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Available online: 22 May 2008

To cite this article: Alan Tait (2008): What are open universities for?, Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning, 23:2, 85-93

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02680510802051871
What are open universities for?

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This article proposes a framework within which the question as to the purposes of open universities should be examined. It argues that the question has become submerged over time through the establishment of so many open universities that have become natural elements in a higher education landscape rather than remaining radical and innovative institutions. The article looks at a number of innovative distance teaching higher education institutions from the nineteenth century through to the contemporary period, and examines case studies in a wide international range. The outcome of the argument is that open universities should articulate their purposes within a discourse of development, and engage with the ethical and political questions as to how development is understood and advanced.

Keywords: distance education; open universities; higher education; politics of education; development

Introduction

Why do questions about the purposes of open universities need to be asked now, after 35 years or so of their existence – or longer if you date them from the foundation of the University of South Africa (UNISA) in 1946 or, even earlier, the development of the University of London External study system in 1858? In the present article I intend, therefore, to review some of the history of large-scale mould-breaking higher education institutions in order to identify the innovative role that they have played, revealing that the question as to their purposes is very much still with us. In particular, I want to show how various, in fact, are the purposes of open universities, but how it is also possible to identify a unifying framework. The article will demonstrate how those purposes do and sometimes do not withstand the impact of time, and will also remind us that it is not necessary to have an open university: many rich countries with widespread participation in higher education do not, such as the USA, Australia, and France. I have employed the term ‘open universities’ to cover innovative distance-teaching higher education institutions that have used distance in radical ways to improve openness. I have not chosen to review in detail the range of meanings that support the terms ‘distance teaching’ and ‘open’, and, to some extent, it is fair to say that I have retrospectively, although advisedly, employed these terms for the first two case studies (see, for example, Bell & Tight, 1993). However, I believe that the development of the argument from a historical perspective will demonstrate that this is a helpful approach in making sense of where the open university movement has come from.

The University of London External Study system

The University of London External Study system is a fascinating example of what has been argued to be the first British open university (Bell & Tight, 1993). The University of London was founded...
in 1826 as a secular modernising response to the ‘ancient’ universities. In 1836 it received its charter as a state examining body, thus receiving endorsement by the state for its developing range of functions, and its capacity to provide opportunity for a much wider range of people than hitherto had been thought of as worth-while participants in higher education. The University of London was essentially a system for external study at its formation, and there was much controversy over its lack of residential requirement. A Special Commission in the 1860s agreed that there could be internal students who resided, and it was not until 1898 that the distinction between external and internal students was finally agreed. Any comparison of the University of London with Oxford and Cambridge was usually disdainfully drawn, especially with regard to the lack of the residential experience as evidenced in this extract from the University Correspondent in 1891:

The great advantage an Oxford or Cambridge man (*sic* but actually accurate) claims over his London rival is his social education. It is he says a moral training. His university career is far more than the acquisition of knowledge. He is no lowly student, working narrowly for his own hand, but a man among men, and he points to the union debating society, to the collegiate and university football, cricket and boating, as influence to this end. (de Salvo, 2002, p. 38)

Some of the snobbery against distance education that remains so familiar around the world is evident from more than a century ago.

The issue of the lack of residential requirement issue is very intriguing, and London can be seen as mould breaking in offering opportunities for study anywhere in the United Kingdom to both women and men. This represented a fundamental modernising step by a secular university in the country’s capital, but also – as we shall see in due course – for much wider afield.

In 1858 it was agreed that in light of the University of London ‘imperial mission’ – note the ways in which the international role of UK higher education came into play here – examinations could be taken overseas. Thus, at a stroke, the mission of international distance education was born. While this served the wandering British as they built their Empire and their trading bases in the nineteenth century, it also served the indigenous peoples of the countries, or at least those few who could manage in academic English with little or no support at all. By 1882 there were 17 ‘colonial’ centres, including Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad, eight further centres in Canada, and also New Zealand and Tasmania. By 1937 there were 79 centres, with a substantial base in Africa, with Nigeria perhaps the largest, and also including Baghdad, Buenos Aires, Peking and Cairo, etc.

