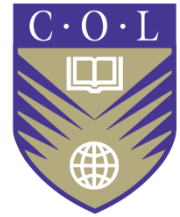


# *Open Universities: Past, Present and Future*

---



*World Open University Presidents' Summit*

*Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University*

*Bangkok, 8 September 2008*

*(Postponed)*

*Sir John Daniel & Professor Asha Kanwar  
Commonwealth of Learning*

It is a great honour to have been asked to deliver the opening keynote address to this World Open University Presidents' summit. I bring the best wishes of the Commonwealth of Learning to Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University on its 30th anniversary and proudly add my personal congratulations as an honorary graduate of STOU.

I have prepared these remarks with my colleague Professor Asha Kanwar, Vice-President and Programme Director of the Commonwealth of Learning, who served previously at the Indira Gandhi National Open University, IGNOU.

In this keynote address we shall try to combine some subjective recollections from our personal experience of open universities with elements of a more objective analysis. We have entitled these remarks: *Open Universities: Past Present and Future*. After exploring the origins of open universities and their current profile we shall look at what is required from open universities in the 21st century. But let me start by describing how and why Professor Kanwar and I got involved with open universities.

## *Personal Experiences of Open Universities*

My own full-time university education was very traditional, not to say medieval. I spent four years at Oxford University for a BA in Metallurgy and another four at the University of Paris for a DSc in Nuclear Metallurgy. Towards the end of my time in Paris, before I had really started seeking a job, I was recruited as an assistant professor at Ecole Polytechnique, the engineering faculty of the Université de Montréal, to teach metallurgical engineering. Once installed in Montreal I decided that since I was embarked on an academic career I ought to learn something about the scientific study of education. I thought this might help me become a more professional teacher.

Looking around the Montreal universities for a programme that I could study part time, the most promising possibility was a Master's programme in Educational Technology at the then Sir George Williams University. It was a two-year full-time programme that included a three-month internship and a research thesis as well as the coursework. I enrolled in 1970 as a part-time student, little knowing that it would take me 25 years to complete the requirements and get my MA (Ed. Tech).

But I get ahead of myself. The programme required a three-month internship in an organisation that was using educational technology. As I started thinking about where to go for this, news reports appeared of a British project, the Open University that was capturing the imagination of educators and politicians worldwide by using educational technology successfully to scale up access to higher education. David Hawkrige, the Director of the Open University's Institute of Educational Technology, took me on as an unpaid visiting lecturer and I spent three months in Milton Keynes in the summer of 1972.

It was a life-changing experience. Everything impressed me and I felt that I was seeing the future of higher education.

First there was the scale of the University. This was only the second year of the UKOU's operation but already there were 40,000 students.

Second, the idealism of the place was infectious. Here were people who truly believed in giving students access to learning and to helping them achieve success.

Third, I was captivated by the sheer intellectual energy that permeated the institution, visible in the course teams that developed the curricula and study materials.

Fourth, the use of media was scintillating. I spent every spare moment viewing or listening to the TV and radio programmes being produced by the BBC.

Fifth, although I could go on, I was overwhelmed by the eagerness of the students. I spent a week at one of the residential summer schools and found students of all ages and backgrounds spending all day in laboratories and field trips and all night, it seemed, continuing the academic discussions in the bar.

Here, I thought, was a teaching and learning system that not only operated at scale, but did so with an intellectual vitality far greater than anything I had encountered at Oxford, in Paris, or at the University of Montreal. I had seen the future of higher education and I wanted to be part of it.

I was lucky. An opportunity arose soon after I returned to Canada after my conversion at Milton Keynes. The University of Quebec had decided to create the Télé-université, an open university for Quebec. I joined the founding team and moved to Quebec City. My colleagues at the University of Montreal thought I was mad to give up a nice academic post in a strong campus university for such an adventure. But I quickly began to enjoy the new challenge: the excitement of innovation and the pleasure of serving students who were often the first in their families to have the opportunity of university study.

