you to incorporate new technologies in an exemplary fashion.

Here I first urge you to bear in mind that these two governmental wishes may not always be compatible. The mega-universities achieved their numerical success on the basis of the mass media. The Internet is not a mass medium but a one-to-one medium. The Internet can do great things for quality and relevance but if you rely on it too much, your access mission may slip. That's why I am delighted to see Asian open universities, like those in India, getting greater access to TV and radio broadcasting.

My second point is that there is a whole new mission waiting for you in the international development agenda, by which I mean the Millennium Development Goals. All these goals, whether they address poverty, hunger, primary education, health or a sustainable environment, require a massive increase in human learning if they are to be achieved. They mean bringing useful and desired information to millions of farmers; they mean training and retraining millions of teachers, they mean bringing messages about keeping healthy to millions of people, especially mothers and youths.

Conventional methods will not do the job. The technology-mediated approaches to learning that were pioneered and perfected by open universities must be put to use. Some of your universities are already doing this. I urge all of you to see where you can get involved. If you are in a Commonwealth country COL is eager to partner with you, because this development agenda is an increasingly central part of our work.

Quality

Most governments now have quality assurance systems for higher education and we often complain about how burdensome they are. My own experience is that state quality assurance systems are good news for open universities. There is no question but that the UKOU's reputation benefited from its steady rise to fifth place in the national teaching quality table. I just said that an open university tends either to function well or not to function at all. If you are in the first category you will usually do well in quality comparisons.

Nevertheless, although the UKOU in Britain gained from being assessed in the same way as all other universities, you should not volunteer for this treatment if the QA system is immature or not sufficiently formative. In India, for example, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council gives conventional universities a summative overall grade that last for five years. I quite understand that the open universities, which are still in a developmental stage, need something more formative and continuous.

More generally, my message to you is that you should never relax on the quality front. The public, rightly, takes time to accord a good reputation to a university. Do good quality work and your reputation will grow with time. In the conventional system, and particularly among the elite institutions, you will always have enemies who make critical comments about the quality of open universities. Do not give them any ammunition for their criticism but try to bring them on board by involving them in your institutions, as advisors, as writers, as TV personalities, or as tutors. Putting senior academics from elite universities in your TV programmes is a particularly good tactic because most elite academics are megalomaniacs and they love the publicity.

Costs

I turn, finally, to costs. Whether it is a fair expectation or not, governments expect open universities to be less expensive than conventional universities. They particularly like it when the scale of your operation enables you to be financially independent of the public purse. This means that you must keep your cost structures under control. New technologies come along and require new investments, which you must be ready to make. New technologies also have different curves when you plot total cost against student numbers. Be aware of these before you commit yourselves irrevocably to the roll-out of a new medium. Remember also that what counts is the effectiveness and the cost-effectiveness of your overall teaching and learning system. Many colleagues here know my own habit of seeing the teaching and learning system of an open university as a blend of independent and interactive activities. I shall not bore you by going through it again. My simple point is that the technologies you can blend, and their different contributions to independent and interactive learning, have become much richer and more diverse since Marquis and I first wrote about getting the mixture of independence and interaction right back in the 1970s.

Conclusion

It is time to conclude. I have suggested that in the first part of this century the two titans of China and India will be particularly influential in world affairs. This is an exciting time to be an open university in

Asia and I hope that the AAOU will remain a vibrant association and an attractive platform for cooperation.

Earlier this month The Economist newspaper, alluding to the disparity of size between India and its neighbours, talked about 'flies around an elephant'. I hope that the big open universities in the region will not treat the small ones like flies or indulge in forms of academic neo-colonialism or intellectual imperialism. You have much to gain from working together.

Above all, remember that you are open universities. The precise interpretation of 'open' will vary from country to country. Here it may be openness in admissions; there it may be an open pedagogy that treats the student as an intellectual equal; somewhere else it may mean special giving special flexibility to students to design their own intellectual pathways.

However your open university defines its openness; treasure it, nurture it and develop it. Universities are converging. Other universities will claim that they are opening up like you. That should please all of us, because it means that the revolution of values that the open universities launched is penetrating the whole system.

Be aware that the onus for reinterpreting the notion of openness as circumstances change will remain with the open universities. The notion of exclusivity, attitudes to students are that at best parentalist and at worst authoritarian, and the concept of the student as a vessel to be filled - all these traditions run deep in the academic world.

You are the people who must take the vision of openness forward. You are the people who must renew the ideal of the open university. Even as open universities lose some of their distinctiveness within higher education systems, it is your duty to see that openness remains a distinctive ideal. Millions of students have found in the open universities a special response to their desire for growth towards greater intellectual autonomy and the enhanced confidence and self-esteem that it brings. See to it that this opportunity remains available to the even greater numbers that will seek higher learning in the years ahead.