To give an idea of scale, 248 external students sat examinations in 1841, rising to 7335 in 1901. Approximately one-half passed. We know nothing from Bell and Tight’s history, from which much of this is drawn, about how many would have had the intention to take the examination but never registered as they dropped out along the way. We do know, however, for the period 1887–1931 that 39,326 students are recorded as passing examinations supported by the University Correspondence College alone while, in that period, some 10,000 gained full Bachelors and even Masters degrees (de Salvo, 2002, p. 39). In the period between the world wars it is estimated that some 10% of external students were registered at overseas institutions. It is not until the 1960s that internal students began to outnumber external students at the University of London.

The Empire was being built. The service to the indigenous peoples of the colonies allowed many very able individuals to build their careers, enabling them to register whatever their ethnic background – unexpected in the British Empire of the 1860s – and many of those who led the struggle for independence and joined the new post-colonial elites of the 1960s gained their degrees through London External. Opportunity could not in any real sense be said to have been on an equal basis but, nonetheless, there was no disbarment. This paradoxical nature of distance education, as I think we can properly characterise the University of London External Study programme at the time, serving the Empire with its oppression of peoples all around the world,
and offering opportunity, albeit a very tough one to succeed with, is one that will come up again shortly in the next case from South Africa. It is important to remain sensitive today to the possibility that distance learning continues to offer opportunities that are difficult to succeed with for so many. This is not only because of the inherent difficulty of part-time distance learning but because of the constraints of cramped housing, long working hours and inadequate childcare facilities, as well, of course, with the engrained disadvantages of non-traditional educational backgrounds in all their complexity, both intellectual and affective, that are so difficult for those of us who have succeeded in education really to understand.

This gives the opportunity to engage with one further dimension of the University of London External System to be identified as very significant, which is the field of student support. The University of London took little interest in how students were prepared for their examinations, either entirely independently or by attendance at tutorial colleges. These latter sprang up on a commercial basis from soon after the start of the external study system, and many offered valuable support to students while some no doubt were less respectable. But the University Correspondence College mentioned above, which worked at very considerable scale, was one of those that laid the basis for the tradition that the Open University, UK (OU UK) inherited of tutorial systems at a distance, residential schools, and classroom-based instruction. An advertisement from the University Correspondence College from 1889 may sound familiar:

Each week the pupil receives a scheme of study which consists of selections from text books, distinction of important points upon which stress is laid in the examinations, hints, notes on difficult and salient portions etc …after the first week, along with these, a test paper (compiled from previous examination papers) is given on the work of the preceding week, the answers to which must be posted to the tutor on a day arranged. These are then examined and returned with corrections, hints and model answers in each subject and solution of difficulties. (Bell & Tight, 1993, p. 72)

One of the intended functions for the University of London was therefore to provide an avenue of individual opportunity and social mobility to support notions of meritocracy as opposed to hereditary privilege, and to ensure that the expansion of the professions and the mobility of qualification demanded by Britain and its Empire were possible. By no means last, it allowed women to gain awards some 70 years before the University of Cambridge.

A second significant function from the very beginning was that the University of London was intended to set standards for curriculum design and in examination systems, and to offer innovation and quality enhancement to the higher education system as it then existed, dominated as it was by the ancient universities.

There were a range of other innovative functions the university carried out, including validating, as we would now call it, the examinations at a number of other institutions including medicine and law before some of them became universities in their own right, and making major changes to schools examinations and curricula. The University of London in the nineteenth century has been seen by one commentator as a mixture of the Open University and the former Council for National Academic Awards (Harte, cited in Bell & Tight, 1993, p. 122).

Thus, we see in my analysis two issues with this first open university: providing widely available opportunity that had not in many cases been dreamt of by individuals, and intervening in the higher education system in order to change it in ways that the existing system was not able to imagine for itself.