Four years later I moved to Athabasca University, the open university of Alberta and western Canada and had another wonderful opportunity to implement distance education under the leadership of Athabasca's charismatic president, Sam Smith. He later persuaded me that after these years in new open universities I

should establish my credibility within the conventional university system, so I went to Concordia University, Montreal, as vice-rector, academic and then to Laurentian University, in Ontario as president.

Laurentian was what we now call a dual-mode university. It taught on campus and at a distance. I think it did a reasonably good job. Nevertheless, the experience convinced me that a single mode open university can do a much better job than a dual-mode institution in achieving both scale and quality in distance education.

After six years at Laurentian I was appointed to my dream job: vice-chancellor of the UK Open University. 18 years after I had spent a life-changing three months as an intern in Milton Keynes I returned to head the University for eleven wonderful years before moving on to UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning.

I became even more inspired by the philosophy of the Open University than I had been during my internship and I never made a speech as vice-chancellor without driving home the fundamental purposes of the Open University: to be open as to people, open as to places, open as to methods and open as to ideas.

My co-author, Professor Asha Kanwar, tells me that even though she had seen the energy and enthusiasm of the UK Open University students at their summer schools at the University of Sussex, where she was doing her doctoral studies, it was not until she met Professor Arnold Kettle at Milton Keynes that she realised the full potential and possibility of what open and distance learning could do. Professor Kettle had moved from teaching the favoured few literature students at the University of Leeds to the OU, where he could reach out to thousands in the UK and beyond. His course units on the nineteenth century novel continue to inspire and engage students in remote locations in India and Africa long after Prof Kettle himself has passed on.

Excited by the fact that the words and wisdom of the great teacher can be captured for posterity, Prof Kanwar immediately applied for a job at the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) which was being established at that time. During her career at IGNOU she became Dean of Humanities and later Pro-Vice-Chancellor.

Both Professor Kanwar and I feel that in our work in open universities we have stood on the shoulders of giants. People like Professor Kettle who saw the opportunity to inspire large numbers of students with a love of learning. People like Walter Perry the founding vice-chancellor of the UKOU, who took the job because he believed that the quality of university teaching in Britain was lamentable and wanted to improve it. People like Ram Reddy, who founded the Andhra Pradesh Open University and then went on to establish IGNOU out of the conviction that only new approaches would allow India to expand its provision of higher education to meet the needs of an enormous population.

The 10 million students in 18,000 institutions of higher learning in India today make up less than 8% of the relevant age group. If India is to achieve 15% Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education by 2015, there has to be a major investment in open universities. India now has fourteen open universities in various stages of development, so Prof Ram Reddy's vision of 'the university without walls' is becoming a concrete reality.

I was privileged to meet these and other early leaders of the open-university movement in 1979 when the UK Open University held a conference to mark its tenth anniversary. It was there that I first met Wichit Srisa-an, the founder of our host university, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University. He is another truly great educator who deserves the title 'Thailand's Mr. Education', for, as well as establishing STOU he has served this country as minister of education, deputy minister and president or chairman of numerous universities. No-one has done more to guide the destinies of higher education in Thailand over the last four decades than he.

## The Origins of Open Universities

So we pay a warm tribute to the founders and architects of the world's open universities. Without them we, their successors, would not be holding this conference today. But we begin these remarks by going back to the middle of the 19th century, well before the modern movement to create open universities that began in the 1960s. Several of the trends that define higher education today such as increasing access; offering programmes across national borders; and credit by examination have their origins in the 1800s.

## Innovation by the University of London

In July this year the Commonwealth of Learning teamed up with the University of London to hold its 5th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning. For the University of London this was also the celebration of the 150th anniversary of its external studies programme.

A remarkable book, entitled *The People's University 1858-2008*, was published to mark the occasion. It is a beautifully illustrated account of a programme that has spawned innovation in open education for a hundred and fifty years and produced five Nobel laureates along the way (Jones, 2008).

In 1858 the University of London made the radical innovation of delinking access to its examinations from study in any institution. This opened up the possibility of a university degree to those who had to go on earning a living while they studied, making higher education available to a far wider range of social classes and occupations. It broke the link between place and study.

