

Open Universities Look to the Future

Sir John Daniel*

1.0 Introduction

The UK Open University will be 50 years old in 2019 and many of the open universities (OUs) that were created in its image from the 1970s onward also have respectable longevity. Collectively they have changed the paradigms of higher education globally, notably by drawing attention to the learning needs of a wider and older range of people and by demonstrating that teaching in classrooms on campus is not the only way to reach them.

As a direct result, higher education systems have grown enormously. Most campus universities, now well aware of the pool of unserved learners, are acquiring skills in new ways of reaching them, notably through distance and online programmes.

This raises the question of how open universities should ‘dress’ now that the conventional universities are putting on many of their clothes. Are the open universities the victims of their own success?

I pay tribute to the work of two colleagues in addressing this topic. Dr. Ross Paul is publishing a first version of his paper *Open Universities: A Storied Past but an Uncertain Future?* in *Distance Education in China* but he is continuing to refine and extend it.

Professor Alan Tait has worked with me for the past year on a project that came to fruition in October 2017 in the margins of the 27th ICDE World Conference on Online Learning. This was a ‘Roundtable’ of executive heads (vice-chancellors and presidents) of open universities from around the world.

2.0 Roundtable of Executive Heads

Preparations for the Roundtable began in autumn 2016 with the identification of nearly 60 open universities on all continents. Invitations – and later reminders – were sent to the executive heads of these institutions in October 2016 and elicited 22

* Sir John Daniel is currently the Research Associate with Contact North (Contact Nord), Canada. He is also the former President and CEO, Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver, Canada (2004-2012). Prior to that, he also served as the Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO (2001-2004) and Vice-Chancellor of the UK Open University (1990-2001).

replies. We then worked with this subset of heads to identify the topics of most concern to them and to develop an appropriate agenda for the Roundtable meeting.

Then, beginning in March 2017, Professor Tait interacted with the respondents by questionnaire and through telephone interviews. He distilled his findings into a 2,500-word text '*Open Universities: the next phase*' that was sent to the respondents before the Roundtable.

Some twenty executive heads had confirmed their attendance by September 2017, although in the event only nine of them were able to participate in person in the Roundtable in Toronto. The others had to withdraw, some at the last minute, because of delays in obtaining visas or for various family, political or institutional reasons.

Restricting attendance to executive heads and not accepting substitutes undoubtedly limited the number of open universities that could be represented. However, the heads welcomed this opportunity to hold candid discussions with their peers in private setting. A larger question is why more than half of the 50 so-called 'open universities' originally approached never replied at all despite reminders.

The programme for the Roundtable was developed around the topics for which the executive heads had expressed most interest. Its format reflected their wish to spend the day interacting with each other. Therefore, the day was almost wholly devoted to sessions during which the participants could talk to each other. Every executive head present had the chance to work with every other head in the course of the day.

No formal record was kept of the meeting, which took place under the Chatham House Rule. In this short article, therefore, I shall only mention institutions by name where facts are a matter of public record. Here I give my impressions of the trends, although they have not yet been refined by feedback from the participants. The session topics provide the structure for this account.

3.0 Are Open Universities' Missions Evolving?

First, are the missions of open universities evolving? All agreed that open universities have made openness and access mainstream concerns across higher education generally, although in some countries conventional higher education institutions (HEIs) are still doing little to address these issues. The OUs continue to extend their missions in an incremental manner, notably using technology to make registration, study and feedback more convenient.

Two OUs, Wawasan in Malaysia and OU Hong Kong, now have full-time on-campus students alongside their distance offerings. In Hong Kong, the numbers on campus (9,000) almost equal those studying at a distance. They find that teaching on campus brings these OUs to the attention of a wider population.

The formal identification of tertiary education in the new UN Sustainable Development Goals has legitimised the goal of serving wider populations. The challenge is that most of the tens of millions of new students in the coming decades will be in Asia and Africa, where the OUs are already under significant enrolment pressure. Is there a limit to how large an OU can become without losing effectiveness? Are OUs becoming complacent once they become mega-universities? Should they be more ambitious?