The University of South Africa

I come now to a very significant example, and one that can be credited with being the first distance-teaching university in the way that we now understand the term.
UNISA is a very significant single-mode distance-teaching university – that is, it teaches only at a distance – now having more than 200,000 students. Material here is drawn from UNISA’s own history (Boucher, 1973), and from the grey literature (Wedemayer, 1968).

One of the core functions of UNISA at its foundation, in my interpretation, was to diminish the domination of British origin as opposed to Afrikaans origin population in South Africa in the higher education context. UNISA later occupied a very paradoxical place in apartheid South Africa. Like the University of London External Studies Programme before it, it was open uniquely as a higher education institution to people of all ethnicities and so-called racial characteristics, and in 1995 had more or less equal numbers of ‘African’ and ‘White’ students, with a tiny proportion, some 4%, of so-called coloured students. When you think of the distribution of the sections of the population you can immediately see the imbalance in those so-called racial groups. Nonetheless, UNISA provided opportunity for black South Africans, and includes some of the most well known anti-apartheid activists and ANC heroes and heroines amongst its alumni, including Nelson Mandela.

UNISA had had a significant struggle to move from the 1920s out of its examining role, in a way analogous to the University of London External examining role, to a university teaching its own students. This was not finally achieved until 1964. It had to battle against opposition from other universities about its very nature – firstly as an examining body that did not teach, and secondly as a teaching body that did not meet its students – and had to fight battles about language between the Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking sections of the population (other languages were not considered as far as I can tell). It also had to battle to maintain openness to all so-called races in South Africa that UNISA maintained through the entire apartheid period. For example, in 1950 its non-European students were in a ratio of some 3:1 to European origin students. On the language side it was often caught between the Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking communities. It came under severe pressure, for example, in the 1960s under Prime Minister Verwoerd and Education Minister De Klerk to move to Johannesburg and take up a residential university campus using Afrikaans only, and to lose its non-European student body completely as the policy was to complete the development of racially separate higher education. It refused to do so, to its credit, and survived the political pressure. However, by the end of the apartheid era in 1990 or so, UNISA was seen by the majority population in South Africa as a symbol both of opportunity and oppression, so much so that there was very serious consideration given to its abolition.

One significant reason for this was that the system of student support consisted of being able to telephone the lecturers in Pretoria, who were present only in the mornings (morning-only attendance policy brought in in 1950). The academic body was very predominantly from the Afrikaner section of the white population, according to UNISA’s own history, because the Afrikaner origin population were bilingual with English while the English speakers were not able or willing to speak Afrikaans; they needed jobs more than the English speakers and they were more open to innovative teaching methods. Whatever the reasons, by the 1990s the institution and its staff were, in my understanding, associated with the apartheid higher education system. The need for student support was substantially ignored – although there were annual vacation school and graduation ceremonies, organised separately on racial lines because of apartheid legislation as well as perhaps ingrained attitude on the part of university staff. Student support was ignored until one of the very notable non-governmental organisations or civic organisations, the South Africa Committee for Higher Education and Democracy, took up the issue. There was huge resentment that so little thought or care had been given to making opportunities real for the great majority in South Africa, representing some one-half of UNISA’s students, as student support was almost entirely lacking. The drop-out and failure rate was thought to be brutal, uncaring and, in the end, racist. In 1958 the major internal history records
drop out as 40%, and this as a university with standard matriculation requirements (this was not an open university in the sense of entry requirement). While the seriousness of the drop-out and failure rates were contested by some in terms of international comparators, UNISA certainly sought to respond to the criticism about both curriculum – too much of it derived from apartheid ideology, including the so-called Christian didactics that resulted in some unbelievably poor quality and racist material – and student support or the lack of it, not least as its very existence was under threat with the new ANC government.

The point to draw out here is how open universities are, by virtue of their character in terms of both scale and their innovative character, deeply embedded in the social and political fabric of their societies, represent values very explicitly for the governments that establish them, can be used for good or ill, and can service functions of development for the state in its analysis of human capacity needs, its judgement about social pressure for higher education opportunity, and its commitment to social justice for individuals, and where the politics are much less attractive can lead to oppressive practice. So, unlike the ancient universities who represent, it is said in Europe, the longest lasting institutions outside the Vatican, open universities seem to be much more sharply exposed to change in terms of what the development needs are in a particular period.