A magazine published by Charles Dickens coined the term *The People's University* for the new venture and proposed 'the young shoemaker in his garret' as an icon for the new type of student. We all have images of the students we are trying to reach. I remember that Walter Perry told the UKOU staff to create a teaching and learning system that could serve 'a lighthouse keeper on an island off the Scottish coast'.

The People's University provoked a debate on the nature of universities. The three academic models in contention in the mid-nineteenth century still provide frames of reference against which today's open universities are judged. For John Henry (Cardinal) Newman a university was a question of residence. He favoured a "university which did nothing...but merely brought a number of young men together for three or four years".

Speaking about the creation of the University of London from a similar perspective some years earlier, the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge had castigated "lecture bazaars under the absurd name of universities".

But the University of London stood its ground against both lectures and residence. In 1873 Robert Lowe said bluntly, "what I mean by a university is an examining board".

Robert Barnes, one of the London graduates who had led the campaign for the external system, expressed the virtues of examination more eloquently when he said, "the young man who presents himself for examination in the confidence of knowledge acquired by dint of self-denial and self-reliance, brings the strongest presumptive evidence of intellectual and moral culture... Knowledge alone must be tested. There is no substitute for it. The University and the public are not concerned to inquire 'when or where' it was obtained. ...Unlike more worldly stores, knowledge can hardly be acquired dishonestly, or without elevating the character of him who has achieved it".

You have noticed that these nineteenth century luminaries always referred to 'young men'. I ought, therefore, to note that the University of London was also a pioneer in the admission of women, who were passing examinations in the 1860s and admitted to London degrees on an equal status with men in 1878. We all know that in more recent decades open universities have made a signal contribution to giving women access to higher education across the world.

This is not the place to trace the rest of the fascinating history of the London External System, but I do commend the book from which I have quoted, *The People's University*. It shows that over the years the External System has had to address nearly all the ideological and practical issues that open universities face today and its flexibility in so doing has been exemplary.

## Correspondence Education

It also recalls that just as we associate open universities with technology today, the development of the London External System was made possible by the development of the rail networks which were the basis for mail services. In 1837 Isaac Pitman offered the first correspondence course (in Shorthand) even before Britain standardised the *Penny Post* in 1840.

For over a century, until the second half of the 20th century, correspondence education brought great benefits to large numbers of people. This contribution was never properly recognised, partly because it involved individuals learning privately and partly because the correspondence schools were mostly private enterprises. Sadly, it was the very success of the ethical correspondence schools, not least those supporting thousands of the University of London's external students, that encouraged the multiplication of the unethical operators that gave correspondence education a bad name and caused a backlash against it in the 1960s.

## The Multiplication of Open Universities

The University of South Africa (UNISA), which started its distance education operations in 1946, can claim to be the first open university. It had a multi-racial student body throughout the apartheid years although, since it operated by correspondence, the races did not mingle. Today, after a merger with Technikon SA and the distance learning operations of Vista University, UNISA has 250,000 students and operates all over Africa and beyond.

However, it was the establishment of the UK Open University in 1969 that sparked the rapid expansion of open and distance learning from the 1970s. These slides show the growth in the number of open universities in the Commonwealth alone between 1988 and 2008.

Two trends combined in the 1960s to create a revolution that brought together open learning and distance education in an explicit fashion, thus dramatically increasing the impact and effectiveness of both.

First, the 1960s were a time when most governments gave high priority to expanding education at all levels. Second, there was widespread enthusiasm for the effervescent developments of communications technology and mass media. The British Prime Minister Harold Wilson considered television far too important to be a monopoly of entertainment and encouraged the UKOU to use it creatively to bring higher learning to thousands whose aspirations had been frustrated.

We have often talked elsewhere about the fundamental role of media and technology in creating the open-university revolution. Throughout history, education has been constrained by the iron triangle of quality, access and cost. When access is increased, people fear loss of quality. If costs are increased to prevent loss of quality access will go down again, and so on. For conventional classroom education there is no way around this conundrum. Open and distance learning is revolutionary because it does allow, through division of labour, specialization, and the economies of scale created by media and technology, to reconfigure the access-quality-cost triangle. Access can be increased, quality can be improved and costs can be cut, all at the same time. This is the revolution that open universities have achieved.