4.0 How are Demographics Changing?

Second, how are OU student demographics shifting? We found that they are changing in different ways – a few towards older students, but mostly towards younger students, although not necessarily to school leavers. However, many of these younger students are not coming to OUs for undergraduate degrees but for graduate certificates and diplomas that can be assets in the workplace.

5.0 How do OUs Compete to Win?

Third, how do OUs compete to win? Which technologies hold most promise? Some of the OUs at the Roundtable now teach entirely online, whereas most outside the West continue to use printed materials.

All have plans to increase their online teaching, but IT is proving most useful in the administrative and student support functions. OUs using paper for teaching now have IT systems for admissions and the processing of assignments. By speeding up processes these have positive impacts on student progression and retention, while also reducing corruption. The general view was that focussing technological innovation too much on pedagogy misses more promising opportunities for its use.

6.0 What are the Implications of Operating at Scale?

Fourth, a session aimed at sharing experiences of mastering the use of technology at scale revealed exceptions to the general correlation between an OU's enrolments and the size of its national population. While most of the mega-universities (100,000+ enrolments) are in large population countries (e.g. India, China, Nigeria) some countries with populations over 100 million (e.g. Philippines) have fewer

enrolments in their OUs than those serving much smaller populations in Canada. This raises the question of whether some of the smaller OUs have handicapped themselves by adopting too fully the division of labour and specialisation of functions characteristic of the industrial model of the larger OUs and the mega-universities.

A surprising discovery was that, with the major exception of the UKOU and its creation of FutureLearn, the OUs generally have not engaged much with MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses).

7.0 Are there Opportunities for Collaboration and Partnerships among OUs?

Fifth, most of the OUs at the Roundtable said that they already have the partnerships they need. There is, for example, extensive course sharing between the state OUs in India. However, partnerships need close attention and management, even when the original agreements are clear. One OU that is itself formally a private institution has had some bad experiences in trying to collaborate with other private sector organisations. The challenges of offshore partnerships are several times greater than those within the same country.

8.0 How does an OU Blend Flexibility, Quality and Scale Effectively?

Sixth, flexibility is good, but so are effective regulations. In the Netherlands, the OU has improved its completion and retention rates dramatically simply by tightening up the regulations about start dates and completion deadlines. It is necessary to put reasonable obligations on students in order to make them give some priority to their studies.

A refrain throughout the Roundtable was that whereas most of the OUs felt that the quality of their teaching and support was at least as good as that of the conventional HEIs in their jurisdictions, they – or ODL generally – still had a poor reputation with the public. Some heads felt that using the term ‘distance education’ – or even the term ‘open’ was not helpful.

9.0 How do OUs relate to their Governments?

Although no session at the Roundtable was devoted specifically to government relations, this vital aspect of OU management came up repeatedly. Most OUs have been the darlings of their government at some stage in their development, but it is impossible to retain this status for decades as governments and their political ideologies change. Success in this vital relationship comes, not surprisingly, from trying to use

the considerable power and reach of an OU to help governments achieve their own education and training goals. This will often mean shifting the focus of the academic staff, in particular, to new aims and programmes. The smaller OUs have special challenges and both the Canadian OUs have lived through near-death experiences, emphasising the absolute importance of nurturing the link between an OU and its government's priorities.

10.0 Conclusions

Distilling the conclusions of the Roundtable through further interaction with the participants will take time, but I conclude with three preliminary observations.

First, open universities are a very diverse reality. The descriptor 'open' conceals great variations in size, mission and pedagogy.

Second, whether the terms 'open' and 'distance' are helpful or not, the open universities are proud of what they are doing to open up higher education and bring it to new places.

Third, without underestimating the challenges of the wrenching changes that the OUs feel they must make for the future, they are confident that they have the right values and vision for the times.