Distance education in the former USSR

UK Prime Minister Harold Wilson acknowledged in the 1960s that one of the influences on his vision for the OU UK was that of the distance education at higher education level in the former USSR (reported in Perry, 1976, p. 8).

Khrushchev brought in very significant educational reforms in the late 1950s, in particular, strengthening the links of schools with ‘life’, and that meant above all the workplace (see Grant, 1964). This extended to higher education, where the systems of part time and correspondence higher education were developed, partly to support that concern, with students staying in the workplace, and partly to restrain costs. It was a major plank of Soviet policy, so that by 1965 one-half of all students in higher education were part time, with some 1.7 million in the consultation/correspondence model, and some 0.5 million in evening classes. The full-time cohort numbered 1.6 million. This expansion of higher education opportunity was a considerable concern to the West, just as higher education statistics are now bandied about regarding China and all the engineers produced there as compared with Europe.

A significant element of the policy purposes of the consultation/correspondence system was to support educational opportunity at higher education level for working-class people who were to take on significant responsibility, primarily as members of the Communist Party. The support was generous in terms of time allowed for study, and of time spent with teachers (so much so that the system was known as the ‘consultation’ rather than a distance education model by some, as students were able to gain so much support) and, of course, higher education was seen as a public good so was not significantly charged for to individuals. Quality was said to be low, and there was, as universally, snobbery about the standards of a distance education system. Ironically, as opportunity for higher education was managed in the Soviet Union on social class lines, children of middle-class parents sometimes ended up in this distance education system, as they were excluded from conventional universities where there was a quota of children from working-class families that took priority. The system thus no doubt had a significant impact on capacity-building in the USSR, and this was what impressed Wilson. It was also integrally linked with the politics of the USSR run by the Communist Party, and after 1990 the system that had been exported or imposed on the socialist countries of Eastern Europe collapsed completely over a
period of some five years. I met many of the colleagues from this socialist distance education system in the 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, who found it very difficult to come to terms with the contempt in which that system was now held, and the fact that new governments, often of a liberal political disposition and who certainly had to build a post-Communist system, withdrew support. But the Communist Party no longer needed cadres, as they were called, of rising functionaries, as they no longer had a country to run, and the function of the system had, in fact, disappeared. My point here is to build the case that very significant distance-teaching interventions are usually state led, add to capacity-building and development purposes, and are intimately embedded with state purposes. These purposes are, of course, of their time, deriving from problems or pressures that arise from particular situations and contexts.

Distance Education in Spain

In 1972 the Universidad Nacional a Distancia (UNED) was established in Spain, and its first cohort of students were enrolled one year later. Visits had been paid by the planning committee to various institutions, including the OU UK. In 1975 Generalissimo Franco died – the Caudillo of Spain, the dictator who had overthrown democracy in 1936 with his invasion from Spanish North Africa and the Canary islands. It is unexpected to find that in the last years of Franco’s regime a distance-teaching university was being established to open opportunity to those who had been excluded. The technocrats in the late Franco period knew very well that the earlier vision of an agrarian catholic society protected from individualisation and modernity was no longer feasible, and they had to prepare for a modern capitalist society and needed the human capacity to do this. UNED was intended to be a university of the second chance, but was also expected to ‘contribute to methodological innovation in the Spanish higher Education system’ (Garcia Garrido, 1988, p. 203). It was notable too that UNED was a national university – the only one in Spain, in fact – and despite the still bitter regional and national division in Spain even after 40 years of Franco, with the suppression of Basque and Catalan languages in particular, initiatives that supported the national rather than regional character of Spain were still challenged. Reference to the indifference to UNED of the autonomous regions in those two parts of Spain was recorded by the then Rector Jose Luis Garcia Garrido in the mid-1980s (Garcia Garrido, 1988, p. 214).