As governments began to understand the nature of this revolution numerous open universities were established in developing countries across the world. Some soon became popular enough to register over 100,000 students each and I coined the term *mega-university* for such institutions in 1994. That was in the thesis that completed my 25-year adventure of getting my Master's in Educational Technology. At that time there were eleven of them in China, France, India, Indonesia, Iran, Korea, South Africa, Spain, Thailand, Turkey and the UK, with an aggregate enrolment of about 3 million students (Daniel, 1996). Today the number of mega-universities has doubled and India alone has 6 million students studying in its public institutions of distance education at the secondary and tertiary levels.

India is a most interesting laboratory for open universities with fourteen such institutions. Last year COL commissioned Mr T. Rajagopalan, formerly Education Correspondent for the *Hindu* newspaper, to write an essay on their development (Rajagopalan, 2007). His conclusion was:

*"Although the Indian State OUs have managed to register huge enrolment figures over the last two decades, a close look at the scene makes one feel that a lot more is to be done to improve the quality and tone up student services. A few of the state OUs, however, have done well in respect of both courses and social reach by way of equity and access. This has much to do with political and institutional leadership. Almost all state OUs in India claim that they provide a better quality alternative to the programmes and courses offered by the correspondence course institutes run by conventional universities."*

In explaining the differences he emphasised the role of state governments. In some cases they have not only failed to be supportive, but have obstructed the state open university with red tape. He noted that

open universities are particularly dependent on a favourable political environment because in the open universities, as he put it:

*"Academic leaders are expected to give a thrust to development of the learning system and make it vibrant and exciting."*

Since this is a summit of presidents of open universities you will be pleased to learn that he noted the vital role of the vice-chancellor:

*"The V.C. as a leader must be a person of impeccable integrity and imbued with a spirit of total dedication to the cause of open and distance learning. Only then can reasonable progress in the path of development of ODL be made. Much depends on the leadership from above and the Vice Chancellor must be a person owing allegiance to the cause of scholarship and learning, not to any political power. Otherwise, how can one expect the Open University to become "a learning community based on reflective practice"?"*

## Dual-Mode Institutions

Although this conference is about open universities, you are well aware that they no longer have the field of distance education to themselves. Dual-mode operation was the flavour of the last decade. Mr. Rajagopalan's study reinforced our own conviction that open universities should be able to offer distance learning of higher quality than conventional universities for which it is a sideline. Nevertheless, today nearly all universities aspire to be dual-mode institutions. Furthermore, we are now seeing open universities such as the Open University of Hong Kong offering face-to-face classes. In Canada the open universities in Québec and British Columbia, the Télé-université and the Open University of British Columbia, have merged with conventional institutions.

Many of these dual-mode institutions do not simply offer two tracks to learning, one in the classroom and one at a distance, but often try to give students greater choice by merging the two tracks into what is often called flexible learning. The current fashion for eLearning has been a major driver in this and by 2006, in a typical American university, one fifth of all continuing and professional development courses were being conducted online (Kapur and Crowley 2008, pp 32-33).

## Open Universities: The Future

We noted earlier that the success of the established correspondence schools serving the London external students spawned the multiplication of dubious providers out to make a quick killing. In a similar way the very success of the open universities has led most conventional universities to jump into distance education. They envy the large enrolments of the open universities and often believe, mistakenly, that distance education is inherently cheaper to offer.

Where does this leave the open universities? Will a host of dual-mode providers gradually nibble away at their lunch? What should open universities be doing to ensure that the flag of distance learning continues to fly high? You will be grappling with these questions in a profound way in planning the strategies of

your institutions but let us offer a few brief observations. We start with the learner, because open universities have achieved success by focussing on their learners in a manner that is real, not rhetorical.

## The diversity of the new learner

The student body of the 21st century will be even more diverse than it is now. Half the world's population of over six billion is under twenty and there are two billion teenagers in the developing world. In countries such as Malaysia and Pakistan, approximately 65% of the population is under the age of 30, while over two thirds of the tertiary education students in Singapore are over the age of 25 (Kapur and Crowley, 2008) Today a student may be anywhere between 18 and 80 years of age. There seem to be converging trends: open universities whose students were mostly mature adults are now seeing more applications from younger people, whereas those which traditionally recruited school leavers are now seeing more adult students.

There are relatively more women in our universities today. Distance education has been particularly helpful for women. In South Africa, women make up 61% of distance students compared with 53% of contact students, and in India women constitute 35% of distance students compared with 29% of contact students.

In an increasing number of countries today's learners are 'digital natives' who take to technology as fish to water, in contrast to their forebears, the 'digital migrants' (Prensky, 2005) who adopted technology later in life. These digital natives are multi-taskers who can perform several tasks at the same time. The need to combine continuing professional development with full-time employment, mentioned as rationale for creating the University of London External Programme 150 years ago, continues to grow. Such academic customers have little time for synchronous instruction.

Distance education has always dealt with a diverse range of learners. Open universities should be able to grapple with the challenge of the new learner better than conventional institutions. To do so they need to know their student body and how it is evolving.

## Integrating eLearning

Distance education has evolved with the technologies available. A feature of the history of education, going right back to the invention of the blackboard in 1850, is that each new technology is hailed as the harbinger of an educational revolution. Such claims were made for radio, film, television, programmed learning and computers and have been made abundantly for online communication and eLearning.

Although eLearning has failed to deliver on the extravagant claims made for it during the dotcom frenzy of the turn of the millennium it is permeating the educational world as fast as expanding connectivity allows. For example, COL is working with 30 of the small states of the Commonwealth to help their tertiary institutions offer eLearning at the request of ministers of education. They call it the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, which is a misnomer because it is not a new university but a way of modernising existing institutions. However, there no question that training in eLearning has been exciting and empowering for the academics in these poorly-resourced institutions.

Open universities are much better placed than conventional institutions to do eLearning well. You have the scale, the power to invest, the capability of good instructional design, and a tradition of responsiveness to students. Long ago Borje Holmberg (1977) defined distance education as a 'guided didactic conversation' and eLearning is ideally suited to this. It is very important that open universities do eLearning well because there are many digital diploma mills giving eLearning a bad name by doing it badly.

Remember, however, that the Internet will never be a mass medium - even if the day comes when everyone is connected to it. Telephone is not radio, even in well-connected communities. Internet learning alone cannot have the mass impact on access that was achieved with the mass media of broadcast and print, so be cautious about abandoning those media until you are sure that you have conquered the Internet at scale.

Remember also not to be fixated on laptops. In the last ten years, much the fastest growth in ICTs has been in mobile telephony. By 2010, there will be 2.5 billion mobile users in the developing world (Atkins, Brown, and Hammond, 2007). A recent study at the University of Pretoria indicates that of about 14,000 teachers, mostly located in rural South Africa, who are enrolled in its distance learning programmes, only 1% have access to email; but 99% own cell phones. The UP first began by using cell phones to provide administrative support and then academic messages. Through this personalised intervention from the university, students became more motivated than before and were satisfied with both the administrative and academic support provided (Hendrikz, Viljoen and Adams, 2006).

## Open Education Resources (OERs)

Distance education has always had its flavours of the year. The current popular flavour, which is related directly to eLearning, is open educational resources.

At the beginning of this decade the Open Courseware movement, based on the principle of sharing faculty lecture notes, launched a movement to make knowledge our common wealth with all the prestige of MIT. The UK Open University went one better by making some of its self-instructional materials freely available on-line. The latest twist is collaborative course development as exemplified by the WikiEducator, a course authoring tool on which there are hundreds of projects to create learning material that is open for all to use in any way they please. The Open University of the twenty-first century will often adopt and adapt such learning materials for their students rather than write each course from scratch. Think of OERs as academic putty that can be shaped to taste.