A comment by John Daniel in his account of UNED in relation to the relative efficiency of UNED as compared with the OU UK is fascinating: ‘It appears that definition of the curriculum by government makes course development and production much cheaper’ (Daniel, 1996, p. 187). The government laid down the university curriculum, and this was then imposed on a national basis, in the face of the hostility of the autonomous regions in particular and, no doubt, of the substantial underground political opposition across the country.

Such is the view of some colleagues, at least in the more recent institution in Spain, the Open University of Catalonia, who believed this motivation lay behind the establishment of UNED at least in part. I have been told that as a result of the refusal in the 1980s of the leaders of UNED to undertake any teaching in Catalan, protecting the particular vision of Castilian as the national language of Spain, it was decided by the Catalans to set up their own open university, which eventually took place in 1995. The main driver in this development was the regional government, the Generalitat de Catalunya, a title not heard since the day of the independent Catalan kingdom centuries earlier, and which certainly would have been anathema to Franco after he overcame the bitter opposition in the Catalan region to his regime. Explicit for the functions of the Open University of Catalonia is a ‘commitment to be rooted in the cultural, social, and linguistic reality of Catalonia, while remaining open to the world’ (Sangra, 2002, p. 3). This is, of course, a deeply political statement of purpose within Spain. The Open University of
Catalonia prides itself on being a truly innovative open university, and was founded as a virtual university as opposed to the open universities in Europe and elsewhere founded in the 1970s and 1980s. There is a clear if discreet distinction maintained between it and UNED. Since 2000 the Open University of Catalonia has been teaching in Spanish as well as Catalan and is extending its reach to Latin America, where UNED has worked since its inception. The nationalist vision of Spain is still very much in competition with that of the autonomy of the regions, which have national dimensions to their identity, and this is being fought out, in part at least, through Spain’s two open universities. Thus, the open universities of Spain are thoroughly rooted in the social and political fabric of the last century, including the as yet unresolved issues of the contested relationships between regions and a national vision of Spain that is seen by some as no more than a Castilian imposition.

The Open University, UK

Turning now to my own institution, the OU UK – in Harold Wilson’s own words:

the aim of the OU is to widen the opportunities for higher education by giving a second chance to those who can profit from it, but who have been, for one reason or another, unable to go to a University or a College on leaving school. (Wilson, 1971, p. 534)

A further very significant contribution proposed by Wilson included the OU UK’s contribution to reform of UK higher education, and this contribution has been informal but very considerable indeed. It includes the preparation of teaching materials that addressed learning objectives; close attention paid to student work load; assessment that was integrated into the teaching materials and the learning process; continuous assessment; credit transfer; and with the training of tutors who worked elsewhere in the education system, primarily in colleges and universities, substantial change in understanding how active and interactive learning rather than lecturing might support students.

The challenges that the OU UK was set up to engage with in the 1970s have substantially been achieved – for example, the change in view about the worthwhileness and value of adult part-time students without conventional educational qualifications; the importance of learning and teaching in higher education, and the support that can be given to it by technologies; the need for student-centred and flexible approaches to higher education if adult part-time students are to succeed. Much of the rest of the higher education sector is now substantially engaged with exactly the range of tasks that the OU UK has demonstrated to be important and worthwhile. Further challenges lie in the fact that the United Kingdom is not the polity it was in 1971: the advent of devolution in Scotland and the increasingly devolved path that Wales is taking means that defining OU UK activity simply for the United Kingdom is no longer adequate. The OU UK now faces some of the issues, therefore, both of UNISA and of UNED, Spain: the world has changed around it and is very challenging to some of the core design features of the institution.

Conclusion

To take a step back, we have open and distance teaching universities being established and promoted to further imperialism, to build socialist and communist societies, to build a society of systematic racism, in a fascist society, as an element of nationalist response to a post-fascist situation, and by social democracy. Evidently, open universities can serve a variety of explicit political ideologies; and can not only fail to achieve those (there are one or two in Europe that have signally failed to make much of an impact on their societies), but can also actually be abolished when the politics and society go in a different direction. It can also be the case that open
universities represent the most significant forms of educational organisation intended to achieve social change, needed by governments of all political persuasions.