This movement towards a global intellectual commons presents both dangers and opportunities for open universities. The danger is that your course material, which is one of your precious assets, will be misused to usurp your business. The opportunity is to show the world what good learning materials are, thereby driving out shoddier products.

However, content development is resource-intensive and the OER movement provides a unique opportunity to developing countries to access global knowledge flows. Bernard (2008) and his colleagues carried out a meta-analysis of hundreds of studies in which distance education students were treated in

different ways. They distinguished three types of interaction: student - content; student - student; and student - teacher. They then analysed all the studies to find which type of interaction made the greatest difference when it was increased.

The results were very clear. Increasing *student - content* interaction had much the greatest effect; with *student - student* interaction coming next and *student - teacher* interaction last. Within this context, the importance of content cannot be underestimated. This is good news for open universities, which have often assumed that the answer to weaknesses in student performance is to increase student-teacher interaction.

## Cross-border Higher Education

Our penultimate observation is about cross-border higher education, an area where open universities can do immense good. This is a growing business because of the generally increased interest in international education and demand from working adult students, who cannot travel abroad to study except for short periods.

We believe that the future of distance learning across borders lies in partnership. Partnership is a sound principle because it helps to develop an indigenous capacity for distance learning in the country concerned and because partnering with a local institution, that is credible or committed to becoming credible, can provide access to much larger numbers of students and can facilitate relationships with the national authorities. The foundations of the future open universities will be built on collaboration rather than competition.

Nearly all your open universities are already thoroughly engaged with cross-border education. We wish you well and hope that your good work will steadily drive out the degree mills and bogus institutions that are active in the field.

## Advice from a Practitioner

Finally, since we have mentioned the pioneers of the open education at the University of London and some of the founders of the open universities that you represent, we leave you with some advice from one of the most successful open university presidents of the last decade, Professor Dominique Abrioux, who took over the reins at Athabasca University when it was in a poor state and transformed it into a large, dynamic and highly respected institution.

In running your institutions Professor Abrioux would urge you to realise:

- the primordial importance of relationships with governments
- the importance of relationship building with other institutions
- the double-edged-sword nature of inter-institutional collaboration
- the importance of cultivating communities of students and alumni

- the need to ensure that governance structures maximize institutional autonomy, credibility, and flexibility
- the importance of the academic staff for the university's reputation
- the importance of increasing market share through product differentiation
- the need to develop and entrench scalable models of programme development and delivery
- the importance of leadership.

This last seems like a good point on which to end, to thank you for the honour of addressing you, and to wish you well as you lead your open universities through exciting times.

## References

- Atkins, Daniel; Brown, John Seely; Hammond, Allen. (2007) *A review of the OER movement: achievements, challenges and new opportunities*. Report to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, San Francisco.
- Bernard, R.M., Abrami, P.C., Borokhovski, E, Wade, A, Tamin, R, & Surkes, M. (2008). 'Examining three forms of interaction in distance education: a meta-analysis of between-DE studies'. Manuscript in preparation.
- Daniel, J. S. (1996) *Mega-universities and Knowledge Media: Technology Strategies for Higher Education*, Kogan Page, London
- Hendrikz, Johan; Viljoen, Jeanne-Marie & Adams, Lizelle. (2006). *Text Messaging (SMS): Perceptions and usage patterns*. South Africa: University of Pretoria.
- Holmberg, Borje. (1977). *Distance Education: A survey and bibliography*. New York: Nichols Publishing Company.
- Jones, Christine Kenyon. (2008) *The People's University 1858-2008*, Cambridge University Press
- Kapur, D. & Crowley, M. (2008) Working Paper No 139. *Beyond the ABC's: Higher Education and Developing Countries*, Centre for Global Development
- Prensky, Mark. (2005). 'The future is now: strategies for reaching today's students'. A presentation made at the WCET Conference at San Francisco, USA.
- Rajagopalan, T. (2007) *A Study of the Development of the State Open Universities in India*, Commonwealth of Learning