And what does all this mean for the question ‘What are open universities for?’ A summary of functions of open universities should include, to work from Perraton’s analysis:

1. to help national and economic development (amended by AWT to include national as well as economic, meaning nation-building in a wider sense);
2. to respond to public demand;
3. to widen access to new groups of students. (From Perraton, 2000, p. 90)

I would add a fourth function that is clear in accounts given by many different open universities of their purposes in Ram Reddy’s volume of 1988:

4. Intervention to change the higher education system in terms of quality and innovation.

This set of functions can be more discursively proposed as being for:

- building capacity that the higher education system cannot or will not deliver;
- providing individual opportunity and social justice that the higher education system cannot or will not satisfy because of its own interests or limited vision;
- intervention to change the higher education system, which is seen as incapable of renewing itself; and
- nation-building – where a national university, as opposed to private, confessional or regional universities, need in the government’s view to support national development.

Open universities are, therefore, at their inception highly political institutions invented because of the inadequacy of the higher education sector to meet the challenge of modernity, defined both in terms of who is to be included in the goods of society and what society needs in terms of human capital.

Open universities are therefore often state-led interventions. A significant complicating factor over the past 20 years is that states in the North have grown less comfortable about that direct steering role in social change, or at least this has been significantly diminished in the 1980s and 1990s by the neo-liberal drive to roll back the state. That has certainly created problems for some open universities in Europe, and I would include the OU UK, when government patronage and protection within the higher education sector fades. There is no such modesty on the part of governments in countries that are currently addressing major modernisation issues, and I suspect this may be a cyclical rather than a linear pattern of development in the North. It may be that as some of the very significant challenges of the next 25 years or so have to be faced by governments on our behalves we shall see the return to more direct intervention.

So while all universities are embedded in their societies, open universities are even more sharply profiled in the higher education landscape. Open universities have to walk between being a university – a necessary condition of their existence for students and staff alike in terms of recognition and reward and, of course, challenged by those whose concept of university they do not fulfil from a range of perspectives – and challenging the nature of the definition of a university in their particular time and place. This seems to be for some open universities particularly problematic at least in the second phase of their life, after the founding mission has been achieved or, in some cases, given up on, when the walk between the comfort zone of a university as we know it and the discomfort zone of what a university could additionally be is more difficult to sustain. In fact the more open universities seek to be like other universities only, the more they...
will lose these critical functions. While some of character of other universities is needed in order to provide legitimacy for students and for staff, there nonetheless continues to need to be an uncomfortable edge of difference for open universities. The testing of these arguments and indeed on the wider range of issues presented in this article could valuably be applied to further case studies, such as the major open universities in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Thailand, Japan, Korea and elsewhere.

To move to a summary of conclusions in answer to the question ‘What are open universities for?’, broadly speaking they are for development, not just for teaching and research, nor even for adult higher education at a distance. Actually the audiences and the methods could change quite radically: indeed they might have to as demographics change and the fact that populations in the North will have so many fewer non-graduates in them in the future. But what remains constant is the development function, and I suggest that it is helpful to define the purposes of an open university in this way. Development management ‘is distinctive in aiming at social goals external to any particular organization in the context of value-based conflicts’ (Thomas, 1998, p. 95). This means that managing the purposes of an open university defined in this way is much more complex than for most other universities, or at least should be. It means that the institutions should be constantly in dialogue about what a university is, sharing enough of the characteristics to offer recognised academic awards, and to attract and retain students and staff, but engaging critically with the received wisdom about what a university is in such a way as to challenge and innovate.

It seems I suggest that a necessary condition of an open university’s continued existence is engagement with risk, driven by values. Those values are centred, in my own vision of an open university, on social justice. Analysis of the set of meanings suggested by the term social justice will, however, have to await further investigation.

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